

AGENCY IS NOT THE ENEMY

Name Withheld

I have spent much time contemplating my journey as a mother, a religious educator, and an aspiring historian. There are moments where I have felt pride and hope, while also moments of discouragement and sorrow. Where I am today, the good and the bad are preceded by the long path of historical precedent. The paving stones of that path can be coalesced into one word: agency. There have been times when agency is embraced and wielded with beauty and strength. More often, it is the lack of women's agency that captures my attention. Why have women not been allowed the whole exercise of their agency, and what have been the results? This is not an academic study of the topic; rather, it is the musings of a proud and very often frustrated woman who hopes for a future where women may, like men, be equal owners of their agency without the shame and fear that is attached to female agency today.

I cannot speak to broader global history and experiences, but women in the United States and my sphere have been ruled by ideas and practices such as coverture and the Cult of Domesticity. Coverture created a cloak of invisibility for women legally and religiously. A woman was known by her husband's or father's name. His voice spoke for her. His legal identity protected her. Male identity covered her existence. The idea was protective, but it resulted in the invisibility of women. The Cult of Domesticity partnered well with coverture. It created the rationalization for coverture. The Cult of Domesticity held that women are inherently more pure, moral, and virtuous than men. Their purity and virtue were so central to the stability of society that they required protection from the world of hard manual and intellectual labor, the divisive realms of politics, and the competitive individualist industrial

workplace. To preserve the moral purity of society, women must be protected. Their sphere of safety was the domestic sphere of home and motherhood. Coverture and the Cult of Domesticity have resulted in the silence and invisibility of women. Those effects are still felt today.

These historic ideals of womanhood have created a world where women's agency has been treated as a threat. While men were given the freedom of experiential agency through fallibility and veracity, women have been denied this latitude. Every time women have sought to expand their agency and own their identity, there is resistance. Why? Fear. Fear that women may choose to exercise their agency in a way that does not support or validate societal norms. They may choose to reject cultural ideals of womanhood, motherhood, and the role laid out by the Cult of True Womanhood. She may reject her role as the source of morality and identity as a wife and mother. By using her agency, she may upend the culture and, more importantly, the family, which is seen as the foundational unit of society. Women's agency must be limited and controlled to protect the cultural family and moral foundations for the greater societal good. She must submit to male agency. This sounds like a harsh, extreme pronouncement, but let us look at a few examples from history that illustrate the claim.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the women's suffrage movement was debated. Resistance to giving women the right to vote centered on their identities and roles in the home. Giving women the chance to exercise political agency would corrupt their moral nature and pull them away from the moral protection of their homes. This, in turn, would harm families and society. Coverture allowed for a man to exercise political agency for her, so she wouldn't have to. In 1911, State Senator J. B. Stanford summed up the argument well when speaking against giving women the vote in California. He said:

Statistics go to show that in most equal suffrage states . . . that divorces have greatly increased since the adoption of the equal suffrage amendment, showing that it has been a home destroyer. Crime has also

increased due to lack of the mothers in the home. Woman is woman. She cannot unsex herself or change her sphere. Let her be content with her lot and perform those high duties intended for her by the Great Creator, and she will accomplish far more in governmental affairs than [sic] she can ever accomplish by mixing up in the dirty pool of politics. Keep the home pure and all will be well with the Republic. (Argument Against Women's Suffrage, 1911 Prepared by J. B. Sanford, Chairmen of Democratic Caucus)

Sanford was not alone in his concern regarding suffrage. He and other anti-suffrage advocates feared that giving women political agency would endanger the family and the republic. For the good of society, their political voice must be silent. Granting agency was too great a risk. Though women currently have political equality according to the law, I felt echoes of this past when I was a party leader in Utah politics. When trying to recruit women to participate in Utah's caucus system or attend political events, more often than not, women would tell me that their husbands attend so they can be home to care for the house and family. There was a sense of relief in some of their voices. The man exercised political agency so she would not have to. She was more valued and comfortable in the home. Engagement by Latter-day Saint women in my district was extremely low. These women were voting, but their votes were mostly informed by their husbands' hands-on engagement in the system.

The shadow of male exercise of political agency in the place of women still exists. Institutionally, the Latter-day Saint leadership now encourages women to engage politically, and some women are responding. However, the shadow of the past and the lack of women modeling leadership and authority in the Church make it difficult for women to see themselves as leaders and for men to acknowledge women as figures and voices of authority in the political sphere. Just as in nineteenth-century Utah, my twenty-first-century Utah political experience was one where male church authority garnered respect and authority that a woman could never attain. The cult echoes were heard when women's

choices regarding work outside the home and child-rearing came up as concerns for supporting a woman candidate. If a woman does not have ecclesiastical experience, can we trust she will use authority wisely? Does involving her in the political realm cause her to neglect her home duties? Is she exercising her agency as we would like her to?

The practice of coverture in America created a marital dependence of women on men. A man could own property, make a living, and have a legal identity with or without a woman. This was not the case with women. The culture and laws based on coverture created a system where women were dependent on marriage. There are examples of women who chose not to marry, but in general, women wanting financial status, security, legal legitimacy, and stability needed to be connected to a man through marriage. However, once married, her identity and autonomy were tied to her role as wife and mother. Until recent years, women in church history, such as Emma and Lucy Smith, were only known because of their connection to a prominent male leader. When I quiz my students on women in church history that they know, this is still the case. Responses are almost always “wife of . . .” or “mother of . . .”

Divorce was a risky and difficult venture for women in the nineteenth and into twentieth centuries. Early divorce laws favored men who had a legal voice and access to the resources needed to leave a marriage. Under coverture, men also owned all property, even if acquired through a wife’s inheritance or dowry. He also owned custody of his children. In leaving a marriage, a man risked very little, while for a woman, it meant losing practically everything. This system created limits on women’s options. If she chose to leave a marriage, there was a strong incentive to remarry as soon as possible, often putting her in vulnerable relationships. Divorced women also risked being seen as immoral. Her cultural identity as the source of morality and virtue created a higher standard for women, and any perceived violation inflicted more social harm.

My grandmother was tied to an abusive temple marriage for years while raising her children in a Latter-day Saint community. She could not afford to leave the man who cheated on her, controlled every penny she spent, and was verbally abusive. It also was not socially acceptable to leave unless she was being physically abused. Her inability to divorce saved a marriage, but it was not a marriage worth saving. She separated from her husband after her last child left home, but she never legally divorced him. Divorce was not financially or socially an option. She died of cancer not many years after her separation. Her last years were in pain and close to poverty, but she was free to exercise her agency.

During the 1970s, divorce laws loosened throughout the United States, and no-fault divorce became the norm. Coverture ended in the financial world during the 1970s. These changes finally gave women more agency regarding divorce. Since then, divorce rates have risen significantly in the United States. This has caused many in the Latter-day Saint community to lament the loss of family stability. Providing women the agency to leave a marriage and have their own identity is to blame for the increase in divorce.

In an April 2007 general conference address entitled “Divorce,” Elder Dallin Oaks stated: “Unfortunately, under current no-fault divorce laws, it can be easier to sever a marriage relationship with an unwanted spouse than an employment relationship with an unwanted employee.” He then amended his condemnation with seeming approval for no-fault divorce in some cases, but blamed most divorces on selfishness. He said, “When a marriage is dead and beyond hope of resuscitation, it is needful to have a means to end it. . . . Often, the cause is not incompatibility but selfishness.”

When I think of my friends and family members who have experienced divorce, it was never a selfish, easy decision. It was not a simple choice of convenience. Spousal rape, emotional neglect, verbal cruelty and humiliation, domineering control, and a husband’s infidelity are

not selfish reasons to divorce. Before no-fault divorce laws, these marriages would still be intact, but they are not marriages worth saving. The numbers don't tell the full story. I would rather trust a woman's agency regarding her safety, security, and health in a relationship than have low divorce numbers. Individual over institution.

When I teach my modern United States history courses, the feminist movement is the lesson that causes the most friction and receives the most negativity from Latter-day Saint students. Why? For many, this movement represents the disintegration of the ideal family touted by United States cultural media in the 1950s. The feminist movement was not a movement against the family; it was a movement to improve women's agency. Women sought agency in their education, work options, finances, and most controversially, agency over reproduction. However, this movement received strong resistance from church leaders. In the May 18, 1993, All-Church Coordinating Council of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Apostle Boyd Packer warned that the feminist movement was a danger to the church and its members. Some prominent Latter-day Saint religious educators still demonize the movement as an assault on the family. I would counter by saying that forced, conformist family structures are not worth saving at the expense of women's agency.

The Cult of Domesticity has dominated women's educational experience in America since colonial times. Since a woman's realm was home and motherhood, education focused on skills connected to motherhood, such as childhood education, nursing, and homemaking skills. Women were discouraged from educational pursuits beyond domestic-based spheres. Careers were also limited to those associated with or closely related to motherhood—teacher, secretary, nurse, and domestic worker. If a woman married, her husband would provide for her. She should be at home creating a safe moral environment for him and his children. Pregnancy could be grounds for firing. The feminist movement sought opportunities for women beyond the domestic



Emily Christensen McPhie, *I FELT a Funeral in my Brain*
(2020), oil on aluminum panel, 18" x 24"
(image courtesy of the artist)

sphere and cultural restrictions of the past, leaving the home for the workplace.

The resistance to these changes was and is strong. In a fireside address in San Antonio on December 3, 1977, Spencer Kimball warned, “Numerous divorces can be traced directly to the day when the wife left the home and went out into the world into employment. . . . Two spouses working prevent the complete and proper home life, break into the family prayers, create an independence which is not cooperative, causes distortion, limits the family, and frustrates the children already born.” I remember as an undergraduate at Brigham Young University, President Hinkley teaching that women leaving home to work was the selling of one’s birthright (a reference to the story of Jacob and Esau). This affected my educational choices. Instead of a career mindset, I pursued my education based on eventually becoming a stay-at-home mother. My dreams of career-based education ended. There are many women from my generation who, like me, feel frustration in the lost opportunities based on our lack of educational and career choices. I returned to school after my sixth child was old enough to attend preschool and have since entered the workforce working in a Church Education System environment. I still get questions about how I juggle home and work life, a question my husband has never been asked. I still hear gender stereotypes, like the time another educator called diaper changing a “spiritual gift” granted to women. I have seen hesitation around hiring a married woman because family may interfere with her career. And when a single woman is hired, there is always the unspoken (and sometimes spoken) question of why she isn’t married. Cults are slow to die, and trust is hard to gain. Women are still working to be trusted when using agency outside the cult.

The most controversial area of a woman’s agency is agency over her reproductive abilities. As long as women have had bodies, they have sought ways to exercise reproductive agency. During the subsistence eras of the past, survival hinged on women’s ability to reproduce. This placed a large burden on them. Childbirth was difficult, dangerous, and

life altering. The pressure to bear children was great, but the fear and pain were real. As a result, women have been using birth control and abortion for millennia, though not safe or dependable. Women were willing to take the risk. With industrialization and medical advances, human survival was no longer dependent on women producing as many children as possible. Some of the burden was lifted, and women sought more ways to control reproduction. The backlash was hard. Birth control was criminalized in the United States until the 1960s.

Safer, more available birth control enabled the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Women were able to disconnect sex from pregnancy and begin to experience it in a way men had for millennia: sex as a social and pleasurable experience, not primarily a reproductive one. The Victorian taboo surrounding sex began to fade. Out-of-wedlock sex has existed forever, but the sexual revolution brought it into the open from the shadows. Like any social movement, there were excesses. Even our restoration story has stories of excess. However, this should not demonize the entire program.

The resistance to sexual and reproductive freedom has been hard and heavy, especially for women who have borne the burden of sexual purity for men and women. The use of birth control was discouraged in the Church's General Handbook up until the 1990s. Early twentieth-century leaders were the harshest in their condemnation. In the July 1916 *Relief Society Magazine*, Joseph Fielding Smith stated, "Those who attempt to pervert the ways of the Lord, and to prevent their offspring from coming into the world . . . are guilty of one of the most heinous crimes in the category. There is no promise of eternal salvation and exaltation for such as they." However, like in the Victorian era, most Latter-day Saint women quietly used birth control against the advice of male leadership. This is a historic trend. In this immensely personal realm, women have always fought to maintain their sexual agency, even when law, religion, and culture shame them for doing so. Bodily and reproductive agency are immensely personal and important for women.

Men have enjoyed a great deal of latitude sexually. Though not always openly accepted, a blind eye was often turned when a man engaged in extramarital sex. Whereas a woman's reputation and future could be destroyed when she engaged in sex outside of marriage. Ideas of female consent were rarely considered outside of marriage and did not exist at all within marriage. She was a passive participant who bore the moral and reputational burden. It was not until the sexual revolution and feminist movement that women began to gain sexual agency. Women are still dealing with the repercussions of this change, and the fight continues as women work to overcome social stigmas connected to their sexuality. Sexual agency for women is extremely personal and elusive, yet when obtained, it is very empowering. The Church no longer forbids birth control; however, as is evident in Elder Neil Anderson's October 2011 general conference talk, there is still a strong emphasis on having children and a subtle encouragement to have large families while deferring judgment to the "husband and wife." I have a dear friend who took this counsel very seriously. She gave birth to nine children. It was financial, physical, and mental stress that has continued for decades. Though she loves each of her children, she feels bitter over the pressure she felt to provide bodies for as many spirits as she could. She always believed God would provide a way but felt betrayed when she was stretched beyond her limits. My obstetrician in Provo, Utah, once told me Mormon women stop having babies after they have had at least one too many. Larger families like my family of eight and my friend's family of eleven are harder to find. As hard as it was to raise a large family two decades ago, the task has become even more difficult and complex today. Pressure from men in authority to have children should not be why a woman gives birth. We should trust her to decide. It is her body, time, life, and heart that she gives to every child she has birthed. She may decide to have none, but that may be better than pressuring her into having children she is not able or willing to care for.

Actions and ideas of the past have created a scenario where the moral foundation of society and the family's functionality depend on women and how they use their agency. Throughout history, the exercise of political, familial, educational, and sexual agency by women has been considered dangerous. Movements where women have sought agency have been vilified. Women who have sought out increased agency have been stereotyped as angry, unfeminine, immoral, unattractive, radical, and prideful. Clearly, female agency is to be feared. If a woman exercises her agency in a way that does not conform to expectations, the family, society, and church are at risk. Women kept in a box are safe, and society is secure. Coverture and the Cult of Domesticity are the walls of the box of protection. Not as much protection for her, but protection of the social orders and power structures built upon the box. If given agency, she may choose to leave the box. She may seek her own identity and sphere of influence. Her agency is an enemy of a moral, religious, family-based society built upon her box. Her agency is perceived to be safest when confined to the domestic sphere and expressed in moral, submissive, humble, and pious ways.

However, maybe full exercise of her agency is the solution, not the problem. Maybe when women are given full access to their God-given agency, true progress can be made. Maybe restoration isn't just a theological exercise, but it is also a restoration of choice and autonomy to half the population whose agency has been restricted primarily out of fear. Maybe Zion is about equity and balance, not boxes and cultural expectations. How can we be of one heart and mind when hearts and minds bear different weighted values, are confined, and are held to different standards? Boxes do not make for strong foundations. Agency is not the enemy. Agency is the plan. Agency is the solution.