

MISSING AND RESTORING MEANING

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Fifty years ago I was living in Cambridge, Massachusetts in a shotgun apartment just off Mass. Ave. at Central Square: 22 Magazine Street, Apt. 3. Spring 1971 marked the last months of my master of arts in teaching program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. I was still taking a few classes in English literature and completing a round of student teaching in a lively seventh-grade class at the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Dorchester, bordering Roxbury's all-Black neighborhood. My four roommates all worked in Cambridge or Boston. My bedroom fronted Magazine Street. I could see from my window the historic red brick Gothic revival First Baptist Church at Central Square, and I often listened for its chime striking the hour. Some events from that time are recorded in my erratic journal, but one event that never found its way into my journal has remained in mind: the sight of women marching down the street one chilly grey day, determined and enthusiastic. The group captured my attention. At the time, I may have read about them in the paper, but the purpose of their march did not lodge in my memory. My focus was on my teaching, my studies, my roommates, and my ward.

Only later did I realize I'd had a great view of feminism on the rise. It's possible that I witnessed the historic international women's day march of March 6, 1971, when throngs of women strode down Mass. Ave. en route to Memorial Drive in Cambridge to take over and occupy an old Harvard-owned building and establish the first women's center in the United States. A recent film entitled *Left on Pearl* documents

1. This essay was originally delivered as a Dialogue Fireside on February 21, 2021.

their march. It's possible that some women deliberately marched one street beyond Pearl to turn left on Magazine Street. I'm still trying to unearth exactly what I witnessed that cold spring day in 1971.

It seems, as one becomes older, wrote T. S. Eliot in one of his *Four Quartets*, from which I will draw from throughout my remarks,

It seems, as one becomes older,
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence—
Or even development: . . . but the sudden illumination—
We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form beyond any meaning
We can assign to happiness.

Granted, some ellipses there, but I think the intent is intact: *[I] had the experience but missed the meaning, and approach to the meaning restores the experience.*²

PAST, EXPERIENCE, MEANING, RESTORING—I'm not certain how all of these fit together, but I know they have significance for me. Experience and meaning are layered. Our comprehension of language, for example, is layered. I learn to read or repeat a few foreign words or phrases that I then can identify when I hear them. Gradually, more words come together and I can understand the meaning of what someone is saying. More gradually, for me, as I speak, I can be understood. My acquaintance with and understanding of women's history has also been layered. It, too, relates to my years spent in the Boston area.

Formidable Latter-day Saint women in Boston began researching Mormon women past and present and brought forth the iconic summer 1971 "Pink *Dialogue*."³ In spring 1973, the issue's editor, Claudia Bushman, and her cohorts held a gathering in her home, featuring Maureen Ursenbach as a guest speaker. Maureen had recently joined

2. T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," II, *Four Quartets*, from *T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 194.

3. *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1971).

Leonard Arrington, the new Church Historian, as part of his research and writing team known as the History Division within the newly organized Church Historical Department, which replaced the old Church Historian's Office.⁴

I heard Maureen speak and was fascinated that she had so much to say about Eliza R. Snow, whom I knew only as a writer of hymns. After returning to Utah that fall, I stumbled my way into an internship under Maureen's direction in Arrington's History Division. A total novice, I started cataloguing the poetry of Eliza R. Snow, a task that plunged me into various newspapers, including the *Woman's Exponent*, and into women's diaries, journals, letters, and autobiographies—the rich trove of women's personal writings at the archives.

I was excited as I excavated the experience of Latter-day Saint women. They were not my ancestors, but I felt a kinship with these sisters—single women (as I was), schoolteachers (as I had recently been), wives, stepmothers and mothers (as I soon became). I found what Claudia and others had already discovered: “Their stories help us to see possibilities for our own lives.”⁵ The experiences of other women's lives gave meaning to my own—meaning I had missed in my own experience

4. Leonard J. Arrington was appointed Church Historian in January 1972. Subsequently, what was formerly the Church Historian's Office became the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, with Arrington as head of research and writing in the department's History Division. See Leonard J. Arrington, “The Founding of the LDS Church Historical Department,” chap. 5 in *Adventures of a Church Historian* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Gregory A. Prince, “Church Historian,” chap. 14 in *Leonard J. Arrington and the Writing of Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016). The same department is now titled Church History Department.

5. Claudia Bushman, ed., *Mormon Sisters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Emmeline Press Ltd., 1976), preface, xii. Bushman's preface and introduction describe how the book emerged from the pioneering studies of the early Boston group. A new edition appeared in 1997: Claudia Bushman, ed., *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997).

until I began examining and gaining respect for their experiences. I found nobility, dignity and worth in each woman's life—no matter how different or difficult or simple or obscure. I valued every woman I came to know. I saw strength in their engagement with conflict and disappointment. I witnessed their personal inspiration, revelation, and access to the powers of heaven. I discovered the importance of making one's voice heard and the significance of unity and collective action.⁶

Wrote Eliot:

The past experience revived in the meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
But of many generations—⁷

For Latter-day women, the collective experience of many generations is found partly in Relief Society stories, histories, and documents. Seeking to understand that experience became a large part of my life's work as a historian. I was introduced to the nineteenth-century Relief Society through assisting Maureen Ursenbach (Beecher by then) with her study of Eliza R. Snow, secretary of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo and the society's second general president. I was introduced to twentieth-century Relief Society through preparing for oral history interviews with Belle Smith Spafford immediately following her 1974 release as the society's ninth president, a position she had held for nearly thirty years.⁸

6. Greater familiarity with women and their writings came from working on *Women's Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900*, edited by Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1982, 1991, 2000).

7. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," 194.

8. Belle S. Spafford interview, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1975–1976, OH 344, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, cited hereafter Church History Library.

Under the leadership of President Spafford, the Relief Society general board published a history of Relief Society in 1966.⁹ But the scholarly approach to history that came with Arrington's appointment as Church Historian precipitated new questions, new possibilities, and a new dive into the treasure trove of documents in the Church Archives (now referred to as the Church History Library). Among the most significant of those documents is the volume containing minutes of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo—a record of some thirty-three meetings held between 1842 and 1844.¹⁰ Joseph Smith addressed six of the women's meetings, and these sermons constitute the only contemporaneous record of teachings that Joseph Smith directed specifically to women as a group.

The precious record that left Nauvoo in the care of Eliza Snow remained with her and eventually found its way—via succeeding Relief Society presidents Zina D. H. Young and Bathsheba W. Smith—into the Church Historian's Office.¹¹ Actually, in 1855 Eliza herself had lent the book to the Church Historian's Office so that some of Joseph Smith's addresses could be incorporated into the history of the Church being compiled at the time. The editors of this new Manuscript History

9. *History of Relief Society, 1842–1966* (Salt Lake City: General Board of Relief Society, 1966). This was an updated edition of *Centenary of Relief Society, 1842–1942* (Salt Lake City: General Board of Relief Society, 1942).

10. "A Book of Records Containing the proceedings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo," or Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, 1842–1844, Church History Library.

11. A physical description of the Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book and its provenance appear in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History* edited by Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), document 1.2, Relief Society Minute Book, 23–24. Emmeline B. Wells made a manuscript copy of the minutes, and Susa Young Gates a typewritten copy. See Jill Mulvay Derr and Carol Cornwall Madsen, "Preserving the Record and Memory of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, 1842–92," *Journal of Mormon History* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 88–117.

selected excerpts from two of Joseph's most memorable sermons to include in their compilation but redacted them—that is, changed some wording in ways they believed clarified what Joseph was teaching. Revisions of diary entries and minutes were commonplace in producing what is known as the Manuscript History, later published by B. H. Roberts as *History of the Church* by Joseph Smith.¹² The Joseph Smith Papers website overviews source documents for that compiled history.¹³ Selected excerpts from the Nauvoo minutes, particularly from the March 17 founding meeting and Joseph's remarkable April 28 address (both in 1842) appeared in the *Woman's Exponent* and later in the *Relief Society Magazine*, as well as the 1942 and 1966 general board histories of the Relief Society. In most cases, however, the excerpts quoted or published were taken from the widely available *History of the Church* and not from the minute book itself.

Naturally, Maureen Ursenbach Beecher's study of Eliza R. Snow led her to the original minutes inscribed mostly in Eliza's own handwriting. Likewise, Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery were beginning their biography of Emma Hale Smith, the society's first president, and planned to review all of the minutes, not just those included in *History of the Church*.¹⁴ The minute book could be accessed at the Church

12. The full title of this work is *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Period I, History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet by Himself; An introduction and notes by B.H. Roberts*, 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974).

13. "Introduction to History, 1838–1856 (Manuscript History of the Church)," The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/intro/introduction-to-history-1838-1856-manuscript-history-of-the-church/>.

14. Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith, Prophet's Wife, "Elect Lady," Polygamy's Foe, 1804–1897* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1984).

Archives on microfilm, and as I recall, Linda made her own transcription of much of the record from that microfilm. Maureen was able to call upon the History Division's inimitable volunteer typist Edyth Jenkins Romney, who skillfully transcribed many original documents for the team. And this was the 1970s, when transcriptions were made on an IBM Selectric typewriter. The transcription in its entirety was completed by 1979.

What became clear as the transcription emerged was that the redactions made in the 1850s by Church Historians and approved by Brigham Young and the Twelve were significant. This came to light at a moment when the field of women's history was emerging and scholars were reassessing women's status in and contributions to politics, economics, the arts, and religion. Since Joseph had proclaimed the minutes to be the society's constitution and law, what did this constitution say about the religious authority of Latter-day Saint women?

Was Emma Smith's ordination as Relief Society president ordination to a priesthood office?

Why was she ordained to serve for life?

When Joseph turned the key to women, was he giving them a priesthood key or keys?

What does it mean to be organized "in the order of the priesthood" or "according to the order of God connected with the priesthood"?

Why did Joseph encourage women to exercise the gifts of the spirit: to speak in tongues, prophesy, and heal the sick?

What did he mean when Joseph "told the women he intended "to make of this Society a kingdom of priests an [as] in Enoch's day—as in Paul's day"?

Why did a member of the Nauvoo temple committee tell the women that their Relief Society "was raised by the Lord to prepare us for the great blessings which are for us in the House of the Lord in the Temple"?

What did Newel K. Whitney mean when, after receiving the endowment in May 1842, he told Relief Society women: "In the beginning God created man male and female and bestow'd upon man certain blessings peculiar to a man of God, of which woman partook, so that

without the female all things cannot be restor'd to the earth it takes all
to restore the Priesthood.”¹⁵

These solemn and weighty questions have now been churning for decades. Since the 1970s, the religious authority of Latter-day Saint women has been a matter of intense discussion, even debate. Lectures, conference presentations, newspaper and journal articles, and books aplenty have taken on these and other questions raised by the intersection of feminist consciousness and the Nauvoo Relief Society minutes and other women’s documents. These represent a small fragment of a complex past—a past that, as we have increasingly recognized, has long been oversimplified. In restoring fragments of the experiences of our first-generation sisters, we have been searching for answers and understanding—meanings missing or lost.

I feel as Eliot expressed:

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss,
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.¹⁶

For decades now, I along with other women and men have been engaged in “the trying,” that is, the effort to not only restore a record but revive experience and meaning that have been missing. I will share just a fragment or two from my own trying within the context of my work at the Church History Department and Brigham Young University.

Around 1976, as Maureen and I examined the original minutes, we discovered that Joseph Smith had not announced to women, as was

15. Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book (Doc. 1.2), entries for 17 and 30 [31] March, 28 April, 27 May 1842, 13 August 1843; Sarah M. Kimball, Reminiscence, March 17, 1882 (Doc. 4.10); Sarah M. Kimball, “The Relief Society,” Report of Relief Society Jubilee, March 17, 1892 (Doc. 4.28), all in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 43, 54–55, 59, 75–76, 115–16, 495, 597.

16. T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” V, *Four Quartets*, from *T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 189.

commonly celebrated at March 17 Relief Society birthday parties, “I now turn the key in your behalf” (as recorded in the *History of the Church*), but rather “I now turn the key to you” (as recorded in Eliza Snow’s minutes).¹⁷ To us, at the time, the difference in the two wordings seemed so significant that we felt that the Relief Society general board should be made aware of this and other mentions of priesthood in the Nauvoo minutes. So we approached members of the general board of Barbara Bradshaw Smith, tenth general president of the Relief Society. Some board members reacted as we had and decided to make a presentation to their General Authority advisers. They did, and their report was not well received.

Hmm—this was not as simple as we thought it would be. The words in the minutes did not speak for themselves. The new historical information being published by members of Arrington’s History Division team had already raised some hackles among certain Church leaders.¹⁸ The surging movement for women’s rights and equality seemed threatening to some. While stories of women’s faith were always welcomed, questions about precedents for Latter-day Saint women’s religious authority were not.

The History Division, which by now included Carol Cornwall Madsen, was not the only women’s history game in town. Interest, research, and publications regarding the history of Latter-day Saint women was mounting.¹⁹ Eager and able women began honing their

17. See Joseph Smith Discourses to the Nauvoo Female Relief Society, March 31 and April 28, 1842, as Revised for “History of Joseph Smith,” September 5 and 19, 1855 (Doc. 2.2) in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 207.

18. See Gregory A. Prince, “Storm Clouds,” chap. 20 in *Leonard J. Arrington and the Writing of Mormon History*.

19. An excellent contemporaneous overview of 1970s women’s history scholarship is Carol Cornwall Madsen and David J. Whittaker, “History’s Sequel: A Source Essay on Women in Mormon History,” *Journal of Mormon History* 6 (1979): 123–45.

undergraduate and graduate skills to write biographical essays or explore women's historical engagement in polygamy, suffrage, social services, and the arts. Some enrolled in graduate programs. A diversity of experiences was being revived by a great diversity of women. At the end of 1979, the year Edyth Jenkins Romney completed her transcription of the Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, President Barbara Smith advanced the idea that Relief Society needed a fuller account of its history, one that was both globally conscious and included new scholarship. Deseret Book, with the support of Elder G. Homer Durham, then executive director of the History Division, invited Janath Russell Cannon and me to co-author that history. With my family responsibilities expanding, I had just left the History Division. Janath—intelligent, energetic, and gracious, and formerly a counselor to Barbara Smith—had recently served with her husband among the first missionaries to go to Ghana and Nigeria. Now she and I would work together on the semi-official project. Meanwhile, Maureen would transfer with other History Division colleagues to the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at Brigham Young University and proceed with careful analysis of the Nauvoo Relief Society minutes. She presented her discoveries at both professional history conferences and early BYU women's conferences, though her hopes for annotating and publishing the Nauvoo Minute Book were not realized. However, Edyth Jenkins Romney's transcript received some covert circulation and Eliza's record of Joseph Smith's six sermons to the women were published in 1980 in *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, edited by Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook.²⁰

The decade of the 1980s witnessed expanding publications in a variety of venues that addressed the questions of women's religious authority, particularly their relationship to priesthood and their

20. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980).

exercise of spiritual gifts, especially the gift of healing. All of this was part of the effort to recover women's experiences and make meaning for a new generation.²¹

As I worked in connection with the Relief Society general presidency and board and Deseret Book, I was working on the inside, which presented me with a particular perspective, as well as certain privileges and limitations. Janath and I had a little room on the second floor of the Relief Society Building where we did our work and kept some files. This was before the building was remodeled to include offices for the leaders of all three women's organizations.²²

At the April 1984 conference of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, now Community of Christ, Church President Wallace B. Smith read an "inspired document" authorizing the ordination of women. The document, which also looked to the future building of a temple, was accepted by the conference and became RLDS Doctrine and Covenants section 156. The Mormon History Association was scheduled to meet in Provo that year, and the program committee decided sometime after the announcement that there should be a panel added to the program that would provide several perspectives on this "inspired document." I was asked to participate on the panel along with Paul M. Edwards and L. Madelon Brunson, both of whom are RLDS. Since MHA at that time was usually held in mid-May, the invitation gave me just two or maybe three weeks to put together a response from the Latter-day Saint perspective. I felt totally inadequate and unsure of

21. Todd Compton provides a significant historiographical overview in "The New Mormon Women's History," in *Excavating Mormon Pasts: The New Historiography of the Last Half Century*, edited by Newell G. Bringhurst and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2004), chap. 12, 273–302.

22. 76 North Main Street, Salt Lake City, Utah. Remodeling of the building was completed in 1986. Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), 387–88.

what to say, especially given the tensions regarding women's authority that were so present at that time. I'm sure Carol Madsen's extraordinary essay on Mormon women and the temple was at least drafted, and I know I drew from that as well as from the Nauvoo minutes.²³ The little miracle for me came when one morning I walked into the second-floor room I shared with Janath. She had not yet arrived, so I was alone. On the table lay a stack of bound copies of the *Relief Society Magazine*, several years' worth. This was curious because they had not been there before. I picked up the volume on top—number 46 (1959). As I was thumbing through it, the October 1958 Relief Society conference talk by Joseph Fielding Smith caught my eye: "Relief Society—An Aid to the Priesthood." I'm not sure this talk would seem remarkable by today's standards, but for me it was the official voice I needed. It gave me permission to say what I wanted to say—to be true to the scholarship as I understood it while speaking "within the bounds" that would keep me from contradicting what General Authorities had taught. Here are a couple of quotations from the Joseph Fielding Smith talk. His words combined with the Nauvoo Relief Society minutes really became the backbone of my MHA panel remarks, later published in *Dialogue*.²⁴

You sisters who labor in the House of the Lord can lay your hands upon your sisters, and with divine authority, because the Lord recognizes positions which you occupy. A person may have authority given to him, or a sister to her, to do certain things in the Church that are binding and absolutely necessary for our salvation, such as the work that our sisters do in the House of the Lord. They have authority given unto

23. Carol Cornwall Madsen, "Mormon Women and the Temple: Toward a New Understanding," in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, edited by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 80–110.

24. Jill Mulvay Derr, "An Endowment of Power: The LDS Tradition," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 3 (Fall 1984): 17–21. The same issue includes comments by the other panelists: Paul M. Edwards, "RLDS Priesthood: Structure and Process" and L. Madelon Brunson, "Stranger in a Strange Land: A Personal Response to the 1984 Document."

them to do some great and wonderful things, sacred to the Lord, and binding just as thoroughly are the blessings that are given by the men who hold the Priesthood.

You [sisters], through your faithfulness and your obedience, will find your place in the kingdom of God when it is established in its fulness and righteousness. . . . It is within the privilege of the sisters of this Church to receive exaltation in the kingdom of God and receive authority and power as queens and priestesses, and I am sure if they have that power they have some power to rule and reign. Else why would they be priestesses?²⁵

I believe President Oaks has in recent years quoted this talk, but in 1984 it wasn't out there.²⁶ Not that my remarks at the MHA conference were of any lasting importance to anyone but me, but they undergirded my hopes and framed my perspective in writing the history of Relief Society and the work that I've done in subsequent years.

Barbara Smith's successor, Barbara Woodhead Winder, eleventh general president of the Relief Society, also lent her support to the writing of the history, which took many more years than we ever imagined. Janath and I agreed that I would write the history up to 1921, and she would write later-twentieth-century chapters. There was no way I could deal with the nineteenth-century Relief Society without featuring women speaking in tongues, prophesying, and healing. Linda King Newell's study of women's gifts of the spirit—"A Gift Given, a Gift Taken"—had appeared in 1981 and precipitated widespread discussion and concern, along with a profound sense of loss.²⁷ One day I went to talk to Barbara Winder about the fact that I would be including

25. Joseph Fielding Smith, "Relief Society—An Aid to the Priesthood," *Relief Society Magazine* 46 (Jan. 1959): 4–6.

26. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood," Apr. 2014, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2014/04/the-keys-and-authority-of-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

27. Linda King Newell, "A Gift Given, A Gift Taken: Washing, Anointing, and Blessing the Sick among Mormon Women," *Sunstone* 6, no. 4 (Sept./Oct. 1981): 16–25; revised as "Gifts of the Spirit: Women's Share," in *Sisters in Spirit*, 110–50.

examples of some difficult subjects including plural marriage and women's healing. She spoke of the concern expressed by male Church leaders because they simply did not have the information to answer the questions then being raised by women. She counseled me to craft a narrative that helped everyone understand both the practice of women's healing and the end of the practice. She was gracious and understanding and invited me to kneel with her in prayer. Janath and I got along splendidly, but we did not always agree on how or how much to feature such questions, so I felt encouraged by Barbara Winder's support. I likewise received remarkable encouragement from President Winder's successor, Elaine Low Jack, who, with her counselors Aileen Clyde and Chieko Okazaki, was eager to familiarize herself with the minutes and the history as her presidency and board looked forward to 1992 and the sesquicentennial Relief Society celebration. They made extensive use of the minutes. *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* was published toward the end of the sesquicentennial year.²⁸ That would not have been possible if Maureen Ursenbach Beecher had not agreed to become a third author in 1988 just before my husband Brooke and I took our family away for two years to Switzerland, where he taught at an international business school. Incidentally, Janath and her husband Ted were then serving as president and matron of the Frankfurt Temple, so we connected in Germany and continued some work on the history there while Maureen pressed forward in Utah.

I want to emphasize the support of women leaders such as Presidents Smith, Winder, and Jack, as well as their successors. Some may consider them to be unaware or unable to understand the questions that trouble their sisters. My experience leads me to believe that they are concerned and searching and pushing forward, often more forcefully than some of us realize.

Women of Covenant received mixed reviews. *A nice book. A reference book. Reminds me of homemaking meeting. I know all the early history. Only the twentieth-century information was new to me.* Some

28. Derr, Cannon, and Beecher, *Women of Covenant*.

saw the history as a record of significant achievements by dedicated women across decades. Some as an accurate representation of Latter-day Saint women's lives. Others as, one scholar noted, "a litany of loss."²⁹

This pervasive sense of loss was hard to counter. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Relief Society women were engaged in significant collective action economically and politically. For a time, they stored grain, they ran a hospital and a newspaper, and for fifty years they directed the Church's social services. Their vivacity, creativity, intelligence, spirituality, and confidence shine through in the pages of the *Woman's Exponent* and the *Relief Society Magazine*. Committed to their families, they maintained a public presence. Still, over time some of the patterns of organization and practice outlined in the Nauvoo Relief Society minutes were tempered, or, like women's healing, terminated. The correlation movement of the 1960s and 1970s centralized, standardized, and simplified in ways that diminished local autonomy and collective responsibility and visibility while at the same time making possible the Church's international growth. I recall talking with Maureen in her Smith Institute office at BYU. We discussed how to frame a history filled with considerable disappointments for women, the vast majority of whom still carried on and moved forward. We decided that only their faith must have allowed them to endure what might have been just as difficult, if not more, than wet and wintry trekking and devastating death. They had determined to maintain the covenants they had made to God and to one another. That discussion spawned our title: *Women of Covenant*. This was one part of the "trying" that Eliot wrote about: the fight to recover what has been lost—both the experience and the meaning.

Writing a Relief Society history that quoted the minutes and acknowledged changes over time was one part of the recovery effort. Maureen moved to Canada and left further labor on publishing those

29. Reviews centered on loss include Cheryl May, "A Diminished Thing?" and Peggy Pascoe, "A History of Two Stories," both in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 235–45.

seminal Nauvoo minutes to Carol Cornwall Madsen and me. With encouragement from Richard E. Turley Jr. at the Church History Department, we began to work on Eliza's record as part of a larger collection of Relief Society documents covering the society's first fifty years, from its 1842 founding to its Jubilee Year in 1892. With this approach, we could carefully document how ideas, policies, and practices developed over time. This iteration of the work began at BYU's Smith Institute with an initial team of women that included Carol and me, along with Jennifer Reeder, Cherry Bushman Silver, and Sheree Maxwell Bench. Then in 2005, when the Smith Institute was disbanded and a large number of the faculty moved to the Church History Department in Salt Lake City to continue work on the Joseph Smith Papers, I moved with them and took the Relief Society project with me. The groundwork had been laid for a new kind of department with the new Church Historian's Press set to publish the Joseph Smith Papers and other essential Church documents and, further, to have a strong online presence with digital offerings, as well as an expanded international outreach. Elder Marlin K. Jensen had been called as Church Historian and demonstrated his commitment to accuracy, transparency, and accessibility. As I took on new administrative responsibilities at the department, my work on our collection of Relief Society documents was put on the back burner. When happily and blessedly relieved of administrative duties three years later, I returned to the half-finished project. Then, there was a different kind of miracle, a blessing that most historians do not receive—an expanded team of experts. Kate Holbrook and Matthew J. Grow joined Carol and me as co-editors, and extraordinarily competent research assistants provided not just the Nauvoo minutes but additional documents the annotation and cross references so greatly needed. Specialists at the Joseph Smith Papers published the Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book online as part of their online documents in the JSP administrative records series. Superb editors tightened an unwieldy manuscript. Church Historian Marlin K. Jensen and his assistants furnished counsel, encouragement, and essential advocacy.

All of this made possible the 2016 publication of the Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book as the central document in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History*.³⁰ For me, this fulfilled many years of hoping and searching and trying. Not that the Nauvoo minutes hadn't been out there before, but now they were widely and accurately available to Church members and leaders around the world and accessible to outside scholars. The new tome placed them in context. It was cause for celebration. Did this publication have a meaningful impact? It did, but not the Nauvoo minutes or the *First Fifty Years* alone. I witnessed the institutional cooperation and support across many years that made publication possible. But other lectures, articles, books, blogs, and podcasts from those working outside the institution also had a great effect. My husband, a longtime teacher of organization development, assures me that lasting change comes as a result of both internal and external forces. I respect those who have labored independently without the kind of institutional support I have had across the years, nor the institutional restrictions. Their freedom has allowed them to raise and explore significant questions regarding women's religious authority, and their commitment prompted them to do so most often at their own time and expense. External and internal forces make change happen.

And changes have happened. Church leaders' mentions of and comments regarding of women's connection to women's priesthood power and authority through callings and temple ordinances have increased in recent years.³¹ I loved the comment of the Primary general president Joy D. Jones at the April 2020 general conference: "My

30. Derr, Madsen, Holbrook, and Grow, *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society*.

31. See, for example, Oaks, "Keys and Authority of the Priesthood"; Linda K. Burton, "Priesthood Power—Available to All," *Ensign*, June 2014, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2014/06/priesthood-power-available-to-all?lang=eng>; Russell M. Nelson, "Spiritual Treasures," Oct. 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/10/36nelson?lang=eng>.

personal admission today is that as a woman I didn't realize, earlier in my life, that *I* had access, through my covenants, to the power of the priesthood. Sisters, I pray that we will recognize and cherish priesthood power."³² I am grateful to have witnessed a lot of progress over the past fifty years, but particularly over the past ten years. I acknowledge that this isn't enough or soon enough or fast enough for some.

Let me turn back to my view from a Magazine Street window in 1971. I was aware of the march, but I did not grasp its meaning. In some ways, across the years, I have relived that same unwitting view from inside the window—a kind of obliviousness. Sometimes the meaning that is missing is simple acknowledgement of our own unawareness of others, of their perspective, of their effort, or of their pain. To the extent that I can claim that unawareness, I hope to repent and to be, as Eliot wrote, “restored by that refining fire” and “renewed, transfigured in another pattern.”³³ That refinement to a higher, nobler pattern is possible only through Jesus Christ. For all of us, “there is only the trying.” Ultimately, as we come to him, as promised in 2 Nephi 27:35: “They also that erred in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine.” Jesus Christ is the Holy One who brings us to wholeness, line upon line, grace for grace. John's testimony of Christ as recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 93 has always had a particular resonance for me.

And he received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness;

And thus he was called the Son of God, because he received not of the fulness at the first. . . .

I give unto you these sayings that you may understand and know how to worship, and know what you worship, that you may come unto the Father in my name, and in due time receive of his fulness.

32. Joy D. Jones, “An Especially Noble Calling,” Apr. 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/04/14jones?lang=eng>.

33. T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” II, III, *Four Quartets*, from *T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 205.

For if you keep my commandments you shall receive of his fulness, and be glorified in me as I am in the Father; therefore, I say unto you, you shall receive grace for grace.³⁴

The meaning that God restores to us individually or collectively is always beyond our imagining. As Eliot expressed it:

And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
And is altered in fulfillment.³⁵

I've experienced and celebrated that altered fulfillment on more than one occasion.

Some of Eliot's most well-known lines move me toward my conclusion:

In my beginning is my end. . . .
What we call the beginning is often the end. . . .
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.³⁶

On Sunday, April 28, 2019, my husband Brooke and I were sitting in a sacrament meeting in Torrey, Utah, listening to two penetrating talks on prayer. Bursting into my mind came the memory of me as a girl kneeling in prayer atop my bed, gazing at the set of six or seven small dolls attached to the wall above my head. They represented some of the First Ladies of the United States dressed in the fashions of their day. For several nights, I prayed that that wall would open up and let me

34. Doctrine and Covenants 93:13–14, 19–20.

35. Eliot, "Little Gidding," 201.

36. Eliot, "East Coker," I, and "Little Gidding," V, *T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 182, 207, 208.

enter their world. As I sat in that Torrey sacrament meeting, I had the “sudden illumination” that across decades, I had actually entered the world of the remarkable women of the past. Finding meaning in their experience had become my life’s work.

God answers our prayers. His promise is sure. Jesus Christ brings us to wholeness and to holiness. Human progress, even within the Church is not undeterred, but I know that “the eternal purposes of the Lord shall roll on, until all his promises shall be fulfilled.”³⁷

37. Mormon 8:22.

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