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Beverly L. Shaw

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## A Chronic Identity Issue: Singleness and Divorce

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Beverly L. Shaw, Ph.D.

As I grew up in a small Mormon community in Wyoming, family example, church doctrines, and community customs all emphasized marriage as the primary goal of life. Activities, social occasions, and lessons reinforced that attitude. Girls were taught homemaking skills at home, school, and church, and since it was primarily a farming community, boys worked alongside their fathers from as early as age six or seven.

I remember learning to embroider in my MIA class and being told to do it neatly so that my future husband would be impressed with my sewing abilities. I remember planning parties with friends where the real goal was to show boyfriends, i.e., prospective husbands, that we could cook well. (Although how they were to discern that from taffy and popcorn balls I'm not sure). I remember the female members of my extended family arranging to let me prepare and serve a dessert for a social occasion where all of "his" female family members would be present and would be able to see my suitability for marriage into their family. The goal of marriage was pervasive, and the resulting message was that it was not only the path my parents and church leaders wanted me to follow, it was the path that God wanted me to follow.

The importance of being married has been a major theme throughout recorded history, but its significance in the Mormon culture far surpasses that of non-Mormon cultures. My experience therefore, was not an isolated case, but was representative of the

norm, not only for my era, but also for those that preceded and followed it. Because of that extraordinary importance, the absence of marriage has not met with any amount of support or approval from General Authorities of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS).

Statements made between the years of 1831 and 1982 by LDS authorities with regard to unmarried members were reviewed by Raynes and Parsons (1983). The authors reported that the communications "take the form of both blessings and cursings, with little non-judgmental material" (Raynes & Parsons, 1983, p. 35). Their analysis indicates that these communications also reflected the broader societal viewpoint: "to be single is a personal and societal curse which can only be changed by marriage."

They found three themes which were quite consistent throughout the years. First, being that there is nothing positive for society that comes from the unmarried state. Single individuals were considered unrighteous or abnormal. The second theme was that women are single by circumstance. While not legitimizing women's singleness, L.D.S. authorities saw women as victims and with promised future blessings, rather than characterizing them as deliberately unrighteous. The third theme was that single men were irresponsible, sinful, selfish, lazy, or suffering from a chemical imbalance (homosexuality). That is, they usually had only negative reasons for being unmarried; therefore, they had no promises in their present or their future (Raynes and Parsons, 1983).

With the increasing awareness within the church that a substantial minority of adult Mormons are single, official communications in the past few years have focused on more positive themes emphasizing not only each individual's value, but also more practical helps such as the importance of self-esteem, the ability to love, single parenting, and, for women, preparation to support themselves (Benson, 1988; Bergin, 1989; Carmack, 1989; Decker, 1989; Hadley, 1985; Hanks, 1989; Hardy, 1989; Hyde, 1984; Linford, 1985; Lubeck, 1987; Miltenberger, 1988; Morris, 1989; Searle, 1988 Underwood, 1984; Warden, 1988).

While this is a positive shift, it does not mean there has been an abandonment of the traditional viewpoint. Although each succeeding generation has had more enlightened insights as to the sources of one's value and somewhat broader definitions as to legitimate life goals, the emphasis on marriage, particularly temple marriage, has continued. As a primary tenet of the church relating to eternal progression and celestial life, the message remains that marriage was and is the worthwhile life goal. Marriage is still, by inference and by direct statement, the life function approved of by God.

It follows that notwithstanding this increasing acknowledgment of unmarried individuals within the membership of the church, there has been and is still an ongoing assimilation of the notion that personal value and worth to God is directly correlated to marital status. For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, being single brings with it an identity crisis that is the result of the dissonance between the reality of their lives and the values they have assimilated regarding the theological importance of marriage.

In a random survey published in 1986 (LDS Church Demographic Profile), the number of church members who were single was found to be just over 30 percent. With the church membership currently totalling over 6,720,000 (News of the Church, 1989), this statistic would mean that over 2,000,000 adult Mormons are single and must confront and resolve the issue of their value and their worthiness to God, and by extension also their identity as a Mormon and as a daughter or son of God.

As a body of professionals, it is vital that we develop as complete an understanding of that reality as possible. It is important that we avoid the cliches and stereotypes as we deal with those who turn to us for help in resolving the pain and turmoil that comes from that dissonance.

Single members of the church come in three varieties: the widowed, the divorced, and the never-married. Each category has its unique problems with singleness and has its unique identity

issues. They have some general issues in common and all face the problem of determining their value with a married church.

### The Widowed

The widowed members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which currently total 4 percent of the membership (L.D.S. Demographics, 1986), have a more accepted place within the church than either the divorced or never-married members because of the eternal marriage doctrine. If the couple was "sealed [married] for time and eternity" (*Doctrine and Covenants* 132:19), the surviving spouse can find comfort in the belief that the separation is temporary and can look forward to a reunion at some future date. For those who have not been "sealed" prior to the spouse's death, this ordinance can be performed vicariously, resulting in the same type of emotional comfort.

Initially, the focus of therapy with the widowed individual is movement through and understanding of the grieving process that follows loss through death. It is only after that work is essentially completed before we will focus on the feelings of dislocation through loss of the married identity. The transition from feeling like an abandoned half of a whole to feeling complete in one's self can be difficult and is often resisted. For some there is a flight into the presumed safety of another marriage, for others a stubborn clinging to a lifestyle that belies the death of the partner, and for still others there is a blossoming which may or may not include another marriage.

The belief in eternal marriage removes the widowed individual from some of the turmoil that comes from not being married within a marriage-oriented church, but it does not help alleviate the problem of simultaneously no longer feeling accepted by other married couples while not feeling comfortable with the singles groups. Nor does it solve the dilemma of feeling disloyal when contemplating remarriage. All of these identity problems can become therapeutic issues.

### The Never-Married

In companion articles, “Ministering Angels: Single Women in Mormon Society” and “On the Edge: Mormonism’s Single Men” published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Anderson (1983) and Johnson (1983b) reviewed the history and explored the status of the never-married female and male of the church. Anderson (1983) states that for women there was the

automatic presumption that she was never single by choice. Instead she was viewed as a victim—primarily the victim of man’s selfishness, occasionally of her own “ugliness,” or her lack of sufficient social standing to win a “self-respecting” man for a husband (girls who had “lost their virtue” were presumed to be in this category), or of some other defect such as feeble-mindedness, although that was not an absolutely insuperable bar to marriage either.

There is a caveat, however, that “if they live worthily and are not married for eternity in this life, . . . they shall not be deprived of the blessings in the hereafter” (Smith, 1959, p. 358). Unfortunately, this message is frequently stated in the “you’ll be given to a good man” format which objectifies the individual and is heard as “you’re less than we are, but we’ll do something for you anyway.” As the object of these unflattering messages, never-married women have a difficult time building or keeping a healthy self-identity.

Never-married women suffer great pain over the absence of marriage. The majority believe marriage to be an important part of “God’s plan,” and many have patriarchal blessings that promise a husband that will take them to the temple, and children, if they live righteously. It is the last phrase that is a large source of turmoil, for active unmarried women usually have tried to do just that. Since they aren’t married, their first response may be a feeling of betrayal by God. But because betrayal is not in keeping with the loving Father of their belief system, they then deduce that there is something inherently bad about them—bad enough that God would deprive them of the important key that would enable them to return to him and to be “Mothers in Zion.” Common sense may tell these women of the real causes of non-marriage, but deep inside there is often a feeling of unworthiness.

Therapy for never-married women has to address not only self-esteem issues, but often, because of the value-to-God component of their pain, theological issues as well. As therapists, we must take great care not to add to the body of pain by reinforcing any of the discounting and demeaning rhetoric, or by using platitudes, or patronizing comments or solutions. It is important to separate and work on the underlying causes (low self-esteem, dependency issues, addictions, dysfunctional family of origin, etc.) for non-marriage from their value-to-God issue so that real change can occur in these women's lives.

In Johnson's (1983b) article about single men, he refers to the specific instructions (*Doctrine and Covenants* 133:1-3) that men must enter into marriage here on earth in order to receive the promised celestial blessings. This doctrine immediately puts single men in a disenfranchised category.

In an article for *Exponent II*, Johnson (1983a, p. 13) goes on to show how those who do not marry find they must "struggle with stereotypes." They are often treated as adolescents whose opinions and suggestions are discounted because of their alleged "inexperience," or they face the inference of perversion. Most importantly, they are considered rebellious for not obeying the commandments of God. All of these overt and covert messages damage a single individual's sense of self, especially if he has strong beliefs in the principles set forth by the church. Like never-married women, never-married men may also have a strong feeling of betrayal or of inherent unworthiness because of unfulfilled promises.

Therapy with single men occurs less frequently than with single women because of the norms that prohibit men from needing or seeking help. Single men frequently are in the position of not understanding the reasons for their unmarried state, yet they "cannot" seek assistance in unraveling it. One contribution therapists can make is to take advantage of opportunities to normalize and legitimize the therapy process for men. As Dr. M. Scott Peck (1978) accurately states, those that seek therapy are not only more courageous than average, they are usually more mentally healthy. Perhaps hearing this message would give them the needed reinforcement to seek whatever help they do need.

For the majority of the single men, it is as much of a surprise to them that they have not married as it is to those who are urging them to do so. But there are few insights into the patterns which block emotional availability and commitment.

Fear of emotional intimacy, sexual repression, homosexuality, and misunderstanding of God's role in marriage choices are among the many avenues that may need to be explored.

Along with addressing the self-worth and the damaged identity issues with those who come to therapy, therapists should always explore commitment-phobia, a problem that is rampant within this population. Commitment-phobia has a distinct pattern, so it can be identified and confronted, if present. Commitment-phobic behavior is characterized by an obsessional pursuit of a female who is or appears to be unavailable. The man's behavior patterns include daily (or more often) phone calls, a desire to be together constantly, immediate or early declarations of love and marriage desires, discussion of intimate feelings, thoughts, and historical information not congruent with the length of time they have known each other. The obsession lasts up to the moment she decides to become available. At that point there is an immediate reversal of affect, a loss of interest, usually excessive fault finding, and a desperate need to distance himself from involvement with her. Depending upon the seriousness of the phobia, the switch in feelings and behavior can occur when she agrees to date him, begins to love him, or marries him.

The "in" cliché of the 80's is *self-esteem*. We may get tired of hearing about the lack of it, the need for it, and the growth of it. But clichés become clichés because they are true and because they are obvious. Never-married men and women suffer more chronically from problems of damaged self-esteem than either the widowed or divorced men and women. As a group, those Mormons who have never married seem to have a higher incidence of psychic injury coming out of their childhoods and more self-defeating defenses as a result. This sets them up for repeated re-injury and reinforcement of their belief in their lack of self value. Therapy with this particular segment of never-married singles can

often be lengthy because of the time needed to heal the damaged self-concept and to build (or rebuild) a sense of personal value.

At times the injuries caused by parents or other significant individuals are a result of misunderstood or misapplied Gospel concepts. This dynamic may make them even more vulnerable to inferences or messages about their marital status being a result of their unworthiness to God. It may also cause them to blame the church for the pain they feel. These religion-based issues are likely to become part of the problems addressed in therapy.

### **The Divorced**

The largest contribution to the church's single population comes through divorce. The most recent available church estimates are that by age 60, 35 percent of the female and 32 percent of the male membership will have experienced a divorce (Van Leer, 1983). Being divorced within the L.D.S. Church can be particularly painful, since divorce offers neither the status of the widowed nor the feeling of "purity" that can be associated with the never-married.

When an active member divorces, many changes take place in his/her relationship with the church which reinforce unworthy feelings and a sense of being a "second-class" Mormon (Raynes, 1981; Norton, 1967). Divorced individuals may be released from callings or may not be asked to serve in particular positions. Where in the past an individual's opinions and expertise may have been valued, often requested, and used, when a divorce occurs those same attributes are frequently deemed valueless.

Currently, bishops and stake presidents are counseled to carefully review the status of any temple recommend holder who is separated or in the process of a divorce, and to make individual case determinations as to each individual's continued worthiness to retain it. This constitutes a slight shift in emphasis over past procedures where as soon as a separation or divorce occurred, a temple recommend became void, and new interviews regarding worthiness were required prior to receiving a replacement.

One large area of consternation is how divorce impacts the temple sealing, since divorce does not automatically cancel it. Even those divorces which also result in excommunication only suspend the sealing and do not cancel it. For the men and women who never remarry, the sealing status brings up a number of perplexing dilemmas. Are the ex-spouses to be sealed in the eternities when they don't love each other on earth? Or does the failure of the marriage on earth make eternal togetherness null and void? And if so, why cannot a cancellation in the now be obtained? Who are the children sealed to, if both parties remain worthy and active? Does the priesthood take precedence in that case, as well? To whom are the children sealed if the priesthood holder is excommunicated and the wife never remarries? These, and a myriad of other questions like them, plague divorced women and men, and may well come up as therapeutic issues as he/she tries to integrate the new marital status with her/his belief system.

Of the three groupings of single church members, divorced Mormons seek therapy far more often than the other two. This is because of the pervasive nature of the damage that occurs with the divorce. With every aspect of life affected, women and men usually need some assistance in restructuring their lives and in moving through the healing process.

Those who are in the process of separation and divorce frequently turn to their bishops and stake presidents for counsel and solace. With few exceptions, the divorcing individual receives compassion, love, and guidance. However, bishops and stake presidents are at a disadvantage in dealing with the many complexities and the far-reaching ramifications of divorce because the focus of their calling, and also their training, is on building marriages not on divorce and its fall-out. Divorce also is not a topic for lessons or sermons except as negative examples. The result is that the divorcing individual may feel further injury, unintentionally, or, in rare cases intentionally, coming from the church organization or the leaders.

Most of the religious ramifications of divorce result in identity issues for both women and men. Some, however, are pertinent only to women. Because women do not hold the priesthood, it

leaves when the husband leaves. Temple ordinances and church doctrine teach that priesthood power is intrinsically intertwined with a man's relationship to God and that it is through his priesthood that the wife has a relationship with God. A divorced woman is cut off from that direct priesthood-God connection.

Because of the importance of the married state, many women have been mistakenly counseled by their church leaders to stay in marriages even when abuse is occurring. This instruction, which implies she deserves or somehow causes the abuse, is shattering to the identity of being a person of value. When God's representatives imply or even directly say that the victim in some way causes the abuse and that the solution is for them to try harder and live more righteously, reality is denied. For individuals who already have identity confusion, these messages just increase it. In general, because of the heightened awareness of the causes and course of abuse, this type of stance by bishops and stake presidents occurs less frequently, but unfortunately is still prevalent enough that it may be one of the problems that will have to be addressed in therapy.

The church's stand that mothers should stay at home and raise their own children is one that can bring great distress to a woman whose divorce forces her to leave her children in order to support them. Because there is no equivalent instruction for men, if men have custody, they face the problem of what to do with the children while they work, but they don't have the added burden of religion-based guilt about leaving them.

In addition to theologically-based losses and injuries for women, divorce brings real-life losses of such gargantuan proportions that her whole being is affected. While like the widowed woman, she no longer has the man she married in her life, she is unlike her in that the absence of her husband is just one of the many losses with which she must contend. The most painful additional factor in many divorces is the rejection that accompanies the loss of love from the primary person in her life. Gone also is her identity as a wife, and with it certain understood responsibilities and functions.

More frequently than not, a divorced woman will also lose her home. If it is not required that it be sold during the division of assets, women rarely have the financial resources to pay the mortgage and upkeep. Recent research shows that a “typical woman with young children experiences a 73 percent decline in her standard of living in the first year after divorce” (Harvey, 1986, p. 73). Since a woman rarely has the training or earning power to match that of her former husband’s, her standard of living, and with it her perception of herself within the society in which she lives, dramatically changes. A wide variety of special extras in which she may have been participating, such as donating time and money to charities, attending plays, participating in sports, giving parties or showers, giving community service, travelling, even giving gifts, more often than not will have to be given up.

Newly divorced women frequently find that although the former tangible assets are divided between her and her former husband, the intangible assets accumulated during the marriage, such as education, insurance, access to company stock options, matched savings plans, company cars, pensions, and future earning power, leave with the husband. Further, if she wasn’t farsighted enough to establish her own credit history, she will be unable to obtain any, since it will not be given to divorced women with no regular income. If she was active in clubs, organizations, and auxiliaries, they often are also gone since they frequently are in the husband’s name or in conjunction with his profession.

Another loss is that often her social life stops, since prior to the divorce most socializing would have been established as couples. Even those social activities that are in conjunction with the church are effected, since they often take place under the auspices of the priesthood quorums. Married female friends may avoid her for a variety of reasons: fear of the “dreaded divorcee,” because she’s a reminder that it can happen to anyone, or because of uncomfortableness with the pain.

As she joins the ranks of single women, the divorced woman may find that the rules changed while she was married. Growing up in a religious culture that emphasizes the woman’s role in the home, she may be unprepared for the expectation that she be self-

supporting, self-sufficient, and emotionally independent as a single woman.

Men do not escape additional areas of identity damage that result from a divorce. The most devastating one, and the one that might bring them into therapy, is the loss of the in-the-home father role. While there is a national trend toward awarding joint custody, the reality is that children usually live the majority of the time with their mother. Even in the best of cases, time spent between a father and his children is short and often strained. In the worst case scenario, the divorced father may encounter insurmountable roadblocks to his continued relationship with his children.

Another area where damage is inflicted is the assumption by others that men are at fault if there is a divorce. No matter what the real reason may be, men carry the stigma of being the one who wanted it or caused it. While this is true some of the time, it is, of course, not true all of the time.

Men also suffer financial losses. However, research (Harvey, 1986) has shown that a man's standard of living increases 42 percent within a short time after the divorce. So as a rule, financial instability is more transitory than for women. Men suffer rejection, the loss of the family home, and their couple friendships. They may outwardly have an easier time establishing new relationships and moving on to a new marriage because of the role of men in society. Inwardly, the movement from being married to being single may be as painful and difficult as it is for women.

Because of the cultural rules—men should be able to take care of themselves and men do not unburden themselves on their friends—we may see them in therapy only if they become incapacitated with depression or anxiety. The therapeutic process is more extensive under those conditions, but the issues affecting identity are the same.

Both divorced women and men face pain and many problems being a single parent, beginning at the moment the children are told there will be a divorce. Helping the children release their anger and sadness can be wrenching. When it is added to the

personal anguish, it is devastating. The sense of failure is palpable. It is difficult being a parent when there are two working at it. When one is alone, the untold numbers of problems can be overwhelming. All of which can add to the feelings of inadequacy and failure. The emphasis on the family and the lack of any sustained or formal help under the auspices of the church can only add to that feeling and to the pain that the children carry. Sometimes our role as therapists will have to include teaching single parenting and practical problem-solving skills as well as the regular healing therapy.

Even if the divorce is the obviously correct solution, no one walks out of a divorce unmarked. And because of the intimate knowledge of personal faults and failings, self-blame is usually high, and by extension, God's blame is high as well. Being divorced in a religion that has marriage as a tenet brings with it tremendous personal struggles involving feelings of unworthiness and unacceptableness both before the Lord and the organizational structure. "Becoming unconnected, unsealed when all the outside forces were saying 'stay bonded, stay sealed' . . . [is] an arduous, tortuous journey" (Raynes, 1981, p. 76). For the divorced, there is the "damning banner invisibly strung across every Church entryway . . . [which reads] "*No other success can compensate for failure in the home*" [italics in original] (Broderick, 1986, p. 63).

### **Sex and the Single Mormon**

It is hard to describe the intensity of the pain that single Mormons bear because of the issues surrounding sex. Research (Shaw, 1987) in this area confirmed that it is one of the most pressing and conflicted problems with which singles in the church have to deal.

Exhortations to live a chaste life, coupled with lessons, sermons, and articles warning against transgressing the church's norms are part of a religiously active Mormon's life from childhood on. Single Mormons are also faced with the knowledge that if they allow the biological or worldly influences to prevail, there is the risk that they will be cut off from participation in the religion in which they believe, and, by implication, from God.

At the same time, single Mormons have the same drives and sexual drives that married individuals have. Further, the major part of this population has been married before, and has experienced the full range of sexual functioning. With the death or divorce of a spouse, elimination of another major part of their identity—their sexual identity—occurs: this because masturbation is discouraged and celibacy is immediate.

The majority of active single Mormons hold and believe the sexual values as proclaimed by the church. However, a sizable percentage engage in some level of sexual activity which ranges from intercourse to masturbation (Shaw, 1987). Although the deviations were “seldom” in frequency, and, in many instances, minor in seriousness, these behaviors added the element of guilt (Shaw, 1987) to the identity problems that have to be addressed in therapy.

Another category of sexual problems for some single Mormons is that of homosexuality. These individuals face dreadful identity issues as they struggle to reconcile their sexual orientation with their commitment to their religion. To help those who seek our assistance, an excellent referral source for us is Thomas and Ann Pritt’s article, “Homosexuality: Getting Beyond the Therapeutic Impasse” published in the 1987 *AMCAP Journal*. Corrections to that article appear in their letter to the editor in the journal the following issue.

Sexual identity issues of unmarried Mormons are some of the more difficult they face. As therapists we can help women and men who struggle with sexual issues understand that

[s]exuality is the general quality of being—one aspect of our total self, that is with us from birth to death and is indivisible from our soul. . . [That] there is an inner quality of sexuality, that we didn’t create but that simply is and that we can foster. . . . And then there is an external action that we can make choices about (Raynes, 1987).

Single men and women, widowed, divorced and never-married, feel they don’t have an identity that fits the official image of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These feelings are a chronic problem. However, statistics show that only 20 percent of

the Mormon households fit the official image of a temple-married couple with children at home (Heaton, 1987).

So resolving the identity crisis is not so much a matter of unmarried Mormons changing in such a way to fit some norm, but rather changing in such a way as to accept themselves as intrinsically valuable. The process of finding personal worth can be of enormous assistance in attenuating the assault upon their identity. It will also enable them to understand the importance of their role within the church organization and their personal value to God. If we are fortunate, we as therapists can participate in that important journey.

*Beverly L. Shaw is President of AMCAP*

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