

Give and Take

THE SOUL SELECTS HER OWN SOCIETY

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As my three daughters have left babyhood behind and begun to develop distinct personalities, one of my biggest challenges as a parent has developed as well: dealing with each girl's need to feel unique and important, yet maintaining a strong and loving bond of sisterhood among them. At one time or another, each has confided, "Sometimes I wish I was the only kid in the family." Yet as I watch my girls in their quiet moments, I see evidences of their great love for each other, a love that is obvious in their admiration (and sometimes envy) for each others' accomplishments, in their eagerness to teach each other the skills and tricks of childhood survival, and in the joy and delight the older girls have in seeing the innocence of the smaller ones. Never having had a sister, I have learned much from my daughters about sisterly love. I can also see parallels between their struggles for individual identity within the family and my own feelings as a sister in the family of the Church.

My daughters depend on the security that comes from a sense of unity with each other: when they are together, they know that there is at least one other person in the world who holds the same values, who follows the same rules, whose reactions are to a large degree predictable and who can be trusted to understand them and defend them.

The same impulse that makes my daughters seek each other out on the playground draws Mormons to each other at a cocktail party—an awareness of shared beliefs, goals, and desires. Recognizing these common interests, the institutional Church addresses itself to the common concerns of an increasingly diverse family of members, almost to a point of exaggeration. Nowhere is this more evident than in the lesson materials developed for the Relief Society. They seem to be aimed at some sort of imaginary "composite sister." This person is new to the Church, married, mother of several children, and has no idea how to cook, to sew, to manage her time, and cannot perform even

the most basic first aid functions.

I have never met this composite sister. My present ward is filled with intelligent, well educated grandmothers, working mothers, single professional women, and divorcees. Most of us have been members of the Church for years. Yet the lessons we are taught week after week are so general that they address us as individuals in almost no respect. The spiritual living lessons consider the basics of faith, repentance, and baptism. Homemaking lessons teach us how to choose fabric for sewing, and this month's mini-classes offer us the choices of sewing designer jeans, decorating chocolate Easter eggs, making quiet books, or quilting. Mothers, grandmothers, and single sisters alike are required to sit through the Mother Education discussions of discipline and the dating years.

Yes, I understand that there are thousands of new converts who need these basic instructions (although I have my doubts about the need to know how to make designer jeans). I understand that we long-time members have not yet reached perfection in the points discussed in those repeated lessons and still need to be reminded of their importance. But how often is the lowest-common-denominator approach varied? How often are challenging questions asked and discussed? Instead, great chunks of the lessons are repeated verbatim year after year in the manuals and repeated concept from concept in class presentations. Even if there were time to allow class participation (which, under the consolidated schedule, there isn't), and a teacher who felt comfortable leading a discussion, who of us is bold enough to admit a doubt, a need to probe, a falling short of perfection in the principle under discussion—in short, anything that would identify her as an individual with unique concerns.

In my ward, a questioning attitude toward lesson material is often interpreted as a lack of perfect faith or a covert desire to undermine the course of the lesson and divert the

teacher from covering the assigned topic in the allotted time. Moreover, often teachers, Mother Education leaders in particular, are admonished to steer clear of personal problems and examples in their lesson discussions.

Of course, a creative teacher can and should change the focus of the lesson so it becomes meaningful to the needs of the sisters she teaches. But this creative teacher has likely heard in her stake preparation meeting the oft-repeated injunction not to depart from the outlined material. "After all," we are told, "it's been approved by the Prophet."

I firmly believe that somehow the Relief Society lessons need to evidence more than lip service to the idea of our individuality. Just as a mother must tailor her teaching to her child's age and understanding, there should be latitude in the lessons, both in presentation at ward level and in the original materials as they are developed at administrative levels, to allow for the differences in background and interest of the sisters who must hear them.

I do not deny that a genuinely felt sisterhood exists within the Church. I have seen its results as I have served in four Relief Society presidencies. But it is too often conditional, contingent upon adherence to some preconceived norm. Too many of us condemn others for working and neglecting their children, or scorn those who choose to stay home for not being involved in "worthwhile" pursuits. "As I have loved you" seems a long way off.

Paradoxically, a feeling of unity can be achieved only after individuality is acknowledged, encouraged, and valued. I take Sister Barbara Smith's address to the recent General Women's session of conference as a hopeful sign in that direction. In her remarks, she said, "Being happy in the achievements of brothers, sisters and associates requires a feeling of security and the recognition of our own great potential. When we can respect not only the differences in others but also their accomplishments, we begin to experience some of the joy the Lord intended."

In order for that feeling of security to grow and the potential of each sister to be realized, the sentiment of Sister Smith's remarks must be translated into concrete administrative and curriculum changes, for the Church's challenge is the same as that of any parent: to build family unity while fostering the individuality of its members.