

## GUIDES TO HEAVENLY MOTHER

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When *Dialogue* asked us to write a personal article about our process of writing *A Girl's Guide to Heavenly Mother* (D Street Press, 2020), we were delighted. The work *Dialogue* does is so important that it was quite a compliment to be included. For this contribution, we decided we would take the opportunity to interview ourselves. We have done lots of podcasts and interviews, but sometimes as an interviewee you just don't get to say everything you wished you would have, or you don't get asked questions you *want* to answer. So, below is our very own self-guided Q&A, for your reading pleasure.

Q: Why did you start writing children's books?

BETHANY: We're fond of this quip from a wise fictional gas-station attendant aptly named Socrates: "The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new."<sup>1</sup> McArthur and I get all fired up about so many good things in the gospel, but we are also pretty feisty about wanting change in the Church—first and foremost a wider embrace of Heavenly Mother and a greater recognition of the power and divinity of women (so that we can live up to our theology of the divine partnership of Heavenly Parents). So we had to decide: we could rant and rave about the lack of strong, spiritual women in our church curriculum and conversations, or we could get busy and create stories to help fill that void. And with the inspiration to invest in the rising generation, we knew that children's books were the

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1. Dan Millman, *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1980; repr. CreateSpace, 2009), 175.

best place to start. So we set out writing in hopes of illuminating and building the next generation of Latter-day Saints to have a fuller sense of feminine divinity.

MCARTHUR: Plus, Bethany and I both have three daughters. We want the world to be a different place for them to grow up in. Look around. Is this a world whose policies, culture, governments, and relationships honor women? (Hint: no.) Meg Conley has recently written about how the pandemic made the lack of respect and support for women's domestic work abundantly clear.<sup>2</sup> Gabrielle Blair's essay on birth control elucidates the gender bigotry enmeshed in the system.<sup>3</sup> Statistics on how much women are paid (or not paid) make the gender pay gap clear. And, frankly, these are just the systems within my own country. Around the world, women face discrimination and are given second-class status. If we want to sway the world, then we need to teach children correct principles.

Q: Wait! You had an *agenda* when writing these books?

MCARTHUR: Um, why, *yes*. An agenda simply means to have an intent or a goal, an "underlying ideological plan."<sup>4</sup> Our plan is that we need our children's books to reflect our doctrine. And, trust us, writing children's books is not lucrative or glamorous enough to spend years of your life doing it for simple kicks. In fact, every year we consider retiring. And then we look at each other and ask, "Is there anything more the world needs from us?"

Now, sometimes people appreciate our agenda and sometimes they don't. That's fine. It actually doesn't matter. Not everyone needs to buy

2. Meg Conley, "America Doesn't Care about Mothers," *Gen*, Aug. 19, 2020, <https://gen.medium.com/america-doesnt-care-about-mothers-8dfc1113f7bc>.

3. Gabrielle Blair, "Men Cause 100% of Unwanted Pregnancies," *Human Parts*, Sept. 24, 2018, <https://humanparts.medium.com/men-cause-100-of-unwanted-pregnancies-eb0e8288a7e5>.

4. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "agenda (*n.*)," accessed Nov. 1, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agenda>.

every book. (Though, if they did, then at least the lucrative angle would change.) What matters is that 1) we feel we are using our talents for good in the world and 2) we get enough feedback from others who feel their life has been positively impacted for us to think our efforts were worth it.

Sooooo, so far, we have always felt there was one more . . .

Q: Why did you choose each other as creative partners?

BETHANY: If you were to meet McArthur, you'd quickly want to come up with a reason to dive into a project with her. She's a helluva storyteller, wicked smart, and doesn't take no for an answer (I've nicknamed her the Holy Harasser). Plus, she co-owned a communications company and knows how to get shizam done! McArthur and I had been neighbors in Washington DC, where we both served with the youth in urban wards and came to know how vital role models are. And she just happened to be visiting me in Mumbai, India when my almost-three-year-old daughter, Simone, asked the earnest question "Where are all of the stories of the girls?" after I finished reading her a children's scripture book. So a dose of friendship and fate turned McArthur into my coauthor.

MCARTHUR: Well, I was lucky Bethany called me up. And, after six books, I have to say I couldn't ask for a better partner. I like working with people who are forces of nature—I want to grab onto their tornado whirlwind and go for the wild ride of their vision. And, P.S., it helps if they also happen to have mad editing skills to balance the deluge I drop onto a page.

Q: Why did you decide to write books about Heavenly Mother?

BETHANY: From the get-go, I wanted to write about Heavenly Mother. *Our Girls Who Choose God* series was a great warm-up, getting readers comfortable with matriarchs and prophetesses and women judges and generals. The women from the scriptures and Church history were dynamo, but they were still human. Why not introduce girls to their

ultimate female role model, Heavenly Mother? I have a master's degree in public health and have worked on food security and nutrition programs in many communities in the US and around the world. But in my early thirties, I started to feel *spiritually* malnourished. Everything I worshiped and revered and thought of as sacred was male. Surely, this wasn't a balanced diet that would promote my well-being. And as I became a mother and started having daughters, I felt compelled to come up with new meals, new recipes to nourish my girls' spiritual development. I couldn't just feed them the patriarchy I had grown up on. We needed to whip up a big serving of Heavenly Mother to have a more balanced spiritual feast. My own soul, my girls, and the whole world felt like it was starving for Her.

MCARTHUR: When I was twelve years old, someone explained to me how a traditional marriage and family worked. And I thought, "Why would I possibly sign up for that? To be an inherently, divinely appointed second-class human? And why would I believe in Heavenly Parents who think that?"

Turns out—They don't.

Traditional, for the record, is a terrible term. There is no inherent worth in something existing simply because it already does. Traditions can be beautiful and empowering, and traditions can be false and demeaning. Traditional marriages have included all those aspects. On the negative side, a "traditional" family has included such things as children not speaking until they are spoken to, women manipulating men (as was thoroughly detailed in Helen Andelin's *Fascinating Womanhood* and often taught in Relief Society), corporal punishment, unrighteous dominion, unequal partnership, and more.<sup>5</sup>

Bethany's husband started using a different phrase: a divine marriage. And that's a fabulous term. A divine marriage and family are based on mutual love and support, an understanding that everyone's

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5. Helen B. Andelin, *Fascinating Womanhood* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1963).

growth and development are worth investing in, and righteous partnership, which is modeled by our Heavenly Parents.

The divine model for marriage should be based on what we know of our Heavenly Parents' relationship. Your first thought might be, "But what do we really know?" Turns out, after we did all the research for these books, *plenty*.

And once we saw that there was a lot of information to construct a new divine model, we knew it had to be told. Young children—both girls and boys—needed to be shown this model as something to aspire to.

Q: Why does Heavenly Mother matter?

BETHANY: We Mormons speak so much about the fullness of the gospel. But to me, it really feels like we're wrestling with just half. The splendid poet Carol Lynn Pearson writes that we can't have holiness without wholeness.<sup>6</sup> And to me, wholeness is only found as we embrace Heavenly Mother and welcome Her into our collective and personal worship and spiritual lives. To have a fullness of the gospel, we need *both* our Heavenly Parents. Can you imagine what would change if we disregarded the cultural baggage of a "heavenly hush" surrounding Her and instead shouted out a "heavenly hallelujah"? Imagine how young girls in Primary would feel if we included Heavenly Mother into the hymn: "I am a child of God / and *They* have sent me here."<sup>7</sup> Imagine how teenage girls would think of their bodies if they fully knew that God has breasts and hips and curves. Imagine how newly endowed sister missionaries would serve if they saw Heavenly Mother as part of the creative process in the temple ceremony. Imagine how young professional women could work in the world knowing that Heavenly Mother is a creative powerhouse. Imagine a new bride beaming after a

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6. "Finding Mother God — Carol Lynn Pearson," interview by Aubrey Chaves, *Faith Matters*, Sept. 13, 2020, <https://faithmatters.org/finding-mother-god-carol-lynn-pearson/>.

7. See "I Am a Child of God," *Hymns*, no. 301.

sealing ceremony performed by a woman and man, celebrating a union in the image of our Heavenly Parents. Imagine how new mothers would feel giving birth and nurturing children, knowing about a Heavenly Mother equal in might and glory! And the list goes on and on . . .

MCARTHUR: But let's be clear: the truth of Heavenly Mother doesn't just benefit girls, it's also vital for boys! The prophet Spencer W. Kimball spoke often about Heavenly Mother. My personal theory on this is that because he lost his earthly mother at a young age, he was craving a mother's love, and Heavenly Mother could help fill that void.

Originally, Bethany and I were only going to write *A Girl's Guide*. We have daughters. We write "girls' stories." But a woman reached out to us—a mother of five boys—and asked that we include boys. That wouldn't work for *A Girl's Guide*—there were very specific reasons that we needed to discuss this doctrine in a female context. Yet the long list of reasons she offered was compelling. Boys can be blessed by the perfect love of a divine Mother.

Boys need to understand that girls are their equal—in the classroom, at work, in family life, at church, in the world. Boys need Heavenly Mother to more fully grasp the divine role of women.

Both boys and girls need to learn that the equality of their Heavenly Parents is the divine model in order to avoid the pitfalls of a skewed world. A few seemingly disparate examples come to mind:

- A recent study from Brigham Young University highlighted the overwhelming inequity of how men and women communicate in group projects. If these students understood the divine model of women and men working together, would those communication patterns be different? I think so.
- A book I recently read about Mongol queens described how their accomplishments were *literally* cut out of the official records.<sup>8</sup> The scrolls were sliced to remove their names, their roles, their actions. The world has removed the glory of women; truth can restore it.

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8. Jack Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens: How the Daughters of Genghis Khan Rescued His Empire* (New York: Crown, 2010).

- Having lived almost a decade in India, it is readily apparent that even in the present-day world, the glory of women is not honored. India practices female infanticide and has one of the highest female suicide rates in the world. But let us not overlook the sexism in our own backyard, including unequal pay in the professional world and unequal workload at home.

BETHANY: And knowledge of Heavenly Mother benefits not only individuals but also communities and even countries. Our Heavenly Parents exemplify the divine model of equal partnership. As Valerie Hudson and co-authors' work shows, the benefits of treating women more equitably are stunning.<sup>9</sup> In countries with higher gender equality, people live longer, there is less disease, less war, and higher levels of education. The divine model is equality. When we as humans follow a divine model, better things happen everywhere.

MCARTHUR: So why do we write these books? Why did we think it was worth highlighting these truths? To change ourselves, our families, and the world. You know. Just that.

Q: How did you choose the art for the guides?

BETHANY: McArthur was the genius behind gathering the art for the book, so I'll let her answer with all the details. But we both felt adamant that the art be expansive and widen our understanding of God, knowing that how we humans view God determines what we believe is sacred and supreme. If we believe only in a white, male God then of course whiteness and maleness become superior. And this has damaging effects. Living in Richmond, Virginia (the capital of the Confederacy) during the racial unrest and reckoning in the spring and summer of 2020, I saw up close the ugliness of white supremacy. We wanted our guides to be part of the solution to achieving racial justice.

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9. Valerie M. Hudson, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Mary Caprioli, and Chad F. Emmett, *Sex and World Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

MCARTHUR: We were incredibly blessed to receive the contributions of more than fifty artists. Most of the pieces in the book were done specifically for the book, which is a great risk and investment on the artists' side.

In my own immediate family, we have Polynesian, Haitian, Native American, East Indian, and a mix of European heritage. To show a Heavenly Mother as only white would be an appalling assertion. We wanted to ensure that as many people as possible who saw the book had an entrance point to relate to their own Heavenly Mother. So, in our book we have depictions of Heavenly Mother from artists in Cambodia, South Africa, Nigeria, Lebanon, Canada, Argentina, Qatar, and New Zealand. Heavenly Mother is depicted as Polynesian, African American, Native American. We have images that are very classical and images in the style of street art. In order to find such a wide range of talented artists, we were lucky to have the resources of the Church History Museum. Their international art competitions from the last fifteen years are available online, so we were able to cull many of our international artists from there.

Through this project, we've seen just how much art matters. When my husband (who is not of our faith) toured the Conference Center for the first time, he turned to the guide afterward and said, "Is your church a men's club? Sure looks like it." For the record, we had had zero conversations about gender and the Church—he was just observant. Later, when we published the *Girls Who Choose God* series, I thought it was an opportunity to change the face of the Conference Center. We heard that the Church leaders were aware of this quandary and were actively working to change it. We are happy to say that Kathleen Peterson's powerful images of women from the scriptures were some of the first art depicting women to hang at the Conference Center. For two years, girls could go to general conference and see themselves in these inspiring portraits. Now, we are happy to say that the first image of Heavenly Mother to appear on Temple Square was Caitlin Connolly's painting *In Their Image*, commissioned from the cover of our book, *Our*



*Heavenly Family, Our Earthly Families*. Images can reflect truth; they can also obscure it. Let's choose truth.

Q: Tell us about some of the art.

MCARTHUR: Every time someone asks me about my favorite artwork in the series, I answer differently because they all make me swoon. But, today, one of them is particularly on my mind. Laura Erekson created a portrait of Heavenly Mother by embedding objects in plaster. It is magnificent. A God with Her arms outstretched wide and open. And, what I love the best, Her crown, Her glory, is made of tools. Pliers, specifically.

The phrase comes to mind that we are our Heavenly Parents' "work and glory"—and what a powerful way to show that! And what a reassuring truth to understand—that in addition to a divine Brother's and Father's love, we also have a Mother's love!

BETHANY: Well, I am sitting here staring at Richard Lasisi Olagunju's Nigerian rendition of our Heavenly Parents. We needed a safe home for it until our art show in Provo in May 2021, so I happily volunteered my bedroom wall. It is about four feet tall, completely hand-beaded. Every day it serves as a bold reminder to me and my husband to work through our conflicts, reconcile, and aspire to a loving and full partnership. Plus, I need to up my hairdo game.

Q: Is there any significance to the colors on the cover of the *Girl's Guide*?

MCARTHUR: Why, yes. Thank you for asking. With these books, we actually got to decide the cover. That is not how the children's book world usually works. So, we decided that we wanted a color that carried all the celebration of life, vibrancy, and energy that we would imagine. What would represent that better than hot persimmon coral orange? (Plus, if you see Bethany's kitchen stools or my chaise lounge, you'd see we both live with that color too! Hmm, I just realized that Bethany's kitchen stools and my chaise each says quite a bit about our individual passions.)

BETHANY: Additionally, one of the most beautiful descriptions of Heavenly Mother came from a rabbi. He had a vision of Heavenly Mother in Her glory: “he saw Her dressed in Her robe woven out of light, more magnificent than the setting sun, and Her joyful countenance was revealed.”<sup>10</sup> For us, this bold color was a tribute to the vividness of the setting sun.

Q: Why did you choose a guide format for the books?

MCARTHUR: We wrestled with how to convey the abundance of information about Heavenly Mother in a way that was interactive and accessible for young people. Then, Bethany was inspired—a guidebook! Bethany and I are both travelers and have relished seeing the wide-reaching parts of our Heavenly Parents’ stunning planet, and guidebooks have been our fast friends along the way. Voilà! So, we sat down to see if that could work. And by sat down, I actually mean we Skyped, FaceTimed, WhatsApped—whatever technology could connect us from rural India to Richmond, Virginia, then Australia, Bhutan, South Africa, Greece, and more far-flung places as Bethany’s family worked their way around their global sabbatical. (You can see how some of these places now feature in the guidebook!)

BETHANY: And the guidebook format enabled us to highlight three different sections for our readers: first, a focus on the divine attributes of Heavenly Mother; second, discovering how Heavenly Mother teaches us magnificent truths about ourselves; and third, a call to action: use these sublime truths to create a more loving world!

Q: Who should read our guides to Heavenly Mother?

BETHANY AND MCARTHUR: So, if you are interested in making change, children are a good place to start. Children have not yet heard the false

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10. Val Larsen, “Hidden in Plain View: Mother in Heaven in Scripture,” *SquareTwo* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2015), available at <https://www.squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleLarsenHeavenlyMother.html>.

traditions of our forefathers or our cultural taboos around Heavenly Mother. We don't want them to go through life as we did, lacking a key component of the identity of God and hence our own.

However, the truth of our Heavenly Mother is clearly not a doctrine that only benefits children. As Joseph Smith taught, we need to have a correct understanding of God in order to understand our own nature and destiny.<sup>11</sup> Hence, this is for *everyone*. Literally. We've been delighted to hear from little kids, great-grandmas, middle-aged bishops, Young Women presidents, elderly high councilors, and others in-between who have been deeply moved by our books.

Q: How has writing these books changed your life, especially your relationship with Heavenly Mother?

MCARTHUR: I think what has changed my relationship with Heavenly Mother even more than writing the books has been the interactions we have had with people since they've been published. Writing the books helped clarify a lot of information about Heavenly Mother. These were things I had heard from prophets and apostles scattered in articles here and there, and then the guides made a gathering place for all of them. And, frankly, that's lovely, but it's not the be-all and end-all. What happened from there is that people started asking us about Heavenly Mother and telling us about their faith journey to learn of Her. Those conversations pushed me to a place to realize that while I had spent the time and work to learn *of* Her, I had not put the same effort into actually having a relationship *with* Her. It is a very different thing to learn something academically and to learn something personally. Both are valuable, but one without the other is not enough. And so, while I have a list of moments when I have felt Jesus' love for me or direction from my Father in Heaven, I now have added to my faith list a single

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11. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007, 2011), 345.

interaction with Heavenly Mother. It was very clear that it was a different Being than who I had interacted with before.

Now that I *know*, I cannot *not* testify of Her. When I hear simple gospel phrases that slide out of our mouths, I want Her included. When people say “Our Heavenly Father’s plan for us,” immediately there is a bell that goes off in my head. The truth is, almost all mothers I know are involved in or even the primary planners for the family, so I cannot imagine Heavenly Mother not being involved in the plan of salvation. We also have a quote by Elder M. Russell Ballard talking about our Heavenly *Parents’* plan for us.<sup>12</sup> So, the most truthful portrayal of the plan of happiness is one that includes both of them.

This is true for many, many phrases we use. “I know my Heavenly Father loves me” is often said in sacrament meeting. Yes, good to know that. Do you also know you are beloved by your Heavenly Mother? Speak that truth. It matters.

BETHANY: Amen!

MCARTHUR: And a heavenly hallelujah!

Q: What response have the books received?

BETHANY: The responses we have received have prompted some of the most humbling moments of our lives. We hear from grown women and men who say that this knowledge changed the trajectory they were on and tell us how much they wished they would have had it sooner.

We have written a handful of children’s books but never has one resonated as deeply as this. People buy one book, and then we see that a week later, they come back and buy a dozen more. It is clear that when they get it in their hands, they feel the power of the truth, and they want to share! We have been taught to let our light shine, and I think this

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12. M. Russell Ballard, *When Thou Art Converted: Continuing Our Search for Happiness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 62.

relates directly to knowledge of Heavenly Mother. Simply, truth helps people. Why hide it?

I think this leads us into our last question . . .

Q: What are our hopes for the Heavenly Mother books?

BETHANY: That people feel loved—divinely, gloriously, *perfectly loved* by both Heavenly Parents. And that that love spills out into the world to create a more balanced, beautiful place.

MCARTHUR: That women will come to know their own worth and the worth of their sisters. That they will come to expect—and work for—the world to move closer to the divine model.

If you have questions you wished we would have answered, feel free to ping us via email ([mcarthurkrishna@gmail.com](mailto:mcarthurkrishna@gmail.com) and [bethanybrady@yahoo.com](mailto:bethanybrady@yahoo.com)) or social media (Instagram @mcarthurkrishna-creates).

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BETHANY BRADY SPALDING {[bethanybrady@yahoo.com](mailto:bethanybrady@yahoo.com)} focuses her life on family, faith, feminism, and good food and wild fun for all! She holds a master's degree from the University of London and has founded programs to promote children's health and wellness in communities around the world. She now lives in Richmond, Virginia, with her book-loving, bike-riding, kayak-crazy family.