

IN CELEBRATION OF A SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASS

Marybeth Raynes

We frequently wander from the outlined lesson in our Sunday School class. In fact, I generally consider such wandering off the track an indication of an excellent class as long as we diverge into topics of relevant personal importance and not into doctrinal blind alleys. But a few months ago, one member of the class became insistent that we stay with the scriptures lest we defeat our purpose in coming to church. We continued to digress, of course, which only increased her irritation. Gradually the two teachers, who alternate monthly, started apologizing after her comments and quickly returned to the lesson. Finally after what was to me a moving discussion about spiritual experiences, she again complained. Just as I was about to defend our indirection, several other class members spontaneously expressed the same sentiment: "I come to this class *because* we consider personal applications of our lesson topics, not in spite of it." Each detailed the ways in which his or her spiritual needs were filled by our format. Fortunately, the teacher let us share our feelings. After this emotional catharsis, all those who had spoken turned their attention again to our dissenting sister. She admitted that she was somewhat shaken but remained steadfast about what she wanted from the class. Perhaps, she suggested, she should change to a class that would fit her needs better. The other class members tried to make it clear that they were concerned *both* about her *and* about their own need to have the class conducted in a satisfying way for themselves, a synthesis and balance difficult to achieve, but at least attempted. I have seen a mutual bath of concern many times in friendships, families, and therapy groups but rarely in Sunday School classes. From this experience and others, I

learned that intimacy is not limited to romantic and familial relationships. In the case of our class, I am not sure now our closeness evolved, but several things have helped.

First, the class has an unusual composition. Although specifically intended for singles, ages 26 and older, we welcome anyone who wants to come. As a result, we are diverse in marital status, background, social standing, intelligence, and lifestyle. Few of us could be considered part of the mainstream of the Church, and our mutual idiosyncracies have prompted us to ignore questions of status, tolerate differences, and understand one another better.

A third factor is size. We are ten usually, but on rare occasions as many as fifteen may attend. Our relatively small numbers allow everyone to participate: By speaking in front of those we trust, we discover what we think and believe, thereby enhancing our spiritual and temporal learning.

Finally, all teachers in my memory have respected the class members' opinions as much as their own. They are as quick to ask for input and opinion as to give it, resulting in a free flow of information and feelings all around.

Over time these characteristics have fostered several qualities I thoroughly enjoy. The most notable of these are immediacy and openness—important components in intimacy. I have discovered it does not require similarity or close-knit interaction in order to bare my soul spiritually. I doubt that few of us even see each other outside of class; very few of our lifestyles correspond. Yet we have discussed loneliness, divorce, problems with one's children, excommunication, and singlehood from a personal rather than philosophical standpoint. We find common ground both in our belief in the gospel and in our occasional insecurity about deviating from the Church's ideal image. This frankness has been a

delightful benefit of our sometimes rambling lessons.

In addition to openness, our ready acknowledgement of differences allows us to broach unusual topics. In obvious pain as he came through the door one Sunday, one of the two mainstream members blurted, "I want to ask a question that will never appear in the lesson manual: What do you do when you want to leave the Church for a while but you know you can't? What can I do when the dilemmas become too great to stand it all?" The response took up the rest of the time. Several simply shared times in their lives when they had felt like giving up. Some gave traditional responses to his questions. Others tried to look beyond his initial questions to understand the full extent of the pain, and if not to provide answers at least to offer suggestions about how to cope.

Additionally, a certain amount of playfulness has evolved. This is not irreverence, but a light-hearted—better yet joyful-hearted—look at old concepts. One brother is particularly good at turning our seriousness inside out by presenting his own spiritual struggles as laughable at times. He refuses to see every principle or program as having eternal life-or-death consequences. A recent quotable: "In the Church, it doesn't matter so much what you read; what matters is where you read it."

I do not mean to imply that every class is wonderful or that I wait with great anticipation to be filled spiritually every Sunday. Sometimes it is boring. Clearly, we wander too much at times. Occasionally the class becomes a personal forum with no focus. On a couple of occasions we have degenerated into polarized debates. Not everyone is a scholar or prepares for the lesson, so strings of platitudes exist alongside earnest questions and thoughtful answers. There have been people who have left the class. Despite these problems, however, most meetings are satisfying. And, of course, if I want more excitement and stimulation, I can introduce a topic I think needs consideration.

And as our class continues, I am impressed that we have succeeded in taking what is usually reserved for personal, informal relationships and transferred it to a larger, more institutionalized forum. We have granted ourselves the permission to choose our own course, to structure how we will relate to each other. In a gospel doctrine Sunday School class, such an accomplishment is remarkable—and cause for celebration.