

A WOMAN HERE

R. R.

I try to strengthen my relationship with my Heavenly Mother, but I'm not always sure how. Some days I sing, "Heavenly Mother, are you really there? And do you hear and answer every child's prayer?" but I always get stuck on the word "prayer" because President Gordon B. Hinckley said we shouldn't pray to our Mother in Heaven.¹ I struggle with this. Why not? Does praying to Heavenly Mother somehow take away from my relationship with Heavenly Father? Why talk with one parent but not the other? That doesn't seem right. These questions usually lead me down a road of cognitive dissonance with two main signposts: "Listen to prophets" and "Where's the female authority on Heavenly Mother?"

I wonder what praying to Her would look like in the first place. Is reaching out with my heart too prayer-like? If it is, how, then, do I honor Her?

By honoring womanhood, I think some would answer.

What does that mean? I would respond. What does that look like? Getting married and having kids? Dressing feminine?

Perhaps I should describe the beginning of my obsession with and desperation for Heavenly Mother and womanhood. Back before my older brother, glasses pushed up his nose and uncomfortable expression twitching on his face, said I couldn't use the word "frick"—which I learned from him—because girls don't talk like that. Before I asked my dad what the purpose of women would be if we couldn't have children, and he responded, "There wouldn't be one," as he fired up the computer, so nonchalant, so every-day-is-this-way attitude. Before my mom

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

tentatively suggested that the cause of my depression had less to do with genes and environment than it did with marital and parental status.

But now that I think about it, now that I've listed it out, I can't really find a beginning. Maybe my musings on feminine deity kickstarted during my undergrad years. As an English major, I took an American literature class where we read "The Yellow Wallpaper," and my professor described how the narrator's husband, John, treats his wife like a baby throughout the story. Words like "hypocrisy," "feminism," and "double-edged sword" rooted to the tip of my tongue. Finally, I could attempt to describe the culture machine, grounded in patriarchal traditions and misguided gendered belief systems, that spun out phrases like "girls can't" and "women should."

I hit a breakthrough—breaking point?—a few years ago when I visited my parents in Florida, where they served an eighteen-month mission. Their apartment was modest with a wide window exposing a dark blue lake. Mom, Dad, and I sat at a long wooden table in the small dining room. I don't remember how the topic came up, but we discussed women in the workplace. Dad declared that women should not be in the workforce because they "tempt the men." My jaw dropped in shock.

I wasn't shocked when a few months back I'd driven down a winding lane with my parents, them in the front seats and me in the back, and my dad said he was pretty sure Elder Bruce R. McConkie said that in the Millennium, men would have multiple wives. My mom, glancing at me in the rearview mirror and with an edge to her voice said, "He's excited for that." My dad didn't respond. I wasn't shocked when I told my dad while he watched TV, his feet propped up on the couch, that my friend was thinking of getting a PhD, and he responded, "I think she should get married," the two options mutually exclusive in his mind. I wasn't shocked when my dad, watching a movie where a woman was raped, said, "Well, duh, don't go down the dark alley, you idiot." And I wasn't shocked when my sister told me that Dad thought the few women engineers he worked with were idiots.

Despite all this, hearing my father blame women for men's inability to control themselves that night in the dining room shocked me. I don't think it was the sexism that shocked me. It was when he decided to explain his meaning and give an example of when he was tempted by other women—and he said this in front of my mom. He'd attended a work conference where he'd met ladies who were "mighty friendly" to him and his coworker. Together, my dad and his coworker had decided the women wanted to be invited to my dad's and his coworker's hotel rooms. My dad told my mom and me that he was "awfully glad" someone else was with him when he met these ladies because, in his words, he "would have been miiiighty tempted" if by himself. I felt myself go stiff at this revelation, partly in shock, partly in horror. Mom stared at the floor. I waited for her to say something. Say something. Anything.

She didn't.

I decided my mom wasn't surprised by this story. But I was, and I didn't know what to say.

These are only a few examples from my life. I've made it a personal mission to collect stories from close friends. Stories of wives with cheating husbands. Stories of rape. The story of a close friend who, as a teenager, was sexually assaulted at a youth activity. The solution that her parents and the bishop came up with was that, in the future, she should wear different clothing.

These are stories I think need to be shared with the world, but they are not my stories to share.

Instead, I'll share about the time I went to the doctor with chest pains, and he told me that "women in particular" tend to get anxious, which can cause chest pains. Come to find out, my allergies were affecting my lungs. Or the time an elderly gentleman stood at the pulpit during sacrament meeting and said, "Young women, when you dress immodestly, it's not only the young men you attract . . ." Or the time a guest speaker at a Young Women activity told us that immodest girls were like unwrapped candy bars—irresistible.

I started to understand the power of women when a friend in grad school told me about *Mother's Milk*, a book of poetry about Heavenly Mother.² His suggestion sent me on a hunt for any literature referencing Her. I found "A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven" by David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido. Paulsen and Pulido gathered "important historical accounts that cast serious doubt on the specific claims that, first, a sacred silence has always surrounded this treasured Mormon doctrine [of Heavenly Mother] and that, second, Heavenly Mother's ascribed roles have been marginalized or trivialized."³ Their research shares accounts from apostles, prophets, and other Church leaders who describe Mother in Heaven "as procreator and parent, as a divine person, as co-creator of worlds, as coframer of the plan of salvation with the Father, and as a concerned and loving parent."⁴

I loved finding these accounts of Heavenly Mother, but I'm disappointed that the authors of "A Mother There" and most (but not all) of the sources they cite to discuss the Goddess are men. The great irony of my life is that most of my understanding of women (women's roles, women's purposes, and the ideal woman) has been shaped by men, whether sexist or feminist.

Male family members helped shape my own sexist views of women; my professors, my friend who first talked with me about Heavenly Mother, and Paulsen and Pulido helped shape my view of feminism and the Goddess. When listening to and learning from these men, I wasn't bothered that they were men.

But I am now.

Why do men have a corner on the market of defining women, or why did I believe they do? Why did I ask my dad what the purpose

2. Rachel Hunt Steenblik, *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* (Salt Lake City: BCC Press, 2017).

3. David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 75.

4. Paulsen and Pulido, "A Mother There," 76.

of women would be if they couldn't have kids instead of my mom? I think part of the reason lies in the fact that the sources members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints most trust are, by default, men—namely, prophets and apostles but also any priesthood leader. Would my friend who was sexually assaulted during a youth activity have been blamed for the attack if the ultimate authority in her ward had been a woman instead of a man (the bishop)?

My questions in and of themselves hold a certain irony. I can't talk about women without talking about men. The etymology of the word "woman" shows that it comes from the Old English word for "wife" plus "man," meaning that even linguistically the concept of "woman" is created in reference to men.⁵ This is not so for the English word "man," which has Germanic roots meaning "human being" or "adult male human being."⁶

Given this confusing and often contradictory cultural understanding of women, how do I define myself, much less understand myself?

After learning about Heavenly Mother and realizing the irony of learning about Her from men, I was angry. But I'm not angry now—not that this won't change tomorrow, but in this moment, I just want to know my Mother.

I want to correct the misunderstandings that surround Her. I want my sister, who, during a "Come, Follow Me" lesson hosted by my parents, emphatically told me, "No, no, we think of Her as so sacred. We respect Her. Heavenly Father respects Her so much we don't talk about Her," to know she can talk about Heavenly Mother. I want my brother, the same one who cautioned me against using "frick" and who agreed with my sister, adding that his institute teacher (another male authority) told him that Heavenly Mother was too sacred to talk about, to know he can love and respect our Mother as much as our Father. He

5. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "woman (*n.*)," <https://www.oed.com/oed2/00286737>.

6. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "man (*n.*)," <https://www.oed.com/oed2/00139525>.

can teach his daughters to love and respect themselves and know one day they will be goddesses, cocreators, co-framers, women defined by whatever can possibly define a god.

What I do know is that I can't and won't try to define everything about Heavenly Mother in this one essay. That understanding Her will take as much study, struggle, patience, and joy as understanding Heavenly Father does. The frustrating thing is that I don't know much about Heavenly Mother. Sometimes I am still genuinely asking, "But, Mother, are you *really* there?" I try to understand Her by studying the imperfect accounts we have, but I struggle to imagine what She'll look like, and honestly, I don't always want to try to imagine. I want to step over the trap of creating the Goddess in my image and instead leap into Her arms, but the more I look outside of myself, the more statuesque She becomes: sculpted, frozen, a Greek goddess created by man.

So I've chosen to believe in Heavenly Mother, and to believe in Her is to believe in Her power and authority. It's to believe in the power and authority of women.

I'm looking to my own intuition now. I'm trusting my own wisdom and believing that my frustration with women being defined by men is genuine. That wanting and needing to commune with my Mother is okay. I'm choosing to believe in and just *believe* women.

That feels divine.

I don't want to ask anymore. I want to declare: Mother, you are *really* there. And when the world understands you, your grace and love and might, it will be because of your daughters.

Amen.

R. R. is a native of northern Utah. She has a bachelor's degree in English from Brigham Young University-Idaho and an MFA from Brigham Young University. R. R. has published work in *Segullah* and *Inscape*. Currently, she works as a junior high English and creative writing teacher. When she's not teaching or reading, she likes to mull over her insignificance in the universe and contemplate how the divine feminine impacts her thoughts, attitudes, and actions.