MOTHERS AND AUTHORITY

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It was not in a grove of trees, and I did not see a pillar of light when I first communed with Heavenly Mother. Instead, I was lying crumpled on the floor of my shower, hot water beating down upon me. My breasts were heavy and sore from producing milk for my second baby, a colicky newborn who would just not stop crying. I called out for help, "Heavenly Mother, I need you. Where are you? Why can't I talk to you?"

I did not see Her. I did not hear Her. But I felt Her presence and had a thought that was not quite my own: "Katie, I am here. Who do you think has the authority to stop you from talking to me?"

The thought astonished me. Who had I granted more authority in my life than God Herself? Yet I knew the answer: Gordon B. Hinckley.

As a Mormon girl growing up in the nineties and early aughts, I adored my prophet. I gathered with my dad and brothers to proudly watch him represent us on *Larry King Live*. I listened as Hinckley responded to a question about women and the priesthood: "Well, they don't hold the priesthood at the present time. It would take another revelation to bring that about. I don't anticipate it. The women of the church are not complaining about it. . . . They're happy. . . . I don't hear any complaints about it."[1] As a child I didn't question the words of the man I had been taught was God's spokesman. When I would later hear quotations from his 1991 general conference address, "Daughters

1. "Pres. Gordon B. Hinckley on Larry King Live (Full Interview)," originally aired Sept. 8, 1998, video, 43:55, published June 5, 2014, https://youtu.be/jAsNMWwRXvs?t=2317.

of God," I was sure he must be correct that it was inappropriate for anyone in the Church to pray to our Mother in Heaven.[2]

As the only girl in a family with five brothers, I saw the gender discrepancies in our youth programs, but I trusted my leaders when they told me that our church honored women and viewed Eve differently from other traditions. We revered Eve for making the brave and wise choice to partake of the fruit and launch Heavenly Father's plan of salvation into action. The atonement of Jesus Christ was never the backup plan—it was the plan, and it required Eve. I was utterly unprepared to have my trust shattered when I went through the temple for the first time in 2008. I was twenty years old and getting married a few days later.

In the endowment ceremony, Eve did not seem to be honored. In the film, she was depicted as airy and naïve, and after partaking of the fruit, she was punished and put under Adam's stewardship to the extent that she made covenants with her husband and not with God. Then she was silent. In church, Eve was praised in talks and lessons, but when it came to ordinances and structures of power, Eve was still subject to all the consequences of patriarchy—men were to lead in the home and in the Church. To add insult to injury, in the endowment's depiction of the creation of the world and humankind, Heavenly Mother was nowhere to be found. Creation was an all-male endeavor. I sobbed in the celestial room as I realized that this was a Motherless house.[3] My family didn't know what to say to me after the ceremony as they saw that mine were not tears of joy.

It was about a year later, in my first semester of the English master's program at Brigham Young University, that I read my first Mormon

2. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Daughters of God," Oct. 1991, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1991/10/daughters-of-god?lang=eng.

3. Carol Lynn Pearson, "Healing the Motherless House," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, edited by Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 231–45.

feminist book—*Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* by Terry Tempest Williams. She wove together the narrative of her mother dying of ovarian cancer and the rising flood waters of the Great Salt Lake. She wrote of watching the men in her family lay their hands on her mother's head to bless her; later that night, she asked her mother if she could feel the tumor, and with her hands on her mother's belly, she prayed.[4] I knew some of the history of women in the Church giving blessings by the laying on of hands, but I hadn't before considered claiming that power for myself. Williams described acting as a midwife to her mother's death, and I came to see the end of life in a new and sacred way.

In 2010, I got to hear Williams speak at a lecture series at BYU. She responded to a question from the audience about the challenge of being accepted as a Mormon writer among other Mormons due to her unorthodox beliefs and practices. She spoke of a book review of *Refuge* published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* in 1995 that argued that by choosing to not give birth herself, Williams refused her connection to Mormon women. The writer criticized Williams for calling herself a "midwife" to her mother's death but then argued, "It could be painfully appropriate, however, since one who refuses to give life might be the best midwife to a dead flock."[5] As Williams described her pain at this criticism, she wondered aloud if, having since adopted a child, she was now a sufficiently Mormon woman for this critic. And I wondered, having lost my first pregnancy to miscarriage a few months earlier: even among Mormon feminists in a tradition that "sees Eve differently," are a woman's power and belonging expressed exclusively through the multiplication of her sorrow and her conception?

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4. Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 34–35.

5. Laura L. Bush, "Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge*: Sentimentality and Separation," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 158.

I gave a copy of *Refuge* to my mother for Mother's Day in 2010. A month later, my mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer (later reclassified as primary peritoneal cancer). The next two years were filled with surgeries, chemotherapy, scans, and sickness. Her belly swelled with fluid as mine grew with what became my firstborn son. We spoke on the phone frequently, comparing detailed stories of rushing to the toilet or trash can to vomit, commiserating in each other's disparate pains. My mother died of complications related to her cancer in May of 2012. We buried her the day before Mother's Day. The flood waters of my grief rose, intertwining my mother's death with my Mormon feminist awakening and the search for voices who, whether biological mothers themselves or not, spoke the questions of my heart.

In the months that followed my experience on the shower floor calling out for the Mother, I would read David Paulsen and Martin Pulido's "'A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven." Their essay reassured me that the "sacred silence" surrounding Heavenly Mother was not official doctrine and did not need to be repealed for people to start speaking up.[6] Rachel Hunt Steenblik, who had worked as a full-time research assistant for Paulsen and Pulido, did just that. In 2017, when I was pregnant with my fourth and final baby, I read her poetry collection *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother*[7] and then bought as many copies as I could to give to friends and neighbors. Despite all this, I knew it still wasn't acceptable to talk about Heavenly Mother openly at church. I had been taught both explicitly and implicitly that women were to be mothers, not seek the Mother. It didn't seem to matter how many women or nonbinary or queer individuals were pushed out by the narrowness of this path.

6. David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "'A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 85.

7. Rachel Hunt Steenblik, *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* (Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2017).

In time I learned that when Hinckley spoke of women being happy and not agitating for change, he wasn't reflecting reality, he was trying to create it with his words. He spent years as the primary organizer of the Church's anti-ERA campaign.[8] He would have been well-acquainted with the organization Mormons for ERA and the Church members who agitated for equal rights under the United States Constitution. And he knew of women seeking greater authority within the Church, too. In 1993, Ezra Taft Benson was mostly incapacitated due to health issues.[9] As his first counselor, Hinckley was the de facto leader of the Church during the September Six excommunications of feminists and intellectuals, including several writers in Maxine Hanks's collection *Women and Authority*, published in 1992.[10] He knew that there were women in the Church asking for equality and for their authority to be recognized, but he denied the voices of these women in the Church to push the conversation where he wanted it to go.

Perhaps it is an intentional mechanism of Mormon patriarchy that women are at times honored as symbols while actual women are cut out of the structures of power. When women speak up about systemic inequality in the Church, we have ready symbols to point to that allow us to dismiss their concerns. Look, we have a Heavenly Mother! (Just don't talk to Her or about Her.) Look, we honor Eve, the Mother of All Living! (Just don't notice how we use the Garden of Eden mythology to justify patriarchy on earth and in heaven.) Humans are a meaning-making people who use story and symbol to express, teach, and share. It is not inherently problematic that the Church uses symbols

8. Taylor G. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 124.

9. Matthew L. Harris, *Watchman on the Tower: Ezra Taft Benson and the Making of the Mormon Right* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 115–17.

10. Maxine Hanks, ed., *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

to represent womanhood. The problem is how the Church uses the symbols of womanhood to deny power and privilege to women and individuals at the margins.

Symbols are adaptable, but in order to stop using symbolic womanhood as a weapon to silence women, we have to be willing to listen to and act upon what we hear from those hurt by the way we represent or fail to represent women and gender minorities in the Church and in the temple. When the Church rolled out significant changes to the temple ceremonies in January 2019 that expanded Eve's role in the endowment and cut out some overt sexism in the ceremonies, the changes were accompanied by a message from the First Presidency instructing members not to discuss the changes.[11] While I found the changes to be an important starting point toward greater egalitarianism, the demand for silence was a fresh injury. It was the updated version of "the women of the Church aren't complaining about it"—because aside from the inherent sexism in the idea that women asking for a voice equates to complaining, placing members under a demand for silence is a fine way to signal not being willing to hear them at all. And even with the changes, the temple remained a Motherless house.

Hinckley-era redirection from our theological shortcomings regarding Heavenly Mother aren't working anymore. Especially among younger generations, the role of women in the Church is among the top reasons for leaving the Church.[12] We can't "sacred silence" our way out of how our ceremonies fail to address the eternal potential of women and gender minorities in a satisfying way. And we can't insist "our women are happy" by excommunicating or informally pushing out the

11. Peggy Fletcher Stack and David Noyce, "LDS Church changes temple ceremony; faithful feminists will see revisions and additions as a 'leap forward,'" *Salt Lake Tribune*, Jan. 2, 2019, https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2019/01/02/lds-church-releases/.

12. Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 224–25.

women who are not, in fact, happy with current gender dynamics. My sons and daughters see and point out sexism in the Church as Primary children in ways that I didn't learn to do until my twenties.

Heavenly Mother needs a theology of Her own. This theology will need to grow out of the voices of those who have sought Her, which will require centering the voices of the marginalized, not pretending that they aren't speaking. Through her poem-turned-hymn "O My Father," Eliza R. Snow turned "the hearts of the children to their Mother."[13] Perhaps by speaking openly and publicly about Heavenly Mother now, we can turn not only hearts but ears to Her as well. Maybe someday it won't seem so astonishing for a Mormon woman to call out to the Mother and believe she was heard and answered.

13. Line from "The Spirit of Eliza" in Steenblik, *Mother's Milk*, 96.

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