

## ASSUMING POWER

Linda Hoffman Kimball

I am the youngest of three sisters, reared as a Protestant in the Illinois suburbs of Chicago. My mother was a nurse who returned to working when I was in my late elementary school years. Her mother was a nurse, too, a Swedish immigrant who arrived in Rockford, Illinois, at the age of ten in 1890.

My mother was creative, generous, and hospitable. Throughout my school years, we hosted guests through various international programs from Germany, Argentina, Japan, and Iran. When I was twelve, my sisters, mother, and I traveled to see my mother's relatives who still lived in Sweden and then went on a whirlwind tour of Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, France, and England.

Mom had the loudest voice and strongest opinions in the household. She was determined and committed to her sometimes eccentric opinions. She had a unique approach to allergies, believing that any ailment—from car sickness to cancer—could be attributed to something ingested or inhaled from the environment. For example, she was convinced that my unsettled tummy after car rides to my grandparents' house in Chicago (which I attribute to being squashed between my parents in the front seat and driving forty-five minutes on bumpy roads) was a reaction to my grandmother's gas stove and gas heating, to which I was surely too sensitive.

Armed with her strong beliefs, Mom petitioned the school board in our town to allow me to go to high school a year early because the middle school being built would have gas heating, which she insisted would have a deleterious effect on my health. I went to high school a year

early. After earning straight As my first term, the school board decided I was officially a freshman and didn't have to do any catch-up work.

Because there were no boys in our family, I just assumed that girls could do whatever they wanted to if they put their minds and hearts into it. My dad was as good a chef as my mother, and Sunday dinners were always his delicious domain. They both had honorable jobs making the world better. Gender didn't count for much other than which bathroom I used at school. And as far as racial distinctions went, and as far as Christ was concerned, that had surely been settled long ago. I brought home 1960s civil rights songs from junior Bible camp and sang them joyfully: "And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free!"

I read the scriptures as my pastors and my own questions led me—seeking truth from the Good Book (and balking at some of Paul's wilder sexist remarks just as I balked at some of my mother's odd conclusions). The words to John Oxenham's hymn "In Christ There Is No East or West" led me along my path:

In Christ there is no east or west,  
in him no south or north,  
but one great fellowship of love  
throughout the whole wide earth.  
Join hands, disciples of the faith,  
whate'er your race may be.  
All children of the living God  
are surely kin to me.

I was a faithful Christian girl who had, as the Protestant parlance pronounced, a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ." (I have been Jesus' girl for as long as I have conscious memories. I still am.) I was very involved in our church's youth group and served as its president. Despite it still being the 1960s, I seriously considered becoming a pastor "when I grew up"—at that time a rare and radical profession for women.

During my senior year in high school, I became close friends with an LDS girl in my class whose family had recently moved to our

town from Utah. She and I found we had a lot of common ground in matters of faith. She invited me to her house for dinner and to meet the missionaries. When they asked me if I wanted to learn even more about Jesus Christ, I said, “Of course!”

Ten months later, as a freshman at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, I felt I would never get a satisfying answer to the dilemma in front of me: did God want me to become Mormon? I was happy and fulfilled in my Protestant faith. The concept the Mormons (as they were then called) taught that the gospel contains all truth<sup>1</sup> was exciting and compelling. It was not a question of “by their fruits ye shall know them” because in terms of quality of character, I recognized there were spiritual giants in each place. There were also the kooky kind of “fruits” on full display in both traditions, too.

During an October visit from two missionaries at my freshman college dorm I had a pivotal experience that gave me a jolt of grace and love beyond anything I had previously experienced. It granted clarity that assured me God wanted me to become a Mormon.

At first, I interpreted the transcendence of that encounter as “Yes, it’s true!” Over the course of the intervening decades, I have come to realize that I didn’t (and still don’t) understand what the “it” in that exclamation refers to and what the adjective “true” fully means. Regardless of my constant wrestling with words and their meanings, I still consider that experience in my dorm room as among the “true-est” experiences I have ever had. It changed my life if not my blood type and continues to shape my journey of faith.

After I waited for two years (attending Cambridge’s university wards and even holding callings), my parents were persuaded that this was not just an adolescent whim and allowed me to be baptized, three days shy of my nineteenth birthday.

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1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 16, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-brigham-young/chapter-2?lang=eng>.

The LDS women I first encountered in New England were dynamic, eager, outspoken, questing, accomplished women. These included, among others, Claudia Bushman, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Judy Dushku, Grethe Peterson, Nancy Dredge, Jill Mulvay, Carrel Sheldon, Cheryl DiVito, Judy Gilliland, and Mimmu Sloan. A half-generation older than I, they were the embodiment of what I thought all Mormon women (and men, for that matter) would be—articulate, advocates of equal rights for all, and full of faith in Christ.

As part of an institute class these women researched the lives of the nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint foremothers, compiled their results, and published a book called *Mormon Sisters* in 1976.<sup>2</sup> They also launched a new iteration of the nineteenth-century periodical *Woman's Exponent* for LDS sisters and christened it *Exponent II*—basing it on the “twin pedestals of Mormonism and Feminism” as they had seen exemplified in the lives of Eliza R. Snow, Emma Hale Smith, Patty Bartlett Sessions, Martha Hughes Cannon, Emmeline B. Wells, and others.

I remember walking past an institute class in Cambridge. I heard Judy Dushku saying that when her colleagues at the college where she taught asked her, “How can you be a Mormon *and* a feminist?” she replied, “Of course I’m a feminist! It’s *because* I’m Mormon!” To me that sounded just right. Shouldn’t everyone—male and female—be a feminist if it means allowing each individual to achieve “the measure of their creation”?

Soon I was illustrating for *Exponent II*, then writing articles and eventually a column, and attending or presenting at Exponent retreats in lovely New England settings.

In September 1979, President Spencer W. Kimball gave an address called “The Role of Righteous Women.” In it he said:

Much of the major growth that is coming to the Church in the last days will come because many of the good women of the world (in whom there is often such an inner sense of spirituality) will be drawn to the Church in large numbers. This will happen to the degree that

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2. Claudia Bushman, ed., *Mormon Sisters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Emmeline Press Limited, 1976).

the women of the Church reflect righteousness and articulateness in their lives and to the degree that the women of the Church are seen as distinct and different—in happy ways—from the women of the world.<sup>3</sup>

I wanted to be “righteous” and “articulate.” The way I understood it, LDS women I knew weren’t “claiming” power from anyone else’s domain. They were examples of *owning* the power inherent in them as daughters and heirs of God.

When, as a new mother, I moved with my husband Chris to Hyde Park on Chicago’s South Side, I met more examples of women (and men) who understood the amazing potential God has invested in each of us. Throughout the decades I discovered soulmates among more LDS women. My sister-friend Cathy Stokes, an African American convert to the Church, was straight-talking, outspoken, committed to the gospel (and Gospel music)—and was not-to-be-messed-with. Others continued to lead, guide, and walk beside me as examples of Christlike women-in-action.

Cathy Stokes is the one who introduced me to a hymn from her previous Baptist tradition. I often hum and sing its refrain. It’s called “Plenty Good Room”:

Plenty good room, plenty good room,  
plenty good room in my Father’s kingdom,  
Plenty good room, plenty good room,  
Just choose your seat and sit down.

Over the course of many decades of Church membership I have, of course, discovered that sisters in the Church vary in their attitudes and confidence in recognizing, owning, and asserting their God-given powers. Not all women were nurtured on the laps of confident, committed women. Not all of them grew up under the influence of strong-minded mothers in a house full of females and a non-hierarchical father. There are aspects of our LDS culture that subtly—or

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3. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Role of Righteous Women,” Oct. 1979, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1979/10/the-role-of-righteous-women?lang=eng>.

directly from the pulpit—have been tainted by “the philosophies of men mingled with scripture.”<sup>4</sup> There remains a lot of long-standing toxic rhetoric that women are somehow “less than,” subservient, or in need of covenantal “safety hatches.”

Some feel that “smashing the patriarchy” is the ultimate goal of what they define as “feminism.” That is not my opinion. Each of us—female and male—have power given us to serve and lead, speak out and nurture, preach doctrine, and clean the bathrooms in the ward building. I’m sure there are others who feel that distinct rules and roles must be enumerated and enforced. I generally diffuse the discontent that stirs in me by reminding myself that each of us approaches life from our own quadrant of the Myers–Briggs personality scale. Some like rules. Some function better with hazier boundaries. (That doesn’t resolve all the hurdles I come across in my life as a committed misfit among the Latter-day Saints, but it provides enough buffer of charity to keep me moving forward.)

As I have assumed from my earliest years, Christ is our example. Can we hear him calling us as he did in 3 Nephi 10:4: “How oft have I gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and have nourished you?” I am persuaded that part of my (and, I believe, our Church’s) current task is to ensure that there is, in fact, “plenty good room” in God’s kingdom. Let us acknowledge our power from our divine heritage. Then let’s choose our seat and sit down.

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4. Hartman Rector Jr., “You Shall Receive the Spirit,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1974, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1974/01/you-shall-receive-the-spirit?lang=eng>.

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