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Discussing Difficult Topics: The Representation of Women in Today's Church

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Wayment: *There seems to be a lack of female models—role models—both in biblical scripture and Book of Mormon scripture. I wonder how that lack affects emerging women's identities. What are your thoughts on this? Do we need to create models? Are there good models that we're maybe not making enough of?*

McBaine: I think you've hit it exactly. The founding idea of the Mormon Women Project and one that I talk a lot about in my book, *Women at Church*, is that “you can't be what you can't see.” History has been written by men for hundreds and thousands of years, and men's history is the public history. Men's history is the history of culture and politics and business. Women's history is the history of domestic endeavors and the history of the home and the private sphere.

Now, with women in and out of the Church entering a more public sphere, there is a need for public female representation—both visually and in the examples that we read about. We need to represent and reflect the changing demographic of our society, our workforce, our educational force, and our spiritual communities, where women are no longer being told, “Just do your work in the home.” They're being invited into ward councils, into the highest councils of the Church. Their voices are needed and being encouraged at every level. But because examples of women in those roles are sparse, some women feel uncomfortable claiming those opportunities.

Examples of women in expanded spheres do exist, but they have to be excavated—discovered and brought out of obscurity and held up to be examined and emulated. These women can be found in ancient and more recent history, and there are scriptorians and historians who are doing comprehensive work to bring these women to light. But I am personally interested in the contemporary Mormon woman and her expanded roles. Women today need to be celebrated—not only for their domestic accomplishments, but for their community and work contributions, and also their ecclesiastical authority. I call this the “both/and” model, as opposed to the “either” wife and mother “or” aberrant worker model she's suffered under in past decades. I like to think that the Mormon Women Project is excavating some of those examples.

In terms of general Church leadership, we're seeing more and more female leaders and female examples *also* being excavated. We see the wives of the Apostles being put on the stand at general conference now, we have pictures of the female general officers in the *Ensign* and the Conference Center, things like that. Elder Nelson's most recent conference talk gave us a mandate to know and love the Apostles' wives as we love the Apostles themselves, and he

encouraged women to claim their voice in a way that hasn't been heard in recent history. I see small but significant changes happening to bring to light the examples we have.

Wayment: *I understand you're now excavating modern examples, but it seems like, as a man, I have such a variety of role models. I can be Nephi or Moroni, but with a woman, you have so few examples. I wonder, do you feel that has a direct correspondence?*

McBaine: Oh, I absolutely think so. Women will often quip that the female examples in the scriptures are either harlots or angel mothers—that's another example of the "either/or" model!—and it's hard to relate to things when they're so black-and-white. Ruth is kind of an interesting example who might not actually fall into those stereotypes, but figures like Ruth are both overworked and completely underappreciated at the same time, I think. They're overworked in the sense that, when we throw Ruth into a discussion or lesson, we assume that all women should be able to find their identity in her, or in one of a dozen other key players that we like to bring up often. We simplify the female narrative by fitting the female lived experience into a handful of scriptural examples, whereas the possibility of male narratives is as varied as the number of male characters.

And at the same time, we expect women to be able to seamlessly accomplish the gender translation needed to say, "I'm going to liken myself unto a Mesoamerican military captain who is noted for creating strategic forts." And we don't think anything of that—of asking a woman to make that sort of gender-identity change to develop her spiritual personality. How often do we ask a man to put himself in the shoes of Rahab? Or Nephi's wife?

I've also heard stories, even just this year in Sunday School, where a woman is included as part of the lesson materials, and the teacher will just choose to drop her out of the lesson because they run out of time or don't really know what to say about her. It feels that women are the first to be dropped out. That might be because we're not quite sure what to do with them. There isn't a lot of information about them.

That problem was illuminated for me a couple years ago when I became familiar with Heather Farrell, who runs a blog called *Women in the Scriptures*. It's interesting how she started the blog—she was home with small children, and she just started reading the scriptures really, really carefully with an eye for all the women. She has written blog posts on the hundreds and hundreds of women in the canonical scriptures. And even if they're not named, even if it's just a mention of "So-and-so and their sister," or "and her daughter came with her," or something like that. Heather Farrell has put such time and love into each one of them. She wrote a book about these women last year, and what I loved about her approach was that it was completely nonhistorical, just a personal exploration of what these women taught her about the women in the scriptures.

And then, of course, there are examples like Camille Fronk Olson, who is taking a very academic approach to the women in the scriptures. There's room for all of that, and more. One of the things I learned, actually, from both Camille and Heather is the idea of actively looking for women in the scriptures, and the interesting things you can find if you actually look for them. They both point out that so much imagery in the scriptures is female. You know, wisdom, love,

etc.—and *so* much imagery is about pregnancy and birth. It makes us ask, “Well how did the men—what we think are exclusively men—who wrote these scriptures have enough intimate knowledge of pregnancy and the toils of women to be able to create all these analogies?”

So there was either a lot of female influence on the writers, or maybe they were female writers themselves—I like dwelling on those possibilities.

Wayment: *Are there ways that you see, in a classroom setting, a teacher could help bridge this gap in a meaningful way, from your own experience?*

McBaine: Yes. One thing we’re trying to do at the Mormon Women Project right now is exactly that: we’ve created our own supplements to Sunday School lessons. So we’ve specifically taken the assignment of the Sunday School lesson—this year, the New Testament lessons—and we’ve created supplements that are written by both female scriptural scholars and good writers who we’ve curated, and we post that every week to correspond with the lesson.

What those writers do is they take the scriptures that are covered in the lessons and they look at them from an exclusively female perspective. We’ve also tried to give both historical and spiritual context for some of those women who might be glossed over by teachers who don’t know much about them. The New Testament is especially rich to do this with because there are so many female characters in it. The other thing we’ve done is that we’ve curated statements about the lesson’s theme from female general officers through the history of the Church. So we have President Barbara Smith talking about the parable of the talents, or we have another general female officer in the Primary general presidency or the Relief Society general presidency or the Young Women general presidency giving a statement about another value that the Savior is trying to teach through another story.

There’s always an opportunity to at least quote a woman in the Sunday School lesson as an ecclesiastical and spiritual authority, even if the stories themselves aren’t about women. We’ve also, in those supplements, included statements from the 350 interviews that we have on the Mormon Women Project right now. These statements add examples of contemporary women living that principle, or discussing that principle.

So that’s one approach to the classroom setting, I think—always making sure that women’s commentary is included as you’re teaching a principle or a story. And if there is a dearth of women in the scriptures to cite and learn from—the Book of Mormon will be tougher!—there are rich sources from Church history that are only now being tapped into.

Wayment: *And with the examples from Church history, we can quote women by name as well, so we can attach the ideas to real people.*

McBaine: Absolutely, yes. That’s why the idea of the pioneer journals is so rich, because it’s tapping into that private history that we actually have in abundance. A lot of the resources from that time aren’t going to be the public, male-driven history that we tend to study mostly in Church history courses. But women were speaking and leading in the early Church even more than today, and their lives and words are becoming more accessible as our historians continue to excavate their influence. For example, there is a book coming from the Church History

department this spring that compiles—like *The Joseph Smith Papers*—the original writings and talks of early female leaders. That will be a fantastic resource!

Wayment: *Can you help our readers visualize, perhaps, the differences between a female and male experience in the Church?*

McBaine: The way they really differ is in the actions that are considered appropriate fulfillment of taught principles. The expectations for our girls, as reflected in their Young Women lessons and principles, are not as action-driven as the boys. Girls are taught about charity, or virtue, or nurturing, or developing their individual worth—all good things, but they are mostly theoretical, preparatory, internal. But the Young Men are inducted into this body of action, very literally: they start attending priesthood, they start collecting fast offerings, they start going home teaching, they start passing the sacrament, they hold the microphone for testimony meeting, or they hand out programs—whatever it is. There are all these physical manifestations of what they are being taught is their role in building the kingdom. And I think that’s at the heart of this division between boys and girls right now in the Church.

That sense of action may be a positive reflection of how effective we are in teaching the importance of principles and ordinances. Because what are ordinances? Ordinances are physical manifestations of commitments that we are making to God. It’s not an ordinance if it doesn’t have a physical component to it—if it doesn’t have an action in which we are actually underscoring a concept. And so there’s this physicality and need for bodies that is inherent in the gospel. Our ordinances require eating things, they require making signs, they require going underneath the water, you know. I think the boys start picking up on that really early on, that when they’re passing that sacrament, when they’re going out and collecting that money that we’re giving to the homeless, when they’re visiting people, they’re actually modeling the action inherent in our saving ordinances. And the girls have none of that institutional action-oriented work in their Young Women’s experiences.

You can look at Boy Scouts versus Activity Days and it’s the exact same thing. Boy Scouts are being given badges—something physical for accomplishing specific tasks. Whereas the girls—well, there’s been a lot of talk about Activity Days recently, how its definition is really at the hands of the local leader. It can be active—not in an athletic sense, but in the sense of performing meaningful actions—or it can be passive (manicure and movie nights come to mind). There are no activities or jobs or accomplishments specifically associated with girls that age. I’ve appreciated in my ward that the Primary chorister has made our Activity Days girls a de facto choir. She has them sing in sacrament meeting so that they feel they have a specific role in the ward and can be recognized for a particular public action.

So this division in church experience starts when they’re eight. And a lot of people, I think, would say, “OK, a woman builds the kingdom through her mothering and through the physical demands of domestic life.” And I think that has worked well for many generations. But at this point, it’s not working as well because the physical demands of home keeping aren’t what they used to be, and men are sharing that burden a lot more—there’s a lot more crossover. That

division simply doesn't put the same responsibility on women as it used to, and so that rationale—building the kingdom through domestic life—isn't working anymore.

Wayment: *That's a great thought. I'm going to throw another dynamic into this: the female missionaries. So now they're coming back trained in enormous numbers. By comparison, I've taught at BYU for nearly sixteen years. In a typical New Testament class, I used to have about 20 percent returned missionaries, and it would be almost always male. Once in a while I'd have a female returned missionary. Today it's probably fifty-fifty male-female missionaries. And typically there's only one or two students who haven't gone on missions.*

McBaine: Wow!

Wayment: *And it's completely changed the dynamic. So now I have in my classroom these female students who have had the same experiences, and it's perhaps creating a bit of tension because they're just as informed, they're just as experienced, and now they're shifting into a different role when they come back. I'm wondering how you see that missionary experience changing the dynamic here. So you've said it's not working, and that might be a further reason why it's not working.*

McBaine: Well, there are three things that I always go back to. But before that, I think it's really important to acknowledge exactly what you just said, which is that these missionaries are having the same experiences, and there are levers in place in the mission field to promote and develop the leadership abilities of women that are not in place in the local churches yet. There's that tension you described because they're coming home to structures and organizations that are not set up to nurture their experiences and the talents they developed on their missions. That is, I think, going to be a huge test for us in the coming five to ten years.

But there are three things that I always go back to in saying how can we better prepare our local congregations to welcome in those women. And the first is, as I mentioned earlier, optics. It's a small and simple thing, but we need to make sure that those women see themselves reflected in the people that are sitting up on the stand and the people who are speaking to them with authority about spiritual and ecclesiastical matters—the people who are reflecting to them the use of priesthood power.

There are the low-hanging fruit examples of optics that I've already mentioned: more women on the stands, and in our imagery. One mid-singles ward here in Salt Lake City has the bishopric and all of their wives sit on the stand together every week, which I've heard from members of that ward is incredibly meaningful to them. Many stakes are now having the stake Relief Society presidency sit on the stand during stake conference or are adding their photos to the stake offices. One lesser-considered example in the optics arena is the idea of baptismal witnesses. You know, the men who stand at the sides of the font to make sure the toes go under? The baptism is a symbol of the Savior dying and being resurrected. And who were the witnesses of the Savior's Resurrection? It was Mary. It was women. And Mary Magdalene herself being the "Apostle's Apostle" as the Catholics call her, being the one to announce that the Savior had risen—is there something there we could emulate? Would it actually be more accurate to the reenactment of this sacred event to have the witnesses be women? I don't know. But asking

ourselves these kinds of questions, I think, is going to help us get to that place where those women can see jobs for themselves, see roles for themselves. So that's optics.

The second thing is that we need to consider how administrative roles can evolve without disrupting priesthood keys. There is a huge range of possibility here that we are not considering, and I think this is what Elder Nelson touched on with his call to women in last conference. We need to enact Elder M. Russell Ballard's counsel to really get women involved in ward councils, and we need to acknowledge that three women in ward council with ten men is going to have inherent structural challenges. And I think that Elder Ballard and local leaders I've talked to are starting to wrestle with that. Like what does it mean to only have three women in this meeting, and what are the other levers that we can pull to make sure that those women's voices are equally influential, right? There's lots to be explored there, which is heartening.

The last thing is ecclesiastical authority. When I'm talking about ecclesiastical authority with a small *a*, I'm talking about that expectation of having influence, that expectation that if a woman gets up at conference and starts talking, that she's going to have influence over the spiritual development of all members of the church. Not only the Primary or not only the Young Women or whoever her constituent is. We should expect the same thing that if a woman gets up and speaks in a local congregation, she deserves that expectation of influence.

And, you know, we can get into this on a separate strain, but the idea that Elder Dallin H. Oaks recently clarified really firmly the difference between priesthood keys, power, and authority. I think his clarifications are really important when we're talking about how to bring these women into our local organizations. Elder Oaks made the point that the keys rest with men, but the authority and power is something that men and women can both have. Again, women in the mission field can start meetings, and they can organize these meetings, and be the administrative figures at the front of these meetings—and that's not something that's actually trickled down yet to the local community.

Wayment: *And she deserves to be heard with the same kind of authority. So I have two questions left. The first one: if you could say something to an educator, a person responsible for helping people define this issue and then bridge it, what would you say? You're looking at that classroom, and your daughter is in that class. What would you want to say to that instructor? "Here's how you could help my daughter have a great experience and help be part of the kingdom."*

McBaine: I think the best thing we could do is not insist that she constantly be making the cognitive leap of seeing herself in male heroes. It's a real gift to our girls and to our women to offer them stories and examples that don't require their "gender screen" to go up. It's a translating process that I think exhausts our girls. I think not all of them do that translation effectively or efficiently. And I think that when we assume that they are making those gender translations, we over-burden their spiritual capacity. We overtax the willing suspension of disbelief that already comes with choosing faith. We're already asking them to choose faith. We're already asking them to go so far, and we're trying to create experiences so that the Holy Ghost can bridge that gap. What a gift to not make our girls go that extra distance, you know?

The other thing I would say is that we shouldn't assume that women don't value power. I mean power in the very best sense. I mean power in the sense of influence. And I think sometimes in the Church we assume that our girls don't want that. They might even tell themselves that they don't want that, and maybe they actually don't, but I think that we assume too often that our girls don't want to participate in ways that are visual, or public, or influential. And so, we've created these two separate power spheres. We have a domestic sphere, which is rich, and there's a power inherent in that that a lot of our women have enjoyed, and nurtured, and fostered for many decades. But at the same time, girls today want to explore power beyond those boundaries.

There is a generational tension in this power exploration, which is very apparent to me when I speak to older groups of people. Because these older women are saying to young girls, you know, "You've got this great role; you've got this great place to exercise power and influence," right? Younger girls exploring power outside of the domestic sphere feels like an indictment of older women who have found a lot of peace and comfort within that domestic power sphere. But these younger girls are saying, "First of all, I want to share that with my husband, and I *can* share that with my husband now. But I also want to explore a broader sphere of influence." It's important to be clear that this idea of influence that I'm talking about is not, "I want to have the power to make people do what I want." Influence in this sense is, "I want to be able to be a contributing member of a community. I want a place of action." And a lot of girls are saying they want to do that *because* they love that community. Decisions made in ward councils and in Church communities and in decision-making bodies across the board change when women are active participants. And they change depending on how many women are in those groups. And women know that—we know that today. And when we're left out of those groups, we know that decisions are being made without our life experience being considered.

I want to be clear: it is important to have our girls and women engaged in public conversations and community life not because I want a genderless society or Church community. I want our girls and women to be more involved precisely because they are *not* the same as men; they bring perspective and life experiences and priorities that are different, and that is the beauty of their voice. I love the idea of Relief Society, a sacred place where women and girls can develop their own voices in preparation for influencing the broader community. I think the potential and purpose of Relief Society is one of the things that's been underexcavated for our girls and our women. I just talked about the sense of action that defines the priesthood. I believe that those kinds of active things can actually still be accomplished in the Relief Society too. And they *used* to be. They used to be. But that vision is—well, not lost, but *narrowed* today. Action in the Relief Society is mostly localized today: we take care of our own, our own widows and elderly and sick and lonely. Which is good and right, but the organization has the potential to be a global force for good, which I don't feel it is today.

I think one of the most valuable things that teachers can teach our girls: the history of the Relief Society is one of action. And it's one of real community building and industry and social engagement. And if you ask a girl today what the Relief Society does, I don't think she would define it that same way. What is the role of Relief Society? How is it actively involved in building the kingdom? What is the perception of it today? How do you actively participate in

Relief Society? What is the Relief Society's responsibility in the global Church organization? What is the Relief Society doing to relieve the suffering of the poor and needy in the world? It's about charity, showing charity. I feel very passionately about the Relief Society, and I think that it's being underutilized and underdeveloped.

Wayment: All right, my last question: What did you want us to ask that we didn't ask?

McBaine: Well, I'll build off of your question earlier about what teachers can do. What can seminary and institute teachers do to strengthen our girls' perception of themselves as agents of spiritual action? For me, the follow-up question to that is, "Where do we find these stories about women?" There's no doubt that with our manuals right now and with the approach that we've had historically, seminary and institute teachers have to do a lot of work to find the kinds of women's stories and quotes and perspectives I'm talking about. They have to do work to find pictures of our female general officers to put up in the classrooms. In fact, I have a great story about a Primary president who wanted to put up the pictures of the general Primary presidency in the Primary room along with the pictures of the fifteen prophets, seers, and revelators. And to find pictures of the general Primary presidency, she had to do a lot of work. She went to the distribution center, she did all of that, and she couldn't find an 8.5 x 11 cardstock picture of any female general officer. The only picture she could find was of the three of them together. So to find President Wixom, she had to go to lds.org, she had to find a talk that President Wixom gave, she had to find her thumbnail photograph, she had to save the thumbnail as its own picture, edit it, and then take it and print it out as an 8.5 x 11. She did this, framed the photos, and the children noticed immediately and loved it!

The bottom line is that teachers have to take a lot of initiative to improve the optics, administration, and ecclesiastical authority of women today. One of the things we've done at the Mormon Women Project to aid in this challenge is put together a bibliography of books that seminary and institute teachers can use. Everything from the Women of Faith series that Deseret Book puts out, to the Camille Fronk Olson books, to Heather Farrell's book, to some sources like mine that have looked at contemporary LDS women. And the Church History Library is working on a project to compile and index all speeches given by female officers of the Church, because if you look for Eliza R. Snow on lds.org, you get very few hits. I would love to see more effort be put into that.

I guess the other question I'd like to answer is, "What would I love to see happen?" or "Where do I think this is all going?" You know, I like the question because it gives me an opportunity to say that I'm much more interested in the journey—how we're moving as a body of Christ towards a more effective integration of women and girls. But I'm interested in doing it in a way that really builds our community rather than tears it down. I want to focus on doing it in a Christlike manner. Emmeline B. Wells described the suffrage movement at the end of the nineteenth century as "diamond cutting diamond," meaning that good women were fighting against other good women. I am both discouraged that we've seen that same diamond cutting among our women in recent years, and also hopeful that we can rise above that.

That said, I definitely have things I'd love to see that are more substantial than just putting people's pictures up. And they mostly revolve around the Relief Society and the development of the Relief Society as a global aid organization that is run administratively and ecclesiastically by women.

Wayment: *That's a great thought. I would love to see that myself.*