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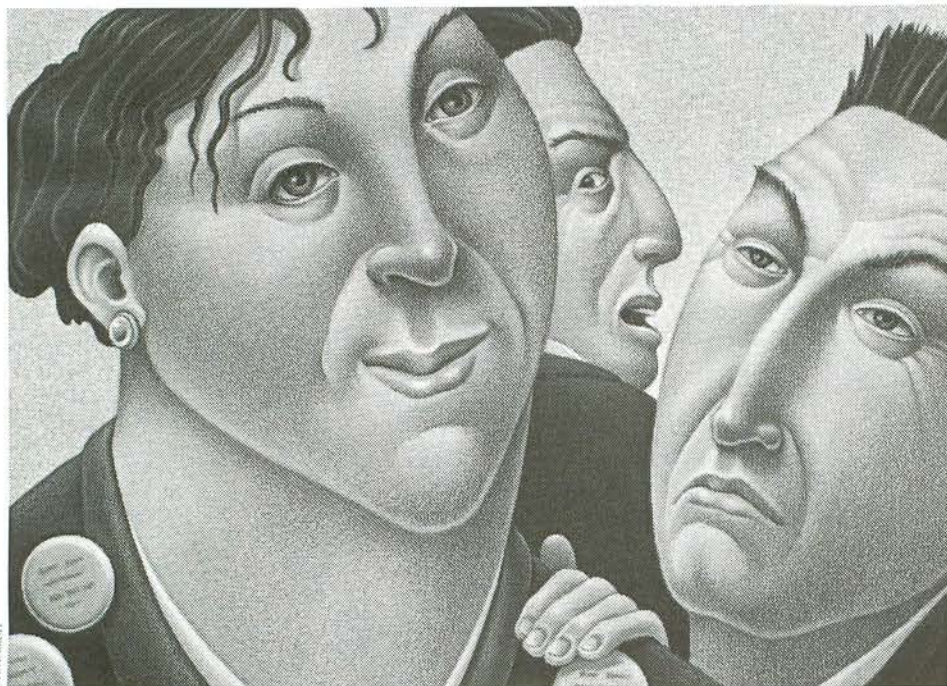
## LIGHTER MINDS

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# BUTTONS, OR, HER STRENGTH IS IN HER PRINCIPLES

(From the Personal Oral History of  
Donelle Lou Clawson Phelps)

by Lynn Matthews Anderson



Vonda Mae kept wearing a new button every week, such as the time she wore one that said, “Prospective Elder.”

I REMEMBER THAT very first Sunday when Vonda Mae Woodruff came to church wearing a button that said ASK ME! I didn't think much of it at the time. I thought maybe it was just her way of breaking the ice and getting acquainted with all the new people in our ward. (We get a whole new crop of

couples in the ward every school year because of the university nearby.) Anyway, I was her visiting teacher (along with Sister Eckersly who works outside the home although she doesn't really need to, so she never can manage to go with me. But to her credit she at least writes notes to the inactive sisters on our list). I thought Vonda was nice enough, if a bit peculiar. Though she'd been “born in the covenant” and in Pocatello, she'd been raised in the East, which I figured accounted for it.

Anyway, every so often after that she'd wear a button. At first, most of them were funny, like THE HURRIER I GO THE BEHINDER I GET and I'M SO FAR BEHIND I THINK I'M

AHEAD! Then she started wearing buttons that would say things like SAVE THE EARTH and SAVE THE WHALES and SAVE THE CHILDREN and SAVE THE goodness knows what else. She was always trying to get the Relief Society to serve “healthy” things at homemaking meeting. But then I don't know what got into Vonda. I'd known for years that she had been subscribing to magazines besides the *Ensign*, so maybe that was it. Rumor has it she'd started listening to even more “alternate voices,” and that despite inspired counsel at general conference.

Lord knows I tried to be Vonda's friend. I spent at least an hour every month preparing the visiting teaching message. And when her whole family came down with the flu, including her, I brought over some of my famous hotdog casserole. I tried to teach her correct principles, but I knew I was up against a lot when I saw some of the books she had on her shelves—all about feminism this and liberation that and even one book with the title *Sexual Politics*, of all things. One month I felt inspired to do extra research on the visiting teaching message, which was “Follow the Brethren.” And do you know that when I quoted to her what I'd found in a Mormon quote book, that “when the Brethren have spoken, the thinking has been done,” she just laughed and said it was a *Church News* editorial that must have been snuck in when the brother in charge was on vacation. I did not think that was very funny, and I told her so. Then she looked at me and said (and I will never forget this to my dying day), “Donelle, you really don't have a clue, do you?” And then she had the nerve to offer me some of her books to read, which I politely but firmly refused to do. I knew better!

Well. After that, I asked to be reassigned, but the Relief Society president asked me to please stick it out because, as she said, she was confident that I at least wouldn't be corrupted by anything that Vonda would say, which I take as a great compliment. But now I just go and give her the message and ask how her family's health is, and I don't stay one second over fifteen minutes. But I make sure I go before the twentieth of the month so no one can accuse me of procrastinating on an unpleasant duty.

All I know is that the time I visit taught her after New Year's last January, she told me that she'd made a resolution to be a better feminist. I hardly knew what to say. She'd already started singing the hymns in a funny way. When she was asked why she was changing all the words to some of the Songs of Zion, she said, “I am not a man. I am not a brother or a father or a son. I want to be

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included as a woman when I sing." She didn't seem to mind that what she sang didn't always rhyme or usually needed more notes than the song called for. She sang her changes good and loud and all the new people who weren't used to her would crane their necks to try to see where these strange sounds were coming from. And it wasn't just her, but usually her whole family would be singing different words. Sometimes they weren't even the same different words! But at least the Sunday School president was able to figure out that Vonda Mae should not be called to be the Sunday School chorister, even though she has had musical training and not too many people in the ward can lead music. As it is, they use her as a substitute only when there is absolutely nobody else they can call on, and even then they try to pick hymns for her to lead that she won't find any reason to have to change on the fly.

Anyway, as I was saying, after New Year's she started wearing buttons all the time to church with something controversial on them, such as the time she wore a button that said PROSPECTIVE ELDER. It had been obvious to me since the very first that Vonda Mae had been tainted by the Women's Movement, but up until then I hadn't known just how badly she'd gone astray. Whatever could she mean by it? I went up to her and told her that it was plain as day that the men, being less spiritual than women, really needed the priesthood or else they'd never learn to serve others and get to the celestial kingdom. Vonda just said right back that she knew plenty of men who were just as spiritual as women, and besides, she also knew plenty of women who could use some incentive to serve others. That was Vonda, all right. She never could admit to being wrong even when presented with the Lord's truth. And to top it off, the next week (which was the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend, and I still cannot fathom why we are having a holiday that honors someone who everyone knows was a communist) Vonda wore a button that said WOMEN DO THE WORK OF THE CHURCH BUT STILL HAVE TO SIT IN THE BACK OF THE BUS. The Relief Society president asked her why she was trying to stir up contention, and Vonda just replied as pleased with herself as she could be that she intended to be the Rosa Parks of Mormonism. I for one had no idea what she meant, but some of the other ladies—and, mark this, most of them were from the East, too—nodded their heads and smiled. (Vonda had worn her liberal Eastern politics on her sleeve from the very first, and it always amazed me how many women didn't seem to know any better than to agree with

her.)

The next week Vonda wore a button that said ELIZA R. SNOW WOULD BE APPALLED! Some of the women went up to Vonda and asked her what her button meant. She said something about how we really ought not to be celebrating the sesquicentennial of the Relief Society in 1992, because, after all, Brigham Young had disbanded the organization in 1844, and it didn't get reorganized until twenty-two years later. Well, we all thought she was just splitting hairs over that, but then she went right ahead and said something else about how Eliza R. must be turning over in her grave about how wimpy LDS women are these days. Now Vonda was beginning to make me mad. I come from good pioneer stock as do most of the women in the ward, and I went right up and told her that none of my female pioneer forefathers were wimps! She just looked at me and said, "That's just my point. Those women had power and they knew it. Most of today's LDS women roll over and play doormat if an almighty priesthood holder tells them to. LDS women today don't know anything about their heritage."

Now you'd think with all this feminism business that Vonda could not possibly be married. But no, she was married all right, and with children, but her husband was a convert as well as from the East, and what was more, he taught at the university and had a beard to boot. After Vonda began wearing her buttons and talking about them, some of the brothers in his quorum told him that as head of his house he should make her stop all this nonsense. He just laughed. Sometimes he would wear buttons to church, too, but he never went in for it like Vonda did. But there was the time when he wore a button that said IN THE HEAVENS, ARE PARENTS SINGLE? And Vonda Mae was wearing one that said NO, THE THOUGHT MAKES REASON STARE!

ALL in all, if it had just been the buttons, or even just the buttons and the singing, maybe we could have all ignored Vonda. But she began to challenge the Relief Society teachers right in class. She would tell the class that what Sister So-and-So had just said was simply "Mormon folklore," not doctrine. In one lesson on celestial marriage, Vonda kept trying to bring up the subject of eternal polygamy, but since nearly everyone I know, myself included, would rather live in the terrestrial kingdom than share our husbands, she couldn't get anyone to discuss it in class. That seemed to disappoint her, but the next week she showed up with a button

that said IF POLYGAMY IS A TRUE PRINCIPLE, WHY DOES IT MAKE US SO UNCOMFORTABLE? Though the Snows and the Grants, who had polygamous roots, seemed mightily offended, the Kimballs, the Claytons, and the Browns (who also came from families that had obeyed the Principle) stayed after the meetings to talk to Vonda about her ideas.

But you should have heard Vonda when Sister Grimmert said that the reason we don't hear about Heavenly Mother is that God the Father loves her so much that he wants to protect her name from being taken in vain and ridiculed. Well, Vonda nearly fell out of her seat for as much energy as she put into waving her hand to get the teacher to call on her. Then she said something like, "Since when does a goddess need male protection? Is protecting our Mother's name more important than letting humankind"—she always said humankind—"know that she exists and cares about us?" Honestly, for a smart woman, Vonda didn't seem to be able to figure out even the most basic truths of the patriarchal order in heaven.

It was getting pretty predictable that whatever controversial subject would get brought up in church would be met with a button the next week from Vonda. So I was not surprised when Vonda showed up with a button that said WOMEN WILL BE LIBERATED ONLY WHEN HEAVENLY MOTHER REVEALS HERSELF. There she goes, I said, dragging our sacred doctrine of a Mother in Heaven in the mud and casting this doctrinal pearl right before any old swine of the world. (Although to be fair I must say that Vonda hardly ever wore any of her buttons in public where the gentiles might mock.)

Anyway, Vonda was giving the Relief Society teachers such a hard time that one of them nearly quit outright and, even worse, one of them took to calling Vonda for ideas before presenting her lessons. (I must say that that teacher presented some pretty off-the-wall lessons, to say the least. People would talk about them for days afterward.) Finally the Relief Society president told the bishop that he had to think of some calling for Vonda that would keep her from attending Relief Society. Fortunately, there was an opening in the Primary for a Merrie Miss teacher, so Vonda Mae was called to that. We weren't sure, what with her having become a women's libber and all, that she wouldn't have the gall to turn down a calling, but she seemed happy as a clam to be a Primary teacher teaching the ten and eleven year old girls.

Not soon after that the entire Merrie Miss class wrote a letter to the Primary general



president to say that they thought the name "Merrie Miss" was stupid. Only they didn't say it exactly like that—they used words that no ten-year-old girl in the world would know, so it was obvious who had really written the letter, even though the girls themselves signed it. Personally I can't imagine why there would be all this fuss over a name—I mean, would they want to be called "Sullen Suzies" or something like that? The girls also told the Primary general president that they wished they had a more exciting name like the boys had. Now, I have never been all that keen on the boys' names myself, but all I can say is that Merrie Miss is such a pert and cheerful little name. I like it lots better than being a Gaynote or a Firelight or a Merry Hand, which is what I was called when I was in Primary.

Well, the Primary general president actually wrote back to the class and told them that they should think about the positive things Merrie Miss can stand for, which is what I thought all along. Still, it didn't surprise me that with Vonda as their teacher, the girls would send a petition to our ward Primary president, Sister Vandergrift, asking her to please call their class "Course 10 and

11," rather than Merrie Miss. At first Sister Vandergrift didn't want to do it, but then all the girls showed up wearing buttons Vonda had made for them that said CALL ME MERRIE MS., PLEASE. The next week the Merrie Miss sign came down off the row and Course 10 and 11 was in its place. I don't know why, but Sister Vandergrift seemed to think that was all right, and evidently no one from the stake noticed.

But Vonda Mae couldn't just stop there—not her, no sir. She was all the time talking to those girls about how important it was for them to prepare for careers and for missions. What happened to talking about preparing to raise a family?—is what I wanted to know. But despite all this, Vonda Mae didn't get herself released until she made buttons for all the girls that said PROSPECTIVE DEACON, which they wore to church once and only once. Even so, the Beehive teacher quit in hysterics about three weeks after several of Vonda's former Merrie Misses started attending Young Women. No one still knows for sure what happened, since the girls' parents are all too embarrassed to talk about it, but rumor has it that the new crop of Beehives just up and marched themselves into the

bishop's office and demanded that he make them all deacons. The Beehive teacher was absolutely sobbing to the Young Women's president, saying that she had had nothing to do with it and that she didn't know what she could do about stopping the girls from including Heavenly Mother in their prayers. She now attends the other ward.

The bishop first thought that just changing Vonda Mae's Primary assignment from Merrie Miss to Valiant A would suffice. But it wasn't long after that that her nine year-olds had to make a presentation in sharing time and the whole class, boys included, talked about how important it was to have a Heavenly Mother and to learn more about her. Bad enough that Vonda was wearing a button that said WITHOUT GOD THE MOTHER, WE HAVE A SINGLE-PARENT CELESTIAL HOUSEHOLD that day, but worse was that her Valiant A's had buttons that said HEAVENLY MOTHER, COME HOME! So then the bishop switched her to teaching the Sunbeams, where everyone thought there wouldn't be any way for her to spout her feminist notions to any real effect with three-year-olds.

I hate to say anything bad about any of God's chosen servants, but the bishop was, in a word, Wrong. Complaints began pouring in from all the Sunbeam parents whose children had learned "different" words to the Primary songs from Sister Woodruff. They were singing things like "I am a child of God, and They have sent me here," and "I know my Mother lives, and loves me, too," and learning new verses to "Book of Mormon Stories" that talked about women. But as usual it took a button to get the ball rolling for Vonda to get herself released. She made one for all her Sunbeams that said I WANT TO SING ABOUT HEAVENLY MOTHER.

Shortly after—the next week, if I remember correctly—Vonda Mae was released from the Primary with a vote of thanks and put into the nursery, where the kids were too little to know how to read. But after a while some parents complained that they couldn't safely send their older kids to collect their nursery-age brothers and sisters without they'd be corrupted by Vonda Mae's buttons. And more than one parent complained to the bishop that all of their children, no matter what age, were starting to ask very hard questions at Family Home Evening. So Vonda Mae ended up as assistant ward librarian. She was a real help in the library, said old Sister Partridge, who'd been the ward librarian so long that no one could even remember the last time they'd seen her in a regular Sunday School class. Vonda never complained about her new calling. In fact, she



After another hour of cross-examination, the skillful attorney managed to pester a full confession out of poor Mrs. Laban . . .



was just completely full of enthusiasm and was unusually helpful about getting visual aids for the teachers.

**B**UT then the real trouble began. Vonda Mae was taking it upon herself to “fix” some of the visual aids. Can you imagine! She’d find a poster that would say “Men are that they might have joy,” and go right ahead and make it read “Men [and women] are that they might have joy.” What’s more, she did it in magic marker, not pencil. Everybody who checked out Bibles or Triple Combinations found little pieces of paper in them with feminist thoughts on them. (“Consciousness raisers” is what Vonda called them.) And Vonda had taped a full typewritten page into all the other books and magazines and manuals saying what she thought was right or wrong about them. (“Critical reviews” is what Vonda called them.) And what else Vonda Mae did to the manuals, especially the YM and YW manuals, was almost unspeakable. I can’t imagine where she found the time to do this, but she went and read every single lesson manual and put her “corrections” (as she was pleased to call them) and “supplementary material” in all of them. (And she did all that in ink, too.) Some of the teachers never noticed the additions or corrections, but there were some teachers who were furious. The bishop was livid. But Vonda told him that she had the facts and the scriptural references to back up her views and to her mind it was high time that the Latter-day Saints stopped believing in 1950s fairy tales about men and women.

To make matters worse, Vonda Mae was something of an artist, and she also drew women in the pictures of the Last Supper. Things came to a head, though, when Brother Clark, who was one of the regular teachers of the elders quorum, ended up with a poster that said, “Let every man [and woman] learn his [or her] duty,” with women included in a picture of the priesthood blessing a baby. He nearly burst a blood vessel when he put it up on display and some of the brethren began to laugh. He went storming in to see the bishop—just left his class high and dry for the better part of ten minutes—and it was after that that Vonda Mae was released. We didn’t have the money to replace the corrupted posters and visual aids, so we either made do or we didn’t use them.

But by then the apostate influence of Vonda Mae had already started to make an impact. It hadn’t taken long for the ward to take sides once Vonda had started wearing her buttons all the time. Fully one-half of the ward refused to even look at Vonda Mae

when she’d come into the building, and some parents would hustle their children right by her so that the kids wouldn’t get corrupted. Vonda started getting hate mail, and she took to stapling up those letters and her long replies on the bulletin board for everyone to read. In all this time, though, only one person ever tried to forcibly remove one of Vonda’s buttons, and that was the one that said BIRTH CONTROL IS NOT A SIN. Sister Sorenson, who had ten children, took that as a personal slap in the face, and she told the bishop that no amount of apologies from Vonda Mae could ever lead her to forgive her.

But even though there were people who wouldn’t look at Vonda’s buttons, there were nearly as many people who would go right on up to her as soon as she’d come in to see what her latest button would say. They would ask her what it meant and Vonda Mae would tell them her ideas and some of them—not all, mind you, but some of those who listened—would actually be nodding their heads and agreeing with her! Even priesthood holders. And even people from the West who had been born and raised in the Church. One sister confided in me that

she’d just about worn a button herself to church, but had chickened out at the last minute.

That was when I took myself and went straight to the bishop. It’s got to stop, I told him. But he said that he’d already talked to Vonda Mae to no avail and besides which, there was nothing in the handbook about people wearing buttons to church, so long as they weren’t political. He said his hands were tied. Wasn’t that just like a man? But he did tell me that he’d finally managed to find Vonda Mae a calling where he was sure she couldn’t offend anyone—sacrament bread coordinator. (He’d first tried having her type up, copy, and pass out the program, but that only lasted two weeks because she kept including all kinds of pernicious feminist stuff.)

At first even Vonda couldn’t figure out a way to make a feminist statement out of making bread assignments, but it didn’t take her long. Now, see, everyone in the bishopric was agreed that the sacrament bread ought to be homemade whenever possible. At first Vonda tried to tell them that that wasn’t really important, but they stood firm on that





principle. So then she started getting very pointed about the way she'd assign the bread—every other week she'd ask a priesthood brother to bake and bring bread. And when she'd find out that Brother So-and-So would accept the assignment and then get his wife to bake the bread, she'd get right on the phone and reassign the same brother, telling him that since he'd raised his hand to sustain her in her calling, that meant he was to accept assignments himself and not to try to get out of them by making someone else do the work. She read about five different brothers the riot act and then after that the men just seemed to be resigned to taking their turns when they were asked. Sometimes the bread on those weeks was a little heavy, but usually the men did just fine and some of the women reported that their husbands had liked baking bread so much that they actually kept on doing it on their own. Other women reported that they got breadmaking machines on their birthdays or for Christmas. I will say that Vonda Mae was no respecter of marital status—she'd assign single men and single women and divorced ones and woe to anyone who showed up with a loaf of store-bought bread unless they had a good excuse. And even then Vonda Mae kept a loaf of homemade bread in the kitchen freezer at church just in case, which had the label on it, "If you even think about devouring this loaf that is meant to be used for the sacrament, you will be answerable to God." This kept even the missionary elders from eating it.

MEANWHILE Vonda Mae kept wearing a new button every week. She wore a button to every single church meeting she went to, including stake conference, and she would wear a bigger-than-usual button to any stake conference when a general authority was attending. She'd get in line to shake the authority's hand as bold as brass, and she would smile and thank him for his inspired talk. And she nearly always gave him a note or a letter to take back to the brethren in Salt Lake. If he'd been good about using what Vonda Mae called "gender-inclusive language," she'd make a point of telling him she'd noticed and that she was very grateful. But if he hadn't, she'd look for all the world as sorry as could be and say in a meek little voice about how she hoped he wouldn't think she was criticizing or trying to steady the ark or putting a hand on the wheel of the Good Ship Zion, but she was concerned about the girls thinking that they weren't important when all they were hearing was "men this" and "men that." And that even

though some older people knew that "men" used to mean "men and women," the young people didn't know that, so could he please keep that in mind the next time he'd be giving his otherwise very uplifting talk in a stake conference or wherever.

She was just as meek as you please, but I can't think that any of those brethren were fooled one minute, not with her sporting buttons right in front of their faces with apostate slogans like RELIEF SOCIETY—WOMEN TEACHING WOMEN WHAT MEN WANT THEM TO TEACH and ISN'T IT TIME TO LIFT EVE'S CURSE? and GOD LISTENS TO ALTERNATE VOICES.

But it was the button she wore that said LDS WOMEN: SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS IN GOD'S KINGDOM that made that one visiting general authority righteously indignant. He told her she shouldn't be questioning the Brethren and that she should accept the place God had assigned to women and not go around trying to be an influence and make other people uncomfortable. She just looked him straight in the eye and said, "Elder So-and-So, the God I worship isn't a sexist being. It's just too bad God has to work with mortals who can't see beyond people's sex organs in determining how best to use them in the kingdom." I was so shocked that she would say such a thing in church, let alone to a general authority, that I nearly forgot to look at the man's face. He was as shocked as I was I am sure, and he started getting red in the face, and then Vonda Mae said very sweetly, "May God bless you in the work of the Church, and please take this back to the Brethren in Salt Lake," and before he could even open his mouth to rebuke her, she'd stuck a letter in his hand and left the stand. The next week she wore a button that read WORTHY OF THE PRIESTHOOD IN EVERY WAY—JUST THE WRONG SEX.

It wasn't long after that, of course, that Vonda Mae really got her comeuppance. Some say it was because of that general authority, and some say it was because of all the letters she'd been sending to Salt Lake, but I think it was the Lord's own vengeance upon her for the apostasy of feminism. As I said before, her buttons had been getting more and more outrageous, but the last one was the corker, the straw that broke the camel's back. It said SENILITY HINDERS REVELATION FROM MOTHER IN HEAVEN, and if that wasn't evil speaking of the Lord's Anointed, I cannot ever hope to know what is. Apparently the bishop agreed because as soon as he saw that button just before sacrament meeting, he told one of his counselors to start the meeting without him, and he just about literally

dragged Vonda Mae into his office. It wasn't my place, but I needed a drink of water and they were yelling at each other and the Court of Love was held soon thereafter.

The upshot of which was that Vonda Mae was placed on probation and that she would only be allowed to come to church if she would stop wearing buttons. So far she's only come when one of her children has to give a talk. She wears feminist earrings, but since they don't say anything no one really minds them.

But her influence was felt, and not a week went by after the Court of Love when six other women in our ward—and all but two from the East—started wearing buttons, and all the buttons said ELIZA R. SNOW WOULD BE APPALLED! Where will it end? □



## SAYING WRITE US

She drew the knife down, across, fragmenting both onions on the worn cutting board. When tears bit her eyelids she thought of other smells, sea water and the odors of her children that not even her husband recognized. He thought she should have done something. That when their

second daughter called her and said she'd left college to ride up the California coast on a motorcycle, she should have explained that this was nineteen ninety-two and now completing school was stylish. But as she had held the phone that afternoon, she couldn't

remember her children's smells or even orange blossoms outside her parents' house. She only smelled oak paneling and her secretary's strong lemony perfume. Saying "Write us" had seemed sensible. She wiped her hand on her apron and gripped the thigh underneath.

—HOLLY WELKER