
ISSUES OF INTIMACY

SEXUAL SEGREGATION

by Marybeth Raynes

DURING A RECENT visit from our home teachers, we came upon a topic that has interested me in the days since and I would like to share some of our discussion with you. One of these men coordinates outdoor camping and survival trips for various LDS and non-LDS youth groups. Over several years, he has noticed some significant differences between Mormon and non-Mormon girls and boys in the ways they act around each other in both play and work activities.

As background to his observations, he explained that the Church requires all youth groups to be segregated by sex on outings or trips, and that strongly discourages co-educational trips. When such outings are allowed, young men and women are discouraged from running a river on the same raft, snowmobiling on the same machines, etc. For corroborating evidence, he suggested that I pull out a number of old *New Eras* and scan the photographs of teens hiking, camping and bicycling. Editorial policy allows no photos of co-ed groups.

On the other hand, non-LDS organizations often allow co-ed groups as a matter of course. For example, the Boy Scouts of America have converted all of their Explorer posts (for youths over 14) to co-ed groups. However, the Church has decided that all posts under Mormon sponsorship will remain limited to boys only.

In my friend's experience (secular and religious) groups have generally been well organized, well chaperoned and relatively accident free. Additionally, he has observed no more sexual interaction on trips with non-LDS groups than with LDS groups.

He has, however, noted some striking differ-

ences. The non-LDS youths usually interact very cooperatively and naturally, sharing status positions and work tasks fairly evenly between the two sexes. This interaction does not seem to be characterized by much sexual flirtation or games. On the other hand, LDS groups typically divide tasks between the sexes. Young men and women seem to cooperate less easily across gender boundaries. Moreover, he feels that the social interaction between the young women and men is much less mature, with a lot of overt sexual flirting and games, combined with pre-adolescent pranks. In all, he seems to think that the rules set up by the Church do not appreciably affect sexual interaction; however, they may limit important social development between young people in the Church and hinder their later adult interaction.

My friend's observations may be his alone, and they may not be true in other locations or with other groups. But if his views are nearly correct, or are replicated in other areas of the Church, his statements and their implications deserve notice.

One implication is quite ironic. The policy that the sexes must be segregated only underscores the belief that all male-female relationships are basically sexual, not spiritual or social. Although I am sure that the intent of the policy to segregate men and women is to de-emphasize sexuality, in fact it highlights sex all the more. Regular social interaction such as a service project, tracking membership charts, planning a ward dinner or conducting a meeting become sexual not only because they are generally assigned only to one sex or the other, but because there are explicit prohibitions to doing such activities between the sexes alone.

A premise of danger and difference underscores many male-female relations in the Church, whether as teens or adults. And when sex is perceived as dangerous or unpredictable, all forms of interactions between women and men must be limited in prescribed ways.

I do not deny for a minute that sexual attraction and behavior can occur in non-sexual settings, such as working on an activities project. But my sense is that most active Church people are well enough socialized to handle it, enjoy it even. For the few who become sexually involved in Church settings, the chances are good that they could also have become involved in secular interaction. For the greater majority whose control is skillfully managed, the premise that their sexuality is unpredictable, maybe even evil, influences a significant part of their social lives.

It is possible of course to make the "problem" of sex worse by trying to solve it through separation. An example is provided by Harold Christensen's research over the last three decades on the sexual attitudes and behavior of college students in Utah and at two non-LDS locations. He found that when LDS youth with strong rules about sexual behavior step outside of those rules they enter foreign, uncharted territory, and often experience what he terms a "backlash" effect. That is, they often catapult into more extreme forms of the previously prohibited behavior, such as promiscuity. Church attendance may also significantly decrease. These youths may also experience more guilt for smaller transgressions (such as intense kissing) than non-LDS students. In a personal conversation with Mr. Christensen, I conjectured that similar findings would be true for adults beyond college age. He agreed. These people tend to feel that "if I'm lost, I might as well do everything." So they do. Not everyone does, of course, but many people have considerable difficulty regaining a sense of self-worth and defining their relationship to the Church.

Some would see this pattern as proof that sex is wild and unpredictable. "The Church is right," they say. "If you don't control sex rigidly, it gets out of control." I see this as a case of self-fulfilling prophecy rather than God-inspired prophecy. If you regard sex as dangerous, you will feel chronic anxiety about sex. But people who believe sex is manageable learn the skills of managing their emotions, and the confidence to explore joyfully within prescribed limits.

In addition to sexual interaction, segregation

may inhibit the development of facets of relationships between the sexes. Cooperative social skills between men and women may not be learned. Relationships which develop with rigid rules about sex role interaction have a hard time developing spontaneous richness in other areas. Each sex becomes defined as the "opposite" sex, rather than the "other" sex. The differences outweigh the similarities, and some people perceive the other sex almost as another species. How many times have you heard that women are more spiritual and men are more carnal?

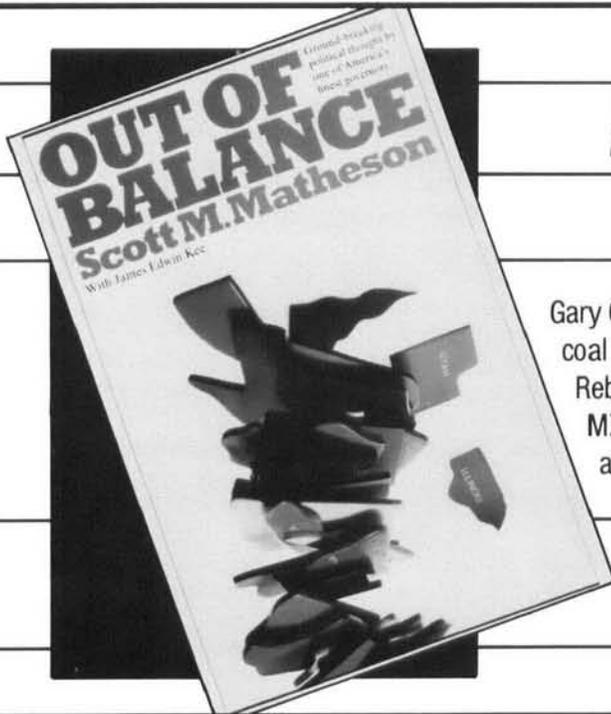
I notice these polarized qualities of interaction around me continuously. A woman who is talking quite easily with me about some recent event changes her tone of voice when a mutual male friend walks into Sunday School and sits down next to us. In equally demanding tasks, such as organizing a ward dinner or a welfare farm project, women are more likely to be praised in sacrament meeting the following Sunday for their time and effort, and men for their skill, wisdom and guidance.

But the most important effect of the rules about sexual segregation may be that women and men never learn to become friends. Friendly, yes. But trusting, sharing friends, no. In my experience, cross-sex friendships are rare in Mormon culture. This lack of friendship can affect many areas of life, including marriage. Since the two sexes are raised in separate gender cultures, many marriage partners have few common activities or joint interests. As a woman friend confided to me, "It simply doesn't occur to my husband to include me as a friend. He thinks of me for sex, for mothering, for couples activities, but for games and the good times of friendship? He doesn't think of it!" Good, deep friendships generally occur between people who see each other as alike and safe. When we emphasize what is different and dangerous about the other sex, we lose points of sharing in every area and stage of our lives, including marriage.

These examples are not meant to suggest that Mormon society is more limited or immature than some other varieties of American

culture, religious or secular. Nor are they meant to imply that there are no differences between women and men, sexually or socially. There are important differences, but I hold that the greater areas of commonality are rich fields for friendship and love. My examples are only meant to point out possible areas of growth.

We need to grow into adult friendships in every area of life. We have essentially generalized children's patterns of parallel play into sex and social interaction. We have a lot of richness to claim by developing new premises, new habits of adult cooperative work and play. I have learned many lessons about relaxed social intercourse between adults in the professional world as I have watched friends in the workplace handle sexual issues and mixed social interaction as equals. Others who have shared their experiences of these friendships with me have usually reported some delightful discoveries. Most of these new insights underscore the awareness that we are more alike than different, and that life is much richer when we share our work, our talk, and our play without always feeling that something may go wrong.



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