Celebrating Womanhood

Marie K. Hafen, Ensign, Jun 1992, 50

Consider three familiar symbols—a diaper, a frying pan, and a boy’s worn-out tennis shoe. How do you react to these objects? Are they symbols of joy and fulfillment? Or are they symbols of drudgery and submission?

Many people in today’s world would be confused by these questions. When I was growing up, society placed great value on marriage and home and family. Since then, economic conditions and social attitudes have changed. The traditional view of family life is being challenged from every side.

Yet these three symbols of home life introduce the place that is for me the surest place to stand in this bewildering cultural climate: the place called home. So I want to say what being a wife and a mother means to me. Then I want to put those feelings into a larger context, because the choice between family life and education is not an either-or choice. For the sake of our own happiness and stability, for our families, for the Church, and for a better society, we need both domestic and educational skills; but we must shape and balance them on the foundation of the gospel.

My voice of celebration is thus a voice of hope, yet also a voice of warning, because the confusion in modern society can confuse all of us about the aspirations of women. Remember the Savior’s words: “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.” (Matt. 10:16.) Wisdom and meekness help us keep our balance in these unstable times.

Soon after my husband, Bruce, and I were blessed with children, we discovered that, as someone said, “to believe in God is to know that the eternal rules are fair, and that there will be some wonderful surprises.” One of those wonderful surprises was to learn what Lehi meant when he said that if Adam and Eve had remained in the Garden of Eden, “they would have had no children; … they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery.” (2 Ne. 2:23.) Astute parents will note here that if Adam and Eve had had no children, they would have had no misery! But note also that without children and misery, they would have had no joy. And two verses further, Lehi tells us that “men are, that they might have joy.” (2 Ne. 2:25.)

Now that I’ve had a house full of children and their not-always-wonderful surprises for over twenty years, all of Lehi’s words have meaning for me. Of course, there are days of drudgery. Dishes get dirty, children cry, and family members get sick. There are bills to pay and cars to fix, too little time and not enough money. There is frustration and fatigue and disappointment. Yet somehow, amid this drab reality, there are moments of genuine joy and meaning so tender that all you can do is kneel to thank God through your tears for the gift of children and the bonds of married love.

One recent moment of that kind for me was the birth of our first grandchild, whose reddish hair is the color of my mother’s hair. This new granddaughter slept in the same little white crib where we placed each of our seven babies. The crib, lovingly refurbished by great-grandparents and trimmed with fresh lace, is no ordinary crib: The baby’s father, grandfather, and great-grandmother each occupied it in the first months of their lives. Is the white crib just a piece of antique furniture? Or does it, like the frying pan and the tennis shoe, represent the grandest cycle of life and love and hope?
Looking back a quarter century, I feel the same way about raising children as Ammon felt about missionary work when he and his brethren testified of “their journeyings in the land of Nephi, their sufferings in the land, their sorrows, and their afflictions, and their incomprehensible joy.” (Alma 28:8; italics added.) Their joy was mixed with sorrow and affliction, for that is the very nature of joy.

As a core part of life’s joy, I celebrate the womanhood that is at the heart of life in a family home. I hope that young men as well as young women will honor this womanhood and cherish it in their own families and in their own lives.

Knowing, then, that marriage and family come first, what should we think about education and careers? Remember—the issue is not marriage or education; the issue is marriage and education. But why? And how?

It has been said that before becoming somebody’s wife, before becoming somebody’s mother, become somebody. Let us consider seven variations on that theme.

First, become somebody who can support herself. Young women should prepare for a career, but not because a career is more important than family life. A career isn’t even as important as family life. Although Church leaders have counseled mothers of young children to avoid working outside the home whenever possible, they have also urged young women to seek education and prepare for careers and meaningful involvement in society.

Career-oriented education matters for several reasons. For example, at any given time, from 35 to 40 percent of the adult women in the Church are single, whether widowed, divorced, or not having married. Only 3 percent of Latter-day Saint women never marry. (See Twila Van Leer, “Singleness Becoming More Common,” Church News, 6 November 1983, p. 4.) In addition, more than 90 percent of both married and single women must work sometime during their adult lives. An LDS woman is now likely to work more than twenty-five years, and six out of ten working LDS women are supporting not only themselves but others in their families.

What these statistics boil down to is that young women who believe they will always have a husband who will fully support them, thereby making it unnecessary for them to work outside the home, are living in a dream world. Husbands may die, or they may be disabled by accidents or illness. Children grow up, missionaries need financial support, and most mothers live healthy, vigorous lives for many years after their children leave home. Single-adult women cannot expect the Lord to rescue them from life’s natural adversity. The gospel has been given to heal our pain, not to prevent it. The Lord does give us strength to deal with a world that can sometimes be dreary, but often that help comes only as we do all we can do.

Second, before becoming somebody’s wife, be careful about who that somebody is. Young people must obviously strike a sound balance between being too fussy and not fussy enough. Elder Boyd K. Packer once reminded us to look for potential, not for perfection. (Address given at BYU Tri-Stake Fireside, 3 Nov. 1963.) And even those who have potential need proving by the test of time.

It is also important to be friends first and sweethearts later. If a young man and a young woman are sweethearts before they are friends, they might discover too late that their philosophies of life are miles apart. I know a young couple who fell in love with the idea of love rather than with each other. Only after they were married did they start to discover real differences in their views on many basic issues. He was in school and thought she should work to support his education. She felt that she should stay home.
and be a full-time homemaker. Their relationship suffered from their many unresolved differences. They should have become friends first.

Third, before becoming somebody’s mother, become somebody capable of being a good mother. Once one of my teenage daughters was frustrated about not having finished her assigned housework. She said to me, “Look, Mom—I’m not majoring in homemaking!” Maybe not, but she aspires to motherhood, and part of being a good mother is knowing how to make not just a bed, but a home. There is no career more meaningful, no calling more divine, than being a person who truly makes a home in the sense of creating and maintaining an environment of human warmth, intellectual stimulation, and spiritual strength—someone who sees the wellsprings of personal meaning that lie beyond a first glance at a diaper, a frying pan, and a worn tennis shoe. Motherhood is above all a teaching task.

A mother is the first and most important teacher in her children’s lives. British essayist G. K. Chesterton once compared a full-time specialist in a single discipline with a full-time mother, who is a generalist in all the disciplines of life. He observed that the specialist is something to everyone, but the mother is everything to someone. Many women play both of these roles at one time or another. Mothers, then, are teachers who contribute to the world and thus need educational preparation to fulfill their noble teaching task. For me, that fact is reason enough for all women to take education seriously, even if there were no other reasons.

I am grateful to see young Latter-day Saint fathers increasingly involved in the daily educational nurturing of their children. What a loss it is, both to fathers and to society, if the bonds of child nurturing belong only to mothers. I agree with the observation that one of the hallmarks of civilization is when men learn from women to become interested in the education of their children.

A prospective mother should take her education seriously enough to become an inspiring teacher, not only because she profoundly influences her children’s lives, but also because she improves the quality of her own life. For example, I have enjoyed a lifelong love affair with literature, particularly the works of Shakespeare. I taught college writing classes while my husband finished law school, and when our children were old enough to be in school, I returned to teaching literature on a part-time basis.

Within the last year or two, I have accompanied each of my children on their own experiences with Shakespeare, through school assignments or otherwise. We have seen videos together, attended plays, and read and talked together. What a delight it has been for me to interact in intellectually and spiritually stimulating ways with my children as our study of Shakespeare has helped us confront essential questions about ourselves and about human nature.

Fourth, before becoming somebody’s wife or somebody’s mother, become somebody who can make her own life richer. Your education is not only for your possible career or for your children; your education is also for you. As Mr. Keating says in the movie Dead Poets Society, “One reads poetry because he’s a member of the human race. Poetry, romance, love, beauty—these are what we stay alive for!”

A friend I will call Marilyn is enjoying a far richer life today than would have been the case if the world of books and beauty had not opened her eyes and her mind. Marilyn grew up in a small town where the most important things in her friends’ lives were being popular and being seen with handsome, athletic guys. She dated a young man who was a natural leader, but at the time he had no serious aspirations for his life. Then Marilyn went with her family to pick up her brother at the close of his mission.
For the first time in her life, Marilyn opened her eyes to the size and wonder and richness of the world. She visited great art galleries and historic cathedrals; she saw the remnants of aristocracy and the grimness of urban poverty; she sang hymns in a foreign tongue; she saw mountains and oceans she never knew existed.

When she returned, her hometown was not the same. Looking at everything with new eyes, she realized that she was far from ready to make serious commitments to her immature boyfriend. From that time on, her thirst for learning took her far beyond the days when the city limits of her hometown had been the limits of her aspirations.

Now Marilyn’s continuing curiosity and broad vision of life enhance her well-developed religious faith. Her life is more full, her service to others is more meaningful, and her children share her insights—all because she reached beyond the boundaries of a teenage mind to touch the broader boundaries of an educated mind.

Fifth, before becoming somebody’s wife and somebody’s mother, become somebody who is spiritually strong. King Benjamin spoke of the “happy state of those that keep the commandments of God” and are “blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual.” (Mosiah 2:41.) Does this mean that if people keep the basic commandments, they won’t have any problems?

Lehi taught us that if Adam and Eve had remained in Eden, they would have remained not in a state of true happiness, but “in a state of innocence”—having no children, no misery, no sin—and no joy. (2 Ne. 2:23; italics added.) So when King Benjamin tells us of the “blessed and happy state” of those who keep God’s commandments, he is not describing a Kingdom of Oz where there are no witches. On the contrary, developing the strength that leads to authentic joy requires us to follow the Adamic pattern into a world of thorns and sorrow.

Adam and Eve fell that they might have joy. But they didn’t skip merrily out of Eden singing and wishing everyone a nice day. They walked in sorrow into a lonely world, where they earned their bread by the sweat of their brows and learned about joy in the midst of misery and pain. Can you imagine how Eve felt when she learned that her son Cain had taken the life of her son Abel and that God had banished Cain?

How could Mother Eve possibly have found joy in the middle of such affliction? She found it by letting the atonement of Christ heal her pain and sanctify her experience. Indeed, her experience with sin and misery played a crucial role in preparing her for the joy she ultimately found. In Eve’s own words, “Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient.” (Moses 5:11.)

Women in the modern world, like women in the ancient world, go forth as sheep in the midst of wolves. In such a world, we must be spiritually strong and wise as serpents, like Mother Eve, who “ceased not to call upon God.” (Moses 5:16.)

A young friend described her feelings as she found her Evelike experience by serving a mission: “When I left on my mission, faith was still just the first principle of the gospel. Now I need it and live by it more than food. I couldn’t get through a day without it. I know that I was born to be a missionary. I know that my spirit is a warrior, because it loves peace. I now know what it means to say that my spirit rejoiceth. My spirit has found expression and joy and finally has been set free.
“Another outcome of this mission that I didn’t expect at all is that I find myself wanting to get married and have a family. After seeing so much unhappiness, I long to establish my own righteous fortress on the earth. I have loved working so closely with the priesthood and realize what an effect it has on my life and attitudes. I also understand that a mission is a priesthood calling. At the end of a great war, even women and old people have to fight. So here we are.”

**Sixth, a message especially for young men: Become somebody who encourages young women to reach their full intellectual and spiritual potential.** I have heard that many Latter-day Saint men do not understand why Latter-day Saint women attend college; that the vast majority of women say they go to college to gain a serious education; but that when asked why they think women attend college, many men list social rather than educational reasons.

Perhaps some women hesitate to tell men their real motivations for fear of being criticized. Of greater concern is the possibility that if male students and faculty don’t take women seriously as college students, they may unintentionally discourage women from pursuing their educational goals seriously. Anyone who uses Church teachings as an excuse for thinking women should not wholeheartedly seek an education does not understand what the Church teaches.

I am encouraged by seeing more young men learning to share domestic and educational tasks with the women in their lives. This will make their eventual marriages become true partnerships in which a man and woman stand side by side as did Adam and Eve, with neither one behind the other.

For example, a recently married friend told me this story: “Not long after we had our first baby, I was in a car accident in which my neck was broken. Because I had to wear a neck brace, Greg had to help me do almost everything. He changed all the baby’s diapers, helped wash my hair, and tied my shoelaces and buttoned my buttons. I thought I loved him before we were married, but during this time I grew to love him much more for what he was willing to do for me.”

**Finally, become somebody who understands that being a woman is worth celebrating.** Women who are prepared for life can celebrate with confidence. Never have opportunities for prepared women been greater—in the home, in the Church, in the work force when appropriate, and in the community.

A woman celebrates womanhood in many ways. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, she may “rock a sobbing child without wondering if today’s world is passing [her] by, because [she knows she holds] tomorrow tightly in [her] arms.” (*Ensign*, May 1978, p. 10.)

She may watch her toddler look longingly at the stairs he doesn’t yet know how to climb. When he looks back eagerly for approval, her answer must be “no,” though the little one bursts into tears. She is a teacher of tough love who understands the role of discipline in nurturing her children.

She is a Primary teacher who tastes the magic of childhood when she greets a proud seven-year-old wearer of a CTR ring who thrusts his fist forward and exclaims with happy courage, “See this CTR ring? It throws out an invisible shield of protection all around me, and no evil force can break through!”

She is educated and able, preparing for her day of marriage that has not come, fully engaged in a professional world that needs the talent and training she offers. Added to these gifts, her caring touch can soothe and heal, for “Charity Never Faileth,” even in the corporate business world.
She watches as her teenage daughter is not asked to the prom, which brings back her own memories of not having been asked. Her heart aches, but she tells her daughter, “My dear, not everyone in the world needs to fall in love with you. It only takes one.”

She works patiently as a volunteer committed to nurturing the homeless; she cares lovingly for ten years for an invalid mother-in-law; she accepts the confidence shown by friends and neighbors to run for the state legislature. “Look what you did for our school through the PTA,” they say. “We need you.”

She watches her son kneel across the altar from his bride in a temple sealing room and thinks of her own marriage in such a room, celebrating the sealing of eternal love.

She enters a hospital room where her first daughter-in-law gingerly sits up and, holding up her own first baby, greets her: “Isn’t she beautiful? Would you like to hold her—Grandma?”

She rejoices in the seasons of a woman’s life, for each time and each season is worth its own celebration. Spread over a lifetime, celebrating womanhood is a celebration of life.

Notes

Marie K. Hafen, a member of the Sharon Fifth Ward, Orem Utah Stake, is a member of the Young Women general board.

This talk was given 27 March 1990 at a Ricks College devotional held during Women’s Week.