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“The Good Part”

Barbara B. Smith
Relief Society General President
2 April 1982

Following the story of the Good Samaritan in which Jesus instructed us to be of service to those in need, we read in Luke, chapter 10, verses 38–42 about the visit of Jesus to the home of Martha and Mary:

Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister named Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, Dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she should help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.

This scripture suggests a number of things, but I should like to direct your attention to the phrase “and Mary hath *chosen* that *good part*, which shall not be taken away from her.” I am impressed each day with the responsibility I have to help women choose that good part which shall not be taken away from them, and as I consider your contributions to troubled clients I suspect that you are most successful when you help those who seek your guidance to come to an understanding of that most human of all activities: choosing.

I do not believe that you or I can give the good part to anyone else. I believe that they must choose it for themselves. Yet I am equally certain that we have an obligation to help others make meaningful choices.

How do we help? You know ways that I do not know, but I do know that as an individual and as Relief Society President there are at least three areas in which I can have an influence.

First of all, in the Relief Society curriculum and programs we try, as the Church does in all of its programs, to help people understand that each one has a choice to make and that choice is a God-given privilege. The ancient prophet, Joshua, declared to the Jews “choose you this day whom ye will serve . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15). In later times the prophet, President David O. McKay, explained to us, “Next to the bestowal of life itself, the right to direct our lives is God’s greatest gift to man.” Knowing that she has a choice, each woman—and I think it equally true for each man—then needs to understand why choices are important and how to recognize them.

A second area in which the Relief Society is very significantly involved is helping women to enlarge their understanding of the process that must be followed in order to make good choices. I think I can help women with whom I have considerable personal interaction to better understand this principle. I know that you spend your professional hours helping the sick to come to a place from which they can begin to make choices again.

A third challenge that we in Relief Society try to respond to is to give instruction and understanding to help individual women recognize that choosing is an everyday, lifelong process. It is never a thing fully achieved. This is particularly true if a woman is to choose “the good part” that will not dissipate or be taken away.

Each woman has a choice. From time to time I hear someone say that Mormon women do not have the right of choice or I read that Mormon women have no opportunity to choose the direction of their own lives. But I am absolutely certain that Mormon women, like all women in America today, have never enjoyed an environment so filled with options as the one in which we are

privileged to live. We have the right to vote, the right of legal entity, the right to sue and to be sued, the right to education—in fact, I cannot think of a single fundamental right of citizenship that has not been extended to women. I know that there is inequity in the world of work and I am sure there are state laws which may need modification. But the truth is that a woman in today's world has more access to the nation's opportunities and resources than any other generation of women. This means that a woman may be part of the process of problem-solving in a very direct way. This means that she can enter into the mainstream of life from many, many doors.

I study the gospel constantly and I am more and more aware of the Law of Agency. There is no more profoundly important doctrine than this in our whole structure of gospel teachings. It is not only a privilege; it is a right, if you will, but it is also a responsibility for each human being to have the divinely-given and guaranteed option for agency. One of the fundamental reasons for being in mortality is to have the right to make responsible choices regarding good and evil. Therefore, it becomes critically important for each of us to understand that we have choices and also to understand the meaning of those choices. The gospel teaches us that there is responsibility in choice, and that the essential elements of choice which lead us to a oneness with eternal things are available to all no matter what the circumstances of their life.

Too often it is suggested that choice wants to be accompanied by freedom from consequences. It is no service to perpetuate such a notion. One great contribution of the gospel teachings to our lives lies in helping us understand that we do not belong to a capricious world of mere chance. Rather, we belong to a universe governed by law. Natural happenings and human behavior are both subject to the rule of law. If we throw a ball into the air, it will come down in response to the law of gravity. If we give love, love will be returned to us—perhaps in ways we least expect, but nevertheless it will come back to us. Knowing this, we recognize that there is an undergirding to human experience which is based upon laws and the natural consequences of those principles of truth, and it helps us to understand the nature of choice.

I believe most of the sisters in Relief Society receive great strength from their knowledge of eternal principles, especially when circumstances become enormously stressful. Let me share with you a few experiences and letters.

Recently, I returned from a trip where I met a young mother in an airport who had a three-year-old child in a stroller. Before our conversation concluded, this vivacious mother told me about the day she and her then two-year-old were out in their yard. The little girl ran over to the neighbor's just as they backed out of the driveway in their station wagon, and they ran over her. Doctors determined that the baby would never walk again because of the injury done to her spinal cord. I couldn't hold back the tears; yet, the mother was hopeful, happy and vibrant. She had one child at home and was expecting another. I could see that her choice would have been either to mope around helplessly or to do all that she could to bring happiness to that child, to live worthy of the blessings of the Lord, and to have peace in her own heart. This is the path she had chosen.

Recently I received a letter from a sister who lost a child in a drowning accident. She wrote to tell me about her experiences as a mother. She said that after the birth of her first child she worked full-time, doing extremely well in her chosen work and having great opportunities in that area. Her first little girl was raised, in the mother's own words, "largely by a babysitter." Then she gave birth to another daughter, and decided to stay home with the two little girls. She described the fun and laughter the three of them had together as she learned to be a mother and a homemaker and won anew the love and companionship of her first daughter. Now let me quote a few paragraphs:

Then July 1980 came, that awful day. Our little daughter left our yard and in a matter of seconds fell into our neighbor's ditch. We searched and searched for her. My husband found her and pulled her out of the ditch and tried to breathe the breath of life back into her. I felt that her spirit had left her body. The shock was terrible. All I could think was that God would not take her. She was too hard to get here and he had already taken a teenage boy from our neighborhood just [the] week [before]. The doctor, being a neighbor, got there right away. He worked on her at the hospital for an hour.

I feel that her spirit suffered pain to re-enter her body just because of her love for us. I felt her respond when I would touch her and talk to her. All night we stayed with her, and silently prayed for her life.

My husband and I went the next day for a walk. I knew his pain was great. We talked. I told him I did not know what to do anymore. I didn't want her to suffer, yet I couldn't give her up. I guess it was in the park that day that we finally faced reality and were willing to let God's will be done. When we went back it seemed as though her life was slipping quietly away from her. She no longer responded. Her heart rate was dropping. The doctor came and he told us that she had very severe brain damage. They called him away and when he came back he said, "She is gone." I shall always remember him, with tears in his eyes, saying those words. . . . We then went to her room. I picked her body up in my arms and held her for the last time. I felt her spirit next to me and I shall always remember that feeling I had when it left. We came home to face our house empty without her. I thought of the poor older daughter. She had not held her little sister. There was a deep pain within her.

Through the love and support of family, friends, neighbors, and ward members, we survived this most difficult time in our lives. But I now know the joys of being a mother, a supportive wife. I also know the pain of losing my child and longing to pick her up in my arms once more.

I have grown even closer to Chantell now. I tell her constantly that I love her. I hug her often and sometimes cradle her in my arms to comfort her. No matter how old a child gets, it still needs that love that only a mother can give them.

I am thankful that Heavenly Father gave us such an important role in life, and I will always strive to better myself as a mother and helpmate to my husband.

Let me share one more of last week's letters. This sister describes her problem in these words:

When my High Priest husband suddenly left us—his family—and announced he wanted a divorce, I was heartbroken. I was also in big trouble. He left me five confused teenagers and \$50.00. The only job I'd had was as a part-time custodian at the meeting house and I'd never been allowed to learn to drive!

My only recourse was prayer and after the necessary soul searching and realization and confession of my own flaws I got up from my knees one evening knowing that everything would be "OK," and also that some how this was an opportunity for me. My life had been put in my own hands in order that I might become what my Heavenly Father

wanted me to be. I didn't stop being devastated; I just charged ahead anyway!

Let me tell you how the Lord and the Relief Society prepared me and helped me through all this.

As a Stake Board Member (welfare, homemaking), I had worked with young special interests for two years. I knew the program and the pitfalls. It really helped.

A whole year before my separation I had worked hard to complete a project for Relief Society. It had been very spiritually lifting. I made some commitments to the Lord and discussed my eternal goals with Him. At this time it was continually impressed upon me that there would be a change in my life and that I should be ready. I know Relief Society prepared me spiritually to want this progress.

My testimony was tried. It was life's darkest hour. I didn't doubt the Church or the gospel but my place in it. I clung and struggled and passed the test.

My calling in the Church was to teach the Spiritual Living lessons. The first lesson's purpose was: "The latter-day saint woman is comforted to know that all things work together for good for she who is righteous." I have never forgotten that principle.

I drove. I didn't learn first, I just drove. I knew my job was too lonely, too low paying and not offering enough growth so I went to the employment office and took some aptitude tests. Then I went to the junior college for academic counseling. They offered me a job teaching time management, a seminar I'd taught in Relief Society. Armed with confidence I managed to persuade DuPont to hire me as an artist. I had only a high school education, no work experience, and no training. In place of a portfolio I took my orientation chart from, you guessed it, Relief Society and some program covers! The motto among the sisters was "keep your knees warm:" we literally prayed me into that job. I'd been single two months.

I struggled, how I struggled with the kids, the house, the car-broke down eleven times in three months, and money. I lost a fender one midnight picking up a young man from work. I prayed for strength. One Sunday in sacrament while listening to a talk on prayer I realized I was wrong. I was praying for strength! I immediately bowed my head and prayed for relief. Three weeks later I was in the hospital. I had had some trouble focusing my eyes and the eye doctor sent me on to a neurologist. I walked out of his office that sunny January afternoon with the words brain tumor ringing in my ears. I stood on the sidewalk and literally didn't know what to do. I wanted to run to my husband—he didn't exist! In that moment my marriage ended. In the car was a

teenage boy who needed me. Who could I lean on? The Savior. My Savior.

After I had been examined and tested they discovered, not a tumor, but multiple sclerosis. I was paralyzed on one side of my face, it left. In March, two months later, I went slowly blind in one eye. It took six months altogether but it came back quite a bit.

Now look at the Lord's hand in this part. My job was temporary and had no benefits, no insurance, no sick leave. I was uninsurable and the day my divorce was final, I would be unprotected. The day before my divorce I was offered another job with full benefits. I took it. The work is not as satisfying—I do book and video illustration and whatever else—nor as challenging—but I was insured! I had to wait until January 8th to be actually covered so for five months I stayed well. In January we were offered an additional benefit—long term disability! It took effect on February 1st. On February 10th I went into the hospital and February 11th my left eye went blind. Sometimes a door must close before another may open. I can see enough to read and write and get around. Unless more vision returns I will have to seek a new career. (After a month it has finally started to return.) I'm sure my Heavenly Father and Relief Society will turn out to have prepared me for it! All that I am and all that I have I owe to the Church.

Yes, sometimes I am lonely. And I know that the answer is to do something about it myself. There aren't a lot of single women here my age—I'm 41—and no men. I'm very careful about where I go and what I do and that is limiting, but it's also protecting and I value that. I have a constant struggle to get them to let me serve. The priesthood worries about my time and my car and my strength. I was directing a play last fall and was asked if it was over-tiring me. I told them "Never you mind I need this." There's always more ways to not be lonely than to have a date.

And I don't always get all the services I need. My washer has been on the fritz for a year. My home teacher has forgotten. But he never forgets me. I believe it is not the service we need so much as the emotional support. And, of course, the easiest and best cure is to go and help someone else. Single doesn't have to mean selfish. Let me serve.

I could go on and on but I'm embarrassed already at the length of this letter. Now I've been single for 22 months. How I've grown. And Relief Society and my Father and the priesthood are always there. They always will be.

Then she ends it with this paragraph:

I hope this letter sounds as nice as I mean it to. I know life has challenges. We knew that when we came. Don't worry about me, my

patriarchal blessing promises me good health until I'm content to be called home. And I'm too busy to go!

Both of these letters attest that we have problems—problems that are both grave and ongoing and problems that may never be solved completely. But I wanted you to hear how these two sisters have found great strength in gospel teachings. They have chosen to invite the Spirit of the Lord into their problem-solving and they have found peace. Their problems have not gone away, but they are comforted. They have courage to go forward. I believe that women who know and understand the truth of their relationship with their Heavenly Father can have this great peace.

There are angry letters which come to my desk too. There are bitter women who come into my office and berate the Relief Society for not solving their problems. Some men and women tell me that God should not allow suffering. Others are constantly defensive and justify themselves as they play the role of martyr or victim. There are those who find flaws in someone else's life to justify their own bitterness.

I only want to reaffirm that making choices in relationship to eternal principles will bring comfort and peace to the troubled soul who can and does turn to God and seeks comfort. I know there are some who feel they cannot turn to God and I am grateful that there are people like you who can help them come to a wholeness sufficient to let them take hold of their own lives and direct its course again.

We approach the problems of the women of the Church from different perspectives. I have been called by my Heavenly Father through His prophet to do a very special work among the women of the Church, and I want very much to help them improve their health and enrich the quality of their lives through Relief Society. You as professionals learn of the needs of women from your training and your clinical, listening ear. I learn of the needs of women from my experienced but not-so-trained ear and I learn of them through Relief Society women around the world. Still, I know we must work together for the good of Latter-day Saint women. We should help each other and not perform in such a way

as to take over for each other. Both of us have a responsibility to them.

Let me suggest some ways that I see us working together to meet the needs of the individual women. I want you to know that I welcome dialogue with any of you that will help me improve my understanding of their needs and increase my vision of how to be more helpful to them as they meet their great challenges.

I know that you see women who need to have the ability to cope with life-threatening situations. At some point they will have to rely on themselves to adapt to the circumstances of their lives over which they have no control. This development can happen through Relief Society. The Relief Society can provide information and experience in disaster response as well as emotional support and companionship. If a woman accepts these opportunities, she can develop the ability to cope with life-threatening situations. She can deal with them personally, becoming strong enough to direct herself through the very difficult circumstances of her life, as my young friend from Texas wrote.

The experiences of cooperative effort in meeting emergencies outside her own life also have great value. Relief Society sisters have rallied together from the very beginning of the organization. The first challenge was to relieve the suffering of the poor. Later responses have helped sisters through long-term illnesses or sustained them during earthquakes and floods.

You see women who cannot cope with being able to provide for others or take care of themselves. At some point in time they will have to learn to be decisive in planning and resourceful living. The Relief Society provides teaching and training in homemaking, career planning, multiple skills, and application of gospel principles. Perhaps some of these encouragements can be of help to you as you find others to support these women.

You see women who need esteem through recognition for their accomplishments. At some time they will have to gain emotional stability and congruency. Relief Society may be the only opportunity for some to give to others, or to provide leadership in a setting outside of the home.

You see women who need to go beyond themselves. We both know that at some point they will have to take risks and extend themselves to others beyond their family. The Relief Society provides an arena for risking themselves. Within its programs lie encouragement and multiple opportunity for giving compassionate service.

You see women who need feelings of self-worth. We know that at some point they will have to strengthen their sense of self. The Relief Society provides the means to acquire attitudes and gain skills of mastery over environment. We have lessons teaching the principles of managing temporal matters. We study the scriptures to gain an insight into attitudes.

You see women who need to love someone and to be loved. They will have to learn to give selflessly to another person and build loving relationships with others. Relief Society provides a truly remarkable opportunity to give to others through compassionate service and provides many opportunities to build friendships by working together.

You see women who need to belong and to be a part of something greater than themselves. We both know that they will have to enter the human community at some point in time both as a receiver and as a giver. Relief Society provides callings, opportunity, encouragement, and stimulation to give to others. There is, for instance, the visiting teaching program in which, by assignment, we go out to call upon others to become aware of their needs and then to give creative ideas on how to meet those needs.

You see women who need to experience congruency between belief and behavior. At some point in time they will have to come to a test of faith. Relief Society provides a support system for each woman and conveys a value for her, accepting her as she is.

You see women who need faith in the possibility of something better. At some point in time these women will have to make a commitment to covenants and gain assurance of an eternal process. Relief Society teaches of eternal potential in the midst of everyday realities. More than that, Relief Society offers opportunities to

expand each sister's knowledge and experience in new areas of knowledge—areas having to do with eternal concepts.

I know I have not exhausted the list of things you see, and by listing a few of the ways in which Relief Society is capable of responding I have not intended to suggest that Relief Society can do it all. I only wanted to suggest to you a few of the possibilities in Relief Society. Hopefully, you can see ways in which Relief Society and Relief Society sisters might become part of the environment which helps the individual women you work with.

Hopefully, also, we will be able to better understand needs and on occasion the malfunctioning of our program. Such awareness might help us to provide more effective help to the women we serve and to the women you are helping.

I am aware of the importance of confidences. I respect your professional, confidential relationship with clients and I would not expect you to break ethical privacy to share information with the Relief Society president without the permission of the client. On the other hand, I hope you understand that a Relief Society president also has a confidential relationship with a woman when she perceives apparent concerns. The Relief Society President, under the responsibility of her calling, should not divulge those confidences to you although she should divulge them to the Bishop because of his divine calling. Obviously this means we have to learn how to become accessible to the individual woman.

I am extremely aware of the importance of agency. I know that a woman's agency is of critical importance to her as she seeks to work out her own salvation and exaltation. I would hope that neither you as professionals nor we as called Relief Society workers would ever forget our responsibility in this matter. We must not deny a woman her agency. We must not seek to remove agency from women. We must not confuse a woman's agency.

I pray that we may both have wisdom and judgment in giving help when we can, striving always to help those we serve become independently able to take on their own challenges and successfully address them.

I think Relief Society has a long and distinguished history of urging women to take a positive attitude toward the problems they face. Sometimes people have suggested that this was an unrealistic position which brought more harm than good. It was never intended that way. From the long-term vision of gospel teaching, such a positive position is really only designed to help our sisters to believe they can meet their challenges and to give them encouragement to keep that positive thrust. The gospel is a gospel of hope. Living the principles of this divine good news helps human beings rise above the circumstances of their lives and become more perfect.

We can seek wisdom and knowledge. We can learn truth. We can give service. We can give love. We can be loved. It is our choice. Agency, when exercised, gives us freedom to become what we have within us to become. Through the use of agency the authentic self emerges. The scriptures attest that the power is in us to do much good, for we are agents unto ourselves. God grant us the vision to live accordingly—to choose the “good part, which shall not be taken away.”