The Season of a Woman's Life: Women and Spirituality

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Good Morning. It is good to be with you and share with you some common concerns. This opportunity comes at a time when I have been doing some thoughtful reflection on my own life. The other day, a friend approaching her fortieth birthday asked me, "How did you handle the middle-age crisis?" I told her that I didn’t. I hadn’t reached it yet. And she smiled and said, "Well how old are you?" and I told her this is my big year, 60. And she kind of smiled and she said, "Oh, you’ve reached it all right. You just don’t remember." Maybe that’s the case of denial or maybe forgetfulness or being out of touch with reality. You could help me figure that out. It has been said with each passing year, there seems a tendency for us to dwell more and more on the hereafter. We go from one room to the next and wonder, now what was it I came here after. But, brothers and sisters, in all seriousness, I believe, in fact that an awareness of the hereafter provides a spiritual dimension for our lives today.

As we learn to view our experiences in this life with the perspective of eternity, we tend to draw away from the things of the world and feel closer to the things of the Spirit. When the reality of eternity presses on our minds, when we are guided by the Spirit, we view life differently. The apostle Paul expressed this thought in his letters to the Corinthians. In his second letter he said, "We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but
the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18). Then in his letter to the Romans, he said, “For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” (Romans 8:5-6).

A woman’s spirituality weaves itself generation to generation through the tapestry of eternity. At the rededication of the St. George Temple, President Spencer W. Kimball prayed, “Let the blessings of Sarah, Hannah, Holda, Anna, and Mary, the mother of the Son of God, bless these women to fulfill their duties as did Mary, our beloved mother to thy Son. And let the power and satisfactions of the prophetesses of all holy women rest upon these mothers today as they move forward to fulfill their destinies.” President David O. McKay taught, “Spirituality, our true aim in life, is a conscious awareness of victory over self and communion with the infinite.” And in the song, “America, the Beautiful” we sing, “confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.”

I believe spirituality for men and women is developed as the demands of the flesh become submissive to the Spirit. A brief story suggests an oversimplified illustration of this principle. A little girl was crying uncontrollably after falling down and skinning her knees while riding her new roller skates. With bleeding knees she was crying out while her mother tried to comfort her. A few moments later, she abruptly stopped crying. Her mother asked, “How come you stopped crying so quickly, my dear?” She responded, “Because I told myself to, and then I made myself mind me.” When we learn to make ourselves mind, we soon realize that we cannot, as someone said, “Live in Zion, but maintain a summer home in Babylon.” When we learn to listen and then make ourselves mind the promptings of the Spirit, we have increased communion with the Infinite. We are better able to view life and its experiences in terms of the expanded perspective of eternity. This quality of life is spirituality. My experience tells me that this comes only after a full growing season. The ripening is gradual, different for each woman. It cannot be forced. As someone said, “Anyone who imagines that all fruits ripen at the same time as the strawberries knows nothing about grapes.”
From the pivotal point where I now stand, as I look back three score years and forward to eternity, I share a brief brush stroke of my own growing season which is perhaps a pattern for many. At an early age, I had the faith of a little child. I believed anything was possible. I knew what I wanted and when I wanted it. Perhaps you are familiar with the thought, “Please Lord, teach me patience . . . right now!” In time, with more experience, I became more patient and willing to wait with faith in a loving Father, hoping that it would not be too long before my prayers were answered: “A few weeks or maybe even a few months, but please Father, not years!”

I learned that often it is during the waiting that the greatest progress is made and eventually we no longer need to have it our way. Experience teaches us that our Heavenly Father knows what is best for us and all we need or should want to know is His will. Eventually we learn to bend our will as well as our knees and yield our hearts with only one desire in mind, “What is it Father that you would have me do? Would you reveal it to me?” Is there any one of us who has not on occasion had to cry out and plead with God with a burning desire to reach and stretch far enough to connect? He invites us, “Draw near unto Me and I will draw near unto you” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:63). After extended periods of fasting and prayer, have we not asked the Father, “What more can I do? What should I understand about working by faith?” And then finally, one day in our progress, we gain a new and wonderful dimension. We learn what to hang on to and we learn when to let go. We learn to differentiate between the things we must hold to tenaciously and those we must let go of. This is a mighty step in our spiritual development. We no longer need to have things our way. Not now, not ever.

We begin to more fully understand the scripture from Proverbs, “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Proverbs 3:5–6). That trust, I believe, comes only after seasons that must include a few early frosts and harsh winters, accompanied by regular weeding, pruning, with nurturing and a constant supply of the light of Christ and His living water.
Only then do we begin to understand and to anticipate the harvest. The season of a woman’s life is not to be measured so much by the accumulation of years as one might mark the calendar to anticipate the time of harvest. The season of a woman’s life is better observed by the questions she asks and continues to ask.

Because the harvest is dependent upon the seeds that are planted, and the attitudes that are formed in one’s youth are revealed in later years, I would like to share with you some of the planting that is taking place in some of the young women of the church. It suggests something of a harvest that can be anticipated after the growing season. For the past seven years, my time, energy, and attention has been focused on how to strengthen the spirituality of young women between the ages of twelve and eighteen. They are on my mind during every day, and much of the nighttime: in every season, springtime, summer, winter and fall. The correspondence I receive tells me that some are in great turmoil, but most of the correspondence I receive gives me reason to rejoice and feel great hope.

Young women of this age are living at a time when they are asking searching questions. I believe that sooner or later all women must find answers to a few basic questions if they are to become the spiritual women about whom President Kimball spoke when he said, “To be a righteous woman is a glorious thing during any age. But to be a righteous woman during the winding up scenes on this earth, before the second coming of the Savior, is an especially noble calling because a righteous woman’s influence can be ten fold what it might be in more tranquil times.”

The first question one might ask has to do with identity. “Who am I?” Even before I am a wife, a mother, a scientist, or a teacher, who am I? We yearn to know who we are and want others to know who we are. For example, after traveling for two weeks in England and speaking to hundreds of youth in many meetings, upon my return home I received a letter from a young girl. It began, “Remember me? I was the girl in the green jumper in the second row.” Another young woman wrote to me following a girl’s camp involving over 500 youths. She asked, “Dear Sister Kapp, you gave me a hug and said something wonderful to me. I can’t
remember what it was. Could you please write and tell me so I could write it in my journal and read it when I feel lonely?” Alex Haley, in his book *Roots*, wrote about his yearn for identity being bone marrow deep. And so it is with all of us: In an eternal or spiritual dimension, a more significant dimension plays upon the stage of our mind: Not only, “Who am I?” but “Whose am I?”

The second question necessary to build a strong spiritual foundation is a question of direction: “What am I to do in life?” And the third—the set of questions at the center of it all—“What is the very purpose of life? Why am I to do these things? What difference does it make after all?”

In seeking to find meaningful answers to these searching questions, gospel principles have been identified that help form the foundation of a woman’s spirituality. They are known as the Young Women Values. They address these basic questions. Each value is defined in a statement of affirmation, beginning with the pronoun I.

The first of the seven Young Women values is Faith. It addresses the question of identity. How I wish every woman, young and older, might find themselves alone some night, away from the city lights, looking up into a starlet sky, the heavens open wide, with a sense of a conduit between heaven and earth. And in the breathless beauty, ponder for a moment the significance of it all and repeat this Young Woman value: “Faith. I am a daughter of a Heavenly Father who loves me and I will have Faith in His eternal plan, which centers in Jesus Christ, my Savior.”

The next two values respond also to the question of identity and relate to a woman’s divine nature and individual worth. “Divine Nature: I have inherited divine qualities, which I will strive to develop.” “Individual Worth: I am of infinite worth with my own divine mission, which I will strive to fulfill.” Without a sense of our spiritual identity, women too frequently link their sense of worth to the false and fleeting values of the world. Conditional worth is increased or decreased by one’s performance, appearance, money, or social acceptance. Eternal identity has no variation in it, and so worth is stable and firm. When we know of our eternal
identity, our spiritual roots are well grounded. We need to be reminded, “You did not come to this earth to gain your worth. You brought it with you.” Your purpose here is that of growth and enlargement.

As to the question of direction—“What am I to do?”—the next four Young Women values suggest a guide. “Knowledge: I will continually seek opportunities for learning and growth.” “Choice and Accountability: I will remain free by choosing good over evil and will accept responsibility for my choices.” “Good Works: I will nurture others and build the kingdom through righteous service.” “Integrity: I will have the moral courage to make my actions consistent with my knowledge of right and wrong.”

Finally, the questions at the center of it all, “What difference does it really make? What is the very purpose of life?” The last part of the Young Women Theme addresses the question of “Why?” “To be prepared to make and keep sacred covenants, to receive the ordinances of the temple, and to enjoy the blessings of exaltation.”

Although these foundation principles have been identified to promote the spiritual growth of young women, the concepts can assist in the growth of women of all ages. A bishop in England wrote me:

Some time ago I sat in counsel into the early hours of the morning with a grandmother who wanted to die. Her family had endured trial after trial with faith and good heart and finally she just felt worn out and unable to cope. After several hours she became convinced that I was as stubborn as she was and accepted a priesthood blessing. She was uplifted by the Lord’s counsel to her.

A few days later I prayed about my ward members. My thoughts were directed to the Young Women Values. I wrote a letter to that sister and I copied the Young Women Values and associated scriptural references for each value.

I posted the letter and forgot about it. The sister in question had not borne her testimony in fast and testimony meeting in many years. But suddenly, she was first on her feet. She told of the inspiring letter she had received, of how she had looked up each reference, and how it had changed her life. How indeed this former agoraphobia sufferer was crossing main roads alone, riding on buses, going shopping, climbing
stairs, visiting the hairdresser alone, all things that days before were considered impossible for her. She pondered the letter daily, tagged on to her scripture study, and to her it was scripture. Her whole life and her outlook on it has changed.

That family still has trial after trial to contend with. But, she faces those challenges with strength and resolution. I was sitting in the Young Women New Beginning Presentation in our stake this week and felt that perhaps you may enjoy hearing a senior woman who has benefited as much as a young woman in this inspired set of values.

For those suffering from the severe winter time in their lives, these principles give hope for yet another season. They can affect attitudes and behavior in the present.

Some seven years ago, when I addressed this group, I mentioned these values, even though they were only ideas at the time. Permit me to report to you now. Brothers and sisters, spiritual growth is taking place as these values take root in the lives of young women. I would like to share just one letter: a sample of many. A young woman wrote:

I want to write and thank you particularly for the values. Through one of these values my life has already changed so much. Last year in my junior year of high school, I set a goal in Good Works to try to help someone in some little way every day. Whether it was something I said or did, or an example I set, I decided to do this prayerfully. So, every day, before I went to school, I prayed and asked Heavenly Father to let me have the influence of the Spirit to know what he wanted me to say or do.

I began to see how everything we do affects others. The longer I did it the happier it made me and the more I wanted to continue. I began to feel better about myself and at the same time more humble. I feel so much closer to my Heavenly Father through my actions. I began to have a different outlook on all of my brothers and sisters around me and I began to realize that everyone, everywhere, no matter what the circumstance, is great in worth to the Lord, and so they should be to me.

We all have the potential of perfection, of traits given through our Father in Heaven and everyone should be treated with that respect. I feel as though I am beginning to understand what love can really be and it makes me feel better inside to feel that love. I know that the Lord knows the desires of my heart, and if they are righteous desires, I can achieve them. By showing a want to serve and do right, my life has
been blessed in great ways. By striving to live the Young Women Values, I have felt closer to my Heavenly Father. I have felt more prepared for the things that happen in my life and I love the church and the gospel with all of my heart. I know that Jesus Christ lives.

Could we consider this young woman to be progressing spiritually? Wouldn’t it be wonderful if all men and women, even those many times her age, were having the same experiences?

These values are providing a foundation for family spirituality. A father wrote:

We are a very ordinary Latter-day Saint family. Four sweet girls, and six fine sons. A really exemplary mother and a father who has some potential.

Last August, Kim, our third daughter entered Young Women. Her advisor, according to custom in our ward, gave her the Young Woman Values poster. She hung it in her room, which she shares with her eight-year-old sister, Jill. Life went on as usual—I thought. A few weeks ago, there was disruption between the girls over some little thing. Jill, the youngest spoke up and reminded them that their behavior was not appropriate. She was immediately challenged, “Why not?” “Because,” said her younger sister, “we are daughters of our Heavenly Father who loves us, and we love Him.” As she continued to quote the entire young women theme from memory, the disruption was silenced and I was impressed a small child had read and reread these values until they had become committed to memory. I was profoundly struck that somehow, without a formal teaching experience, this statement of values had become instilled in her mind and heart to the point that it had come forth spontaneously in a moment of conflict. Oh, how I pray that she will be similarly protected when she must confront serious difficulties in her life.

As I reflected upon the power of that moment, I knew that we must do everything possible to give each of our children a shield of righteousness that would prevail over all of the sinister influences of the world. A shield they could carry outside the walls of our home. For the past few weeks, we have spent our Family Home Evenings talking about our family, our values, our commitment, our testimonies, our righteous aspirations. Everyone has participated, right down to the five-year-old. From those discussions, we have capsulized a Family Mission Statement, a family motto, and a set of questions we should keep in mind that we have called Family Standards. They are as follows:

*Family Mission Statement:* We will work together to make our home a heavenly place, full of love and laughter, and acceptance, where
everyone may come and be nurtured and healed, where each may come to
know of our divine heritage and potential as children of God, and
where Heavenly Father’s Spirit may feel free to dwell. Our family will
make and keep sacred covenants to qualify for eternal life with him.

Family Motto: Do what is right no matter what.

Will it lift and bless others? Would Jesus approve?

We’re all memorizing these statements and using them to improve
our behavior. My children are quick to ask me the Family Standards
questions when they sense that I may not be acting out of my values,
and I am grateful. We have much to do, but we are making progress.
There is a new spirit of cooperation and purpose and wholesomeness in
our home. The catalyst for all of this was the Young Women’s theme
and the little girl who took it all more seriously than we realized.

How wonderful it would be if every home was so united in
purpose. Soberly, seriously, sadly, as you know perhaps as well or
better than most, this is not the case. There are disruptive
circumstances and influences. Discouragement, despair, desponden-
cy, and degradation all sap away healthy awareness of an individu-
al’s self worth. Frequently, young women and women are the
most serious victims. They write to me; they come to you. Their
hearts are sobered, their spirits are dampened and their faith
weakened.

But we also know that support can come from beyond the walls
of the home: whether professional, ecclesiastical, or neighborly,
outside support is often critical. Positive support can help provide
light where there is darkness, faith where there is despair, and hope
where there is discouragement. Basic gospel principles lead us to
our Savior who has promised that when we come to him he will
heal us. This is true for every season and every generation. He
will heal.

Looking back over the years, I am glad God allows us to
struggle, to cry and to feel pain. I am glad to know about hurt
and healing, about fear and faith, about offenses and forgiveness.
I am glad I know about discouragement and encouragement, and
about the grace of God and His infinite love, else how could I bear
witness of His reality?
Oh, if it could be said of every woman, what Joseph F. Smith said of Eliza R. Snow: “She walks not in the borrowed light of others, but faces the mornings unafraid, invincible.” I am convinced that there are many Eliza R. Snow’s among us even today. And there can be many, many more. Our hope, our vision, our goal, is to help prepare women of faith, who can call down the blessings of heaven and strengthen their sisters who need spiritual strength. Our prayer is that the Spirit of God will rest on every woman, every man, every daughter, every son. Visions and revelations come by the power of the Holy Ghost, the Lord has said, “On my servants and on my handmaidens, I will pour out in those days of my spirit, and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:18).

Seven years ago, this coming Sunday, I was sustained as the Young Women General President. Speaking at that time, I spoke of our divine heritage and I made a pledge:

We’ll work to have every young woman . . . stand in the valiant ranks of loyalty, commitment, and dedication. . . And together in unity we’ll prepare a generation . . . [worthy of] the Lord’s commendation, that He may have a house of worthy members when He returns (“Youth of the Noble Birthright,” Ensign, May 1984, p. 77).

Seven years have gone fast. There has been reason to rejoice and reason to mourn. But this continues to be my constant desire to help young women increase in their spirituality, knowing, as Paul taught, “to be spiritually minded is life and peace.” God bless us all to experience this peace in our own lives and be ever mindful of the great power of righteousness that comes from the spirituality of strong men and women. God bless us. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Sister Ardeth G. Kapp was recently released as the Young Women General President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She is now serving with her husband as they preside over the Canada Vancouver Mission.