

## TURNING THE TIME OVER TO...

Heather Sundahl

## RELIEF SOCIETY BABY



CHRISTOPHER THURNACK

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**M**Y MOM calls me her Relief Society baby. She served in the stake or ward Relief Society presidency on and off from the time I was born until, well, last December. Although "Relief Society baby" was a term of endearment, for years it triggered only resentment and sarcasm. "I'm not your baby," I'd think. "Relief Society is." And so I grew up hating what I saw as this other, favorite child. I became the jealous sibling, too needy not to compete, too small to win. Yet I rarely resented my three older siblings. In fact, we were all a united front against this monster child that sucked up my

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mom. Only recently am I finally learning to put away my sibling rivalry, accept this other child, and embrace sisterhood.

Most of my early memories involve Relief Society. I still feel the anxiety and shame of my first full-blown lie. I was pestering my mother to read to me, but every time she sat down with the book, the phone rang. It was "business": a meeting to be scheduled, a casserole to be delivered, a lesson to coordinate, a service project to plan, a counselor to be released. . . . The phone (Relief Society's ultimate weapon) was the enemy—more frequent than meetings, longer than visiting teaching. For what seemed like the hundredth time, my mother sat down and opened up the book. But before the twelve dancing princesses could even get their shoes on, the phone rang again. I hopped off her

lap and picked it up. "Hello?" I said, my voice tiny with fear. "Is your mommy home?" It was the stake president. I paused only long enough to shift away from my mother's "I-can-see-right-through-you" blue eyes. "No. She isn't." Click. "It was for Angela," I said smoothly, the lie becoming my friend. And the twelve princesses danced until dawn in a frenzy only deceit can inspire.

In order to spend more time with Mom, I refused to go to preschool. Tiring of my tears, she gave in. My favorite part of those days was visiting teaching. Each woman was a godmother to me, kind and tender, granting unlimited cookie rights and swapping stories like recipes. Those magical visits first showed me the beauty of female friendship—how praying, encouraging, and kvetching is an unparalleled joy.

Another reason I enjoyed accompanying Mom was that she seemed so powerful and important when she did her job. There was a notable difference between Mom as housewife and Mom as Sister Bickmore, the stake Relief Society president. Like Clark Kent emerging from the phone booth as Superman, Mom would hop into our Country Squire and become Supermormon, the most powerful woman in the stake. Mom was legendary, a modern Martha, forever behind the scenes, making sure all was well in the community. And she loved it. People respected her for her competence as well as her compassion, her brains as well as her brownies.

Unfortunately, womanhood was not so revered in my home. It was seen as a noble calling, in an abstract sense. But in real family life, the implicit assumption was that the sons were smarter than the daughters, that Dad's job was more "real" than Mom's homemaking, and that a "logical," emotionally removed (read "male") approach to life was superior to an intuitive or care-giving (read "female") approach. Perhaps my father is simply a product of a generation that emphasized providing over interacting. My brothers, however, see my dad in an entirely different light; while Angela and I struggle to conjure up memories of childhood with him included, Lee and Danny recall not just a provider, but a Scoutmaster, a tee-ball coach, and a friend.

If my home had had fewer gender-based boundaries, I might not have resented being female so much. So although my time with Mom revealed the potential power of womanhood, I began to believe, as I got older, that men were indeed superior—why else would Dad take the boys places and not the girls? It is ironic that just when I might have started

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seeing Relief Society as an ally, not an enemy, I instead saw femininity as a flaw and womanhood as a consolation prize in some twisted, pre-mortal gender game that I had lost.

As I entered BYU, my resentment for my mother (and in some ways all women) intensified. I learned the language of the academy, the language of power—the father tongue, which Ursula Le Guin says is “the language of thought that seeks objectivity,” and “distancing—making a gap, a space, between the subject or self and the object or other.”<sup>1</sup> Finally, I had learned to detach myself and look coolly upon the rest of the world. Maybe I was as good as my brothers. I practiced this new dialect on my father, and, to my delight and surprise, he listened. I reveled in my proficiency in the father tongue since “those who don’t know it or won’t speak it are silent, or silenced, or unheard.”<sup>2</sup> I would be silent no more. I openly scorned Relief Society with its lace tablecloths, floral dresses, tears, and touchy-feely attitude. Things like Relief Society made women seem silly and emotional. I stopped attending Relief Society altogether and occasionally sat in on a priesthood meeting. Not a chiffon

bow in sight. I thought I was in heaven.

Thus I started to become the woman Le Guin describes as estranged and alienated from the feminine:

She recoils from the idea of sisterhood and doesn’t believe women have friends . . . and anyhow, A Woman is afraid of women. She’s a male construct, and she’s afraid women will deconstruct her.<sup>3</sup>

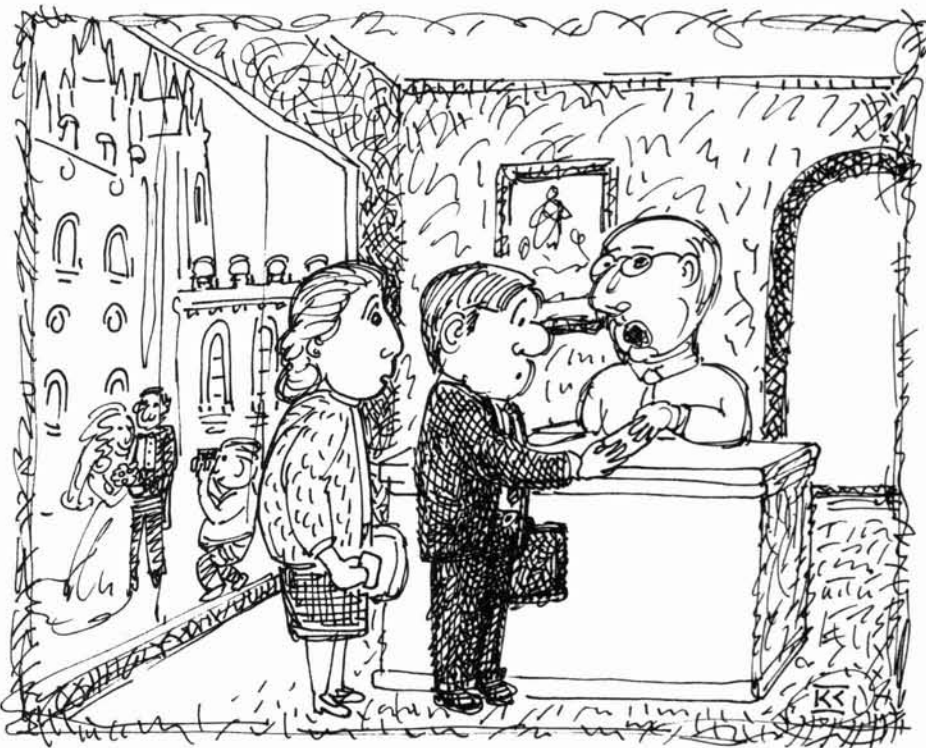
I did not reject women completely, just the ones I felt gave the rest of us a bad name. The summer after my freshman year, I read Ayn Rand, hung out with guys, and, when my mom coerced me (“How would it look if the stake Relief Society president’s daughter wasn’t in attendance?”), went to Relief Society and didn’t talk to a soul.

Returning to BYU, I studied gender theory and women’s literature with some of the finest souls I’ve ever encountered. At first I was resistant, thinking feminism was for women who couldn’t quite cut it in this man’s world. But I read and listened and for the first time spoke up about what being a woman meant to me. Feminism was not a philosophical weed, but a tree with many branches, most of which reach up toward the

light. I also realized that it was not only okay to be a woman, but that it was incredible. When I read Grace Paley, Maxine Hong Kingston, or Terry Tempest Williams, it was like a revelation: “Verily, verily, thus spoke Woman.” Here were voices that shared my world, my language. They fit. Not like a glove, but like a pair of faded jeans, snug enough to feel secure, baggy enough to accommodate my tush (another legacy from the women on my mother’s side), and roomy enough to grow into. By recognizing feminism as an empowering philosophy and not a crutch for weaklings, I took my first step toward sisterhood. Like those days of visiting teaching with my mom, I again felt the security and power of the female community.

Unfortunately, due to my youth (okay, immaturity), I included only others who felt as I felt and believed in my sorority. How could I relate to women who dropped out of school to get married? Or women who said, “My husband thinks . . .” when they answered a question in Sunday School? Or women who said, “Who cares?” to Heavenly Mother, sexism, or BYU’s Women’s Resource Center? So although I had discovered my own voice and embraced my own womanhood, I still had a hard time listening to the many voices of Relief Society. Wasn’t it little more than a catering service for wedding receptions and stake functions? To me, it symbolized servitude and self-delusion: Can you really heal anybody with a casserole?

Aside from conflicting views of womanhood, my mother and I had other barriers. I always felt that she substituted the external for the internal and sought politeness over intimacy. If I came to her crying, instead of empathy, I’d get a bowl of soup. If I was depressed, instead of a heart-to-heart, she’d clean my room. I have difficulty seeing past these acts, and as a result, I have never felt like my mother and I were friends. When my resentment over the years I spent as her Relief Society orphan overflowed (and it did regularly), I would attack her hypocrisy, citing many of my friends’ moms who worked “outside the home” who were around more than she was. What was the virtue of staying home if your Church calling required the better part of your time and energy? Yet inwardly I blamed myself. Somewhere inside I felt I’d failed as a daughter. Why else would she have privileged her calling above my needs?



*"May I also see a driver's license and a major credit card?"*

It wasn't until one late summer night right after I got married that I finally understood. I was in my old room, sitting on the bed, looking at some of my old books. *Amelia Bedelia*, *Horton Hatches an Egg*, *The Brut Family*—you know the kind. Mom came in and sat next to me.

"I used to love to read to you kids," she said, picking up a book of Norwegian fairy tales. "This was Danny's favorite." She sighed and adjusted her reading glasses, thumb at the bottom of the lens, index finger on her temple. The other fingers fanned out in a fluid motion. (There is something swan-like in her gestures and carriage. Dad calls it class. I call it grace.) "I read it to him so many times we both knew it by heart. But I can't remember what I read to you." Her eyes searched the stack as she stroked the fairy tales.

"I don't know, Mom. I don't remember you reading to me all that much," I said, trying to be honest but not accusatory. At twenty-two, I was getting tired of accusations. She looked at me and smiled. "That's right. You were my Relief Society baby. I never really got a chance to read to you like I did with the others." Something in her voice seemed to invite sincere dialogue, so I cautiously approached her about my childhood. I shared my hurt over feeling second best. I told her about the lie to the stake president and my anger at Dad's emotional abandonment. I let it all out. But not to hurt her. It was as if we had momentarily been joined emotionally and could share freely without defense or judgment. She listened with her soul, and I spoke with my heart. She paused when I finished, and then she shared her heart with me. "Do you know what it's like," she said, "to raise small children, keep your husband happy, and run a household efficiently? It's a lot of work, which I don't mind. Growing up, I looked forward to it. I'd watch Mom and Dad in the kitchen canning peaches together and thought that was what marriage was. Dad always did chores. He didn't just 'help out.' He assumed responsibility and enjoyed being with Mother. But their relationship was unusual."

She paused and smoothed the pillowcases. "No one acknowledges housework. No one really cares if your children are clean or if you have a dust-free coffee table. Not that those things aren't important, but there is no recognition. But to successfully organize and cater a luncheon for 300? That's different. You see, Hedy, in the Relief Society my importance was acknowledged. My skills were valued and praised. It gave me confidence and enabled me to grow in infinite ways."

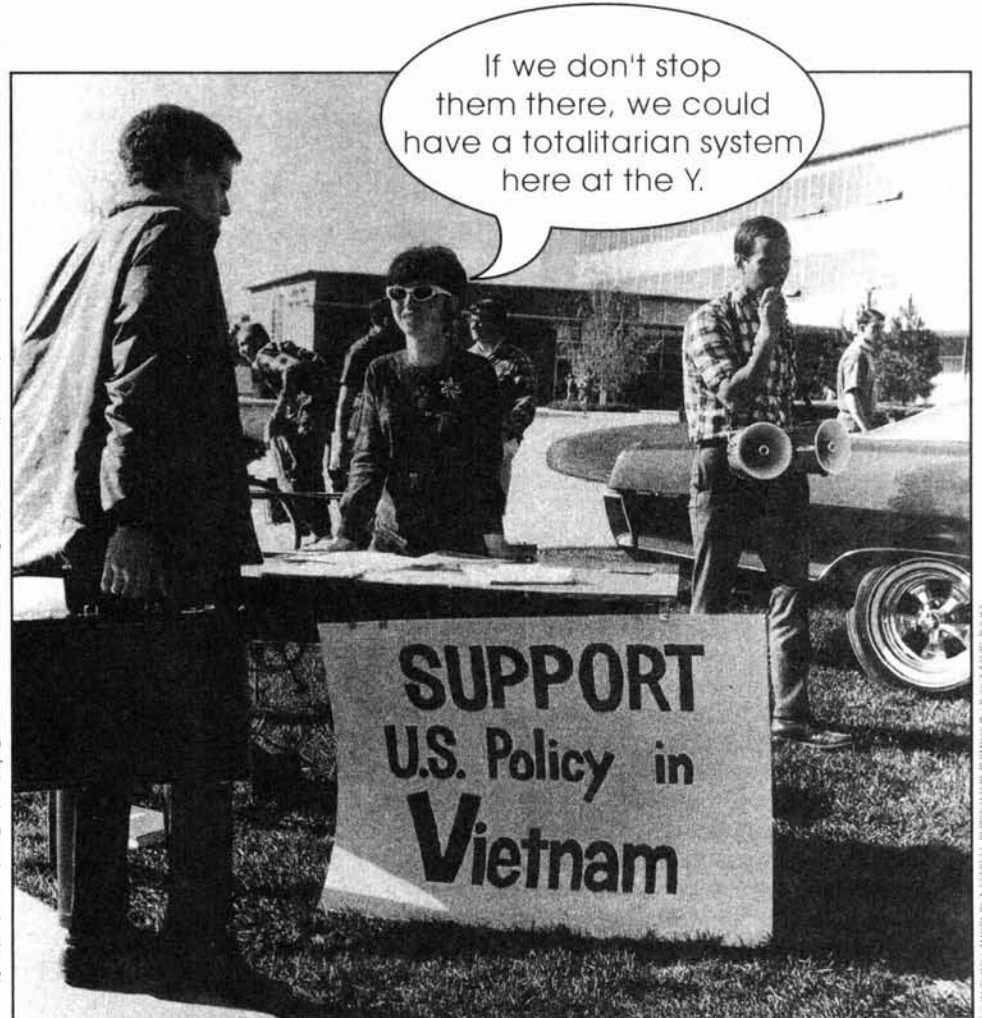
"But Mom," I said, "was all of that more important than me?" She shook her head slowly and without shame. "No. But did you ever stop to think that it was better to be raised as a Relief Society baby than to have a mother with no self-esteem?" Her words were fire, burning away my ignorance and self-pity. I began to understand. I had not been abandoned. Her confidence and her power were her gifts to me. And, in a way, they are more precious because we had both paid for them together. That night changed me. I had experienced an intimacy with my mother that—however rare—binds me to her. We had heard each other. It also awakened in me a new perspective on my childhood, my mother, and the power of Relief Society.

**S**INCE then, my understanding and appreciation of Relief Society has continued to grow. Last year my husband and I had the fantastic and hellish opportunity to teach English at a university in Qingdao, China. Since the nearest branch was sixteen hours by train, we became a con-

gregation of two. There's nothing like distance for perspective. Midway through our stay, we traveled to Hong Kong over Chinese New Year. I couldn't wait for Sunday. I wanted to go to Relief Society.

When I sat in that room filled with women from all over the world, I felt home again. I cried during the opening song. I cried during announcements about home-making meeting. And I bawled when I stood and bore my testimony of Christ and the joy of sisterhood as embodied by that group of beautiful Saints. Like Ursula Le Guin, I wanted to shout: "Listen to other women, your sisters, your mothers, your grandmothers—if you don't hear them, how will you ever understand what your daughter says to you?"<sup>4</sup>

Since returning from Qingdao, I often contemplate the unfavorable conditions for women in China and for women in general. What can be done to ease the burdens and lighten the hearts of women everywhere? I used to feel a new ideology was the solution. I felt that if women could socially and politically assert their worth, they could begin to





discover their power. And in many ways, there are battles to be won with some types of feminist artillery. But, now, I also look to the tools of my mother, and her mother before her, to aid me in helping my sisters.

Many of these tools are in the kitchen. A casserole's merely a mixture of ingredients, but it can be something more. There is something sacred about the loaf of bread or plate of cookies that one woman has created to console another. Many women use cooking to express their love and attentiveness. A casserole can be consecrated. Other women speak through quilting or knitting, each stitch a testament of faith and hope. Ultimately, each woman must find her own tools of liberation.

I have much to learn from my sisters, and I have much to share. So I loan Mom Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, and she gives me Lorraine Trout's Chinese Chicken Salad recipe. And we respect each other.

On Sundays, I attend Relief Society and am happy to be there. I sit next to strangers and schmooze with them about their pretty ring or shake my head in sympathy as they tell me about working a seventy-hour week in a low-paying, dead-end job. At night, I lie in bed and worry about women. I see the faces of my dear Chinese students. I want them to know about the Savior. I want them to unite as sisters and share their strength. I also want them to find happiness, even if it means bucking tradition and telling their parents that they will not marry the man their father has picked. And I want my BYU freshmen to come back next year and the year after, until they graduate—even if they get married. Even if they have babies. I want to be assigned back to the less active sister I used to visit teach so that I can make her chocolate chip cookies and share the sweetness of the gospel.

I HAVE learned to take comfort in tangible things. Tonight, as I lie in bed, my hands finger the quilt that envelops me, and I talk-story to God. It's a habit I started as a child. I lie there and just think, say, or feel whatever is on my mind. As a little girl, I loved rambling to God because there were no interruptions—no phones, no timers, no agendas—only the eternity that lay between me and sleep. As an adult, I find this space even more precious. I listen to my husband's labored breathing, and I breathe with him, imagining that I can breathe away his cold. Tonight, I will ask for his health.

As I pull the quilt tighter around us, I try to imagine the women who made it. The woman in Beijing who sold it to me was old

and tiny, so that is how I envision its creators: tiny hands, tiny bodies, tiny feet made tinier having once been bound, receiving tiny salaries. Such women are the heart of China. Theirs are the dreams of the day when these hands will unite in sisterhood, carrying the load of Christ. They will hear him calling, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. . . . For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matt. 11:28.) And finally, they will know peace.

We sisters in the Relief Society—in fact, all women everywhere—are like this quilt. We are of many colors and patterns, shapes and sizes. United we can create a safe and warm place for people to lie down and find

rest. We are bound together by sisterhood, one of love's greatest forms. As I lie here, this quilt tucks me in, each stitch a kiss, each square a blessing. When I close my eyes, I see myself tying fat yarn on a calico quilt, surrounded by women and babies. My mother and grandmothers are there, showing me how. Homemaking, I mumble, and drift into a delicious sleep. ☞

#### NOTES

1. Ursula K. Le Guin, "Bryn Mawr Commencement Address," in *A Community of Voices: Reading and Writing in the Disciplines*, ed. Toby Fulwiler and Arthur W. Biddle (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 397–408.

2. Le Guin, 398.

3. Le Guin, 406.

4. Le Guin, 407.



### THE SWIMMER

He was in the Red Sea, skin-diving, when God gripped his forehead and told him, "Grow your hair long now" and made the fish around him resonate like a configuration of door knobs before someone who wants to go outside. So it was true: God, the universe's greatest spy, knew how he packed his suitcase, knew how much oxygen remained in his lungs as he extended his arms and fluttered his legs twenty feet below the ocean's surface surrounded by blue and black and yellow fish, their tiny jaws clicking open and shut like the latch to the room where, he knew now, God had been watching the day he arranged his dreams into a wreath of inconsolable flowers unfolding with reckless grace until their petals dropped out in clusters and clumps and utter defiance of the lavish capture of time he had first sensed was possible when one day in the library every body of water in the book on *The Lovely Lakes of Europe* had seemed to him a flawless blue masterpiece and the best reason he could give for wanting to learn to swim.

—HOLLY WELKER