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A RESPONSE TO “WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO SUGAR AND SPICE?” BY AGNES M. PLENK

Juel D. Gregersen, MSW

To be graced by the presence of Dr. Agnes Plenk at our October AMCAP conference was an honor for us. Few have given so much to so many as she has. The good resulting from her work in the lives of many children, now adults, is immeasurable. We love her as a sister because she is loving to our children and accepting of love from them. She exemplifies Christ's words, “Whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me” (Matt. 18:3–5).

Dr. Plenk set the stage for plain talk with the intent to help. It was stimulating, though painful, to be so honestly confronted. I hope my responses to her presentation are equally honest and well intended. I agree with and will amplify some points she made, and I disagree with and will challenge others.

Therapists Are Moral Agents and Value Brokers

Dr. Plenk and Perry London are right. All therapists are moral agents who function “more like a clergyman than a physician.” If we as LDS therapists do not declare our values in therapy, we are incongruent with ourselves. However, our critics and our members alike share the confusion as to how can we share our convictions *with* others without imposing our values *on* others. When we stick to the widely accepted values of protecting wives and children from abuse, we are popular. If we oppose homosexuality, social drinking, premarital sex, pregnancy without marriage, and abortion, we stir up claims that we are imposing our religious values on others. Some of us feel intimidated and retreat to the neutral medical model, keeping our religion and our values a secret. In some professional settings this neutrality is expected by the administration.

An example of this dilemma is how we professionals counsel unwed, expectant parents. About 25% of the births in Utah involve unwed

mothers. These new mothers are usually young and immature and have the least financial and educational resources. Church leaders teach abstinence from premarital sexual relationships, oppose abortion, and tell unwed parents that if they do not marry, the placement of their infant for adoption is a wise alternative. In doing this, are they valuing children and the quality of life for both the parents and the newborn infant, or are they imposing their values on the community? Such value statements are usually left up to LDS bishops, while LDS therapists, even in LDS Social Services agencies, remain neutral in helping unwed parents explore their alternatives and make their own choices.

Therapists Are Responsible for Their Own Behavior, Not the Client's Behavior

Dr. Plenk and Perry London, in expecting the therapist to "assume responsibility for the behavior of clients in real life," have gone beyond the scope of therapy. How can we be responsible for things over which we have no control? Is influence control? Certainly not! There is a big difference between *declaring our own convictions* and *giving directions*. Being responsible for our clients assumes a superior-inferior relationship, perpetuating low self-esteem in our clients and burn-out in us.

Keeping Current

Keeping pace with the knowledge explosion in such a fast-moving world is a real challenge. Brigham Young advised us, "Search after truth in all good books, and learn the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God, and put them together and you will be able to benefit yourselves" (*Journal of Discourses*, 12:313). The Savior told his Apostles, "Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matt. 10:16).

The Value and Values of Women

Dr. Plenk's observation, that some women have achieved enough educational and financial independence that they don't have to be sweet unless they want to be, is interesting. Even though these women no longer use sweetness as a manipulative tool to gain the approval of their husbands and neighbors, they still find themselves competing in the business and professional world where they must, just as men do, please their supervisors and their clients. Money, success, and power have become their values, and sweetness remains a tool. Is exchanging the approval of husbands and neighbors for the approval of an employer or consumer a step up or a step down? How does this enhance the value and values of women?

Women who value kindness, service, graciousness, and sweetness above money, success, and power are often run over by children and adults who are selfishly competing for more attention and a greater share of this world's goods. After working for long hours at low wages, these women may not have enough energy left to be true to their values and remain sweet when they come home to play the role of homemaker.

Women who know they are daughters of an eternal Father, and who know of their eternal potential, value themselves and have a sense of self-esteem that allows them to value kindness, compassion, and Christlike service to others. This same assurance also allows them to have their down days without being down on themselves. For these women success, independence, position, and status have value mainly in serving their Heavenly Father by serving their fellow humans. It is this eternal perspective rather than financial independence that gives women (and men) freedom to be sweet.

But let's come back down to earth. Motherhood and homemaking have relatively little status in this world. No wages, no quitting time, no annual or sick leave, no medical or retirement benefits, no sabbatical or educational leave, no leave with pay, not even leave *without* pay. We must agree with Dr. Plenk that women who seek status or a livelihood through employment often receive less of either than men in the employment field.

Dr. Plenk and many others seem to misunderstand the Church position on mothers working outside of the home. Many changes took place in our society after World War II. During the war, many women joined the work force to help our nation preserve peace and freedom for the world. After the war, many of these women remained at work outside of their homes to supplement the family income.

In an effort to retain the greater benefits of a mother's influence on her children, the Church opposed mothers' working outside the home if it was solely to gain added luxuries. This counsel did not apply to family businesses or farms where the family worked together; and it did not apply to single parents who *had to* leave their children so they could earn a living.

Curbing Independence in Women

Dr. Plenk refers to "strong measures" taken to curb the independence of women in the Church. If curbing women's independence were the intent of the Church leaders, it would be very disturbing.

Relief Society bazaars to raise money were commonplace through the 60s. In the 70s, the IRS modified their tax regulations. It was compliance with government tax laws, not a desire to control women, that

prompted Church officials to put an end to Relief Society fund-raising activities. It was not only the women who were affected by these new government regulations. All Church groups who worked to earn money for any reason were put out of business. The only services that remained were those central to the mission of the Church and which paid taxes on any profit.

Church procedures continually change to meet the current needs of Church members. The councils that make high-level decisions include representation from the Relief Society, the Young Women, and the Primary. Further, all groups in the Church are accountable equally to the councils, and to curb one group more than any other group would be wholly inconsistent. The Lord told Joseph Smith, "Let every man esteem his brother as himself, and practice virtue and holiness before me" (D&C 38:24).

These "strong measures" related to the correlation movement have placed more responsibility on the fathers in the homes and have produced more rapid growth in the men of the Church. Before fathers can become Christ-like, they must learn to be leaders, not dictators. The Savior taught that "whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" (Matt. 20:26-28; 23:11; Mark 9:35; Luke 22:26-27). Too few homes have great fathers, and some homes have no fathers; thus, the children in these homes have no male models of greatness unless they seek them elsewhere.

Dr. Plenck says, "Women were firmly established as homemakers and babymakers. These changes infantilized women and created many conflicts." The way she says it degrades the role of homemaker. This is contrary to her other statements about valuing women as mothers. She implies it was the male Church leaders who placed women in these roles. Who did assign to women the role of bringing babies into the world? It may have been their own choice. "Man [and woman] was also in the beginning with God . . . [and was] independent in that sphere in which God . . . placed it, to act for itself" (D&C 93:29-30). We do not know when or how or if we chose our gender, but we know that we willingly came to earth to have this experience. We did not come here under protest.

Rather than criticizing the Church for encouraging women to be mothers and homemakers, let's elevate the role of mothers and homemakers in our society. It does, in fact, take more skill and energy to be a homemaker than to perform any other kind of work. The influence of homemakers on our future is more profound and greater than the influence of any other profession.

I think some tough questions for the Church and its members have

to do with our attitude toward the never-married, the divorced, and widowed mothers. Are single mothers who care well for their young children considered productive citizens, worthy of financial and commodity support which would allow them to stay home and be homemakers if they wish? Or do we expect them to “work” for what they get? Do we limit our definition of “work” to activities that produce cash flow? Actually, many of these mothers want to work, at least part time, so they can associate with other adults and feel productive; but they ought to have the option to stay home.

Motherhood has status primarily in heaven—a long wait for a single mother and a bad reflection on how distant this world is from heaven.

Do we as Church members contribute generously enough to the fast offering funds to make adequate care possible? Of course there are abuses by those who receive help, but does this excuse us from sharing the burdens of the single mother? Should these mothers and their children live below our economic standards? We seem to view single mothers who receive welfare assistance as lacking in ambition and productivity. Even when adequate care is given, such care is viewed as a handout, not as the recipients’ just due. This attitude is so pervasive that many such mothers feel guilty if they buy an ice cream cone for their children. A newer car is out of the question. Church members might well consider what the Lord told Joseph Smith: “And you are to be equal, . . . you are to have equal claims on the properties, . . . every man according to his wants and his needs, inasmuch as his wants are just— . . . every man seeking the interest of his neighbor” (D&C 82:16–21).

Unmarried mothers who spend time with their preschool children and train them to become responsible, productive citizens can be as productive as mothers who leave their children in the care of others while they earn a livelihood. We ought to encourage these mothers to be with their children by providing adequate assistance and adequate status by treating them as queens. The poor among our members should be limited to those who are able but who refuse to work.

Women and Self-Esteem

When Dr. Plenk discussed the value of women and motherhood, she focused on more money for education, welfare benefits, day care, and other programs for single mothers. The real solution lies in how men view women and how women view themselves. On the surface men may say women are equal, but if they really believed it they would routinely treat women with *mutual* respect. As men, we pay a hypocritical tribute on Mother’s Day. We heap on very high expectations as we

portray the ideal mother, followed by returning mothers to their prescribed, subservient roles.

Women themselves present several paradoxes. They may fight for equality on one hand but continue to contradict it on the other.

Some women dress and act to please men. Some go further and engage in pornography and prostitution. Perhaps they feel contempt as they watch lustful men seek the pleasures they offer, and gain revenge as they receive high pay for their services. Premature sexual involvement is often the result of submission by women to more persuasive males.

Women who play the role of one who is weak and helpless, one who needs protection and provisions from their male heroes, feel only a small measure of success mixed with resentment and anger for their own dependence and feelings of inadequacy. Some wives play the traditional role of "inferior assistant" to their husbands. They dutifully obey without question and lose their individual identities in exchange for security. (The scriptural role assignment "help meet" is not synonymous with "help mate." The word *meet* means "ideally suited for," implying "equal to" or "just right." Our Creator seems to describe woman as a help "ideally suited for, equal to, and just right" for man.)

Some more aggressive women are highly competitive with men in the marketplace. They abandon motherhood and fight hard to play the traditional male role. They run for political offices and corporate positions. They seek education and professions in a formerly all-male world. This is healthy to the extent that it is a true reflection of their interests and abilities, but in some cases these drives reflect doubt in the value and status of motherhood and homemaking.

If women clearly saw their value and their unique motherhood role, they would prepare themselves to be better persons, mothers, and citizens. They would be better educated and better prepared for leadership. They would command, instead of demand, respect. They would respect themselves instead of being robots for the more aggressive, manipulating males.

Helping Women Esteem Themselves

How do we help the women of the nation feel their true worth? One way is to rear them in good families where mothers have status as individuals and as women. Developing a good family is a responsibility we all share equally. Mothers who respect themselves can rear sons who respect their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters. Women who resent the male tyrants in their lives have more difficulty loving, nurturing, and training their sons to be kind, gentle, and self-confident.

We could also provide better education for motherhood (and fatherhood) in the schools.

For those mothers who are divorced, we could provide better church resources, acceptance, moral support, educational opportunities, financial assistance, commodity support, and day-care centers.

We can teach women about their eternal role and value in the eyes of our Heavenly Father.

It is a tradition in our society, not in heaven, for women to bear the greater burden of child rearing and homemaking. It is easier to leave home each day, go elsewhere to work, and return home to escape from work, something a homemaker cannot do.

This tradition is contradicted in the scriptures, where equal or more emphasis is placed on fathers being the teachers of their children (see Moses 6:50–62; 7:1; Ephesians 6:4; Book of Mormon, Enos 1:1; Mosiah 4:15; Alma 56:47; 57:21; D&C 29:48; 68:25–28; 93:40, 47, 49). In each reference, the duty of parents to teach is elevated as an important and eternal role. There are few scriptural teachings about housekeeping and groundskeeping. Apparently these roles are to be equally shared (see Moses 5:1).

The ERA

Dr. Plenk describes the male leadership in the Church as being “frightened” by Mormon feminists into taking “strong stands against the ERA, day care and professional careers for women.” The Church views the ERA as a moral issue, not an equal rights issue. This debate has been carried out in detail elsewhere and there is no need to repeat it here.

I think we have already shown that the Church is not opposed to day care nor to professional careers for women. The Church opposes anything that interferes with the more important roles of wife, husband, mother, and father. Men are included in this attitude.

Recent women’s meetings of the Church have encouraged women to develop their talents and abilities as human beings, while at the same time being true to their opportunities to become wives and mothers. Those who do not have opportunities to become wives and mothers are esteemed by the Church (though, perhaps not by some members of the Church) and given the same hope for the eternities as any other worthy woman.

Pressure to Maintain a Facade

The economic and social pressures on Mormon women, referred to by Dr. Plenk, do not stem from the gospel but from our inability to live the gospel. There is something in our human nature, both male and female, that motivates us to compare ourselves and com-

pete with others. Our failure to conform to our high standards leads us to build and maintain a facade that "all is well." Seen by our neighbors with whom we are competing, this facade further escalates the comparisons, competition, and facades. This type of competition motivates public performance, but jeopardizes self-esteem.

Those in the Church who are honest in self-disclosure belong to a wonderful support group. Those who continue to compare and compete are depressed, anxious, and neurotic. They need some good therapy and some truly Christian neighbors.

Perhaps too much is made of independence, both by Dr. Plenk and by the Church. Mutual interdependence seems to be a higher law. Not one of us is self-sufficient, self-reliant, or self-supportive. Our goal is to become capable of doing more for ourselves and for others. Some of us grow gardens and have our year's supply of food, clothing, and fuel in storage so we could survive in a crisis, and yet we depend upon many others to maintain our quality of life. If we were totally independent, we would raise our own sheep for wool, spin our yarn, weave our cloth, and make our own clothing. We would grow our own lumber and manufacture all the other raw materials to build our own homes. We would similarly provide our own transportation, publish our own books, and educate our own children. But none of this would be necessary because, being self-sufficient, we would never marry and have children, and humans would become extinct.

God created us to need each other, to work together, and to serve one another. He wants us to take care of the poor. Our eternal salvation is based on visiting the sick, fellowshiping the stranger, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, and so forth. We must all take our turns in both roles, the giver and the receiver. Without generous givers, the needy have no hope of survival and growth. Without the needy, gracious receivers, the giver has no hope of salvation. The single mother may choose to gracefully receive financial assistance while she is giving to the world children who are well prepared for productive adult roles.

Divorce Is Most Stressful

I agree with Dr. Plenk that separation and divorce must be among the most stressful of all experiences. I think it is much worse than losing a spouse in death. There are continual reminders of past pain and lost happiness. Common bonds and interests continue, and old wounds are reopened. There is no official, acceptable mourning period to provide closure. Divorced people are nearly deserted by the mainstream of the Church. Most people do not know what to say to the divorced person.

Divorce is also very difficult for the children who are caught in the

middle with torn loyalties. Their trauma leads to behavioral problems that further challenge the single parent. We in the Church believe that the decision to divorce a spouse must be an individual choice after careful thought and prayer, and after having exhausted all available resources to strengthen the relationship. But when one makes a decision to seek a divorce, he or she remains worthy of the same love and acceptance as any other member.

To paraphrase, “pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless [the neglected, the abused, the poor, the divorced] and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27).

Reporting Child Sexual Abuse

Contrary to Dr. Plenk’s implication, all of the Mormon therapists I know report child sexual abuse because the “close-knit feeling for each other” is closest to the child victims. Our greatest challenge is in being patient and kind with the offender who is in a state of denial and who with his smooth talk has minimized his offenses in the minds of others. He needs immediate Church discipline, with time to get his life in order. We view this life as the time to overcome our problems and prepare to meet God. Excommunication from God’s kingdom on judgment day may be final. (The Church has just recently refined and improved its procedure for reporting child abuse and neglect.)

Another challenge is dealing with the very slow, and often brutal, investigation and prosecution process. Often the investigation by civil authorities retraumatizes the victim.

Education and Role Models

Certainly Dr. Plenk is right in her wish for better role models and better parent education groups. There seems to be little interest in parent education until some of our children create enough stress to motivate us. Then we say, “I wish I had known this ten or twenty years ago.” The *Becoming a Better Parent* course is available in many stakes under LDS Social Services supervision. An *Infant Parenting* course is also available in many agencies. Numerous similar classes are available in many community agencies.

The best place to learn these attitudes and values is in a good home, but the traditional family of two parents and several children is less common. The best resource to the family ought to be the Church, but too few attend church and some church meetings are not practical. Thus, by default a greater burden falls on community resources. If there is a panacea, it lies in the good home with the Church as its

resource. Community agencies can be of greater service as they strengthen family life and support Church programs.

Money and Commitments

Money may demonstrate our priorities, our commitment, and our values, but money is also used to escape responsibility and as a substitute for love. Our “Santa Claus” divorced fathers use money to load their children with entertainment, goodies, and gifts and then return them to their mothers to do chores and homework. If we really valued motherhood, we would give money and more. We would give motherhood the status it deserves. We would be prayerful and creative in learning to apply gospel principles to our problems. We would take greater advantage of the relatively inexpensive resources of the Church and help each other to strengthen our families instead of turning to the government to solve our problems at considerably higher cost.

Being Christian

The gospel of Jesus Christ as taught by Alma in the Book of Mormon describes Christians as those who “are willing to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light; . . . mourn with those that mourn; . . . and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:8-9).

Perhaps we ought to remind ourselves, and I’m sure Dr. Plenk would agree, that to be good Mormons we must first be good Christians.

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