3-1-1985

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Francine R. Bennion

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WOMEN AND ROLES: TRANSCENDING DEFINITIONS  

FRANCINE R. BENNION, M.A.
A panel presentation at the AMCAP Convention 4 October 1984; panelists included Russell Osguthorpe, Ida Smith, Merlin Myers, and Carolyn Rasmus.

Members of our panel have no experience as professional psychotherapists or counselors. We differ from each other in viewpoint and academic training, but are united in our great interest in what women do and who women are. Recognizing that we have neither training nor experience for the work you do, we hope that we might perhaps enrich or extend some of your own frameworks for understanding women who come to you for help.

The theme of your conference is, “The work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever. And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation ...” (Isaiah 32: 17–18) Speaking of events preceding that peaceable habitation, Isaiah says earlier, “In that day every man shall cast away his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, which your own hands have made unto you for sin.” (Isaiah 31: 7)

The people whom Isaiah was addressing made idols of wood and silver and gold. We, with more advanced sophistication, make idols of ideas we have created, of frameworks we have devised for seeing things. Having created a convenient way to describe something, we sometimes treat that description as a self-existent thing itself, an entity to which we give our belief or faith. We see examples in many of the concepts we hold about the nature of human beings. For example, after some psychologists devised a measure they called I.Q., others came to think of I.Q. as a thing a person has, rather than as a quantitative measure of some tasks a person has done. I.Q. is now commonly spoken of not as a measurement but as the thing measured.

Another example: the Greeks, among others, spoke of mind as an entity distinct from body, and now we routinely assume we all have minds and bodies, distinct and separate entities. So engrained in our very language are the concepts of mind and body, “physical” and “mental,” that it is difficult for most occidentals to think of a person as a single living being not divided into parts. Terms invented to conveniently describe us now determine what we think we are.

The concept of role has been devised to represent conveniently the particular relationships a person has with others, or to represent a particular set of tasks or functions. However, we now hear of “woman’s role” or “women’s roles” not as convenient descriptions of relationships and tasks but rather as things in themselves: the role is what a woman is, or should be—a woman can be adequately understood or defined in terms of role tasks and role relationships. The concept of role is becoming an idol to which undue homage is paid.

I like Elder Hanks’ quote from Nora in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House: “I am a human being first.” Many of our women feel they are not human beings first. They are roles.

Though problems exist because of particular roles assigned to women, more profoundly destructive, I believe, are the problems which come of thinking of women primarily in terms of any role, of defining women primarily as role-players. I would like to suggest...
some of these problems.

A major problem is the loss of personal identity. A former Relief Society president, married to a stake president, said, "I feel I'm only a place-taker." She is the hostess for visiting authorities at stake conference, she serves supper to widows when her husband invites them all to a dinner, and she is the one who is honored when the Young Women need a special guest. Anybody, she feels, could be playing the role. What troubles her is that to those whom she cares about and is serving, she is "the wife," not a person.

Women who feel themselves to be place-takers, and men who regard them as such, feel that women playing the same role are interchangeable. Devastating loneliness is experienced by women with only "role identity" in important relationships. I heard this summer of a young woman who has eight-week-old twins and three other children under the age of five and a half. She has not been getting much sleep, she has been very tired, and she has experienced considerable stress. She has no energy, nor desire to do anything, nor sense of ability to do anything. Her husband goes to school in the day and works at night. When her mother phoned one day and asked, "How are you?", she answered, "I'm not okay. I'm not well." Late that night, reporting the conversation to her husband, she repeated to him, "I'm not okay. I'm not well, I wonder if I'm depressed." He replied, "There's nothing wrong with you. You can do it. My mother did." The husband seemed to perceive women in the mother role as interchangeable. The woman playing that role for his children was not to be considered in terms of her own thoughts, her own feelings, her own circumstance, or her own needs. She was simply occupying the same role his mother did.

Women who feel themselves to be primarily role-players may begin to regard others also as role-players and relate to them as such. I don't know how many Relief Society presidents you see who are concerned primarily with being a perfect role-player. Instead of looking at needs of the women and how the organization could serve them, such leaders are concerned with being a perfect role model, with being poised and impressive, with matching or exceeding the achievements of other Relief Society presidents, with doing everything beautifully. Though she wants to be a good administrator, and though she may do much that is good, such a woman does not serve her sisters in the same way as does a human being who uses the role as a means of serving other human beings. I have heard more than one sister echo the words of my friend who said, "I sit in Relief Society and think, I shouldn't be here. They've all got clean houses. They are all perfect. What's wrong with me?" I asked this woman to show me through her home, and she reluctantly did so. It was quite orderly and clean, with signs here and there of being lived in. The problem was not really with housekeeping. Many such women see neither themselves nor others as living breathing individuals in legitimate struggle with the complexities of being human. They see themselves and others as role-players.

In addition to loss of personal identity and warm human exchange, a second problem is that a role and its virtues may seem synonymous and inseparable: if you are playing the role, you have its virtues; if you are not playing the role, you don't have the virtues. For example, a woman chose to marry a man though she knew he could not beget children. She married him because she loved him. After she had been married for a couple of years, she sat in Relief Society next to a young woman having trouble with a crying baby. Seeing the woman's fatigue, she offered to hold the baby for a while, but the mother refused: "No. You can't do it. You aren't a mother." Because she was not occupying the mother role, her neighbor assumed she lacked tenderness and skill to comfort a troubled child.

We frequently encounter the confusion and judgments that grow from
such thinking. I've known more than one woman who went by the book, paid tithing, had home evening, and made sure the children made their beds and went to all their meetings. I'm thinking of one such mother whose teenage daughter ran away from home and got involved in drugs. The mother said tearfully, "I did everything I was supposed to. What more could I have done?" She could have listened to her daughter, could have known her daughter—at least that is what the daughter reported. The woman had ceased to be a person who was her mother, and had instead become a perfect role player. She really had done everything that she perceived as part of that role, and was heart-broken to discover that neither all virtues nor expected rewards were synonymous with the role she had played.

There are of course many reasons a woman's best efforts may not make her perfect in a role she is trying to play. A third way of seeing role problems is in terms of context, or rather lack of context. When women are spoken of as roles, the assumed context is often either a vacuum or Utopia. There is no past or future, there are no other persons affecting how the role can be played, and worst of all, there is no larger framework for transcending problems with the role.

Two young women this summer have become profoundly depressed, one requiring hospitalization. Both are bright, educated, beautiful, talented, and intent on living the Gospel. After three years or so of marriage to rising young professionals active in the Church, these women lacked the activity, the rewards, and the sense of being to which they had been accustomed. There had been progress, satisfaction, and recognition in athletic ability, talent, or first-rate scholarship, but there was little in staying home all week changing diapers or hoping the husband would have an hour's time with them. As wives and mothers, they were playing roles they had expected to play, wanted to play, and thought themselves prepared to play. However, the women had no adequate context in which to place contrast between what they were experiencing now and what they had experienced in the past.

The context provided by other persons is often left out of role definitions for women. For example, one prescription our women hear is, "A woman sets the tone in a home." What does that say to the woman allowed to say only, "Yes, dear," or "Yes, Daddy!"? There is a 19-year-old woman who is earning her own living, but still living at home. One night, she left a public celebration and went for a ride with friends without asking her parents' permission—something not immoral, unethical, or even disobedient, but something of her own choosing, her own initiative. When she returned 35 minutes later, her parents took her straight home, where her father expressed his concern for her by ripping her dress, breaking a framed photo of her, abusing her verbally and emotionally, and finally by announcing, "From now on, you have two choices: 'Yes, Daddy,' or leave." What kind of resources will a woman like that have for setting the tone in her own marriage? You may say that this is an exception. I wish it were, but I know many middle-aged wives who are living not as loving and loyal mature persons but as dependents who wonder why they are not happy when they are playing 'Yes, dear' roles so well.

Motherhood is often defined without the context actually provided by real live children. A young woman from a family of 14 looked forward to being a mother. She chose to marry young, and now at 28 is the mother of six. I saw her at a party and asked, "How are you doing?" "Not very well," she said. "I'm finding there is almost nothing about being a mother that I like." She went on to say that the only time she has a sense of happiness is the one night a week she gets away from home and goes to the Genealogy Library.

Whatever the complexities of a given role, a woman can better address
them if she can step outside the role to look at her struggles and capacity for growth in the context of a world where she and others have agency, experience change, and are subject to natural laws and limitations of mortality. However, if there is no such larger context, if role problems must be solved only with the bounds of the role itself, a woman may be helplessly paralyzed.

A fourth problem: when one defines what a particular role is, one is also defining what the role is not. For example, the role of woman in supporting priesthood-holders is usually defined in a hierarchical way: women are underneath, holding up the priesthood. This definition excludes other kinds of support—for instance, that found in an arch, where each side supports the other. It also excludes the concept of space-time vectors in which a vehicle stays on course because of the balancing of forces or components. Because we customarily use a top-bottom definition for the woman's role in supporting priesthood-holders, other useful concepts of support are excluded.

A fifth problem with role-playing is that the value of a person often depends on the value of the role. In a hierarchical society, which we have as Mormons and Americans, the seeming value of a role is derived from its place in the hierarchy. That becomes very confusing for men and women who feel that because women's roles are relatively low in the hierarchy, a woman has relatively little value.

A sixth problem: one who thinks of herself as a role-player and who constructs the ideal role from several sources (for example, her mother and her mother-in-law) may combine elements which are mutually exclusive, or which together exceed human capability. Many women do manage to combine conflicting or excessive elements in their personal role definitions. Most must choose either to attempt all and achieve only mediocre results, or to do some things well and others inadequately or not at all. Either course is unacceptable if a prime component in the personal role is either consistent excellence or perfection.

A seventh problem, and the last I'll mention here, is that role definition of women usually ignores the importance of personal interpretations, interpretations integral to the way in which roles are either defined or played. For all the trouble it causes, I would not want to do away with that capacity for diverse perception and interpretation which God preserves for us. We must keep that capacity in mind if we are to speak or listen productively and if we are to avoid the errors which come with any kind of stereotype. There are serious problems with thinking of women primarily or exclusively in terms of role. When persons encounter difficulty, complexity, or change, they need a transcendent definition of themselves as agents who can address the matter. They are not helped by role limitations, which may contribute to their simply wishing problems didn't exist, or to their feeling themselves a failure or oppressed victim, a captive cricket which can wriggle its limbs but never escape the cage.

Though the concept of role has its uses, we would do well to remember that it is a concept of our own making, a convenient way to represent some tasks and relationships for individuals. I do not know how well in our day we will manage to cast away the idol which role has become, and thereby approach a more peaceable habitation. I do not know how perfectly we may come to imitate Christ in regarding qualities of being as transcending the niches which societies create for their own convenience. I do believe that if we are to live well, we must learn to understand ourselves and each other as live agents, not merely as place-takers or role-players.

This address and the three that follow were all part of a panel discussion on Women and the Church.

Sister Bennion is a former member of the General Relief Society Board and mother of three and a former faculty member of Ohio State and Brigham Young Universities.