

MORMON WOMEN AND THE ANATOMY OF BELONGING

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I'd like to start by sharing two stories: the experiences of two different women, both raised in the Church and fully claiming to belong to the global sisterhood of Mormon women. The first came in the form of an email comment I received while I was a guest on a local radio show about a year ago:

As a forty-four-year-old stay-at-home mom, I am sorely tempted to blame my LDS culture for significantly narrowing my life choices. My youngest of five children entered first grade two months ago. I'm home today using craft paint to fix the dings in my fall-themed pottery and planning my lavish Christmas decorations on Pinterest. I'm mad. How did I get here? I guess I have to own my choices and stop playing victim. Yes, I was strongly socialized to choose the path that I did. Yet, I have friends . . . *who managed to pursue a professional course that I now envy.* [These friends mention] the powerful female role models they had at home. I think my biggest regret is not being that role model now for my four daughters.

The second story I draw from my personal experience being the daughter of a professional opera singer. My mother sang as a soloist at the Metropolitan Opera the whole time I was growing up and had an illustrious tenure at the San Francisco Opera before I was born. One time I was asking her about her youth and how her career got started, and she told me a remarkable story. She told me about singing a solo recital at Brigham Young University soon after she had graduated from there and was teaching music at a local junior high school. This was about 1965. She was starting to audition as a soloist and getting some

attention at this time, and she would soon move to California to dedicate herself to a solo career. She was unmarried. After the recital at BYU, Hugh Nibley came up to her to congratulate her on a job well done. “But Sister Bybee,” said the towering campus hero, “how do you expect to be able to continue with this singing and be a wife and mother? You know it will be impossible to do both, so you should give it up soon.” Stunned, I looked at my mother. “Wow, Mom, what did you say? I mean, this was Hugh Nibley!” My mom just gave me a surprised glance and dismissively said, “Well, I ignored him of course!”

Why my mother, in 1965 under the disapproving eye of the likes of Hugh Nibley and presumably others, was able to be so confident and clear in the path that was right for her is a mystery I’ve sought to unpack my whole adult life. What is the difference between my mother and the woman from the radio show who, despite several decades of presumed social liberalization, found herself socialized into a path that was not authentically hers?

Both my mother and the woman from the radio show define themselves as “Mormon women.” Speaking for my mother, at least, those are the first and most important descriptors of who she is, as they are for most of the more than three hundred women we’ve interviewed for the Mormon Women Project, a collection of interviews with LDS women from around the world published at mormonwomen.com. Those descriptors provide a beloved binding force that holds together millions of women around the world. They appeal to the essential human need to belong to a community, a tribe, with whom we have things in common and from whom we expect mutual respect. Our community goes beyond just a social club, though, as President Linda Burton reminded us at a recent general women’s session. We “belong” to a divine sisterhood, circumnavigated by a range of binding factors—from as little as a shared knowledge of Primary songs to the dedication demanded by

temple covenants.¹ So even though these two qualifiers—“woman” and “Mormon”—are potent definers of belonging for many of us, they are also remarkably broad in today’s contemporary Church: a new convert in Zimbabwe is just as much a “Mormon woman” as a mom of five in Draper, Utah. And so I am interested in what defines “belonging” to this worldwide sisterhood. What shape does belonging take? What are its essential parts? How do those parts function together? What parts are extraneous? What is the heart of belonging, and what is the appendix that can be removed without damaging the whole?

In looking at the definition of Mormon womanhood, it seems to me that the boundaries of that community have shifted over the past almost two hundred years from being initially proscribed by the institution, in the early days of the Nauvoo Relief Society, to essentially being defined by the Mormon women themselves in today’s modern global Church. Let me explain what I mean. Let’s start with a look at the Nauvoo Relief Society, established 174 years ago. The organization acted as a sub-community within boundaries of Mormon womanhood, one to which a woman applied for membership. The recently published *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women’s History* revealed to me a previously unknown detail about membership in the inaugural Relief Society: new members had to receive the endorsement of two peers, testifying to their virtue and worthiness, before they could be admitted into the organization. In other words, the boundaries of Mormon womanhood were drawn institutionally around a tight subset of women whose behavior was morally uncompromised. Learning about this recommendation process made me uncomfortable because it feels antagonistic to the welcoming spirit of Relief Society gatherings many of us experience today. It’s as if the early Mormon women were saying, “This is what belonging is. This is what it looks like.” A standard of virtue and morality was the essential element

1. Linda K. Burton, “I Was a Stranger,” Apr. 2016, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2016/04/i-was-a-stranger?lang=eng>.

that gave the sisterhood its shape at that point. I can understand the institutional boundary-drawing better when I put it in the context of temple preparation—the women were preparing the subset to receive and perform ordinances, so membership in the Relief Society was then more like receiving a temple recommend than entering the embrace of a community of fellow sinners, but the Nauvoo Relief Society provides the starkest example of Mormon womanhood being strictly defined by a set of behavioral markers.

Although the recommendation process was not continued with the reorganization of the Relief Society in Utah, early-twentieth-century Mormon womanhood had its own unofficial behavioral markers for establishing belonging in the sisterhood. For example, the behavioral practices around motherhood replaced peer recommendations as ways to gauge a woman's tether to the sisterhood's gravitational pull. Even though Mormon womanhood had increased in numbers since the Nauvoo days, Church membership was still homogeneous enough that institutional and cultural markers drew the boundaries around acceptable belonging. Mid-century American women stayed home with children, canned food, and made quilts, sometimes basing their actions on doctrinal principles but mostly out of tacitly agreed-upon cultural markers of what made a "good" Mormon woman. The consistency of those practices among a majority of women created a sense of belonging and drew a boundary between those who participated in these same behavioral markers and those who didn't. Similar to the Nauvoo Relief Society, women themselves seem to be the best police of who is within the boundaries and who is outside, even though the twentieth-century version of inclusion was less official than the nineteenth century's.

So, moving into the twenty-first century, who is determining the boundaries today? Who today is defining what belonging to the mainstream sisterhood of Mormon women looks like? I propose that the growth of the Church and the rapid pace of social, technological, and economic progress over the last several decades has produced a new era

of boundary-drawing, one in which belonging can be defined by fewer and fewer universal behavioral practices across the group, and instead belonging is simply claimed by the members of the group themselves when they enter that most universal of covenants: baptism. The new convert from Zimbabwe belongs to the sisterhood of Mormon women because she is a woman and because she has made baptismal covenants. Those may be the only common denominators she has with the mom of five in Draper, but the sense of belonging comes from their willingness to embrace and be embraced, not exclusively from their participation in practices institutionally deemed appropriate for female members of the Church.

But perhaps this vision of belonging as simply a willingness to embrace and be embraced is a little too futuristic; maybe that transition isn't quite yet complete, where sisterhood is a choice we nurture to make the diversity of our membership thrive. Perhaps there are some of us who still feel like we need to participate in social or behavioral markers in order to be in the fold: we need to be married, we need to have multiple children, we need to not have too successful of a career, we need to dress demurely, we need to have our lives together and functional. In reality, even though we are theoretically widening our embrace to expand the boundaries of belonging in the twenty-first century, many of us do still feel a bright line between being "in" and "out." So let me restate my thesis about the mainstream Mormon woman's choice to belong: In my observation, I have seen a pattern in that women who have healthy, happy relationships with the Relief Society and Church institution as a whole are those who have set firm boundaries for themselves around what it means to be a Mormon woman. They have acknowledged that they will disappoint someone, they will make waves, they will not live up to a behavioral ideal, and they are okay with that. They have internalized the idea that the baptismal covenant keeps them tethered to other women, and they have limited their commitments to any socialized expectations beyond that. They belong on their own terms and enjoy

the fruits of belonging while acknowledging that the tribalism that is often a byproduct of belonging has its limits for them. Importantly, they have done this while respecting that the Church also needs to set boundaries in order to function, and some of those boundaries will not encircle them.

Referring back to the story of my mom from the beginning of my comments, my mom—whether she knew it or not—had set boundaries for how Mormon womanhood would define her. I can testify that she took the best parts of our global sisterhood and then acted with integrity on her own choice to belong. She was not married in the temple, only had one child, was a full-time professional, and yet acted every day like she was the most belonging believer there was.

In this observed pattern, those who have less happy and healthy relationships with Mormon womanhood have been less boundaried about what they will and will not embrace from the institution. From my anecdotal experience, many of my friends who have left the Church believed while active that everything Church leaders taught needed to be accepted and internalized. Their belonging necessitated allowing the Church institution to push them in ways that felt uncomfortable or wrong, resulting in a complete break with the Church when belonging devoured all ability to be individual agents. In the language of my friend from the radio program, belonging looked like crafting and decorating from Pinterest because these are behavioral indicators of belonging, but they left her resentful and mad. She had absorbed a definition of herself that was perhaps unexamined, and thus the choice to belong hadn't been a choice at all but rather a default.

Why is it some Mormon women are naturally more boundaried than others? What is it that allows some women to say, "I choose to belong on my own terms," sometimes in the face of severe cultural pressures? Dr. Susan Madsen, a professor of leadership and ethics at Utah Valley University, recently wrote in the *Journal of Leadership Education* about four perspectives that inform a Mormon woman's perception of

herself, and I think these four perspectives are useful in this discussion. The perspectives are, first, an Eternal perspective, meaning a dedication to lifelong learning and progression, continuous improvement, and development. Second, a Motherhood perspective, meaning a belief that raising children in love and righteousness is the most important role a woman has on earth. Third, a Community perspective, meaning a belief that serving and helping others is central to one's life purpose. And, fourth, a Personal Revelation perspective, meaning finding answers for oneself through direct communication with God.²

As a people, we have the tendency to assume that baptismal covenants result in a group alignment of these perspectives, where we share the weight and prioritization of each perspective uniformly. We tend to overlook the fact that spiritual personalities come in as many forms as earthly personalities, with some perspectives more naturally and easily exercised than others. We do this especially with women. If we were to map my mother along these four different spiritual perspectives—à la Myers-Briggs or some other sort of personality test—I would think that the Personal Revelation and Community perspectives would jump off the charts for her, whereas perhaps the Motherhood perspective would be less emphasized. Although my mom wanted to have more children and couldn't, her sense of belonging wasn't jeopardized because she felt confident in her ability to contribute other, equally important perspectives. She somehow instinctively realized she couldn't be all things to all people, and her contributions to the group were still sufficient to be a full-fledged believer on her own terms. Like any successful work team where personality tests are so often used to ensure rich group dynamics, our global sisterhood thrives off of the varied spiritual strengths, perspectives, and contributions of our Church membership. Unfortunately, we too infrequently think or act along these lines.

2. Susan R. Madsen, "Latter-day Saint Women and Leadership: The Influence of Their Religious Worldview," *Journal of Leadership Education* 15, no. 2 (2016): 58–73.

If we were to similarly profile my radio friend, her spiritual personality might not have looked very different from my mom's in theory, but in practice the Motherhood perspective had trumped all others and seems to have given her a lopsided profile that wasn't in line with her authentic self. She let herself be too extensively defined by her Mormon womanhood rather than defining Mormon womanhood for herself. We Mormons aren't great at establishing or respecting personal boundaries, of saying, "This is what I can give to my membership and this is what my membership gives to me." We are afraid we will disappoint others or the Lord; we conflate perfection with cultural markers. Boundaries are not easy. But I believe that as we have more conversations about how to make inspired and loving boundaries with both other Church members and the institution, our sense of belonging will actually blossom rather than wither. We will be able to acknowledge the various spiritual personalities—those with eternal perspectives, those with motherhood perspectives, those with community perspectives, and those with personal revelation perspectives—and confidently accept that our spiritual personalities will result in varied offerings to the group. What one person brings to the table is something another cannot; what is comfortable for one person to accept blindly is not comfortable for another.

The famed research professor Brené Brown talks extensively about the relationship between boundaries and compassion, stating that the most compassionate people she has interviewed are also the most boundaried.³ And what does compassion have to do with belonging? Well, in this present and future age I'm describing, when belonging to Mormon womanhood is a choice to embrace and be embraced by others with whom we may have little else in common, compassion for each other is the very glue that will keep our global sisterhood tethered together. We are no longer tethered to each other by universal, traditional Americanized wifehood and motherhood. We are no longer tethered by what our

3. See, for example, Brené Brown, *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution.* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

kitchens look like or what we do at homemaking activities. Compassion for each other will be the defining characteristic of belonging, and that compassion flourishes when we have a personal understanding of what we bring to the table, what we don't bring to the table, what's okay for other people to do to us, and what's not okay. Brené Brown uses the BIG acronym to describe the relationship between boundaries and compassion: She asks herself, "What Boundaries need to be in place for me to stay in my Integrity and make the most Generous assumptions about the people I interact with?" Generosity, she claims, can't exist without boundaries, and in our modern global Church, belonging can't exist without generosity. "I'm not as sweet as I used to be," says Brown of the changes she made after establishing boundaries for herself. "But I'm far more loving."⁴

Imagine the sisterhood that could exist if we honestly defined our boundaries: which spiritual perspectives we excel at and which others we simply do not; which part of the institution's cultural practices enrich our lives and which do not. What if we were at peace with those boundaries and generously acknowledged that others are living with their own boundaries? The heart of our belonging is our covenant-keeping—the compassion that comes from embracing and being embraced.

I don't think I've ever quoted Dr. Seuss publicly before, but I'm going to here today. In his brilliant story "The Sneetches," Seuss explores the human tendency to look for external markers of belonging. The story tells about two groups of Sneetches who live on a beach; one group has stars on their bellies and the others don't. The ones with stars on their bellies think they are better than the plain-belly sort and actively exclude the Sneetches without stars from their group. There is a clear boundary dividing those who are in from those who are out, despite the fact that they are all Sneetches. A character named Sylvester McMonkey

4. Brené Brown, "Boundaries, Empathy, and Compassion," YouTube video, posted by "Kalli Laskari," Jun. 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLTLH3ZK56M>.

McBean arrives with a fantastical machine that will give stars to those Sneetches who have none, which is thrilling to the plain-bellies, until those who had stars at the start realize that it's no longer special to have a star, and that now *not* having a star needs to be the marker of belonging. Chaos ensues as each group of Sneetches pay to race through the machine having stars put on or taken off depending on what the other group does. Seuss writes in one of my favorite lines that the Sneetches ran through the machine "until neither the Plain nor the Star-Bellies knew / whether this one was that one . . . or that one was this one . . . / or which one was what one . . . or what one was who."

McBean leaves convinced that "No, you can't teach a Sneetch," but happily the story ends with the exhausted and penniless Sneetches unifying on the beach, realizing that there is no "in" and "out" but simply a shared identity to appreciate.⁵

Today, the Lord asks us to create unity without stars, without the behavioral or social or cultural markers we've relied on in the past to establish belonging.

It's a grand experiment, a latter-day challenge to maintain that cohesive global community without as many measurable standards. The Sneetches learn to do it after much struggle. Are we yet at the place where we can say, "I don't have a star, and that's okay" or "She doesn't have a star, and that's okay"? Can we rely on compassion and covenant-keeping as the only needed tether?

And by the way, it's never too late to craft a more personal definition of Mormon womanhood. A year after our correspondence, my radio friend is now enrolled in law school.

5. Dr. Seuss, *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1961).