

EXPONENT II





EXPONENT II PROVIDES FEMINIST FORUMS

for women and gender minorities across the Mormon spectrum to share their diverse life experiences in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance. Through these exchanges, we strive to create a community to better understand and support each other.

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Writers are welcome to join us for our free, bi-monthly virtual writing workshops on the first and third Tuesdays of the month from 9-10 p.m. ET. Register at TINYURL.COM/EXII-WRITINGSERIES



COVER ART

ARRIVAL

I ran out to my garden several times during the creation of this work, gathering everything from Italian parsley to grapes. It explores the complexities of womanhood and female identity. The woman standing in a lush garden represents not only Eve, but all women past, present, and future. The central question is whether she is lost or found, or both. This work is both a tribute to the resilience and strength of women and an invitation to examine our own journeys and celebrate them. It is an ode to the long line of women who have come before us and an affirmation of the infinite possibilities that lay ahead.

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A REVERENCE FOR TREES, A REVERENCE FOR PRINTERS

THIS SPRING, *EXPONENT II* FOUND A PRINTER THAT AGREED TO BE OUR MIDWIFE. Due to an initial email joke that *didn't really land*, our account representative, Mary, actually thought our magazine was about midwifery. After the confusion passed, we agreed she wasn't entirely wrong, and when I had my first tour of North Star's printing facility she expressed how enthusiastic she was to be "a midwife" to the words and artwork of Mormon women and gender minorities.

In fact, similar to a midwife, I observed a real reverence and fortitude in Mary as we discussed the details of printing our first issue together while we walked through the facility in Spanish Fork, Utah. She taught me how they accomplish zero-waste production, taking extra steps to gather up and bundle all excess paper trimmings to be re-made into new paper pulp. Working in the printing industry has made Mary a real defender of trees. "Every harvested tree deserves to go towards something that really matters," said Mary. She was proud her facility printed the packaging for 21 million COVID-19 test kits during the height of the pandemic.

A month later, when it was time for Mary and I to review the issue's print proofs, she admitted she had already read a few articles. "I think a tree might be content to learn it was turned into this magazine," she told me. She shared how one of the essays by a transgender sister impacted her heavily. Words printed on a page turned into a desire to give someone she'd never met a comforting hug. We agreed we were thankful to the trees whose sacrifice allowed us to build community and create a safe landing space in *Exponent II*.

Although this issue is open-themed, the editorial team loved seeing organic themes emerge through the submissions. As the writing and art engage each other, we saw a clear thread about connection — particularly through the lens of generations.

As El Call examines precedent and revelation in priesthood ordination, Katie Ludlow Rich illuminates what genuine

connection and service looks like in the life of Sue Szwahlen, the first woman (and LDS) mayor of Modesto, California. Artist Kathryn Ivy Reese talks about the Behold You Belong Movement and directly invites others into their inclusive, artistic collaboration.

Along with the book reviews and the stunning array of poems, the personal essays also speak to connection. Allison Pingree's piece envisions a world where her husband is not struggling with Alzheimer's disease while JosieAnna Peterson creates a powerful tribute to her late cousin.

Without prompting, we also had moving submissions addressed to the generations to come. L.E.R. writes a brave letter to her daughter about the realities of postpartum depression, Lauren Toiaivao Bost discusses parenting styles amid faith transitions, and Trang Thach Hickman advises her two children about what it is like to live "between two worlds" as a Vietnamese refugee living the life she has now. Janalie C. Bingham Joseph reflects on her life as a working mother and Alma Frances Pellett shares her experience witnessing her son's ordination. Many of these relationships and experiences are under construction, similar to what Kimberly Applewhite Teitter explores in her essay on faith and Carol Lynn Pearson's portrayal of the Holy Weeks we undertake in our own lives.

After I signed off on the print proofs to send another issue of *Exponent II* officially to print, Mary asked me if I knew I was part of a community "defining a new generation of Mormon thought leaders." As the eight-year Layout Editor who has typeset more than 25 issues, sometimes I get caught up in a poem or artist statement and the magnitude of what I'm a part of silences me, similar to spotting spring's first blossoming cherry tree. But mostly I feel a lot like a midwife myself . . . head down and focused on an important task at hand, birthing a new life. 🌱

**WE WERE
THANKFUL
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SPACE IN
EXPONENT II.**

COMPLETE RECONSTRUCTION // RECONSTRUCTING COMPLETION

I WOKE UP THIS MORNING TO THE UNFAMILIAR SENSATION OF UNFILTERED SUNLIGHT STREAMING THROUGH MY BATHROOM WINDOWS. When my husband and I settled into our home two years ago, we quickly learned that his 3 AM shower routine didn't match well with my desires to sleep in, particularly in our 90s-style open concept primary bathroom that allowed the harsh fluorescent white to blast over the walls and cast stark shadows into the bedroom. Ever the problem solver, he moved his early morning ritual downstairs, but I still keep the bathroom door closed in a soft invitation to reclaim our space as ours.

But this morning I could see the sun shine, and it was surprisingly unnerving. I arose from my slumber with the same heaviness around my eyes and pit in my stomach I've had for weeks. Peering into the bathroom as my vision reluctantly adjusted, I noted the errant state of the space.

We've finally taken the leap to seal off the wall, move our shower over into the light, and create more storage space. Our well-meaning neighbor, doubling as contractor, has left the space as tidy as he can under the circumstances. But I can't help but feel the overwhelm of a home in disarray — large pieces of furniture tossed to the side, a countertop full of tools and toys and whatever else needed to be moved to make room for the work, the ladders set up precariously in front of the door.

It's looking at the yellow insulation exposed inside the walls, with mere intermittent fluffiness, that has me feeling the most vulnerable. I feel a chill run through my spine as I gaze at it, logically recognizing the psychosomatic projection of my current distress while emotionally still wanting to wade into my suffering for a few more moments.

I haven't always known this about myself, but I find comfort in order and structure. The people who are closest to me might even be shocked to hear this since I've struggled to stay organized for years — the byproduct of longstanding executive functioning issues without intervention — but it's true. Order is a core value of mine, and I've come to understand this by interpreting the turmoil I feel when things are out of place. Moving into a new home during the pandemic has been equal parts relieving and profoundly disconcerting, and while I'm eager for change, I feel a longing for things to stay the same so I don't have to struggle through the chaos of the in-between.

Staying engaged in the gospel often similarly feels to me like settling into gentle destruction, being satisfied in the dissatisfaction of the gaping holes left by unanswered questions from an omnipresent and still distant God. Even the process of growth in a secular sense, absent the implications of spiritual progression, often is compared to violent processes in which

we have learned to find beauty — a caterpillar digesting parts of its own body wrapped in a tight cage of its own design, to burst forth and become a butterfly; a seed pod ripping itself in two so the tender sprout can fight its way through the dust to find the light.

But I like order, and I don't like the in-between. I struggle with the waiting, the constant prayer, the hoping for miracles and squinting to watch them form, the bargaining and the self-soothing when my walks with God take me on the rocky terrain of uncharted territory. It has been especially hard lately, with my life in a sort of unrelenting, yet nondescript chaos. I find myself without the skills to manage the complexities of life as a mother of young children, a partner in a logistical-stretched marriage, a Black female professional in a white context where passive aggression feels like the norm, and a human being with many passions.

MOST OF ALL I WONDER WHY WE ONLY GET TO GLEAN HIS WISDOM FROM THE END OF THE EXPERIENCE, INSTEAD OF IN THE MIDST OF HIS WAITING AND HIS NEED. WHAT MY SOUL YEARNS FOR IS A MODELING OF THE WAIT.

I am dutifully serving as Sunday School teacher in my small, high-needs ward in West Salt Lake City, and so I've been more attuned to the scriptures lately, even as it were by slight coercion. I read with curiosity how Jesus prepared to enter His ministry with a 40-day fast, a feat that surely must have been a body-crippling task. I wonder, why was this the path He chose? Where was His willingness? Who chose the length of time He was wandering in the wilderness without food? Was He waiting for some optimal period of bodily destruction to give Him the signal that it was time to begin? And what would it have been like for Him to have His literally devilish little brother whispering sweet stupidities when He's that famished? But most of all I wonder why we only get to glean His wisdom from the end of the experience, instead of in the midst of His waiting and His need. What my soul yearns for is a modeling of the wait.



"The Same But Different" by Andrea Larsen



After returning from this journey, Jesus delivered what we refer to as the Sermon on the Mount that many Christians know and love. He reassured the growing following that His intention was not “to destroy, but to fulfill.” But the teachings of Jesus were so radical that they *often* were interpreted as threatening or destructive, or maybe even just discomfiting to the ruling classes of the day. Readers of the scriptures are often critical of the people who didn’t catch on right away that the Messiah was who He said He was — people like the Israelites, who were brought out of bondage only to miss eating the onions and figs that they might have never even tasted; or the Pharisees, who are depicted as staying safe within the bounds of their own relational frames. But I have compassion for the intricacies of following a wild man with ways not of this world.

I cycled through a randomized gospel music playlist one day as I was driving in the midst of a deep ruminative spell, and a song by one of my favorite artists came on:

*Give me a clean heart
To lose the double mind
To believe You when You tell me
Everything will be just fine
Just lay Your hands on me, Lord
And I will be brand new*

*And I am calling out to You
For a strength exchange
I will gladly take Your joy
For my weakness
Give me a clean heart
And I will serve nobody but you*

The repeated refrains became my silent prayers to the Almighty: *I am calling out to you for a strength exchange. Give me a clean heart, and I will serve nobody but You.*

I once listened to a Faithful Feminist podcast episode about the miracles of Jesus. One of the hosts shared her kinship with the woman with an issue of blood because of her own experiences living with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). As a therapist, my ears perked up to hear the comparison. The woman shared that when her compulsions are at their worst she spends an extended period of time on her rituals. She described the tension in her head between wanting to stop her ritualizing and continue on with the life from which she is removing herself, while at the same time worrying that her family will be affected or contaminated if she doesn’t maintain her efforts to keep clean. She noted that the woman with the issue of blood in Jewish culture would have been ostracized from society, unable to be in close proximity with her partner, if she had one, and in effect, wiped from relevance. Imagine the emotional toll that must have been, the desperation in the wait.

The podcast host continued by noting that the treatment for OCD is exposure therapy, which involves trading off or inhibiting the urge to engage in rituals, managing the extreme discomfort that arises in the short term, and then *waiting* for the pull of the ritual to loosen its grip. To give yourself over to

the process of exposure is a difficult thing that I have observed many times, where the tug-of-war between the suffering of the familiar and the pain of the unknown is in full effect. It takes faith, bravery, trust, the belief that healing is possible, an effort that amounts to many daunting, wobbly steps into the light.

When the woman with an issue of blood stepped into the street that day to seek a Savior whose name she might have only heard floating up to the window of her self-contained prison, she needed a faith big enough to raise herself from the dead, to overcome the inevitabilities of her own cultural and social destruction. She needed to suspend the narrative of her contamination and believe in the cleanliness of her heart, to reach the One who could exchange her weakness for joy.

I receive my own strength exchange in that story, as I am reminded that the unsettling feeling that haunts me is just as likely to be the natural byproduct of the path to transformation as it is to be a stumbling block along that path, and that the decision lies with the orientation of my own desires. 🙏

Kimberly Applewhite Teitter is a psychologist living in the Salt Lake City area with her husband and two daughters. She is also a director of the Debra Bonner Unity Gospel Choir.

ARTIST STATEMENT

The Same But Different

I quilt with clay. A quilt is made with small pieces that come together to make something whole. My work is a response to the black and white thinking in today’s society. Us vs. them. I believe that instead of demonizing or fearing the other, we would do better to look for common ground and work together. We all have beauty inside of us; we can create something stunning together. Maybe not in spite of our differences but because of them.

My process: I make stamps and colored slip from porcelain. I roll slabs from red earthenware and paint them with black or white slip. I stamp the surfaces and then cut and assemble my pattern. They are glazed with a milky clear glaze. Watch a video of her inspiration and process on YouTube @AndreaLarsenArt or using the QR code below.

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THE PLACE THAT DOES NOT EXIST

IN THE PLACE THAT DOESN'T EXIST, MY HUSBAND AND I LACE OUR FINGERS and stroll the streets on a summer Saturday evening. We catch the sunset, laugh at a joke he tells, brush up against each other and melt into passionate kissing . . . and he remembers it all the next morning.

There's an outdoor cafe where we meet up with friends and pass the hours telling stories over crusty bread, wedges of cheese, bittersweet chocolate, and strawberries bursting with juice. He remembers our friends' names, the stories they tell, and what we ate.

In this place, we gather with my mom, my daughter, and my five brothers and their families for a reunion. As we make meals, spend afternoons building sandcastles at the beach, and watch slides from my dad's old projector, some childhood pathologies play out again while others are healed. My husband catches my eye at the right time, recalling what I told him years ago about those patterns, and understanding what these changes mean to me now.

On the drive home, we stop for fuel, and he knows how to insert his credit card, choose the type of gas to pump, and hold the nozzle in place, rather than throwing it to the ground in frustration — gas spilling over my legs and shoes.

Our home in this place that doesn't exist has a kitchen with cupboards — cupboards where he remembers to put the measuring cups, and the cans of diced tomatoes, and the glass bowls with lids. In this kitchen he knows to turn the stove off, and to heat his flannel bean bag neck warmer in the microwave, not the toaster oven. On Valentine's Day, the card that he leaves me on the kitchen counter tells me what he loves about me and why I'm his Valentine, instead of wishing me both "Happy Birthday" and "Happy Mother's Day."

In this place that doesn't exist, there's one that *does*: my husband's music. In the living room, here and now, he lifts his 1732 Sanctus Seraphin violin and plays Bach's *Chaconne*, his fingers quivering in yearning vibratos and his bow flying in lightning-speed arpeggios. This music — exquisite sounds that tether his soul to his body and alchemize my despair into amazement — will be the last thing to go. 🎻

Allison Pingree is an educational developer and instructor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education; she writes and lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her personal essays have been published in *Exponent II*, *Dialogue*, and *With Child: Mormon Women on Mothering*.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Short & Cranky Dream 1 & 2

Recently I have been exploring my relationship to the land where I live and the feeling of being loved by the earth. I chose to use a toy camera called the Diana Mini. The soft focus of the plastic lens along with unpredictable light leaks and shifting film colors remove the images from the sharpness of reality. The double exposures and overlapping images add a dreamlike quality that shows how hard it is to hold on to the feeling in a concrete way.

Sally Stratford
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HOLY WEEK

THE RETURN ADDRESS SAID “YOUR FRIEND JESUS.” I’d never heard from him this directly before, and my hand shook as I opened the envelope.

*You are invited to join me
in a journey to the Holy Land
for an observance of
Holy Week.
I will knock.
RSVP*

I accepted, of course, overwhelmed by the honor. When the knock came, I opened the door. Reverently. Before me stood the Lord himself, His hand reaching out to me.

“I’m ready!” I smiled.

“No one ever is,” He smiled back.

I looked around for the car, the tour bus, the shuttle.

“This journey,” He said, “is taken step by step.”

“Where are the others?” I asked.

“This journey,” He said, “is always taken alone — except for me. It’s a simple journey. I lead. You follow.”

“We are going to the Holy Land?” I queried, looking about at the ordinary, familiar paths I had walked every day, year after year.

“There is no holier land than this,” He replied.

“But it *is* — an observance of Holy Week?” I hoped I hadn’t misunderstood.

“It is,” He answered. “Holy Week. We will begin here, with Palm Sunday.”

I looked where He indicated, ready to see a depiction of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the Lord being welcomed with waving palm fronds, garlands of flowers, a joyous celebration.

“But that’s — *me!*” I said, recognizing the scene. “That’s the banquet when they gave me that award at work and that great promotion! And then — there it is! — that very night I got engaged to the love of my life! What a day that was!”

“Ah, a memorable Palm Sunday.”

“Wait,” I said, a strange feeling rising in my throat. “Isn’t this about Holy Week? *Your* Holy Week?”

“Not mine.” I could tell the smile came from His heart. “*Yours.*”

I froze and grasped His arm. “*Mine?*” My voice was thin, for I knew my Bible. “Am I, like, going to die soon? Is that what this is about?”

“Not the big death,” He said. “That will come later. First come the small deaths.”

“*Deaths?*” I heard a crack in my voice. “You said *deaths* — as in plural?”

“Several, perhaps many.”

“But, *small* — right? *Small?*”

“They won’t feel small at the time.”

I turned and looked back, wondering if it was too late to change my RSVP.

“There’s no going back,” He said gently. “I played out my Holy Week — not only to assure your resurrection from the big death — but to give you a pattern of resurrection from the small deaths. Your Holy Weeks will come. Your only choice is whether you experience them alone — or with me.”

My hand tightened on His arm. “Not alone,” I whispered.

“The next day we observe is Maundy Thursday.”

I could not lift my eyes. I remembered the events of that day. The Last Supper. The Garden of Gethsemane. The betrayal. The anguish.

“Look!” The Lord gently raised my gaze.

Scenes in a private garden. No apostles. No soldiers. No olive trees. Me. And betrayal.

“Cancer . . . the outcome uncertain . . .”

“Downsizing . . . nothing personal . . .”

“Divorce . . .”

“Your child is in jail . . .”

“Dead . . . a drunken driver . . .”

Disappointment . . . discouragement . . . depression . . . loneliness . . . defeat . . .

Alone in the garden with betrayal. I saw myself — alone on my knees, heart breaking, weeping. Weeping in the garden.

“*All these?*” I looked at the Lord in disbelief. “All these will come?”

“Betrayals will come,” He replied. “Betrayals like these. You will kneel in your garden, and you will weep. You will not bleed, but, oh, you will weep.”

“You will be there?”

“Every moment.”

“You will not sleep?”

“I will not sleep.”

He took my hand and we walked on. “Good Friday,” He gestured.

I looked and saw myself, bowed down with a heavy weight. “Ah!” I said. “I am ashamed to bow under such small sorrow.”

“I was given my cross,” He said, “and you are given yours. Now hear. Surrender to the crushing weight. Your hands are tied, you are brought low, stripped of pride. When you fall, stand again. There is fatigue, there is defeat, but stand again. Loved ones along the way weep for you. Let them. Hands



"I Forgive Me" by Kathryn Ivy Reese

reach out to wipe your face. Let them. And let your words be words of forgiveness, for your betrayer knows not what he does."

"You are with me still?"

"Every step, lifting, lifting the burden."

"And then — I die?"

"Life as you knew it on Palm Sunday is no more."

"Entombed?"

"A heavy rock over the entry."

"And now the darkness," He said as we walked on. "Do not fight the darkness. A Saturday of darkness is holy too."

I looked. I was lying on my bed. So still, eyes closed, no will to rise.

"Rest," He said. "Reflect. Wait. Trust the darkness."

I waited. I watched my sad, still face on the bed. No lamp. No candle. So dark. So small and alone. I scoured the sky for a hint of morning.

"Easter will come," He said. "Wait."

A slice of light. Tiny. Another. Slowly as morning. Ah, it *was* morning — becoming, slowly becoming. No moment to mark it, so slowly. The light falling — on my sad face, on the bed, then coming *from* my face! My body rising from this

small death. Sitting. Standing. Accepting the light. *Becoming* the light.

"I've never seen myself look like *that!*" I murmured. "I'm *more* than I was before!"

"Ah, my friend . . ." I could hear sunrise in His voice. "This is the secret of Easter. Life after death is always larger than life before death."

"Resurrection." I spoke the word in awe. Such freedom. A stone rolled away.

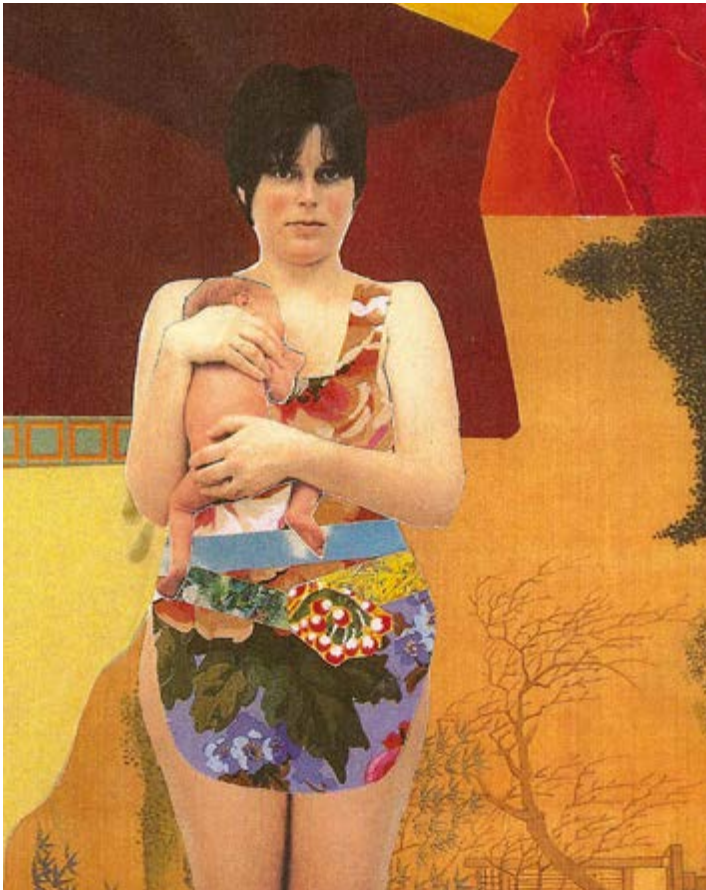
"Observe the pattern," He said. "Surrender. Carry your burden the best you can. Forgive. Trust the darkness. Especially — *forgive*. If you don't, it can be a very long time until morning."

"But however long it takes," He said, "however painful your Friday, however dark your Saturday, I will be with you every moment — promising the celebration of Easter morning. For Holy Week, I came into the world."

We walked further down the path.

He led. I followed. ☒

Carol Lynn Pearson is an author living in Walnut Creek, California, who has devoted much of her work to important issues regarding women and our LGBTQ+ sisters and brothers.



ARTIST STATEMENT

Afterbirth

I made this collage when I was engaged to be married. As a daughter of Eve, I would soon be starting my own journey into the wilderness. I looked to the life ahead of a wife and eventually that of a mother, with trepidation. Today I would tell my younger self she did a beautiful thing to jump when the jumping felt like love and death all in one.

A few years later the choice to get pregnant with my first child was another step deeper into the realms of surrender and sacrifice. Just like on our wedding day, with no idea what was ahead, we leapt! Our choice to become parents was “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14).

Laura German Reynolds
@gereymanolds

A LETTER TO MY DAUGHTER

I STILL REMEMBER THE DAY AS IF IT WERE YESTERDAY, which says a lot since lately I hardly remember anything at all. It was an unusually warm Saturday for Massachusetts in January. I had just attended a friend's baby shower. Several of us in my ward were pregnant at the same time. Though I was 35 weeks pregnant, my shower wouldn't be for another two weeks.

Granted, if I would have been like most expecting first-time moms, I would have had a shower much earlier — surrounded by family, friends, and all the baby hoopla that comes along with it. But I didn't want that. And all of my family and your dad's family, including most of our friends, lived in Utah. We lived in Boston, far away from anyone whom I would invite to such a charade. But even then, there was something else afoot. I didn't want to be surrounded by people, especially women. My heart raced. I felt overwhelmed, drowning in anxiety. The mere thought of greeting, smiling, and pretend-gasping as I opened pink-tissue-filled presents felt impossible.

Should this have been a red flag? I didn't think so at the time. Becoming a mom was not a lifelong dream of mine, but yes, I had pretended dolls were my babies when I was a child. Yes, I babysat actual babies a handful of times. And yes, when I married your father — at the overdue age of 24, according to Utah Mormon standards — we both wanted to have children, eventually. But that was only one thing in a very long list of things I wanted to do in my lifetime.

So no, repelling all baby things during my pregnancy did not seem concerning to me. I hadn't bought a single thing for you. I hadn't given much thought to what my life would look like once you arrived. Maybe I was unconsciously avoiding any thought of motherhood; maybe I was desperately clinging to my last days of freedom (yes, I know that sounds cliché), my last days as one of just two people in the one-bedroom apartment, my last days before your dad and I would become parents — a title that would be with us until the end of time. I wanted to bask in every second of it.

So, there we were, your dad and me, sitting on our very uncomfortable blue couch watching TV, as we did most Saturday afternoons. Your dad and I had a very happy life. After five years of marriage, we still actually enjoyed and reveled in each other's company. (I hope that when the time is right, you get to experience a beautiful, loving marriage like this with whomever you choose.) The heat had made my feet swell like pillows, and I had to put them up on the coffee table. Your dad joined me by doing the same. I stared at him and, with a mix of panic and grief, said, "Only four more Saturdays of just you and me."

I don't know when you'll actually read this, but I hope that whenever you do, that you also know and understand just how excited I was to have you. Life is complicated that way. Before you, just a year earlier, I had experienced an awful loss, from which I had only partly recovered. After lots of negative pregnancy tests, doctor visits, pills, exams, and treatments, my first pregnancy had come to an abrupt end at nine weeks. It was one of the worst experiences of my life. I told myself I could not go through that again and did not want to get pregnant if the outcome could not be certain. Seven months later, I was thrilled to be running my first half-marathon in Portland, Maine, but even more so because you were right there in my uterus, bouncing along with me as we raced together for the finish line.

Part of the challenge, this paradox, was that I couldn't help but fear that a big part of me would cease to exist, that your father and me as I knew us, and the life we had built and lived for so long, would come to an end. And although there was a new beginning waiting around the corner, literally a new, beautiful life to be had, the end of anything can bring along sadness and grief. So I had been grieving for months, without even knowing it.

But you had other plans for us. There would not be one more Saturday. Hell, there wasn't even one more day. That warm Saturday in early January of 2020 was the last time it was just me and your dad. Just me and my thoughts, me and my dreams, me and my individual life plans.

The high on your birthday was 72 degrees, the hottest January day on record for the city of Boston; it was a beautiful day indeed. But even as you were whisked away to the NICU, where you would remain for another 10 days, a huge void began forming inside me. It wasn't the typical homecoming from

...REPELLING ALL BABY THINGS DURING MY PREGNANCY DID NOT SEEM CONCERNING TO ME.

the hospital with a swaddled baby in my arms to a furnished nursery filled with all the things from our baby registry. Instead, your dad and I came home empty-handed, ready to begin building and assembling the little nook that would become your "room" in our makeshift office area. Miraculously, all of our new friends had quickly mobilized to gather everything in my baby registry (I somehow managed to create one) and then

some. Meals arrived at our doorstep held by the most loving and friendly hands, help was always a text or phone call away, and your grandma and aunt flew out to see you within 24 hours of your unexpected arrival.

But *you* still weren't home with us, and every day that went by, my sadness grew. I spent all day at the hospital sitting next to you, watching you sleep. I was told I should pump so you would have milk next time you'd wake up. That was no fun. I hated pumping from day one. I walked around the hospital with bags of ice over my boobs and under my armpits. I never knew (there was so much I didn't know) that pumping around the clock only accelerated milk production, which would engorge my breasts beyond their limit, and then the milk would make its way into my armpits, causing the glands to protuberate and sag. Not a beautiful sight, let alone a wonderful feeling. Excruciating pain or discomfort was all I felt. No one, not even my own mother, had ever mentioned this. I remember thinking in that moment, "Where are all the f*****g baby commercials showing moms with lumps hanging from their armpits?"

I hope that my sharing this with you now — the complicated truth of things — will save you from some of the shock you may experience and better prepare you if you ever choose to take on the path of pregnancy. Pain and grief. I'd feed you, change your diaper, swaddle you, place you in your bassinet, pump, go to the bathroom, change my own diaper, rest sitting on a chair while balancing ice packs on my chest, maybe eat something, then get ready to wake you up and do it all over again, every three hours from 6 am until 6 pm. Technically, I should've felt lucky. Lucky that I got to go home at 8 pm and sleep until 5 am while nurses took care of you throughout the night. I wasn't lucky. I was grateful you were getting exceptional care. But you were mine, and I wanted you home, and healthy. (Also, I wasn't getting uninterrupted sleep — I was waking up every three hours to pump or I would lose my supply. Word of advice, my love, it's not the end of the world if you lose your milk supply; don't hurt your body or your mind trying to meet some arbitrary quantity of milk or number of months. Formula exists and is not from the devil. I would embrace that soon.)

Who was putting all this unbearable weight of societal expectations on my shoulders? Not my mother, not your dad, not my friends. It was definitely coming from somewhere . . . was it from within? Was it the same metaphorical microchip many women are born with, especially those of our faith, that was supposed to equip us with all things mothering, that was physically and emotionally crushing me? Maybe it was a first-timer thing. The constant feeling that anything could go wrong, that you might get sick if I didn't boil the bottles for exactly five minutes. (But the one time that I boiled them for almost two hours because I simply forgot was still panic-inducing, so I threw the bottles out.) The few minutes of sleep I would get each night would be filled with thoughts such as:

You better go check on her; she may not be breathing.

She may have wrapped the swaddle over her head.

She may have something in her mouth if you don't get up now she might not make it until the morning.

Yes, morbid, but this is common with many first-time parents. I'd get up and check, and you were fine. I still get those

thoughts, but these days, if I wake up, I just check the camera; most of the time I try to sleep through it.

My doctor gave me the standard postpartum screening six weeks after delivery. She was concerned. While the pain in my breasts and armpits had subsided, the sadness was still there. I'd cry in the morning. I'd cry at night. I'd cry while eating. I'd cry while breastfeeding. I felt this was parenting, especially for a mom, just eternal sadness and exhaustion for the rest of my days. I had succumbed to it. But were all moms really feeling this way? Were there moms out there who were truly gazing into their newborn's eyes, making faces, holding their tiny hands, falling in love with them more as each second went by? Who were these moms, and could they please share their secret? I, on the other hand, felt like a robot — a robot whose only function was to keep you fed and cleaned, and also to keep you from falling and getting hurt. (I failed miserably at that during your first year.) To keep you entertained? That was your father's function. Should I have done more skin-to-skin contact? There's all this research about skin-to-skin contact during the first few weeks of a baby's life. They practically attribute everything from kids having a stronger immune system to increasing your chances of getting into Harvard. (Okay, that last one is an exaggeration, but they really sell you on that.) I'm sorry I didn't do more skin-to-skin contact with you; I'm sorry that during your first trimester of life I didn't play peekaboo, or sing to you, or read to you, or fall asleep holding you, or carry you in my arms a little longer, or look forward to spending time with you. I wanted to, I truly did. I wanted to do and feel everything those darn moms on the commercials, and posters, and on the street did. I felt nothing, absolutely nothing. My cup was empty and bone-dry. But that's motherhood, right? Me being empty and dry so that you would be filled with everything you needed to thrive?

I was sick. No one knew. No one was around to notice (thank you, Covid). Your dad had an inkling but had to focus on you because no one else could. You two were so close, from day one. He picked up my slack, and there was a lot of it. But warmer weather helped. Getting out of the house and going on walks with you strapped to my chest helped. Going back to work helped. My breastmilk drying out helped, though it was still sad once it was gone, one of those grieving moments. More sleep helped, and getting some time to unwind with your dad every night became something I looked forward to.

But the sadness wouldn't entirely go away, and I would still freeze from panic and anxiety, completely incapable of demonstrating the slightest motherly trait. My therapist suggested depression medication. Growing up in a Latinx household, I didn't consider depression a medical condition. Depression emerged when you weren't doing the things you were supposed to. You were depressed because you chose to be. "Exercise more. Change your diet. Get outside. Pray for it to go away. Serve others. Think about other things besides depression." These were the things I grew up hearing. Thus, depression medication felt taboo. "Too many side effects. You'll become addicted. It'll alter your brain and personality permanently. It does more harm than good. It's not natural." Having educated myself on the topic, I still couldn't shush the voices in my head.

But I knew that the person I had become, the person staring at me in the mirror, that wasn't really me. That woman was not the mother I wanted to be. The real me was trapped, or was in a deep coma.

A friend of mine described it perfectly to me once when she said, "I was in a fog. A mental fog. Every day. And medication lifted that fog; and I was able to see. Everything was clear around me." Somewhere deep in that fog, my love for you was dying to see the light of day, dying to break free. I had to try — for you, for me.

GROWING UP IN A LATINX HOUSEHOLD, I DIDN'T CONSIDER DEPRESSION A MEDICAL CONDITION.

After two weeks of taking the medication, the fog started to lift. I was finally capable of feeling joy as I held you close and fixed my gaze on your beautiful face, those perfectly round, deep-brown eyes, carefully framed by the fullest rosy cheeks, and the coolest, tallest baby mohawk I had ever seen. I wasn't a robot anymore. I had become your mom, and I'm sorry it took so long after your arrival.

It has not been blue skies ever since. There have been plenty of foggy days — some even pitch black. There have been some floods, some thunder, and even tornadoes. But here I am, trying to take care of myself to be the best mom for you and (years later) your little sister too. I now know that isn't selfish; it isn't vain; it is necessary. While I cannot express in words the extent of my love for you, I hope you can see it in my actions and countenance. You truly bring so much joy into my life. And the best of all? I can feel it alongside you.

Love,

Your very imperfect mom, who tries every day, and will never stop. 📧

After spending several years in the Boston area, L.E.R. resides in Utah with her family while continuing to work for Harvard University.

After Dobbs

ALIXA BROBBEY

My friend stares directly at
the sun, cups his cheeks
with her palm—risking blister

and burn. She is the picture
of bliss. Rosy cheeks stark
against white lace. They sway
as one, slice through the cake
with giddy imprecision. Her corset
cinched so tight she kneels
by the bleach bowl in prayer.
She folds over, like a hanger's
hook. Bile stains the air.

Alixia Brobbey is a writer and law student currently based in Utah.

MEET SUE ZWAHLEN: THE FIRST WOMAN (AND LDS) MAYOR OF MODESTO, CALIFORNIA

INTERVIEW BY KATIE LUDLOW RICH

WHEN SUE ZWAHLEN, MAYOR OF MY HOMETOWN, MODESTO, CALIFORNIA, SAT DOWN TO TALK WITH ME over Zoom, she had just returned from a week in Washington, DC, with the United States Conference of Mayors. While she was gone, her father-in-law passed away at the age of 92 and her twelfth grandchild was born. After our interview, she would conduct an audit committee meeting, but in our time together, I felt like I had her full attention. With her salt-and-pepper hair, stylish black-rimmed glasses, and subtle red lipstick punctuating her smile, she exudes a youthful energy that immediately drew me to her. I had gotten to know some of her kids in high school and at BYU, but by the end of the hour, I found myself wishing I had spent more time with her while growing up. Two years into her term as mayor, Sue sees leading a city of nearly 220,000 residents as a continuation of the work she has been doing for decades as a mother of six, an emergency room nurse, and a community volunteer.

Sue came to a life of service by following the example of her mother, who worked full-time as a secretary at Modesto's St. Stanislaus Catholic Church. Her mother was often the person who greeted people at the door of the church. Some arrived needing food and other essential resources. "Many days she would come after work to pick me up from school and say, 'Oh, Susan, there are some people that need groceries,' and we'd run to the grocery store. And then we would deliver the groceries to people's homes." She

learned early on that women can work, love their jobs and communities, and be mothers at the same time.

When Sue was a senior in high school, she began dating Lynn Zwahlen, a star football player and member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While Sue loved her Catholic family and friends, there were always points of doctrine that didn't sit quite right for her. When she expressed an interest in going to Lynn's church, he suggested that he go to hers, too. So they attended LDS Sunday school in the morning, Catholic Mass in the afternoon, and LDS sacrament meeting in the evening. Many of their dates included conversations about the gospel. After high school, Lynn was recruited by LaVell Edwards to play football at BYU while Sue went to Oakland to attend the Samuel Merritt Hospital School of Nursing. They stayed in touch through letters and weekly phone calls.

From the window in the hallway of her dorm, Sue had a view of the Oakland Temple. The beautiful building and its grounds had intrigued her since she first saw it on a trip to Oakland when she was ten years old. "I'm going to go in that building someday," she remembers thinking. Now that she was living in Oakland, she looked up the local LDS church and rode the bus to a Sunday meeting where missionaries connected



her with the UC Berkeley branch. She began meeting with the missionaries from the student branch, and they were sometimes joined by Scott Kenney, a founder of *Sunstone Magazine*. Sue decided to join the church. In December, 1973, Lynn baptized her a few months before leaving for his mission to Tokyo. When he returned from Japan, Sue was in Provo working as a nurse at Utah Valley Hospital and attending BYU. They were married in the Oakland Temple in July 1976.

After Lynn graduated from dental school, the couple settled in Modesto to raise their family — four boys and one girl who came in short order, then a fifth boy who arrived ten years later. Aided by supportive parents and in-laws who lived nearby, Sue worked part-time as

an emergency room nurse, volunteered weekly in each of her children's classrooms, and eventually ran for and served two terms on the Modesto City School Board.

Another service opportunity connected her back to her childhood. Sue recalled a day when her mother came home from work and said, "Sue, I'm so excited. There are two women in the community and they're going to start this agency called Interfaith Ministries. Now I will have a place to send people

THE DECISIONS THAT WOMEN MAKE IN THEIR HOMES AND IN THEIR COMMUNITIES ARE THE VERY THINGS THAT MAKE THEM EFFECTIVE LEADERS.

when they need food." Decades later, while serving on the local communications committee for the LDS church, Sue received a call from a member of the Interfaith Ministries board asking if she would serve as a representative on the board. Her answer was immediate: "Absolutely. You have no idea what this means to me." For 25 years she has continued her service on the board. "And we're still feeding people. It's free food and clothing for people that are in need. And that all started way back when with two women who saw a need and filled it."

Sue was elected mayor in February 2021 in the midst of a global pandemic. I asked her if this was a tricky time to start the role. "Not tricky for me," she

said. "I spent my career as an emergency room nurse. And that was one of the reasons why I wanted to run, because I understand how disease works and how we can best combat it and take care of the people in our community. So that was one of the motivating forces to run."

As an emergency room nurse, she was required to triage constantly, deciding which situations were life or death. This taught her how to sort priorities and make good decisions quickly about what needed her attention. It carried over to her family life, raising children, and balancing the various demands on her time. She is adamant that her roles as a nurse and as a mother were not separate from her preparation to be mayor of a large city — they were all part of it. The decisions that women make in their homes and in their communities are the very things that make them effective leaders.

Like many other cities in the country, Modesto has serious challenges with homelessness and mental illness. Sue's work as a nurse prepared her to understand and address these issues. In the emergency room, she worked directly with unhoused people and people in mental health crises and she understands that assumptions about homelessness are unhelpful: "There are reasons every person on the street has a unique diagnosis or situation that they're dealing with. . . and we're working really hard to address those [specific] issues."

The approach requires seeing the issues instead of hiding from them, bringing more people into the conversation, and using creative problem-solving. Modesto was the first city in California to have their city meetings translated into 20-plus languages in real-time through the program Wordly. They have a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee that is working to make these efforts part of their city culture. They also have a police chief who has actively initiated police reform for alternative response models. In addition, the city now has a committee with representatives from a variety of law enforcement and mental health professions that has

created initiatives such as pairing mental health and behavioral health clinicians with police officers on certain response calls. It requires a multifaceted approach to rise to the challenge of meeting the needs of people in the community.

Like many areas in California, Modesto is experiencing a contraction of LDS church membership. Wards are more likely to be consolidated than split and expanded. So it came as a surprise to many when, in the April 2022 General Conference, President Russell M. Nelson announced that a temple will be built in Modesto. Sue immediately thought about how good it would be for the community. She thought of her in-laws and other longtime LDS families (including my grandparents) and how dedicated they were to the gospel. For many years, particularly before the Sunday block of meetings, practicing the faith often meant being at the church every day of the week for various meetings or early-morning seminary and Saturday activities. "I have no idea how the decision transpired, but I thought of the people in this community, and those families that really laid the foundation for church commitment."

Sue wants women to know that they, too, can do a job like hers. "It takes a lot of energy and a lot of time, a lot of juggling schedules and being able at a moment's notice to adapt, change, learn, grow, make a decision, and go forward." When I demurred, suggesting that Sue may be exceptionally talented and hardworking, she pushed back. "What I'm trying to say to women who are interested in something like this is that everything they're doing now with their families, their jobs, their careers, their involvement in their children's schools is all preparation for a job like I'm doing now. Whatever you are involved in, it all just fits together. It's not separate. What you are doing now prepares you for what you do next." 📖

Katie Ludlow Rich is a writer and independent scholar living in Saratoga Springs, Utah.



can a woman

forget

her

shame

?

HOLINESS FOUND ANYWHERE

INTERVIEW WITH KATHRYN IVY REESE

When did you first realize you were an artist?

Aw . . . I was in kindergarten and my teacher would let us sing songs and color for the first ten minutes of class. I've been riding that Crayola bliss ever since.

I love that! Has it always been that smooth sailing bliss, or have you ever struggled with self-doubt and direction in your artistic journey? If so, what pushes you onward?

I think the toughest part of my creative life has been change. I thought I wanted to be an illustrator, then a fine artist, then an art therapist. All of those didn't work out for various reasons. On the

same line, I used to think a Mini Cooper was my dream car until I drove one. It's been deflating to test drive careers, but what are my 20s for anyway?

I'm so struck by the way you work with erasure and scripture text from the Book of Mormon as a medium. Can you tell us more about your process?

The process for finding poems has a lot of flexibility. In January, I had a show with Lily Camille Howell, and her method is very different from mine but the results are just as personal. First, I scan a page for any verbs that I feel drawn to, circling anything good with a pencil. Then I'll go back through and do the same thing for pronouns. That helps me answer *who* the poem is about

and *what* they are doing. Then I go back a third time to see if I can create a sentence.

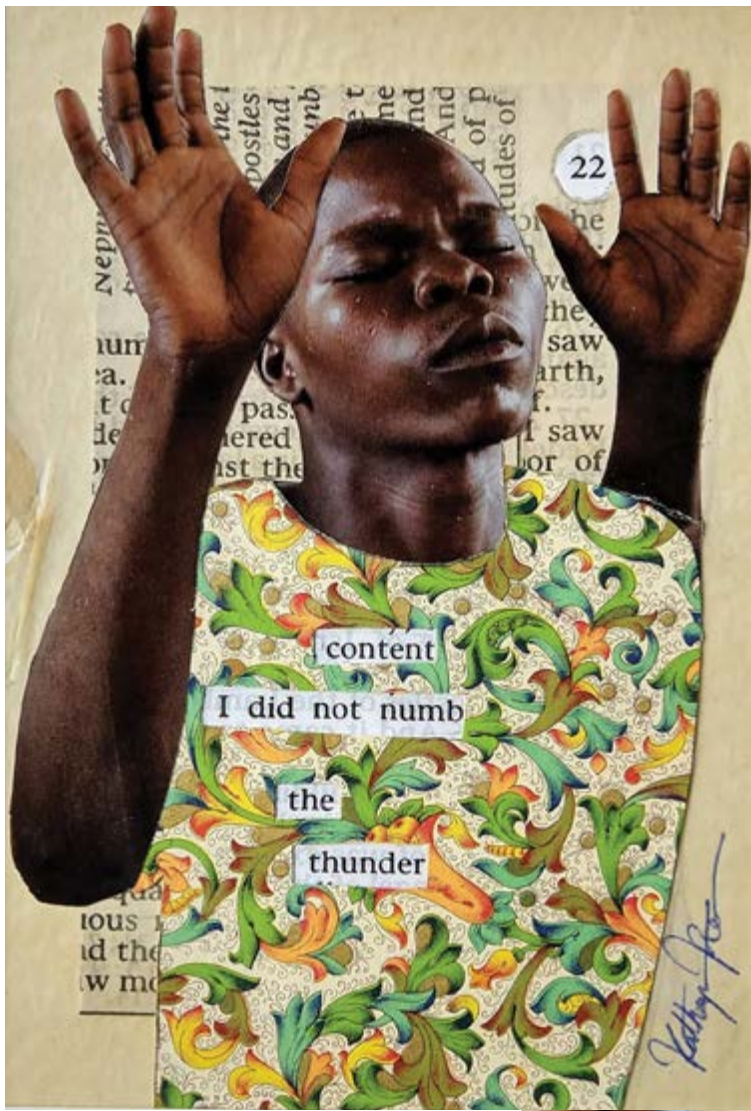
As part of the Behold You Belong Movement, I avoid references to deity because I'm interested in validating atheist experience as much as Christian experience. Something important to me is that the poetry is never seen as a device for staying in the church or leaving it, but rather a chance for scripture to mirror us as we are.

Tell us more about the Behold You Belong Movement.

Behold You Belong is a collection of poems and art inspired by the pages of the Book of Mormon. Through black-out poetry and collage, anyone



Above: Behold You Belong gallery | Opposite page: Detail from "Yea They May Forget"



Above: "Thunder" | Right: "First Name"

across the religious spectrum can explore personal, invisible, or taboo experiences.

You talk about how this work “attempts to blur the gaps” between communities. Can you say more about this goal?

Scripture has a way of validating some while alienating others. By trimming the word count, a book that has so much cultural weight and authority becomes more accessible. In the most uncanny way, erasure adds a lot.

Platforms that are designed for both traditional saints and ex-Mormons are rare. There is a soluble membrane between these groups but very little emotional infrastructure for families

SCRIPTURE HAS A WAY OF VALIDATING SOME WHILE ALIENATING OTHERS. BY TRIMMING THE WORD COUNT, A BOOK THAT HAS SO MUCH CULTURAL WEIGHT AND AUTHORITY BECOMES MORE ACCESSIBLE. IN THE MOST UNCANNY WAY, ERASURE ADDS A LOT.

and communities to navigate inevitable shifts. So far, I've seen this poetry make an impact on a macro and micro level. As a community — atheists, feminists, queers, BIPOC folks, and/or devout members, etc. — all can approach the scriptures with equal amounts of autonomy. It's so beautiful. But even if we take the practice out of the public sphere completely, there can be breakthroughs. In an introspective way, this poetry is a tool we can use to commune with conflicting parts of ourselves.

I recently sold a piece with the poem, “I have new things to be.” That poem exists because I kept thinking about how much I used to dream of being a trauma-informed Relief Society President. At this point, my goals have shifted just as much as my belief system, and I have needed a way to circle back to myself. The phrase I found felt as if my past self

were giving me permission to dream differently. If we can hold our own cognitive dissonance with kindness, we will be more equipped to do the same for others. This, to me, is the foundation of belonging.

What inspired you to call this a movement, and where do you hope it goes from here?

It feels like a movement because the art revolves around a universal need for belonging. The big, fat dream is to fill an entire Book of Mormon with poems. That's 531 pages. I'd like for that to be 531 different people.

So it is an invitation to add and participate?

Absolutely. There is an ongoing open call for entries. The best way to contribute is to email beholdyoubelong@gmail.com, and we'll send you information about which pages still need poems.

Tell us more about the relationship between the “found objects” and holiness in your work. Where did this impulse come from?

Found objects are used to collage the poems as an homage to the idea that holiness can be found anywhere. I have had impactful spiritual experiences with scripture — that's true. But I also have memories that are just as potent involving bees, Katy Perry songs, and

Cheese Whiz. Collage is a subtle protest against the idea that membership has a monopoly on miracles, serendipity, beauty, peace, purpose, safety, and, of course, holiness.

Wow, that is so profound. I don't know about you, but I grew up with a lot of object lessons in church — some beautiful, others that felt harmful in hindsight. I still think about the jar of rocks and sand and priorities when I feel out of balance. I also think about the piece of Wonder Bread that represented chastity, passed around my seminary class, and how no one wanted to eat it afterward. Did you have any of those experiences, and what do you make of them now in light of this conversation about collage and found objects?

Symbolism is a fascinating way to communicate. There are really old paintings of the Virgin Mary that include white lilies because that flower represents purity. It's the same idea as adding the peach emoji to a text after a friend tells you they are trying on swimsuits. Making art gives us the chance to create our own meaning or renegotiate symbolism. Collage can be a way to reclaim the objects that were used in those Sunday school lessons.

What else do you enjoy besides art?

Lately I'm really loving something called ecstatic dance. It's like a wholesome rave. No shoes, no phones, and no talking while DJ plays earthy EDM and people dance just to be at home in their bodies.

What is the best way for people to find and support you?

Right now, the best way to connect with the movement is through the Instagram account [@beholdyoubelong](https://www.instagram.com/beholdyoubelong). I post updates about shows, workshops, available art, and community experiences. You can also email the movement at beholdyoubelong@gmail.com. 📧

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE EXPONENT II BLOG

The Holy Ghost as an Ambassador

MINDY FARMER

November 19, 2022

FOR MY BLOG POST THIS WEEK, I OFFER MY BAPTISMAL HOLY GHOST TALK to my children:

You were born with a light in you. We were all born with this light, often called a conscience, which guides us to make good choices. Our conscience is also called the Light of Christ and this means each one of us has a divine energy for good within us.

Every person you meet has this light and the capacity for good. This light helps us know what is good and true and loving. After we're baptized, we can receive the Gift of the Holy Ghost, which is like a super rechargeable battery for this light.

Sister Cheiko Okazaki said, "Strength comes from faith in the Savior's love and in the power of his atonement. If we trustingly put our hand in the Savior's, we can claim the promise of the sacramental prayer to always have his Spirit with us." This means that we don't have to make perfect choices. We just have to keep trying and promising to try and be like Jesus. When our choices don't bring us closer to Jesus, we can try again by trustingly putting our hand in the Savior's. The Holy Ghost will be there to help us recharge our light by reading the words of Jesus Christ, serving others, and seeking the good around us.

A Seat at the Table is Only the Start

BRYN KNOWLTON NEENOS

February 12, 2023

ABOUT TEN MINUTES INTO THE MEETING, I realized that our Relief Society president was sitting in the audience, not one woman had spoken yet (and wouldn't until about 25 minutes into the discussion), and yet the Elders Quorum president and Bishop kept pointing to and referencing the RS president in the audience as they explained the organizational shift of RS and EQ presidencies taking over more of the care of the adults of the ward through ministering while the Bishop focuses on the youth (read: young men, but that's for a different post).

The incongruence between the woman in the audience and the two men leading the discussion was striking. Here were two male leaders who had clearly had long conversations about this organizational evolution and had planned this discussion. There was a woman sitting in the audience who was being told she was an integral part of this plan, but who was, for the moment, a passive spectator. . .

I wonder what ideas might have emerged in the meeting if the RS President had led the meeting in partnership with the EQP and Bishop or even perhaps instead of them. I wonder what urgent insights were left unsaid because the person to say them didn't feel they could or should. Perhaps that person wasn't even present because they feel they don't get a seat.

Don't Let the Perfect (Words) be the Enemy of the Good

NICOLE SBITANI

January 27, 2023

IF YOU ARE INVOLVED IN ANY KIND OF EFFORT FOR GREATER HUMAN RIGHTS for people who are different from you, you are bound to screw up and say something insensitive or prejudiced or inappropriate. Language naturally evolves and things that you may have learned as inoffensive could have shifted in meaning since. Or it's possible they were always hurtful to the people most affected, but your bubble didn't include people from that group or those who were aware of their preferences. Or there could be ongoing debate from members of that group on whether certain terms are inclusive or not (see: "Latinx," "queer," "AAPI," "BIPOC," etc).

In a church that preaches repentance, there is too often an emphasis on perfection accompanied by an overwhelming fear of failure and judgment from others. So many of my Christian friends have told me, "I love how you speak up, BUT..." or "I love what you're doing on the blog, BUT..." followed by an exclamation along the lines of "I could never do something like that; I'm too afraid of getting called out" or "I'm too scared to post anything online or have anything recorded in case someone catches me saying the wrong thing."

I argue that giving into our own fears to the point that we don't try to advocate for others is failing to follow the example of the Savior, whose commitment to those on the margins was never conditional on the response the most powerful people in society had.

These are excerpts from the Exponent II blog. Visit the newly re-launched exponentii.org/blog for the full posts and more from our bloggers and guest writers.

Do We Believe in Sacred Groves?

KAYLEE MCELROY*

August 24, 2022

THE LAST FEW WEEKS, THE MOST SPIRITUAL PART OF CHURCH FOR ME HASN'T BEEN INSIDE THE CHURCH BUILDING. It's been spending the time between classes peeking through a weed-covered chain link and barbed wire fence, trying to get a glimpse of the drainage pond that sits on the church property. . . Frogs live in the pond. I can hear them calling, and they sound big. Cicadas buzz. Birds trill from the cattails. The pond supports an abundance of life, in all its chaotic messiness.

Inside the building, church is a cold, controlled environment. . . I'm tired of Sunday School answers, and I'm tired of trying to think of polite ways to push back against cultural assumptions. It's emotionally easier to just numbly sit there and let correlated catechism enter my ears.

And then there's that drainage pond at the church. I keep returning to the pond, in hopes of glimpsing some of the life I can hear (but not see) through the vine-wrapped fence. For me, this pond has become a metaphor for the feminine divine at church: She's wild and dangerous. She's fenced off for your own protection. She's neglected and unnoticed. Not everyone knows she is there. You have to intentionally go to her if you want her to be a part of your church experience. It's less frustrating to fill this part of my longings elsewhere.



* This excerpt by Kaylee McElroy was reprinted here due to a misattribution to Natasha Rogers' words in the Winter 2023 issue.

Our Mother-Goddess Gleaming Bright, A Hymn

SARAH J. CARTER

Our Mother-Goddess gleaming bright,
Shine on us with thy perfect light,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Thy bonds of mercy with us sing,
Thy bells of joyful glory ring,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Oh, praise Her! Alleluia!

Round, full to bursting with thy grace,
Wild dancing, shatter in thy praise,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Might sparks like fire within our veins,
Surrender to Thee celestial pain,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Oh, praise Her! Alleluia!

Thy blooms of comfort start to flower,
We drink deep the drenching shower,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Teach us the path to hopeful peace,
Where hands and tongues may find release,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Oh, praise Her! Alleluia!

A poet for thirty years, a mother for twenty-four, a midwife for ten years, a teacher for seven, Sarah J. Carter (she/her) has written poetry for *Wayfare Magazine*, *Bristlecone Firesides*, and a guild of game-loving scientists who share her DNA.

“THE LORD HAS DIRECTED”: PRECEDENT AND REVELATION IN PRIESTHOOD ORDINATION

IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS, WOMEN ARE NOT ORDAINED TO PRIESTHOOD OFFICES. The established pattern is assumed to be from God, and thus, must be overturned by God — if at all.

However, there is no explicit divine direction to deny priesthood offices on the basis of gender, and the temple endowment currently grants priesthood power to all genders. Here, I explore ten common explanations for women’s exclusion from priesthood offices, and argue that none of them adequately justify current gendered divisions.

1. MODERN LEADERS HAVE STATED THAT THERE HAS BEEN REVELATION THAT WOMEN AREN’T ELIGIBLE FOR ORDINATION TO PRIESTHOOD OFFICES.

In 2014, Dallin H. Oaks declared that “the Lord has directed that only men will be ordained to offices in the priesthood.”¹ Lacking scriptural citations, this statement was an implied revelatory answer to the Ordain Women movement. In response to a personal letter, however, Oaks did not claim that modern leaders had received a new revelation. Instead, he clarified the direction as being “what the Lord himself has done . . . Jesus chose only men to hold the offices of His priesthood,” he explained, and “Joseph Smith — personally instructed by the Lord and heavenly beings — did the same.”²

2. THE SCRIPTURES STATE THAT ONLY MEN CAN BE ORDAINED TO PRIESTHOOD OFFICES.

In fact, the standard works contain no explicit directions regarding women and priesthood offices, nor do they explicitly link priesthood power to maleness. However, the frequent use of generic masculine language leads to an implicit link between maleness and the priesthood. Such terminology — used in texts from the King James Bible to Latter-day scripture and hymns — obscures the role of women and creates an exhausting translation process. While General Authorities usually interpret this genericism to be “binding on, applying to, and inclusive of women,”³ they make an exception with priesthood offices.

This selective interpretation creates tensions within the texts. D&C 20:29, for example, calls “all men” to repent and be baptized; the section later uses male pronouns to expound on priesthood offices. D&C 42 requires missionaries to be ordained to preach and baptize, but sister missionaries aren’t ordained to perform baptisms. D&C 84 states that priesthood is necessary for salvation, but as priesthood offices currently function, women are unable to “[obtain] these two priesthoods.” This interpretation appears to create separate, gendered pathways to exaltation.

3. THE MODERN CHURCH HAS THE SAME ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AS THE “PRIMITIVE CHURCH,” AND JESUS CHRIST DID NOT ORDAIN WOMEN TO PRIESTHOOD OFFICES.

While we have no record of Christ ordaining a woman to a priesthood office, a lack of evidence does not necessarily constitute a prohibition. It’s vital to acknowledge that the majority of His teachings and actions were not recorded. We must also acknowledge that the Bible itself has been filtered through people with many different doctrinal and political goals over the centuries, often downplaying the role of women.

In the text we do have, however, evidence that Christ’s treatment of women was revolutionary. Following His ascension, there is clear historic evidence of women holding roles in the burgeoning structure alongside men. The New Testament mentions Junia, an exemplary apostle, and Phoebe, a well-regarded deacon. Over the ensuing centuries, evidence shows women ordained to priesthood offices as church organization continued to develop. The church could draw from the examples of Christ and these women, but has chosen not to do so.

Even if the early church was patriarchal, modern church structure is not solely determined by ancient church structure. Current priesthood offices resemble third-century Christianity more than they resemble the itinerant disciples of Christ’s time. While leaders rely on the sixth article of faith to make the case for male-only ordinations, the evidence for any organizational hierarchies in Christ’s day is “fragmentary and vague.”⁴ Though



ARTIST STATEMENT

Through Emma's anointed hands — clothed with the bond of charity, of perfectness and peace.

Joseph Smith initiated both women and men into the Anointed Quorum in Nauvoo 1842. Soon after, Emma Smith was anointed and ordained to the highest and holiest order of the priesthood. For just a few short years the quorum was taught the true order of prayer and participated in prayer circles together (47 women, 39 men).

My visual blessing harkens to the spirit of those prayer circles, an offering of sanctified bits — anointed by my hands. Assembled only for a moment to be photographed, ephemeral like a prayer.

Page Turner | @pageturnerstudios

the origins of the church may be in the pattern established by Christ, secular organization strategies are woven into the hierarchical structure. Shifts in church organization, then, are compatible with Christ's example.

4. JOSEPH SMITH DID NOT ORDAIN WOMEN TO PRIESTHOOD OFFICES.

Although there is no historical evidence that Joseph Smith ordained women to a modern-day priesthood office, there is substantial evidence that he envisioned an expansive priesthood role for women. When organizing the Relief Society, for example, Joseph Smith proclaimed that it "should move according to the ancient Priesthood" and that he was "going to make of this Society a kingdom of priests."⁵ The "Anointed Quorum," a leadership body comprised of those who had received the endowment, wasn't considered fully organized until Emma Smith was endowed and received "the fullness of the priesthood."⁶ In giving a lecture on priesthood and its privileges to the Relief Society, Joseph Smith taught that God sanctioned women's healing blessings by providing the requested healing.

As "the Restoration is an ongoing process,"⁷ the church could expand on Joseph Smith's intentions for women's integral priesthood role.

5. IF WOMEN WERE TO BE ORDAINED TO PRIESTHOOD OFFICES, THE CHURCH WOULD HAVE DONE SO ALREADY.

In response to questions like those of female ordination and praying to Heavenly Mother, some modern apostles have linked precedence with revelation. They view a pattern of absence as evidence of God's direction. They insist that they cannot change what God has declared; "they are not free to alter the divinely decreed pattern."⁸ Because of the divine origins, changes could only come through new revelation.

However, precedent is definitionally different from revelation. In a practice of ongoing restoration, revelation has overturned seemingly unchangeable precedence, as in the case of allowing Black women and men to obtain temple ordinances. Even the wording of those ordinances has evolved "under the Lord's direction and in answer to our prayers."⁹

A lack of scriptural precedent has been used as justification for policy adjustments; when asked whether women could pray in sacrament meeting, the First Presidency determined there was no scriptural prohibition against it. Although they could have continued in the precedent of restricting women, that precedent did not set the policy in stone. Lack of precedent for women's ordination is far from decisive.

6. CHURCH DOCTRINE IS ETERNAL, AND THE DOCTRINE IS THAT ONLY MEN WILL BE ORDAINED TO PRIESTHOOD OFFICES.

The priesthood itself is not unchanging,¹⁰ and priesthood doctrines are revealed as situations change and needs arise. Each dispensation has expanded priesthood access to a wider



group of people. Women's relationship to the priesthood has evolved since the Nauvoo era and has continued to evolve in recent decades. For example, in 1993, Boyd K. Packer asserted women held neither priesthood authority nor priesthood power.¹¹ Twenty years later, Oaks taught that women did have priesthood authority, but not priesthood power.¹² Since becoming prophet in 2018, Russell M. Nelson has repeatedly linked the temple endowment to priesthood power, emphasizing its accessibility to women. These evolutions show that women's exclusion from priesthood offices need not be eternal.

7. ACCESS TO PRIESTHOOD POWER FOR WOMEN IS DISTINCT FROM ORDAINATION TO PRIESTHOOD OFFICES.

Nelson's recent teachings assume that there is an important difference between priesthood power and ordination. But it is not clear what that difference is. While apostles have dismissed the idea of "free-floating authority" obtained through the temple endowment,¹³ this defense ignores the history of the Melchizedek Priesthood and the church-bestowed authority temple workers of all genders use to perform ordinances.

When speaking to women in 2019, Nelson reaffirmed that "from those covenants flows an endowment of His priesthood power upon you."¹⁴ When women are widowed, they have power to preside and bring priesthood blessings "into [their families] through [their] endowment and sealing in the temple."¹⁵ All endowed members are to study temple covenants with a promise that "spiritual doors will open."¹⁶

While recent leaders have claimed that women are not authorized to give healing blessings because they do not occupy priesthood offices, Wilford Woodruff stated that "any good, faithful sister who has received her endowments has the power to wash and anoint the sick."¹⁷ This leader-sanctioned practice stretched into the late twentieth century, demonstrated by a particularly touching account detailing Camilla Kimball's participation in a blessing of healing for her husband. Women in particular have been asked to "cultivate, use, and expand"¹⁸ their spiritual gifts and understand the personal importance of priesthood restoration.

Acknowledging the right that endowed women have "to draw liberally on the Savior's power,"¹⁹ Nelson did not present limitations to that power. Instead, he encouraged seeking the guidance of the Spirit while studying D&C 84 and 107, which include descriptions of priesthood offices, warning that others may seek to encourage doubt and limit women from calling on God's power.²⁰

8. PRIESTHOOD OFFICES BELONG EXCLUSIVELY TO A MALE DOMAIN; WOMEN HAVE THEIR OWN EXCLUSIVE RESPONSIBILITIES. THIS DIVISION BENEFITS WOMEN AND THE CHURCH COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE.

Resistance to change comes from believing that men and women have different, but equally important, roles. Women are often seen as more spiritual, with innate senses of love and faith. Although the idea of motherhood as the female complement to male priesthood has declined, gender essentialism is still used to establish distinct spheres.

This doctrinal demarcation relies on tenuous theology. Equality is an essential gospel tenet, exemplified by 2 Nephi, where "all are alike unto God" — regardless of gender. Regardless of its ideals, church culture promotes gender as an acceptable division.

This division harms both women and the church community. Patriarchal structures place men over women, from husbands presiding in the home to the upper echelons of leadership. Access to most leadership roles is established by gender assigned at birth, even though men are not inherently better leaders. Men are never under the authority of women, and it's hard to fathom how significantly an all-male priesthood structure affects our view of gender. This power imbalance

cannot be erased by professions of equal partnership and affirmations of women's leadership. Constant assurance of value is not evidence of interdependence. "Separate but equal" engenders discrimination, emphasizing differences between groups rather than similarities.

The borders of understanding priesthood need to be extended beyond men holding bureaucratic authority. Priesthood power is unfathomable and God-controlled, predicated on principles of righteousness — not maleness. While women are supposed to have equal access to priesthood blessings and priesthood power, current practices keep them from using it in traditional ways. Women are not given the same opportunities to gradually exercise priesthood that men are given; women "are not trained for it, not prepared for it, and have been trained to believe [themselves] not capable or worthy of it."²¹ Conversely, boys as young as eleven administer in noticeable ways. Women and girls are taught to not seek the privileges and honor that accompany priesthood duties. Gendered restrictions relegate women's service to the private sphere, depriving the church of their skills.

9. MEMBERS SHOULD ACCEPT CURRENT CHURCH DOCTRINE AND PRACTICES, RATHER THAN QUESTIONING THEM.

Apostles caution against asking questions. They claim that since God has already provided answers — and circumstances have not changed — there is no need to ask again. "Satan and his minions," Nelson warns, "will constantly contrive roadblocks to prevent you from understanding the spiritual gifts with which you have been and can be blessed. Unfortunately, some roadblocks may be the result of another's misbehavior."²²

However, church leaders themselves seem to have been a roadblock to understanding priesthood power. Changes may not have been revealed because the leaders and its members are unwilling to ask whether priesthood restrictions are God's will. We, as a church, must be committed to making deep changes to more fully integrate women. We must live in such a way to be worthy of the privileges and powers of the priesthood.

Relying on precedents and patterns in the scriptures limits the ability of the church to respond to changing circumstances through continuing revelation. The restored church itself began with a question; the Doctrine and Covenants is filled with guidance in answer to the questions of Joseph Smith and other early church members. God is pleased when we desire more knowledge. Church leaders encourage members to seek truth, teaching that "even as we trust God's prior answers, we need to be open to further personal revelation."²³

Expansions of gospel understanding have been specifically led by women, especially recent understanding of the priesthood. While there is caution regarding personal revelation, it's evident that God intends for women to exercise their priesthood power guided by study and the Spirit. As the ninth Article of Faith declares, "we believe that [God] will yet reveal many great and important things."

10. THERE IS NO GOOD REASON FOR WOMEN TO BE ORDAINED TO PRIESTHOOD OFFICES.

Setting aside the ways that separation of roles can lead to abuses of power, ordaining women to priesthood offices could benefit the church community.


Oaks states that “qualifying for exaltation is not a matter of asserting rights but a matter of fulfilling responsibilities.”²⁴ Limiting women prevents them from accomplishing their priesthood responsibilities. Regardless of parental status, men currently receive the responsibilities of priesthood and fatherhood, while women receive only those of motherhood. Men receive frequent instruction on their priesthood responsibilities, and are told that they “must never let the great powers of the holy priesthood of God lie dormant in [them].”²⁵ They are told of God’s desire to bring the priesthood into the home — to further the mission of the church and claim blessings for their families. The same should be true for women.

Endowed women can use priesthood power to expand on the care they already provide their communities, as “caring for others is the very essence of priesthood responsibility.”²⁶ The priesthood is “always used to serve, to bless, and to strengthen other people.”²⁷ Joseph Smith taught, “If you live up to your privileges, the angels cannot be restrained from being your associates.”²⁸

Opening the priesthood to all could facilitate spiritual priesthood understanding, strengthen marriages and families, and empower unmarried women. Women would have more access to leadership opportunities, potentially addressing previously overlooked concerns. An overhaul in the gendered hierarchy of the church could be used to improve racial and class equality and build a more diverse group of leaders. Because Melchizedek priesthood is the ultimate presiding authority in the home, and because that authority is distinct from ecclesiastical authority, anyone who has received the temple endowment can preside and exercise priesthood power within their families. Detaching priesthood power from gender roles could thus open doors to a long-overdue celebration of queer families and members.

Oaks cautioned that Satan may lead us to misunderstand the priesthood. To determine whether teachings were from God, “we should look to the results — ‘the fruits’ — of principles that are taught.”²⁹ Embracing and encouraging the use of women’s priesthood power bears overwhelmingly positive fruits.

“We need women who can discern those positions that may not be popular at all, but are right,”³⁰ Packer declared in 1978. I, among others, have discerned that the limitations placed on women are man-made policies, not God-given doctrines. Despite androcentricity, scriptures provide no prohibitions against female ordination. Despite a lack of records, ancient Christianity has evidence of prominent female leaders. Despite his limited time, Joseph Smith presented a plan that provided all with access to God’s power. Despite patriarchal, complementarian structures, men and women are alike unto God. Despite the barriers to understanding, endowed women have the right and responsibility to exercise their priesthood

power. Perhaps “to wait for a revelation on the subject is foolish until we have exhausted all the resources already placed at our disposal.”³¹ 

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FOR FURTHER READING, including an extensive and resource-rich bibliography, SCAN THE QR CODE OR visit: tinyurl.com/elcallsources



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CLEAN

On my cousin Autumn's murder

“After a cruel childhood, one must reinvent oneself. Then reimagine the world.”¹

— Mary Oliver

1.

Eight years old. Two pairs of bare feet stomped on the dock, stopped for a moment, and sprang — one girl diving perfectly, the other flopping on her belly awkwardly, feeling weighed down by the jealousy of not being allowed to wear a two-piece. Blonde hair bleached by the sun glistened in the water, as the orange sun dropped behind the blue horizon. Play, swim, play — the day was always nothing but play. Sometimes we fought, forgot, jumped on the trampoline, and fought again. But arguments over who won the game never lasted long — forgetting is easy when you are young. All the bare feet knew was play. After swimming for hours, we raced up the hill, toward our old home, for dinnertime, to eat frozen pizza and watermelon and play video games and play the way siblings and cousins do and, when the sun went down, said goodnight to Grandma and piled into the car. Sometimes on our drive home we would howl out the window — especially if there was a waxing moon — and then my brother and I would say goodnight to our cousin, and do it all over again the next day until August, when she had to go back home for school, and instead of three there would only be two.

Eighteen, now allowed to wear a bikini and even get a tattoo, and — if I knew the right people — drink Tequila and smoke cigarettes. I watched her, her hair now bleached by chemicals, sob over our dying grandmother and say sorry, begging and pleading for forgiveness. For what, I had no clue. We had picked her up from the airport and I almost didn't recognize her. I hadn't seen her in years. She had a tattoo of a strange-looking bee on her left forearm and was wearing tight pants. She asked to stop at the gas station on the way home and said, “You have to be 21 to buy cigarettes in Portland.” I had smoked a cigarette with her, and we drank some Tequila before heading to the nursing home. She was acting strange, in a way I didn't quite recognize because I hadn't seen it much before. I did not know that she was struggling with addiction, at least beyond weed and liquor. At the nursing home, on top of a hill that overlooks our beloved lake, I blamed the adults in the room for abandoning her, my half-sober eyes darting glances at

each one of them — even though I was of age and even though I was one of them now, or at least pretending to be.

Eighteen. The same bare feet stood on my brother's porch. I never thought I'd be — tan, muscular, curvy — her source of envy, but at the lake that day she kept saying how good she thought I looked. I wanted to take care of her, and I tried to make her a giant breakfast that she took only one or two bites out of. She was beautiful, and in a way I saw myself in her as when we were kids. She looked more like me than my own twin. It was the Fourth of July and we did sparklers in the yard, and later I watched her cry and smoke a cigarette. She told me many things that I've tucked away into the crevices of my mind. Her childhood was darker than I had thought. She thought her old home was possessed. I wonder now if one of our ancestors was protecting her — she said a “good spirit” had lived in her old home and helped her — or if it was all just the drugs. During our last conversation, she was far, far from sober, but her eyes grew lucid for a moment, and she began vehemently apologizing to me. I wasn't sure what she was apologizing for. I hadn't seen her since we were kids. I wondered why I was always jealous of her life, when in reality both of our childhoods hurt in different ways. I didn't know what to say, but I loved her in a new way.

2.

Two years later, the same blonde hair was found, dyed red, and the same bare feet were found stained red. The article read, “Blood splattered on the passenger door and clothes strewn on the pavement. A bare body in the grass — (mistaken for a boy), facedown in a trail of blood.” Facedown in a trail of blood. Summer had skipped Autumn that year, replaced by a rainy winter. I sank into the couch and put my face in my hands. She had asked me for help just months before. She said desperation might drive her to sell herself, commodify herself, as if she were nothing more than a toy for men to play with. But I didn't help, and this was a rite of passage as I became one of the adults to blame. Facedown in my bed, I wept.

Facedown in a park because some monster did who knows what, then decided to pull the trigger against the head of a girl who was once so good at diving and speaking Chinese and drawing and playing and learning, slowly, throughout each summer to be warm and give hugs and be a human because, then, somebody helped her. But as soon as she grew breasts and started doing drugs and tried to escape the hell that she lived in, nobody wondered where she was. My uncle told the papers, “It kills my heart that someone brutally took her out this way.” My heart, however, is still very much alive, and I



know that although she's dead, she was fading long before. I know this because she had looked me in the eye that summer our grandma died and I no longer saw a girl but a ghost. Her chance to be brought back to life was stripped from her because of some trigger-happy bastard who could have been stopped if somebody had cared. Maybe if I had cared.

I didn't go to her funeral. My family chose to have an open casket. My mom later told me that her feet looked the same as when she was a kid, that the only thing that was different was her head, and even that was still hers. I was angry, and I didn't like it that anybody could see her. She deserved freedom even in death, and to me, freedom begins with the body. I owed it to her not to look at her body. I didn't think she would have wanted that.

In late August, when the trees and leaves were not yet brown for fall but not fresh anymore from spring, just a week before I was to fly to Spain, I visited the natural cemetery in the Swan Mountains. Little trinkets scattered the now sunken spot that she was lowered into. We bought a six pack of Modelo to leave there. That's what she drank the last time I saw her. I poured out half of mine and used the remaining beer to weigh down the can for the flowers I brought her. I wondered if she knew or cared. How can a life, with all of its intricacies and depth, be so easily whittled down to some dirt, rocks, souvenirs, a few cans of beer, and three pairs of feet standing gloomily over it?

My mom looked sad, in the way moms look sad when they're talking and thinking about losing babies. Autumn had been like one of her babies. My mom is a mom to everyone, not just to her own. As virtuous as that fact is, it is a trait that invites heartache from everywhere: from people — young and old — from animals, from plants, from the heavens, from the gods themselves. Love does not carry the ease that some people think it does — at least not god-like love, not motherly grief. It's a kind of sad that I might know someday. But for now, I am too young and selfish. For now, I will board a plane to Europe and make something of myself, and try to forget. I will try to forget my old life and try to forget the unforgettable.

ARTIST STATEMENT

I Will Rise

An individual's spirituality is a complex concept that is constantly evolving. Through forms reminiscent of the inner workings of the body, this work explores both the outward expressions of spirituality visible to others and the powerful hidden truths that are unique to the individual. When we embrace all aspects of our spirituality, these coexisting ideas intertwine and work together in harmony, allowing us to rise to our full potential.

Jessica Downs
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3.

The waves splash against my ankles on the lake we used to share. A bird chirps, people pass, and none of them know the girl who looked so much like me that the librarians used to give my books to her in the summer by mistake. None of them know me either, and the ones who do know the girl who drank Tequila and said things she didn't mean and tried so hard to fit in and was so afraid; so, so afraid. They don't know that she

***SHE DESERVED FREEDOM EVEN
IN DEATH, AND TO ME, FREEDOM
BEGINS WITH THE BODY. I OWED
IT TO HER NOT TO LOOK AT
HER BODY. I DIDN'T THINK SHE
WOULD HAVE WANTED THAT.***

died, too. She died and her vessel is now a new creature. Still an imperfect creature, but a new one nonetheless. All living beings are entitled to new-creaturehood, and a deep, newly discovered part of me hopes with all of her strength that even the dead ones get that chance, too.

Now, as I gaze out at the water, one head of blonde hair and one pair of living bare feet tucked in it, I don't bang on the chest of God, imploring why He created such an evil world and such evil men and why we must suffer because of them. I've done enough of that in my life. No, my gaze just rests on the water, bluish gray, calm, still, reflecting the expanding sky. The water, "a mirror of roughness and honesty," reflects me, too, and the clouds touch my head and my head touches the clouds and I think of the countless times I've stood at the foot of this water and wondered about my life — my life, with all of its quirks and intricacies and heartbreak, the regrets and the mistakes that lie ahead, the rejection and the love and the fear that, one day, this body that used to house a little girl will someday house an old woman, and she will die — all of this, a part of my eternity. The spotless, fresh water silhouettes the frosty tips of the mountains I used to call mine, but I fear they are no longer mine because I moved away to start a new life. Nevertheless, the water and the mountains speak, and I listen, and all of the seemingly endless pain and polluted thoughts in my head — of confusion and hopelessness, blood and death, anger and guilt — grow hopeful, christened, clean. ☞

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NOTES

1. From *Blue Pastures* by Mary Oliver



GENTLE PARENTING

I AM A PARENT TO TWO YOUNG CHILDREN, SO NATURALLY I REVEL/WALLOW IN MY “REVENGE BEDTIME PROCRASTINATION” ROUTINE. It is usually my only “me” time and is hard to cut short even when I know the consequences. That said, most mornings I mourn my decisions. My oldest child, like me, can be grouchy in the morning before eating. There is screaming when I move slowly, and sometimes hitting and kicking. Their rage summons rage in me that I am rarely prepared for in these ungodly hours. I roll out of bed and shuffle toward the kitchen, often with them on my back.

When I’m in a better headspace (meeting rage with compassion and operating on enough sleep to wax philosophical — rare but still), I imagine God as a parent. My LDS upbringing made this somewhat easy for me to do: I was frequently reminded of my identity as one of God’s children, and prayed daily to “Heavenly Father.” Now that I’m a parent, my framework for God is colored by my everyday life. Like me, God feels love and compassion for Their children. God feels the burden of caretaking and modeling the behavior They want to see. God sympathizes with me, and is bored with me. God is doing a lot right now and could really use a vacation. God is long-suffering. My anger often summons God’s anger. Or so I imagine.

I am living a version of my future that a patriarch warned me about when I was a youth, but which I dismissed as a comical and disturbing impossibility: I am an inactive member of the Church with no plans to return. Together, my firmly ex-Mormon partner and I parent two children who are basically strangers to religion. The spiritual paradigm shifts that I’ve cycled through in recent years have been enlightening and draining, affirming and frightening. I pray with my family but rarely alone. I rarely read scriptures, but I’m trying

to model kindness. I miss my church community, but I feel anxious about inserting myself and my children into another. How do I reconcile my current daily life with my guilt-ridden, Mormon-identifying subconscious? In short, I don’t. I ignore this disconnect. Instead I find solace in Walt Whitman’s words: “I contain multitudes.” I find peace for now in the gray that I’ve

NOW THAT I’M A PARENT, MY FRAMEWORK FOR GOD IS COLORED BY MY EVERYDAY LIFE.

made of my former black-and-white thinking. I can be good and inactive.

I was raised with the Church as my personal foundation and as the core identity of my family. Singing hymns, hearing stories of my grandparents and great-grandparents’ conversion and faith — these were a common part of my youth. It was a comfort to have all the answers and to have the ritual of Sunday services and youth activities structure my week. As a parent outside of the Church now, I constantly feel inadequate to the task of encouraging my kids’ healthy spirituality and providing the community structure to support it (which I enjoyed as a child). What structure am I offering my children? What values? I feel pangs of panic rise in me when I realize we’ve watched TV or gone to the grocery store Sunday morning. Our Sabbath currently feels largely indistinct from the other days of the week. I acknowledge this and simultaneously feel fear, remorse, resolve to change, as well as the delicious ease of having no responsibilities or obligations to anyone. Even God. That last feeling is so satisfying in this season of my life that even thirty-plus years of social pressure to do otherwise is no match for it. “Me” time is scarce and sacred right now, and “me” doesn’t want another “to do.” This flies in the face of what I internalized as a member about how to be faithful and service-oriented; about how to be good, especially as a woman and mother. I think of my own mother and the cumulative years of her life she has spent in service to other people — her children, her husband, her mother, members of the ward and the community. Since retiring recently, she signed up for a weekly ukulele class. It is one of the rare things I’ve seen her do entirely for herself. I’m elated for her. When I consider how I might be harshly judged for saying no to doing more, I hope

ARTIST STATEMENT

Heavenly Mother Holds Me after a Long Day

On my hardest days I go to bed imagining Heavenly Mother helping me take off my dirty shoes and brushing my hair until I fall asleep (sometimes you just need your mom).

Eleanor Tribe
@eleanorasart

I'll be met with sympathy. I imagine I would, especially from a Heavenly Mother.

I was not the first of my parents' children to step away from the church (I know myself and I could never have been the first). Several of my siblings left in short order, all with their own catalyst and convictions. Meanwhile I quietly shared many of the beliefs of my siblings, but had no momentum to leave then. I was an early morning seminary teacher at that time, struggling to align my personal beliefs with the church-issued instruction manuals. I modified lessons that did not resonate with me, and uneasily taught things to young people that I now regret. Because I stayed as my siblings left, I became a sounding board for the concerns of my parents, especially my mother. I hurt for my family, all while resenting the culture of fear that created our distance and my own complicated role as both comforter and commiserator. The impossible task of comforting my heartbroken mother, while being adequately vague about my own shifting beliefs so as not to alarm her, was enough to give me palpitations. When my husband admitted to me around this time that he had no desire to attend church anymore, I finally felt ready to seek help via counseling services.

My counselor had a strong religious background and within minutes I felt seen and understood by her. At the end of our first session she asked, "What do you think would make you happy?" I had an immediate, gut response: "It would make me happy for my parents to be happy." She was not pleased. "The question was what would make *you* happy," she probed again, and for the life of me I could not come up with anything beyond that. To me, this was a reasonable answer. It resonated with how I understood my family, how I understood God. This was the way I knew how to be good. If my parents were happy, I would be happy in turn. Mortal, heavenly — with either set of parents, I felt the objective was clear. To be asked about my preferences seemed at best, irrelevant; at worst, sinful.

Several years later I told my sister (who left the Church first and navigated the fallout with amazing generosity and grace) about my counseling experience as we rode the subway in NYC. She laughed, and then we laughed loudly together. It was healing to tell her and be instantly understood. My sister would never have centered her happiness on "having my parents be happy." I marveled at how two people with the same parents from the same faith could hold such different world views. As foreign as that felt to me, I saw how right and necessary answering for yourself is, how in line with God's plan. To sit with her and laugh as we hurtled forward in the darkness to our chosen destination added to the poetry of it all and gave me some much-needed levity. At the time, I was facing what seemed like a lose-lose decision: take a break from church and get a breather from the anxiety/dread/rage I felt as a self-described "fringe Mormon" and devastate my parents, or stay and continue the slog through said anxiety/dread/rage.

Clearly, I chose the former. I was one of many struggling members that took the global pandemic as an opportunity to slip out the proverbial back doors of the chapel. In some ways, I regret how I left by not including my parents more in my exit. On the other hand, it felt like communicating every step of my leaving would only be more painful for them. I wish I

could safely talk about my faith and doubts with my parents, but the distance has been necessary and freeing. I imagine God is aware of the necessity of this type of distance for children to thrive. God encourages this healthy distance intentionally in order to nurture my personal growth. God will meet me where I am.

Having created some distance between myself and the Church, between myself and the expectations of others, I'm attuned to my own desires in a way that feels true to a sense of divine self-worth. My counselor has encouraged my husband and me to define our personal values and discuss the values foundational for our family. To be so involved in defining our family values rather than claiming those prescribed by others was almost embarrassingly exciting to me. I want to model personal conviction and trusting one's own intuition to my children. I have hope that God, as an understanding parent, sees goodness in my effort and sincerity, despite my leaving the Church and taking my children with me.


My parents and I have settled into an uneasy silence when it comes to my family's inactivity. I know they are afraid for me and constantly plead with God on my behalf. I know my mother entreats my late grandmother for help from heaven. I know they worry for their grandchildren's salvation, and fear that our family's afterlife will include "empty chairs" as the colloquialism goes. I can't ease their fears, and I'm coming to terms with the fact that that's not my responsibility. I feel angry at the impossible paradox set up for so many families of faith — to teach children obedience in tandem with individual agency, while threatening an eternity without each other when someone doesn't fall in line. I'm angry at my parents' sorrow — that they can't enjoy friendships with their adult children in the same way that so many other parents can, those who aren't burdened with resentment about their children's seemingly rebellious choices. I'm angry at not feeling safe to be fully known by them, when I want to be. I know that God knows me and has empathy for my anger. God wants me to feel free to share my feelings. God needs some alone time to manage *Their* emotions. God allows distance between us so I have space to sort out my feelings. God can handle my anger and my distance. God can handle my parents' anger and their fear.

Like so many parents before me, including my parents, I'm doing my best. The state of the world today and the endless, grinding 24-hour news cycle of horrors, on top of my spiritual evolution, have worn me down mercilessly. I feel feral with regard to keeping my children safe, healthy, and reasonably happy. As a stereotypical millennial, I've developed a healthy distrust of institutions that claim moral authority. I feel a strong instinct to protect my children from any institution (not just the Church) that would threaten their claim to their intuition, happiness, or freedom to define themselves and their own values. Like any good parent, I want my children to avoid the pain and challenges that I've experienced. I want no part of perpetuating trauma.

Still I know this is the same motivation my parents had and have, as did their parents before them, and so on. There is trauma I'm passing on that I am laughably ignorant of. I imagine God realizing this too. God knows that somehow

They will fail their children. God needs Their motivations to be known and understood. God wants to be known and to spend quality time with me. God subscribes to the gentle parenting model. God tells me I am safe here, right where I am. God crouches down low to get on my level and coaches me through the intake of breath and slow exhale.

I work with my oldest child to model this breathing technique, a tool for helping her manage her difficult feelings. Whether she is in the throes of a meltdown or her mood is stable, often she has no bandwidth or interest in hearing or trying to understand what I'm offering her. I feel frustration and sadness well up in me, because this is one of the few tools I know to offer her, and if she won't accept it, I feel powerless to help. I sit nearby her and weep. Parenting is so, so hard. In my role as a parent, I remember that I've felt called to unconditional love — full stop. While my patience is tested, I remember my child's ability to emote in front of me without fear or inhibition is a credit to me. I breathe in deeply and acknowledge this hard won truth. My child feels safe to share their true feelings with me. I let them know they are safe and I am nearby — we will get through this hard moment together.

God waits nearby for me to be ready to receive love. God sees me as a blessing. God sees parenting me as one of the most humbling and instructive experiences they could undertake. God sees that I am of them, but entirely apart from them. I am God's, and God's work is to help me claim ownership of myself. 

Lauren Toiaivao Bost (she/her) is a domestic laborer based in Richmond, Virginia.

Reluctant, Radiant

HEIDI NAYLOR

Home teacher walks into our hospital room at dawn
and lays hands on my head, hands on top of your hands

Window of cold glass and a dry, drifting wind
first Tuesday in October

Let my back ache with labor
Let my head throb hotly
Let my leg, numb, slip from the bed
like it wants to walk off
large, unfamiliar, and bare

I can't recall the words of your blessing, but
Let me feel the cradle-press of your fingers
Let my focus find your face
young and tanned from summer work

Our firstborn baby, years too early and six days late
Let the doctor tug at him with tongs
Let the doctor fall backwards onto the floor
have I dreamed this? dim memory folded into family lore

Poor little baby, olive-skinned, calm . . . what can we give him?
Let's kiss on his plum pretty features
Let's make him our tentative home
Let's renew our immature love

The grip of the pincers has bruised his temples
Let that hot brand seal a wish
Let that hot brand mark him for angel care

Evening outside, liquid cool, a silver sky
coyote chases a rabbit from the brush
and sings at the moon

Heidi Naylor is a writer and teacher in Boise, Idaho. More: heidinaylor.net

WORKING MOM

MY SECOND DAUGHTER HAS WANTED TO MAKE A HOT CHOCOLATE STAND FOR THE PAST SIX WEEKS. She's been on Christmas break for seven days, and we've talked about it. I even bought some stencils for her to make signs, but she goes back to school the day after tomorrow and still it hasn't happened. Whenever I can't seem to get something done, like helping my 10-year-old gather what she needs for her hot chocolate stand, I blame it on my working mom status.

I tell myself, "I'd be able to get this done for her if I wasn't working so much." And while that may very well be true, who's to say if I were a stay-at-home-mom (SAHM) — an acronym that bothers me — I would have had any more time or wherewithal to help her with the hot chocolate stand than I do now?

I am the youngest of six children born to a SAHM. I came along as a pleasant surprise seven years after the fifth was born. Growing up, the only women I ever knew about in my family who actually worked "outside the home" were my Aunt Joyce and a first cousin. I later learned my aunt walked away from her life as a SAHM with seven children on a dairy ranch in Star Valley, Wyoming, to become a teacher and later lived with a German man a few years younger than her. I still remember my shock at seeing a coffee pot in her small Salt Lake City kitchen apartment. My cousin ran drug and alcohol abuse centers for adolescents with her then-husband. Oddly enough, she also got divorced, had seven children, and later married a man 17 years younger than herself.

WHO'S TO SAY IF I WERE A STAY-AT-HOME-MOM (SAHM) — AN ACRONYM THAT BOTHERS ME — I WOULD HAVE HAD ANY MORE TIME OR WHEREWITHAL TO HELP HER WITH THE HOT CHOCOLATE STAND THAN I DO NOW?

My sister also works. She is a schoolteacher and has two young sons she has had to leave with sitters while her husband recovered from some health issues. But other than that, most of my cousins and aunts on both sides of my family, as well as ward members in my home ward in northern California, have

ARTIST STATEMENT

The Myth of Complete Balance

If balance is the thing we aim to achieve, then we will always be left wanting. In this work, the woman cranes her neck upward in an entirely uncomfortable looking position, with her main focus and drive directly locked at the golden idol baby balanced precariously on her forehead. With her blue star-speckled skin she becomes complementary background noise to the bright shining baby she's fixated on. She has attained the ever elusive goal of balance, stillness, perfection. But at what cost? She isn't free to move around because if she does the baby will fall.

While balance does happen, I find in my own life, it is fleeting and temporary at best, leaving a sense of failure and disillusionment as I break my own neck trying to place the pieces of my life back together in a way that won't fall off the scales. It's the work between the balance; the picking up and putting down that leads to what I have found rewarding and sustainable. Just as in this work, complete balance is for mythical beings, not human ones.

Mya Cluff
myacluff.com | @myacluffstudio



been SAHMs. Growing up, I absorbed the message that the best thing I could do with my life was be a mother and stay at home with my children, so I switched my high school dream from studying psychiatry to social work when I started at Ricks College because it was better suited to the role of being a good mother.

Fast forward twenty years and here I am, currently the CEO and manager of a real estate development and

I AM THE CEO IN A MALE-DOMINATED INDUSTRY AND HAVE FIVE CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 12.

investment company in south Florida. I had to totally take over my husband's business due to unforeseen circumstances in 2020 (which is a story in and of itself). We work together, but I am the face and name of the business and have had lots and LOTS of growing pains being in this position: phone calls with lenders, Zoom calls where I am the only woman present, and negotiations where I had to present numbers I wasn't even fully able to understand.

So, I am the CEO in a male-dominated industry and have five children under the age of 12. We've had some partners who introduce me as such and people marvel at how I "do it all." They don't know about the failed hot chocolate stand or about my eldest daughter's F in civics while I was on a business trip or how child #4, who is in kindergarten NEVER, EVER has turned in his homework. I really do not "do it all" and wish I would stop trying.

I have mostly made peace with being a working mom. I finally hired a babysitter about eighteen months ago to collect the children from school, feed them, drop them at math tutoring, and run errands. It took me a long time to hire someone, mostly because I had to give up my "dream" of making stay at home motherhood my career.

I still wonder if I'm doing the right thing and will admit that I even once Googled, "What is best for children, working mom or SAHM?" I was led to a wonderful research article that basically said if the mother is happy, the children are happy.

So, am I happy being a working mom?

I'm honestly insanely envious of my neighbors and friends at church who do not have to work outside the home, and I often wonder what those with one or two children do with their time. I have had to work hard at not letting it bother me, but instead be grateful that I have the energy that I do and a mother-in-law who lives three minutes away and calls my children her own and cares for them, too.

My mother-in-law is Haitian and grew up in a culture where the extended family, or a "restavek" (a young girl from the countryside), did the house work and cared for the children, whereas women with a college education, like myself, were expected to go to work.

In contrast, a few years back, after getting my real estate license shortly after my fourth baby was born, I remember my husband bragging to my professional stay-at-home-mother, who was visiting, that her daughter was a bonafide real estate agent. My mom was NOT happy and said, rather emphatically, "She should be with her children!!"

I think it would be easier if I had chosen this career and really had a passion for it. It feels so first world, white privilege to even say that, though. While traveling before I was married, I met many working moms who left their children in the Philippines to come work in Taiwanese factories or moms who arose at 4 a.m. to prepare pork and noodles at the breakfast market in Thailand every day. I'm certain they never once stopped to ask themselves if they liked their job. It was a matter of survival and desire to better their children's lives. I guess that's why I do it; it's a kind of survival.

I have moments where I like the time away from home and the kids, and then I feel guilty when I'm with all five children in the car after work or on the weekends and they're all talking and/or whining to me at once, and two of them are hitting each other, and the other two are yelling while the three-year-old won't buckle his car seat, and I think, "Maybe it's just all hard" — staying home with the children and making them and housework your career (whether by choice or circumstances), or working away from home and kids (whether by choice or circumstances). Either way, life as a mom is not easy and we're all just doing the best that we can.

So here I am, defying my culture and being a working mom. Even if it means not always being around to help with a hot chocolate stand, I hope my children, especially my two oldest girls, will see that there's no wrong way to have a family and to be a mom. 🙏

Janalie C. Bingham Joseph is the CEO of a real estate investment company in South Florida, and a mom to five children.

EVERY NEEDFUL THING

EDITED BY MELISSA WEI-TSING INOUE & KATE HOLBROOK

REVIEWED BY YNNA PADILLA

With its title sourced from Section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants, *Every Needful Thing* is a collection of essays from accomplished women in the fields of science, medicine, mathematics, politics and government, business, psychology, and law who have dared to ask questions which shook their faith while contributing to their chosen fields and ultimately bettering the world. The list of the contributors and their brief resumes at the beginning of this collection is inspiration alone. In addition to an array of professions, *Every Needful Thing: Essays on the Life of the Mind and Heart* (BYU Maxfield Institute) includes Asian, Pacific Islander, Black, and Indigenous voices.

This collection opens with an essay from Astrid S. Tuminez, which felt like a gentle nudge reassuring me, “See, someone like you is in here too.” Dr. Tuminez was raised in the Philippines, where I was also born and emigrated from at the age of two. *Every Needful*

Thing is organized into five parts, with titles that originate from different verses of D&C 88, but read like the ultimate FAQ readers wrestle with on a regular basis: How do I know God is real? How can I believe in science and Creation? How do I rationalize the messy history of the Church with what I currently believe politically, socially, and spiritually? The world is such an ugly place — where is God amidst the suffering? Why do I see such few representations of myself in the Church and its leadership?

The answers to these questions are answered in both satisfying and unsatisfying ways, but even when I found myself arguing with a rationale, it would only take a few pages for the writer to acknowledge their own privilege and/or limitations.

This collection is timely and relevant. While I grimace at most recently-produced art which references the COVID-19 pandemic, the essays acknowledging this significant historical event do so sensitively and with beautiful, specific insight. Lisa Grow is a lawyer whose research focuses on the intersection between law and disasters. Grow’s essay identifies the disaster of the pandemic and openly discusses the frustration she experienced witnessing members of the church questioning and contradicting public health measures while citing conspiracy theories to back their claims, a microcosm of the growing division in the country of how to handle and combat the virus. Humans attribute disasters such as pandemics and even more commonly earthquakes and fires as acts of God. Grow argues that she sees God amidst disaster in the acts of human kindness, compassion, and resilience.

In contrast, the majority of the essays consider ‘evergreen’ topics. I

EVERY NEEDFUL THING... [READS] LIKE THE ULTIMATE FAQ READERS WRESTLE WITH ON A REGULAR BASIS...

was particularly moved by the writing of women in the fields of science and medicine and their own wrestling with their vast understanding of the earth, biology, and the human body and God’s role in the creation of the universe. As Dr. Dyra N. Krakos writes, “My faith is a complex system. The fragile web of answers from parents, teachers, and Church leaders that sustained my childhood faith could not withstand the shaking of my questions as I grew. As I learned to think critically, I had to build a new system with redundant mechanisms for nurturing faith and spiritual growth in the face of new information and more complex questions. My spiritual identity was ground down and rebuilt again and again. My understanding comes in agonizing incremental steps.”

I look forward to the countless quotes that will be taken from this collection to supplement talks and lessons in the church. I feel a surge of hope seeing this book on my shelf and knowing another volume of completely feminist LDS voices exists for future generations to encourage and maybe answer the deepest and most important questions of their hearts. 📖

Ynna Padilla is a speech-language pathologist who enjoys reading novels, pilates, and surfing.



NOT GIVING MY SON THE PRIESTHOOD

IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS, ALL BOYS ADVANCE IN THE PRIESTHOOD ON THE FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR THEY TURN TWELVE, FOURTEEN, AND SIXTEEN. It's usually an important step in their lives, the ordination done (if possible) by their fathers, adding a bit of patriarchal connection to the act.

My father was quite proud to ordain me as I went through the different offices in the Priesthood. I don't remember much about those occasions; only that those advancements were less a choice than an expectation for a boy's life, much like being in the Boy Scouts. I do know that my father taught me that the Priesthood was a tool for service. He instilled in me that I should use it to bless others, without hesitation or self-interest in how it manifests. My mother's contribution was a deep knowledge that the Priesthood must never be used as an excuse to exert authority over others, something she herself had often experienced.

I have five children, four of whom have or are going through the Young Men's program. The oldest were ordained by their grandfather (they felt more connected to him than to me, as I didn't live near them at the time). But now, with my youngest son about to be ordained this year, the opportunity to ordain is lost. Future generations will not see my name in their Priesthood lineage with pride. My place in the Patriarchal orders of the Priesthood has been suspended, likely never to be reinstated. I am a transgender woman, one who has set aside her temple recommend and authorization to exercise the Priesthood by embracing who she is, medically and socially.

I knew it was coming, my youngest son's ordination. I knew this was one of the major family events in the Church that I had willfully given up, knew how it would look to others as a reminder that I was abandoning the faith and failing my family. It was one of the many parts of the Church I would be missing, including seeing my children marry in the temple if they chose to do so. But even when you have prepared yourself for it, when those times come, feelings of loss arise.¹

The first Sabbath of the year was quite like any other winter day, with rain verging on the possibility of snow. We all squeezed into our pew — the kids stuck to their electronics, me wondering if it would be another day feeling cramped in the large chapel full of people. Among the long list of ordinations to be affirmed by the congregation, my youngest's name was called. He got to his feet, as requested, a little unsure of himself as most are the first time they are called to stand to be recognized. He didn't think to also raise his hand in affirmation, which (when I was his age) was used as a way to break the

tension of having so many eyes on you. An appointment for the actual ordination was set for later in the day.

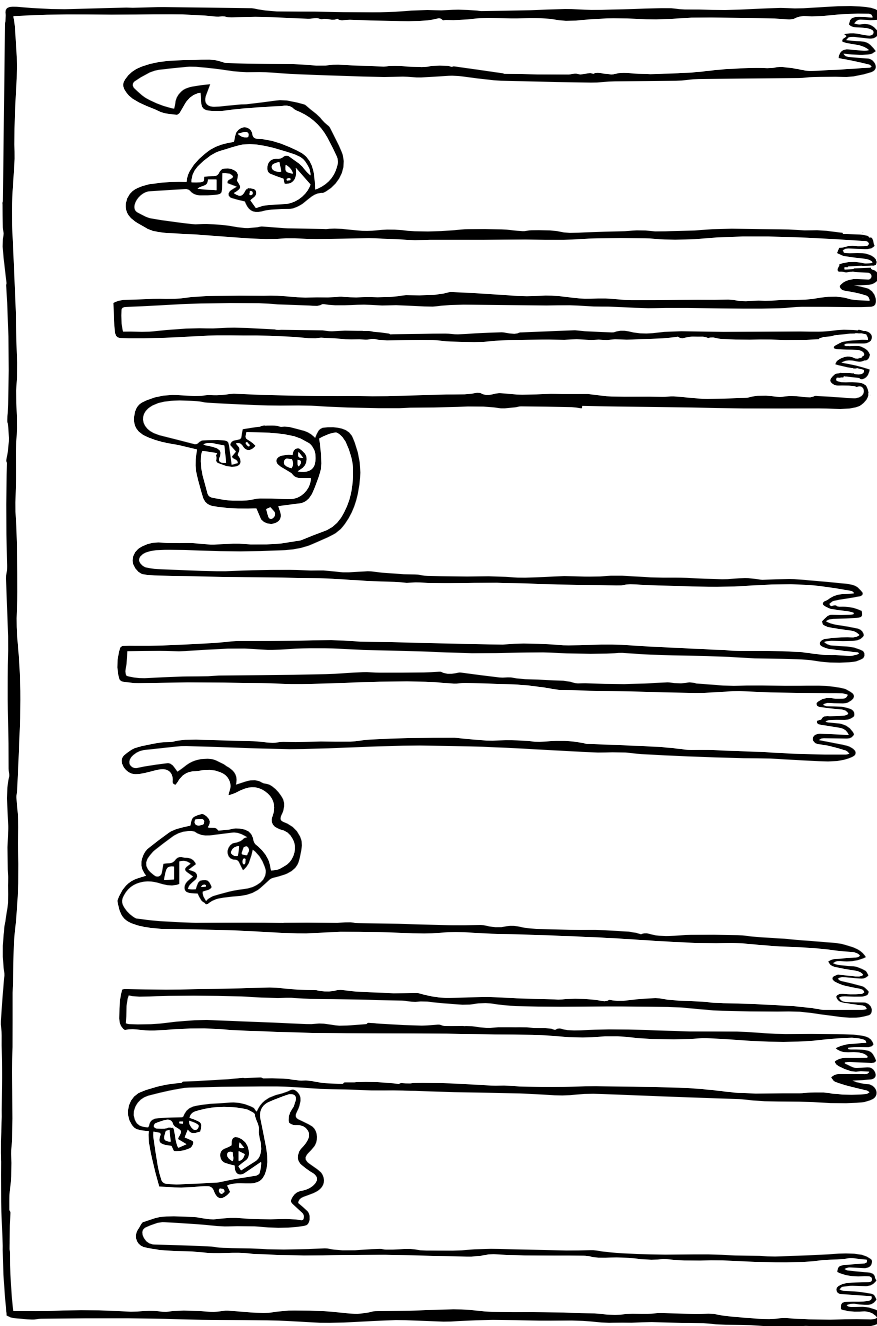
That afternoon, with the rain looking more like snow but immediately melting on contact with the solidity of the earth,

MY PLACE IN THE PATRIARCHAL ORDERS OF THE PRIESTHOOD HAS BEEN SUSPENDED, LIKELY NEVER TO BE REINSTATED. I AM A TRANSGENDER WOMAN, ONE WHO HAS SET ASIDE HER TEMPLE RECOMMEND AND AUTHORIZATION TO EXERCISE THE PRIESTHOOD BY EMBRACING WHO SHE IS, MEDICALLY AND SOCIALLY.

we arrived for our scheduled time. We waited as patiently as possible in the hard folding chairs, the quiet of the nearly empty church building and the isolation of our disjointed family seeping into us. It was just the five of us — three kids and two parents. For most families, it's a time for extended family to attend and witness what is considered to be a major step in a young man's progression. But we had no family nearby. Those who were distant were not very interested and a fair number had long passed from this life.

The family before ours started filing out of the room, looking joyful. Some exchanged greetings with us as they passed. This family was very much in the vein of a large extended family, despite the loss of the father to cancer the previous year. Family, grandparents, cousins — as many as they could gather were there.

After seeing off the previous family, the Bishop then invited us into his office. It was the usual Mormon chapel classroom size, with chairs around the perimeter and a desk at one end. My second youngest son decided the whiteboards were there to be drawn upon and immediately set to it. Everyone else found chairs and waited. My youngest had found bubble gum to chew at some point and was busy practicing small bubbles. He was directed to the solitary chair in the middle of the room.



"Reaching For Heaven" from The Prayerseries By Riley | theurim.com/riley | [@prayerseriesbyriley](https://twitter.com/prayerseriesbyriley)

The Bishop made an attempt at light conversation, taking the chance to ask about the two Priesthoods to help draw the boy out.

It was a rather simple ordination, using the words specifically written in the Doctrine and Covenants for conferring on him the Aaronic Priesthood and ordaining him to be a Deacon. The bishop then gave some small blessings and encouragement as directed by the Holy Spirit. My young son continued his bubble blowing throughout.

I couldn't concentrate on the blessing given at the time. Though I had tried to prepare myself for this event, I was stuck wondering if I should feel more about not even being part of the circle of men performing the ordination. Should I be feeling regret? But there was nothing, no pride, no wishing things were different for me. Yes, there was the usual irritation that his two mothers could not be part of the circle and that his sister would never be so ordained, but it really was as simple as what my parents had taught me: that for the power of the Priesthood, who used it truly did not matter.



ARTIST STATEMENT

Restraint

This piece is part of a line of questioning regarding how we relate with and create borders around our relationship with others and the world. I was curious about how we systematically impose order over the external parts of our life in an attempt to make sense of or find meaning in what feels uncontrollable. Using symbols from both the nature and man-made settings, I am interested in creating a comparison between the wild and the domestic.

Janessa Lewis

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Afterward, there were handshakes from those involved in the ordination, and the Bishop leaned down to let the new deacon know that this was a good time to hug his mother. Once he'd done that, there was a hesitant, "... and Alma."

I don't entirely blame him for the hesitation. He has not really worked out the preferred relationships involved, since I am no longer the boy's father, but one of his two mothers, an almost unheard of family arrangement in the Church. I leaned into my son's perfunctory hug, holding him a couple seconds longer to try and silently convey all I was and was not feeling into him. It was done.

None of this has affected either my or my son's feelings about being ordained. It's something he has chosen to do, knowing that it wouldn't be required of him if he didn't want to, just the next step and the addition of new responsibility in the Church. He'll be working with his older brother and other deacons in passing the Sacrament, enjoying the first few times but probably falling into bored necessity as the months wear on, just as untold numbers of deacons have over the decades.

For me, the Church continues to be the place where I need to be, even if there are many who'd prefer I no longer

participate. I will continue to teach and support my children as they grow and learn and find what spirituality and/or religion works for them. I can hope they find one similar to what I have, but the important part is for them to build their own house of faith, their own expressions of how they interact (or not) with the divine.

And we will continue to journey onward, having faith we will be guided in the paths that are right for our own growth. Mine will involve giving my newly ordained son a Mother's Blessing and talking of its long history in the Church. I will try and teach him the same lessons my parents taught me, and continue doing what I can to make him know he is loved. 

Alma Frances Pellett is a software developer and stay-at-home mom currently living in American Fork, Utah.

NOTES

1. See also the essay by Alma Frances Pellett, "Letting Go of My Holy Place," in the Winter 2023 issue of *Exponent II*

O LADY, SPEAK AGAIN BY DAYNA PATTERSON

REVIEWED BY RACHEL RUECKERT

Illustrious poet and former *Exponent II* Poetry Editor Dayna Patterson has done it again. Her new poetry collection, *O Lady, Speak Again* (Signature Books, 2023), is everything it promises to be and more — a witchy, spell-soaked collection exploring female characters from Shakespeare’s plays with a refreshing, feminist twist. The poems grapple with women’s roles in Shakespeare and also in Mormon culture.

I’m an unabashed Patterson fan and have been since I first encountered her chapbook *Titania in Yellow*, which *O Lady, Speak Again* includes and expands upon. My first experience reading Patterson demanded reading the poems aloud for the sheer fun of it — she is an ingenious wordsmith, with a poem in this volume called “How to Give Birth to Words” (93). When I finished reading that first chapbook, with mouth-drop awe and a “do it again” impulse that prompted me to start rereading immediately after finishing the book, I

knew I would never again miss anything Patterson ever wrote.

O Lady, Speak Again had the exact, delightful effect on me. It’s vivid and whimsical, cutting yet delicious. This volume is for a literary general audience (Patterson has an impressive resumé and publishing records for her poems) — but it is also a feat and triumph for our community. Patterson places Shakespeare alongside quotes by church leaders, her own family members, and heralded writers such as Carol Lynn Pearson, Terry Tempest Williams, Rebekah Orton, Suzanne Elizabeth Howe, and others. It’s a party with many of the coolest people, real and fictional, in attendance.

I’m especially struck by Patterson’s compelling, revisionist lens. In “And Why Not Change the Story?” the speaker calls out Shakespeare as being a revisionist himself, changing his source material — such as changing Juliet’s age unnecessarily from 16 to 13, “just shy of a sonnet” (13). In another poem centering Juliet, she writes: “I want to rage at your ‘creator’ — dear puppet, let’s be honest, he’s pulled your strings along ... O, Patriarchy. For my daughter’s sake, for every girl’s sake, I want to cut these strings” (73).

“In this Version” invites us to imagine Ophelia going to a women’s college to study botany (8). Later in the collection, we go even further with this resurrection, with Ophelia renaming herself “Lia — bearer of news, of good news,” who is allowed to grow old (73). Patterson gives us new glimpses and beautiful renderings of Miranda, Cordelia, Jessica, Hermione, Perdita, Viola, Lady Macbeth, Titania, Paulina, and even Juliet’s Nurse. Through this volume, Patterson bids these women — and all women — to speak up, to speak again. “Our hands stained with

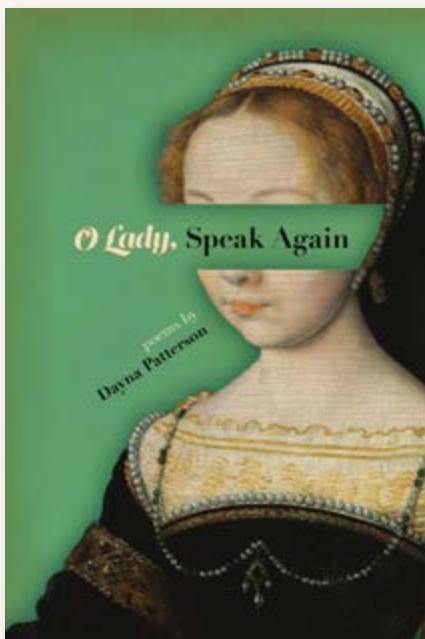
**THE POEMS
GRAPPLE WITH
WOMEN’S ROLES
IN SHAKESPEARE
AND ALSO IN
MORMON CULTURE.**

**... I’M ESPECIALLY
STRUCK BY PATER-
SON’S COMPELLING,
REVISIONIST LENS.**

/ yes.” (104). It feels like an invitation as well as an invocation. She calls us into the “O” of tragedy, to examine the faith of our fathers, to listen hard to the experiences of polygamy, and to also feel the power of female relationships and the “wildflowers wicking” our ankles (72).

This collection is personal and urgent, with many “self-portraits” and deep investigations of past and selfhood. Here, the speaker journeys from her days as a devout Mormon girl, “the sin of sex distant as Saturn with its chastity belt” (17), to a missionary offering up celibacy as a solution to queer couples as if to say “cut without spilling blood” (35), until the speaker is then a softened woman who peels “away old faith like sunburnt skin” (36).

Patterson dedicates this book to “fire-speakers” in her life. She herself is a fire-speaker of truth, a voice that wakes me up and puts a skip in my step. These poems are feminist magic — playful, yet powerful and poignant — and I am left spellbound. 📖



WAYFINDING BETWEEN WORLDS

DEAR H. & S.,

Hung high on your grandparents' living room wall is a grainy photograph taken 36 years ago in Vietnam, the origin of one of the worlds I inhabit. Standing in a sunny courtyard with checkered tile in front of a blossoming tree are a young, thin, and pleasant Ông Ngoại (my father) and Bà Ngoại (my mother), a confident eleven-year-old Cậu Hai (my oldest brother), a cautious six-year-old Cậu Ba (my second brother), and — nervously and cautiously hiding behind Cậu Ba — a three-year-old girl: me. Later that night, we boarded boats that would take us to a refugee camp on the Bidong Island of Malaysia.

Chronologically, the next family photo we have is staged in front of white walls adorned with peeling posters and photos, our dwelling at the second refugee camp in the Philippines. We waited there between fleeing Vietnam and arriving in Houston. I'm nearly a year older and grinning wide, proudly showing my two rotted front teeth. Other than looking in different directions, Cậu Hai and Cậu Ba appear about the same as in the first photo, ordered in descending height next to Bà Ngoại. Ông Ngoại is not in the photo; he was unable to leave Vietnam for another six years.

When people meet me — whether in college or graduate school, at work, church, or elsewhere — they do not see these pictures. They can only see the world in which I meet them. But I've never had the luxury of living in a single world, with singular meanings and common norms.

Instead, I've spent my life striving to make sense of different yet simultaneous ideas of right and wrong, wise and wasteful. I am a Vietnamese immigrant, the product of a Tiger Mother upbringing and Buddhist cultural traditions that you see most frequently in the fruit-laden altar below heavily airbrushed photos of ancestors on the wall when you visit my parents. And because Ông Ngoại couldn't reach the escape boat in time, I am imprinted with the vigilance and stress from my effectively single mother living in poverty in a foreign country.

I am also an American, raised in Houston. Perhaps because single motherhood made Bà Ngoại more receptive to helpful Vietnamese-speaking missionaries, I was steeped in LDS teachings. I spent many weekends with my “white LDS parents” from whom I learned frequent and explicitly spoken “I love you’s”, physical affection, and an approach to family life with much more emphasis on children's preferences and interests. When I left Houston after graduating college, the only one of my siblings to leave, I became a resident of yet more worlds — Ivy League social circles and renowned

medical institutions — that remain as foreign to Ông Ngoại and Bà Ngoại as the United States was to them when they decided we would flee.

Living virtually alone in the intersection of these worlds has been, and continues to be, real work. I've been torn between one side or the other, feeling at times that I had to choose just one, but not wanting to reject either. And I've lacked the words or concepts to explain what I felt and experienced. As my worlds are now your heritage, I hope my grappling with dualities helps you navigate the tensions that I already see you facing as you express frustration when Ông Ngoại and Bà Ngoại don't quite understand what you're trying to tell them in English or in broken Vietnamese. While emotionally taxing for me — this trying to make each “side” see the value in the other — it has also been a joy, because I see the fun you've discovered as you mimic their behaviors, like wearing socks with your flip flops.

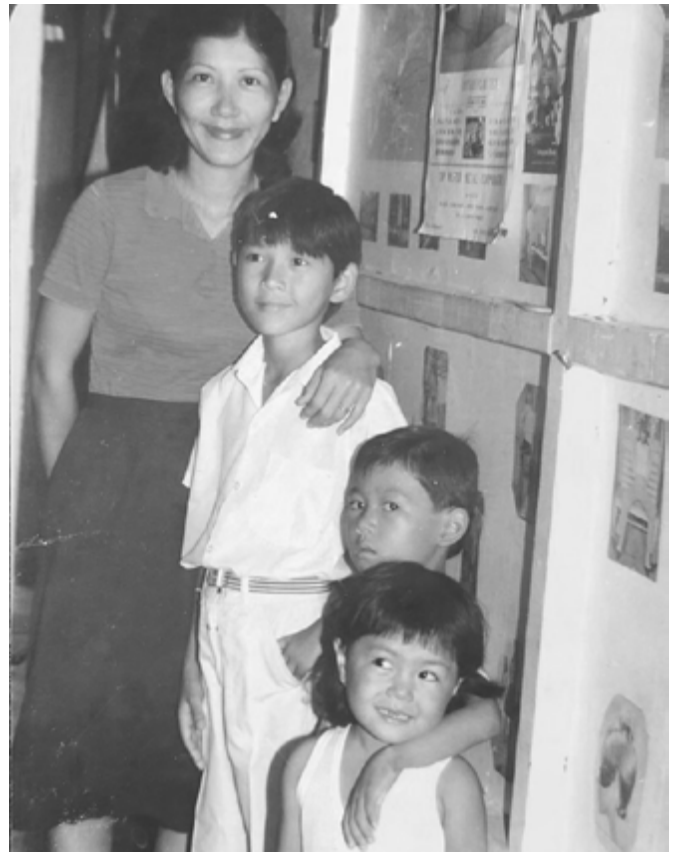
I.

From the moment Bà Ngoại, your uncles, and I arrived in the U.S. when I was four years old, I always felt different from those around me, especially at school and at church where I spent most of my time growing up. The elementary school across the street from our first Houston apartment was almost entirely populated by kids who spoke only English or Spanish. I had no idea what they were saying and spent my first two years as a student in the English as a Second Language program. Years later, when I began a graduate program in Public Health, I still felt less prepared than others in my cohort, who somehow seemed to naturally know how to keep up with the reading, synthesize the material, and ask questions in lectures.

When I first returned to Vietnam, at the age of 17, I belonged to a large family there — Ông Ngoại is one of five children and Bà Ngoại is one of 14 — yet differences soon emerged. When people on the street saw me, they thought I was Korean because of my lighter skin. As my cousins accompanied me to shop for clothing, I discovered that I did not have the same thin physique as people living there because the clothing often didn't fit me. My relatively underdeveloped Vietnamese speaking skill also marked me as someone who was “not from there.” Hearing others' perspectives on how I was different was funny, but also isolating. I was an outsider in Vietnam, and I was also an outsider in Houston, where I was more petite, had a darker complexion, and spoke less-clear English than many Americans. As a young person, I wanted to fit in, but I couldn't seem to avoid sticking out.



Family photos provided by the author.



II.
Neither of you has ever been spanked, but when I was a girl, Bà Ngoại was quick to discipline me and your uncles. She used her hand, a feather duster, a flip flop, the fly swatter, or the closest object within arm's reach. That also happened in the other Vietnamese immigrant families I knew, and we could laugh together, at school, about our experiences at home. But then I'd then go to school or church and hear that hitting or spanking was bad or even against the law. I observed adults, instead, talking with children when they were misbehaving. In one culture, I was experiencing normal child discipline; it was unpleasant, but not shameful or unjust. From the perspective of another culture, I grew up experiencing a minor form of child abuse. To describe my mother as abusive was never a thought that crossed my mind. She raised three children on her own in a foreign country. She made sure we were well-mannered, well-fed and clothed, and she did all she could to help us succeed in school. To afford living in our one-bedroom apartment when our family first lived on our own, she spent many late nights carefully packing floss picks into plastic bags for \$0.04 per bag, often shedding quiet tears with her friends who did the same work because of the struggle and loneliness they shared. How could anyone who really knew her and how she loved and cared for us consider her abusive? I couldn't harmonize my experience at home with what I learned elsewhere.

When I am not working for my employer, a great deal of my time revolves around you. Swim lessons, Cub Scouts, baseball,

soccer, gymnastics, birthday parties, piano lessons, play dates, trips to the zoo, school campouts, and more; that was not my experience growing up. In high school, I recall being crouched over at my bedroom desk studying for a calculus test when Ông Ngoại or Bà Ngoại would call, telling me to drive over to the family's nail salon business because they needed my help with a bottleneck of customers. Obediently, I stopped studying and drove to the nail salon for the stench of acetone and the chance to clip someone's toenails, massage their feet, and paint their nails. What about school? Well, we needed the money; we didn't want to lose customers, and I didn't feel that I could say no because I didn't want to disappoint my parents. To them, the right action was for me to support the family and respect them as the older generation. Were their priorities wrong?

As I figure out how to raise you, I can't help but reflect on the meaning of my choices. What does my decision to parent you differently than how I was parented suggest about how I see Bà Ngoại's actions? Does helping you with your homework instead of seeing how you might help our family mean I dissent from respect for elders? I've come to accept that my mother was doing the best that she knew. My family did what they had to do to survive in completely different circumstances. And we had love, real and communicated clearly, though not through words.

III.
Confidence in that love has been my compass in navigating the tensions between the moral meanings of my parents'



ARTIST STATEMENT

Late Night Thoughts

When thinking about the contextualization of my work, there are two main themes that feel important. One theme is the intersectionality of womanhood and mental health, and the other is women and craft. Both themes include various aspects of the importance of women, dealing with heritage, sexualization, and other aspects not limited to craft or mental health. In this way, it is important to me to contextualize my artistic work in a way that seems approachable to all women. To visually portray this reality, I use bright, bold colors to lighten the more difficult subjects that occupy my mind as I create. The result is a kind of visual landscape that attempts to describe the inner struggle of being a woman coping with mental illness.

Sadie Bingham
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worldview and that which I learned at church. Growing up, I sat in Sunday classes learning the importance and value of discussing church topics, sharing spiritual experiences, and praying at home as families. I understood these to be good things — habits to aspire to, and activities that most people at church were doing in their homes. We did not do those things, and as a child, I could not see how I could change that.

After Ông Ngoại arrived in Houston, neither he nor Bà Ngoại attended church with me. I continued attending, with a couple that became second parents, and heard repeatedly about keeping the Sabbath Day holy and not going shopping on Sundays. But when I could drive as a teenager, I took Ông Ngoại and Bà Ngoại shopping on Sundays. Whether I would do that for them was never a question to me because they worked the other days of the week, and they asked me to drive them. I believed that I was honoring my parents by doing what they asked, that my parents were good people, and that God would see and understand my intentions. I still believe this.

During one of my first times at the temple, when I was participating in sealings, the sealer asked people in the room to raise their hand if they had been sealed to their family. I was the only person in the room without a raised hand. My stomach sank. I had never previously felt like an outsider at the temple. Was God less willing to bless my family in the next life? Did the sealer notice? Did he think about how it made me feel, or did he assume that I, of course, aspired to the same thing as everyone else in the room? My mind knew that, of course, I was not lesser; it would somehow work out in the end. But my heart felt pained at the realization that I was, once again, different from everyone else in a place where we all were supposed to belong.

IV.

Often at work I have felt as though I'm seen as less capable than others, especially of leadership — that, somehow, I am partially invisible. I've had people suggest that I change to be like those who are more readily seen. What I hear is: *sound more assertive, speak up more, spend less time on people*. I'm always looking for ways to grow and improve. This feedback confuses me because my approach to working with others is very intentional. I try to have a willingness to admit when I'm wrong or have dropped the ball, I seek others' input when making decisions, I want everyone to have a seat at the table, and I want to hear from everyone present.

Remember, I was also raised in a culture that did not reward talking back to someone more senior (in age or otherwise) than myself. Why should I change that? What wisdom might they be lacking? Those offering that advice are assuming that I want to adopt or assimilate to develop all of those qualities *they* think that a leader should have, but I don't want or agree with some of those common qualities. I think there's value in admitting when one is wrong, in openly recognizing the contributions of others, coaching those you lead, and clarifying the "why" of the work being done to achieve a common goal; those are valuable traits I want to practice.

* * *

You also live within multiple worlds. Each of your worlds is big and complex, and you may feel that choosing one means that you're abandoning the other; it doesn't have to feel this way. I have two thoughts on this:

First, not too long ago, I was introduced to the concept of integrative complexity — the ability to develop and differentiate opposing traits, values, and perspectives and synthesize them into larger ones. Integrative complexity has led me to approach opportunities to see and experience these dualities as an asset rather than a challenge. Each side of all of these dualities has aspects that are valuable to understand and appreciate, even if you choose something different for yourself or your own family someday. Try not to shy away from learning what you can about each of them before you make your decisions, though many times the path of lesser resistance will seem appealing. You may still choose one over the other in some instances, and that's okay. Just try to be open to learning about each so that you can make informed decisions. Any decisions you make also do not have to be set in stone, despite it feeling so. We all learn and grow with time; what feels right at one moment may feel different at another point in time. Extend yourself grace as you are figuring out what's right for you.

Second, amid navigating the seeming dualities of black vs white, good vs bad, right vs wrong, you might benefit from a realization I recently had, one that made me feel less afraid of making decisions: there aren't any perfect decisions, just decisions you make with the information you have. The point of a decision is to get us to the next decision point. So even if you find out that a decision you made was less than ideal, you get to make another one about how to proceed. This has helped me feel less anxious in making choices about my complex life.

Decades after the photo in the refugee camp, I have realized that I get to design my life, and that sometimes — as the wedding album that lives in the protective black box in our living room attests — I get both worlds simultaneously: traditional áo dài dresses and gray Nordstrom suits; a rare karaoke serenade from Ông Ngoại and the uninhibited dancing of friends; a tea ceremony at home joining two families as incense wafts in front of ancestral portraits and confirming vows before a sealer on an upholstered altar in a temple. Those moments when our family officially started were a celebration of the complicated, full life that I want for me, for you, for us.

I LOVE YOU!

–MAMA



Trang Thach Hickman (she/her) is a health equity product manager based in Houston, Texas, with a passion for spending time with her family, creating, and bridging cultures and perspectives.

EXPONENT II WOULD LIKE TO THANK

*the foremothers, writers, poets, painters,
photographers, authors, artists, collagers,
mayors, illustrators, ceramicists, theologians,
designers, editors, volunteers, and readers
that made these 48 pages possible.*

*This is our continuing tribute to the power of
women's and gender minorities' voices. May
we absorb them; may we share them.*

1974

2023



EXPONENT II RETREAT

September 15-17, 2023 in New Hampshire



The 2023 Exponent II Retreat Keynote Speaker is Dr. Lacey Bagely, LMFT (she/her). Dr. Lacey is the owner & clinical director of Celebrate Therapy where she leads a team of clinicians serving LGBTQIA+ individuals, couples, and families. Her work as a therapist and advocate for the LGBTQIA+ community centers on empowering folx to dismantle internal and external systems of oppression.

There are need-based, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ scholarships available to support folx interested in attending.

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“Celebrate the Everyday” — Submit your writing & artwork for our Fall 2023 Issue

For this issue, we celebrate the quotidian, sing odes to the everyday, and honor the seemingly small moments of existence. When have you embraced idleness or broken free of a productive-at-all-costs mentality? Tell us about your journey with mindfulness, witnessing, specific objects, tedious tasks, etc. What have you learned through this deep level of observation?

TO SUBMIT YOUR WORK, PLEASE FOLLOW THE GUIDELINES ON [EXPONENTII.ORG/SUBMISSIONS](https://exponentii.org/submissions) BY JULY 15, 2023.

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- **Ynna Padilla**, Book Reviews
- **Natasha Rogers**, Blog Editor
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