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In a Peaceable Habitation

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For our conference this year, we have focused our theme on peace, specifically the scripture from Isaiah prefiguring the millennial period when "my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in quiet resting places" (Isa. 32:19). We are approaching that theme through a particular concern with LDS "habitations" and the people who suffer most when those habitations are not peaceful: women and children. In so doing, we are sharing a professional concern that is nationwide among our colleagues as inquiry into the incidence of incest, child abuse, and battered women reveals what amounts to an epidemic of domestic violence. We have no evidence that would lead us to believe that LDS homes are spared in any higher percentage than others, hence our decision to focus on women's issues for this conference.

You are familiar with the statistics: Between 100,000 and 500,000 American children will be molested this year. One study (Newsweek, 1984) shows that 19 percent of all American woman and 9 percent of all men were sexually victimized as children. Probably between two and five million American women have been the victims of incest or molesters. Seventy-five percent of the perpetrators are friends, neighbors, or relatives. Once begun on child-molesting, most do not stop. One study (Newsweek, 1984) of arrest convictions and confessions showed an average of 73 victims per heterosexual pedophile and 30 per homosexual pedophile. About 90 percent of all child molesters are men.

According to a study by Diana E.H. Russell (1982), unique insofar as I know because it was based on a random sampling, 38 percent of its sample of adult women reported at least one experience of sexual abuse before the age of 18. Twenty-eight percent reported at least one such experience before the age of 14. When these cases are broken down by whether the perpetrator was a relative, the rate of incest with relatives was 16 percent for women under 18, and 12 percent for women under 14. Only 2 percent of the incest cases were ever reported to the police, only 6 percent of cases where the perpetrator was not a member of the family were ever reported.

The statistics on wife battering and the physical abuse of children are even better known, but no less horrifying.

The work of Carol Gilligan (1983), of Harvard's Graduate School of Education, has recently synthesized and made available to a wide audience some serious challenges to the traditional measures applied to the moral development of men and women. In such systems, notably those of Kohlberg and Piaget, where moral decisions are made on the basis of the highest "rule," girls and women have usually been found to be a full stage or more behind boys and men, apparently "confused" and unable to sort out the rules. Gilligan's work, though not without problems, finds that women focus on relationships and make moral decisions in that context. Men, says Gilligan, define a self "through separation" while women define a self "through connection." Men measure themselves against "an abstract ideal of perfection" and women make the same appraisal "through particular activities of care" (Gilligan, 1983, p. 35). The implications of this general model
for the therapist are profound, particularly in our responsibility to help clients toward self-actualization.

If it is true, as Gilligan suggests, that men tend to associate danger and violence with intimacy (1983, citing Horner, 1968, p. 40), then it explains why women and children, relatively less powerful, are most frequently the victims of violence from the husbands and fathers who along with the power to protect, also have the power to harm. The assignment in our culture of responsibility for the quality of relationships to women also helps explain why many women see no alternatives for themselves in situations where they are the recipients of something besides love; it must somehow be their fault. LDS therapists can help them identify such alternatives. We must also recognize that presently in our profession the LDS therapist a woman is likely to see will be male. I tend to see this as increasing the problem for women. It may, however, be an advantage in helping to reshape the values and behavior of men. If the men who are beating their wives, raping their daughters, and seducing the children of neighbors can perceive masculine role models of genuinely loving and respectful behavior, I believe the chances are increased that they will be able to change. As a Latter-day Saint with a conviction of the Savior's redemptive love for us, I cannot accept the pessimistic statistics that the rehabilitation of incestuous fathers and pedophiles is virtually nonexistent.

But as a therapist, I must apply that Christian conviction as a serious working principle. How can that hope be translated into a reality?

Scott Peck, whose recent book on human evil (1983) has a great deal to say to Latter-day Saints, has observed: "Free will is the ultimate human reality. . . . Evil is the inevitable concomitant of free will, the price we pay for our unique human power of choice" (1983, p. 244). He also observed that we cannot conquer evil by destroying it. Only through self-purification can we "by the grace of God . . . truly love [our] enemies." That love, he suggests, then can absorb evil "like blood in a sponge or a spear in . . . one's heart" so that it "loses its power and goes no further" (1983, quoting Gale D. Webbe, p. 269). Peck admits that he does not have a map of how love works, only that he knows from experience that it does work. I believe that all of us in this room who have wrestled with sin and actual evil in human form, can share his sense that "good people can deliberately allow themselves to be pierced by the evil of others—to be broken thereby yet somehow not broken—to even be killed in some sense and yet still survive and not succumb. Whenever this happens there is a slight shift in the balance of power in the world" (1983, p. 269).

It is my earnest hope that we may apply that perspective to the sessions which follow, focusing specifically on therapeutic issues for women. "The work of righteousness shall be peace," Isaiah promises us, "and the effect of righteousness, quietness, and assurance forever." May we be able to help the people who come to us achieve some measure of that quietness and assurance.

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References

