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Working for a More Divine Model

McArthur Krishna and Bethany Brady Spalding

When Bethany's daughter Simone was almost three, she and Bethany were reading a popular LDS children's book of scripture stories. At the end of it, Simone turned to her mom and demanded, "Where are the girls? I want to read about the girls!" Not unfamiliar with this question herself, Bethany was still surprised. She picked up the book, flipped through, and found the authors had not chosen to tell the story of even a single woman.

Children ask lots of questions, which means parents answer a gazillion questions a day. But Simone's question, and Bethany's search for answers, would spark a decade of pivotal books. For many people, this exchange would have been the end, but Bethany's talent is not only to spot holes—she also dives in and fixes them. (It must have been a genetic trait for Simone to spot the hole too!)

In this case, she called me—she knows I think stories matter.

Together, we have now written six children's books. Deseret Book has published the *Girls Who Choose God* series, highlighting stories of women from the Bible, Book of Mormon, and now (drumroll) Church history! We have also created *Our Heavenly Family*, *Our Earthly Families*; *A Girl's Guide to Heavenly Mother*; and *A Boy's Guide to Heavenly Mother*. We've been busy.

The art on the cover of this issue of *BYU Studies Quarterly* is from the latest in our series, *Girls Who Choose God: Stories of Extraordinary Women in Church History*. These were busy women!

A Church historian did an unofficial survey and found that only 15 percent of surveyed Latter-day Saints could name more than five

women from Church history. (Saying “Sister Smith” five times is cheating.) When Bethany spotted this same hole with her daughter, she felt it was imperative to continue our *Girls Who Choose God* series with bold women from Church history. We focused on fifteen women whose efforts were essential to the Restoration. Their accomplishments were staggering, but one of the most impressive achievements was their fight for—and ultimate winning of—voting equality.

In the 1800s, the Relief Society was used as a canvassing mechanism to recruit women to fight for the right to vote. These early Saints—both women and men—clearly understood that treating women as second-class citizens was not divine. When faced with a situation that is out of line with doctrine, the appropriate response is to work to change it so that the policy, institution, or situation aligns more with our doctrine (all while respecting others’ vital agency, faiths, opinions, and rights). And these women worked with a vengeance!

The Relief Society played an activist role in shifting the world’s broken system to a more divine model. Relief Society leaders worked to ensure women’s voices were heard in their communities, governments, and countries. They spoke at national conferences. Their unabashed call for women to be allowed to vote occurred at a conference in Temple Square—with no men (except journalists) even present. They were fiery, articulate, relentless.

“It is woman’s destiny to have a voice in the affairs of the government. She was designed for it. She has a right to it. This great social upheaval, this woman’s movement that is making itself heard and felt, means something more than that certain women are ambitious to vote and hold office. I regard it as one of the great levers by which the Almighty is lifting up this fallen world, lifting it nearer to the throne of its Creator,” said Orson F. Whitney, defending the inclusion of women’s suffrage in Utah’s state constitution.¹ Isn’t that astounding?

While there were many sisters who threw themselves into the cause of women’s suffrage, we focused on only three in our book, although we wish we would have had room for all of them. We chose Sarah Kimball, Martha Hughes Cannon (called “Mattie” in our book because that’s the name she went by), and Emily Richards to demonstrate how their varied talents furthered the cause of equal suffrage. Sarah Kimball was

1. Orson F. Whitney, in Proceedings and Debates of the Convention Assembled to Adopt a Constitution for the State of Utah, Day 27, <https://le.utah.gov/documents/conconv/27.htm>.

an organizer who put women to work fighting for their rights. Mattie Hughes Cannon was a trailblazer, having earned four degrees (sometimes as the only woman in her class), and then being elected the first female state senator in the United States. Emily Richards was a powerful speaker who pleaded the cause of Mormon women all over the nation.

Bethany and I each grew up without knowing these women's world-changing stories. I think that is true for most of us. However, these women's exemplary lives can be models for *all* of us! We especially want the next generation to better understand how to live and work in this world, and these three women can inspire us.

As Mattie Hughes Cannon said, "No privileged class either of sex, wealth, or descent should be allowed to arise or exist; all persons should have the same legal right to be the equal of every other, if they can."² After all, as we know, God is no respecter of persons either.

A few things struck Bethany and me about this dynamic trio:

1. They had diverse talents. Gaining the right to vote did not happen with just one person or one skillset. This clear example shows us that whatever our talents may be, there is a need for each person to step in.

2. They worked. Change in the world sometimes just "happens," but often it is made to happen by people who see a problem and *work*. These women, among countless others, spent hours and days and years working to shift the world to a more divine model. As President Nelson was quoted as saying by Joy D. Jones in the April 2020 general conference, "The Lord loves effort."³

3. They leveraged the power of their faith (in both personal and official capacities). These women knew that equality between the sexes is divine. For some people then (and now), this was news. Yet these women chose to use that restored gospel knowledge to work to eradicate the hogwash of discrimination.

The remarkable artist who portrayed the women in the *Girls Who Choose God* series is Kathleen Peterson, a descendent of strong Utah suffragists. Kathy cares about authenticity in her paintings, and she did extensive research to be sure that each painting was accurate to the women it features as well as to the culture and era in which they lived. In preparing to paint this picture, Kathy first studied many old photos of suffragists. (We love their hats!) For the dress, she was able to copy an

2. Rebekah Clark, "Dr. Martha Hughes Cannon, First Female State Senator," Better Days 2020, <https://www.utahwomenshistory.org/bios/marthahughescannon/>.

3. Joy D. Jones, "An Especially Noble Calling," *Ensign* 50, no. 5 (2020): 16.

outfit Emily S. Richards, the figure on the left, wore in some of her photos. Sarah Kimball, the central figure in the painting, and Mattie Hughes Cannon, on the right, both wear costumes appropriate for the times. In fact, Kathy had two historians in the Church History Library critique all the paintings, and she adjusted the dress as they advised. This painting shows the relative age of the three women, who all knew each other—Sarah was more than thirty years older than Emily and Mattie, and she did have the white hair the painting depicts. Kathy found the slogan “Votes for Women” in several photos. The red, white, and blue frame, with a star in each corner, echoes the bunting that hung from many platforms at suffrage meetings. The saying around the border—“To the wrongs that need resistance, to the rights that need assistance, to the future in the distance, give yourself”—was given to Kathy by Bethany, who has the phrase hanging above her calendar to inspire her daily choices to invest her time wisely. The quotation comes from Carrie Chapman Catt, who was president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (1915–1920) when the Nineteenth Amendment was passed and ratified.

Kathy painted a vibrant scene of Sarah, Mattie, and Emily rallying for what they knew was right. They knew that when you choose to serve God’s people, God blesses your efforts. We hope our book inspires our youth—and us!—to do the same.

Along the grand adventure of life, McArthur Krishna has worked as a window washer, on a construction crew, as an archeological aid, a Bollywood extra, a river rafting guide, a business owner, and an artist. Those adventures led to publishing seventeen children’s books (including four with Deseret Book) and new job titles: Holy Harasser and Hog-wash Eradicator. Now, she travels the world with her family and dreams of West Virginia rivers, zydeco dancing, and bottomless guacamole.

Bethany Brady Spalding is the co-author of the Deseret Book best-selling series *Girls Who Choose God*. She never intended to become a writer but felt compelled to create stories that shine light on strong, spiritual women. And now she is a believer that you can change the world through good books! Her most recent, *A Girl’s Guide to Heavenly Mother*, was written to celebrate the change in the Young Women’s theme. As the mother of three daughters, Bethany devotes her energies to developing magnificent girls by loving and leading her family; by directing programs in her local community of Richmond, Virginia, to empower middle school girls; and by supporting women’s literacy initiatives around the globe. Bethany has a master’s degree from the University of London; she recently returned from an eight-month trip around the world; but the place she most loves to be is snuggling a kiddo in bed with a beautiful book!