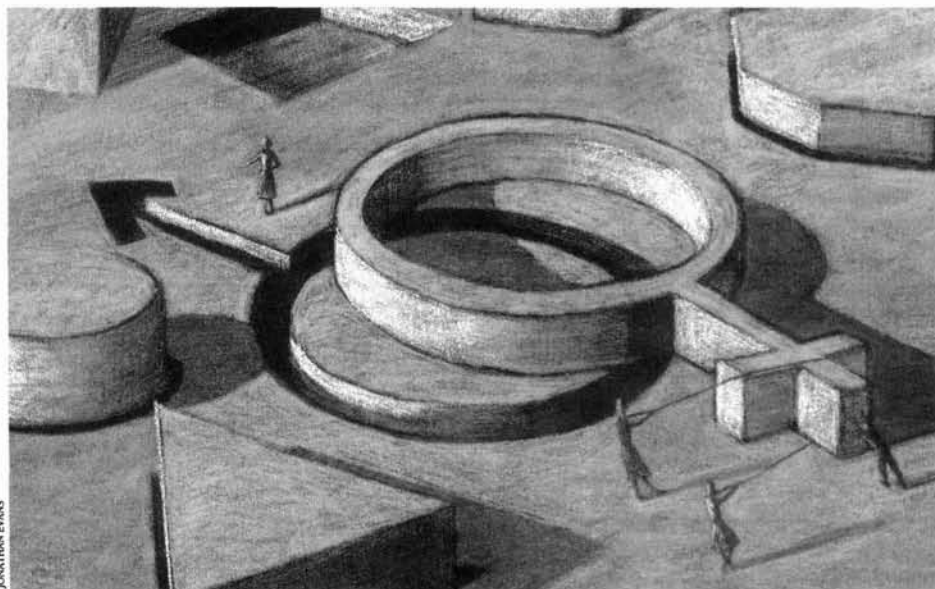


MOVING BEYOND THE PRIESTHOOD DEBATE: WOMEN'S AND MEN'S MODELS OF SPIRITUALITY

By Karen Farb Tullis



I have no doubt that ordination to the priesthood would be very affirming for women, but I question whether the priesthood as it is currently defined and practiced will ultimately empower them.

IN THE APRIL 1992 general conference, Chieko Okazaki spoke about connections between people. To illustrate her point, she made a "cat's cradle"—a horizontal crisscross pattern—out of string, a symbol of people vitally connected to one another. The space between the strings, she said, represents Christ's love, which allows the pattern to occur. I was intrigued by this familiar, yet novel illustration—a horizontal pattern of connection. And while I was relieved that the pattern she used was horizontal—as it resonates with my experience—part of me was expecting her to turn the cat's cradle on its side, making it into a vertical pattern. The cat's cradle turned on

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edge is "Jacob's ladder"—a more typical model in our church for both our relationships with each other and with God.

Sister Okazaki's example demonstrates a model of relationship that is non-hierarchical—but equally and vitally connected. It also brings to light some different notions of what it is to be in relationship to both God and each other, while an expectation of the ladder highlights the constant pressure on women and men to tell stories and use examples that support a hierarchical view of relationships. This hierarchical view comes from the structure of the priesthood—the governing and ecclesiastical body of the church.

The models we use to explain our relationships with each other and with God have an impact on our understanding of these relationships. I believe that this story demonstrates some basic differences between women's and men's experiences of relation-

ship, authority, power, spiritual growth, and definition of self. Most, if not all of the metaphors in our religion (save the ones used by Sister Okazaki) and the tradition it was born of have been conceptualized by men. When only one model is presented, it is experienced as and thought to be the only way. Yet when another model is introduced, what was once thought of as the only reality becomes merely one possibility.

What happens internally to a person when his or her experiences, thoughts, and ideas do not fit the espoused models, metaphors, or ideals? All of us have had experiences of trying to measure up to a model or an ideal—as parents, spouses, students, professionals, missionaries, Mormons, sports enthusiasts—and we have all tried various strategies to deal with the inevitable misfit. Some try to force their experiences to fit the model. But thoughts, ideas, and experiences that don't fit may split off from the psyche, and, depending upon how painful the misfit, conscious or unconscious feelings of guilt may result. Some may simply try very hard to ignore whatever doesn't fit, while others may invent ways to make their experiences fit and still feel okay about leaving the parts that don't fit unexplained. Some reject the notion of prototypes altogether, claiming that they aren't based on any one person's real life. Still others may find that the model is just that—one model and not the reality—and may look for another way of doing things. When it comes to our spiritual life and understanding, should we simply ignore areas that don't fit the currently espoused model? Or should we take these opportunities to explore ourselves, our spirituality, and our relationships with each other and with God?

The question of how we as individuals deal with spiritual models and prototypes applies to all of us in the Church. We all have very personal spiritual experiences, and at the same time we are confronted with specifically defined notions of spirituality. These notions, which I feel generally reflect male experience, must be scrutinized if we are to incorporate female members' spiritual experiences. And the Church's expansion to many non-Western and non-industrialized peoples will further impel us to understand the Western, male roots of many of our theological models and practices. In this article, I will concentrate on how women's metaphors and models may not necessarily fit the currently espoused notions of spirituality and priesthood.

I have no doubt that if women and men are ever going to think of each other as equals within the Church, it will be as a result of women receiving the priesthood. I also have no doubt that ordination will be

*Abraham was willing to kill his son for the principle of obedience;
Hannah's obedience included negotiation with the Lord.*

very affirming for women, who will finally think of themselves as equals to the men who have stood in authority over them all of their lives. I question, however, whether the priesthood as it is currently defined and practiced will ultimately empower women. I fear that instead of being empowered, women would again find a mold they have not created but into which they would have to fit. Priesthood, as the power of God, has been defined in practice and theory by men since both the proverbial and literal Adam. Men have created a language to describe it, rituals to pass it on, and norms for its practice. And naturally, they have created this language, practice, and theology out of *their* experience—their bodies, their lives, their relationships, their constructions of reality, and their understandings of spirituality.

After Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery aggressively sought and then received the priesthood, they in turn gave it to other men. Joseph and Oliver had the power, authority, and influence to construct priesthood's modern-day meaning, usage, and relevance. With their own understandings of religion and spirituality, coupled with revelation, they laid the foundation of the practice and meaning of the priesthood. Women, on the other hand, having only recently come into some influence in the Church and society, are just now beginning to understand (through their own work and research) how their reality differs from men's. Unfortunately, we women do not have other women in spiritual power to receive and shape a priesthood for us. While women hold spiritual leadership roles, such as in the Relief Society and Young Women's presidencies, they may be viewed only as administrators and role models, and are not given the same respect for interpreting and understanding theology as are general authorities. How do we as a people, and as women, view women's authority and ability to interpret and understand doctrine?

A HISTORY OF WOMEN AND MALE-
CONSTRUCTED MODELS

*Why don't we tell Hannah and Samuel's story
as much as we do Abraham and Isaac's?*

IN the sixties and seventies, record numbers of women began pursuing careers but found that the career world belonged to men. Women felt validated on many levels when they entered and suc-

ceeded in this male world. The feminist movement found giving up all that was "feminine" more acceptable than not entering the workplace. In fact, many defined feminism as the swapping of the feminine for the masculine. This kind of conformity, however, is not acceptable for many women and feminists anymore. Women have found that their experiences are not the same as men's. Women do not want to deny, devalue, or doubt their own experience, or silence parts of themselves in order to succeed. Much of the business world no longer expects a woman to give up being a woman in order to work. More and more women are able to manage on their own terms; they undertake research with expanded methodologies; they trade, barter, and negotiate in a way that is inclusive of relationships; they construct non-hierarchical businesses.

But this change has taken twenty years, and the fallout from this painful process is immeasurable. Yet this societal shift appears to be an unavoidable process. Throughout history, women who have wanted to stretch beyond the role handed them have had to strike out on their own. We have rarely been invited to join male domains—at least initially. Women were not invited to Harvard College; Radcliffe, its "sister" college, was started by women for women. And only after it found success did Harvard allow some women to take a few classes; eventually, the two colleges merged. Similarly, women were not invited to join the priesthood and so came up with the Relief Society. Joseph, upon hearing the plan for the proposed Relief Society, said he would provide "something better for them. . . . I will organize the women . . . after the priesthood and after the pattern of the priesthood."¹

Women in our culture have been taught, to one extent or another, to seek validation from men on many levels—from our fathers that we were daddy's girl, from our brothers that we were as cool as they were (whether or not we really liked playing army), from bishops that we were worthy of callings, from boyfriends, professors, bosses, husbands. We have sought validation that our bodies were beautiful, that we were attractive, smart, witty, desirable, spiritual, marriageable. Overall, men are seen as the movers and the shakers of the world—they get the attention, the jobs, the money, both from other men as well as from women—so

for women to seek their validation makes some practical sense. To want the priesthood that men have, their positions of leadership, their privileges to shape and interpret theology—this priesthood envy is not out of order. But instead of conforming to a certain male model to gain validation, we must seek to understand what *our* metaphors of spirituality are so that we may feel empowered from within.

In moving beyond the priesthood debate, I align myself with others who claim that women need to find their own meanings within spirituality—that we need to actively, individually *and* collectively, define what we spiritually and ecclesiastically need and want. I think that the current practices and definitions of the priesthood meet the spiritual and psychological needs of men, but this model has been applied to all of us; any deviation from it has been seen as not normal, or even bad.

In Western civilization, women's thinking and psychology have been largely misunderstood by both men and women. Harvard developmental psychologist Carol Gilligan has written that when women try to fit into the male culture at large, the usual result is that they, and others without power, are either knowingly or unknowingly silenced.² It is extremely difficult to empower powerless group A by passing down dominant group B's norms of thought, speech, and belief. Usually, the dominant group's construction of language, thought, and action is viewed by that group, as well as by other less powerful groups, to be *the* reality; the minority group's practices are viewed as less developed. This group in turn must adapt by psychologically splitting off parts of themselves, resulting in a good/bad split between what is espoused and what is experienced.

For example, until recently, psychologists thought of women as less sophisticated in reasoning, less logical in moral thinking, and in a state of fusion within relationships.³ More recent research has shown that women's moral reasoning is not inferior to men's, and that rather than basing their moral thought on a system of laws and hierarchical rules, women base their moral thinking on a system of care and connection. So rather than subverting hierarchical laws, women take context into consideration. Gilligan has found, for example, that girls will stop a game if someone is not fitting in or having a

good time. It is more important for them that everyone be taken care of than for the game to go on. Furthermore, girls usually engage in inclusive games that provide a role for everyone. In boys' games, someone who does not fit in or follow the rules is "out." Boys play games with strict rules and hierarchies—some people definitely are "better" at a game than others—with obvious winners and losers. For boys, games, not their participants, are the focus.

These two different approaches don't always fall under categories of gender. Last week in Relief Society, a young sister expressed some concern over a sibling who was no longer active in the Church and as a result was no longer included in her family functions. One woman brought up the question of which is more important—the family rules or the person. Yet another sister countered by saying that as Church members we have the truth, and we know the rules to live to get back to our Heavenly Father—either you're in or out. This comment stopped all conversation about the matter, since this approach honoring the rules rather than the people involved is privileged in the Church.

Another example might be Abraham, who was willing to kill his son for the principle of obedience. (See Gen. 22.) In contrast, Hannah was hesitant to give up her baby Samuel to the Lord. (See 1 Sam. 1.) Hannah's obedience was based on her connection to her infant and the Lord, and her story is one of negotiation—she balanced her needs and her child's needs with those of the Lord. While I assume that both of these parents loved their children, each expressed and defined that love quite differently. Hannah's

love was defined by connection; Abraham's was defined by obedience to a hierarchy in which the Lord held the highest position. And just as Abraham followed the Lord, Isaac, in turn, was to show love for his father by obeying his instruction. If these two stories can be taken as representative, it would appear that men and women have different notions of spirituality and the human relationship with God. In each story, obedience was important, but it played out differently.

Abraham's story of spiritual development is the one that has been retold many times: through self-subverting obedience we will find favor with the Lord and ultimately be able to return to him. Hannah's story of connection and negotiation with the Lord is not as familiar, probably because it does not reflect the model of spiritual development currently espoused in the Church. But for me, a woman, the story of Abraham and Isaac has always felt wildly immoral and selfish, while Hannah's story feels real and understandable. Yet it has been difficult to voice this opinion in church, since Abraham has become the only model of righteous obedience. My understanding of what is a moral person has been forced into a model it clearly did not fit. As women, we do have our own spiritual interests, experiences, and practices. Our spirituality, our constructs of theology, and our interpretations of our relationship with God reflect our understandings of self and other. As a developmental psychologist, through my own research and that of others, I understand that women and men come to know and conceptualize self and other through very different experiences, starting as early as infancy. These differences should be reflected

in the priesthood women have.

MALE AND FEMALE DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS

Men separate themselves from their women caregivers, while women connect with them.

IN Western societies, we view infants as highly dependent beings with the potential of eventual independence. Our very notion of selfhood includes differentiation and separation from others. But for male infants dependent upon female primary caregivers, this developmental task becomes tricky. Nancy Chodorow theorizes that in order to differentiate from their female caregivers, male infants must become independent of them.⁴ Becoming a self for males means separating from the mother, a female. For the growing toddler and preschool male, close relationships with female caregivers are simultaneously desired and guarded against, since they threaten both selfhood and development of gender identity. So the male self is experienced separately and autonomously; relationships are viewed with suspicion as encroaching upon the developing self.

Unlike males, females do not need to totally differentiate themselves from their female caregivers who also serve as their gender role models.⁵ In fact, female infants seek to identify with their female caregivers as part of their development of self. Relationships, then, are not experienced as a problem or threat to individuation. Instead, the experience of relationship is an integral part of self-development.⁶ The self, therefore, does not have to totally separate from (m)others in order to be different, and relationships are experienced as necessary for growth. Others are experienced as connected to the self.

Male and female children in our culture grow up with different experiences of self—one conceptualized as separate, one connected—and different experiences of relationships—one as possible threat, one as enhancement. The worlds of men and women are shaped by these powerful, albeit different, experiences of self and relationships. Generally speaking, women base their ideas of theology, relationships, and philosophy on their experiences of inclusion and connection. Men, on the other hand, structure their philosophies, theology, and relationships based on their experiences of separation. But the concept of relationships is tricky when separation is the developmental goal. The need to remain separate in order to protect the individuation of the self conflicts with relationships. And since humans are so-



"Mrs. Smith . . . ? This is Elder Jones. You've been chosen for a free trial membership!"

If we look at Christ's life from a female perspective, perhaps we will be able to add to our understanding of the meaning of his life.

cial beings, this is especially problematic.

Hierarchical forms of relationships have been a solution to the male problem of preservation of self. Through hierarchy, men can protect their needs for separation and protect their individuation through status. In a hierarchy, people are either above or below each other—always maintaining some sort of boundary, some type of separation between self and other.

Christianity puts men in an awkward position. Christian principles of loving and serving others challenge this understanding of "separate" relationships. If men see non-hierarchical relationships as a possible encroachment on the self, then loving and serving others can certainly be threatening. The writers of the New Testament grappled with this "threat" as they tried to make sense of Jesus' radical doctrine to "love one another." (John 13:34.) This new doctrine is worded in a way that makes service and love of others a means toward the finding of the self, or at least a requirement for the ultimate reward—life with God and Christ. So rather than self-depletion, love of others is newly cast in the light of self-enhancement.

As a hierarchy, the priesthood is a nice solution to the problem of balancing self-protection and Christian requirements of giving of the self. While men serve others, separation from the other is preserved through the rank and status of the priesthood offices. Christian principles of love and service are incorporated into the hierarchy as a means of advancement.

Women, on the other hand, see neither the intimacy of serving one another nor the connection of loving one another as a threat. We have no need for hierarchy to protect individuation as we love and serve others. We do not need or want to distance ourselves from each other through rank and status. We don't need to conquer ourselves to serve others (a doctrine that has always seemed foreign to me), nor do we fear connections with others, since we have experienced relationships not as fusion or a loss of self, but as enhancement to ourselves. Service isn't seen as sacrifice of the self, but as a part of the connectedness of everyday human life. A hierarchy of rules is not as necessary to govern relationships that ensure service and love for each other; for women, an ethic of care and connection explains the functioning of rela-

tionships. Structures, rank, laws governing relationships, lists of self-conquering exercises—hierarchy—do not feel useful to women. They may, in fact, make women feel distanced from relationships and from our spiritual interests. Relationships, love, service, and spirituality presented in a linear, stair-like, or ladder-like model do not resonate with women's real life experiences.

MALE AND FEMALE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Men approach God through obedience to rules; women through understanding self and others.

SPIRITUAL development and relationship with God, then, may differ between the sexes. Spiritual growth for LDS men is perceived as movement within the hierarchy. Within both the spiritual hierarchy and priesthood hierarchy, God is in the top position. All underlings must obey those in the higher status positions, who have received the word from God. Spiritual growth is advancement through obedience. Again the metaphor of the ladder—the more we obey, the higher we step up toward God. As men progress in the hierarchy, they attain more prominent positions which provide them more power to act as individuals. They literally become the "judges in Israel." Judging (or our notion of judgment) requires total separation, even "objectivity," or, in other words, consideration of neither connection nor context. Finally, God the Father is conceptualized as the ultimate judge. And, as a judge, he is separated from man. Man must therefore do all that he can to progress within the hierarchy, to obey and climb the ladder; that is the only way to attain redemption and reunion with God.

My experience, and that of many women with whom I have spoken, is that God, like other people, is not completely "separate" from us. Understanding and loving the self and others is also understanding and loving God. We are all connected in different ways. Just as infant girls experience relationships with their caregivers as part of their growing identities, God is, to me, a part of myself. Lists of steps for a closer relationship with God seem almost blasphemous, denying what I have felt my relationship with God to be. As I get to know myself, others, and situations in the world around me, I understand

more of who and what God is. Understanding is my spiritual journey, a journey that connects me with others on their journeys. So coming into a relationship with God feels less to me like steps on a ladder and more like a process of discovering myself, others, and the context in which we all live.

Achieving closeness to God through prerequisite laws depends on the view that God is outside of the self, that only through conquering or disciplining the self can it be achieved. Yet if God is within all of us, understanding God requires not the conquering of self, but a deep understanding of self and others. Laws seem arbitrary at times, even at odds with approaching God through understanding the self (self-in-relation-to-God). What feels right to me is not necessarily obedience, but knowledge. Obedience may make me "close" in proximity to God, but proximity does not guarantee intimacy, understanding, or "being with." Being with God, or anyone else, for that matter, is not accomplished through mere proximity. "Being with" is gradually attained through understanding, sharing, negotiating, and, ultimately, knowing.

The issue of women and priesthood is a question of women and our understanding of redemption. I fundamentally believe that Christ is central to our redemption. But in current LDS theology, Christ is merely the means of mercy in a hierarchical progression model, with God as the judge. Yet the most important thing that Christ taught and lived is the "rule" of loving one another. This puts a spin on the previously mentioned Relief Society sister's comment: yes, we do have the truth, and the truth is that we should love one another. The person is not only more important than the rules, the rule is love for that person. Christ's example is female as well as male. I often think about what his life, teachings and example have given us—a role of love, an example of a connected relationship with a Father in Heaven—a self-in-relation-ship with God. Christ's life has been interpreted through an obedience and repentance model, with Christ as a gatekeeper to grace and forgiveness. If we look at Christ's life from a different perspective, perhaps we will be able to add to our understanding of the meaning of his life, and this expansion may give new meaning to our own lives.

CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY AND THE PLAN OF SALVATION

The Garden of Eden story is a male model of separation, individuation, and obedience.

PSYCHOLOGY and cultural anthropology have led me to see that our culture's psychological ideals are only a secularized version of its spiritual or religious story. Cultural psychologist Suzanne Kirschner claims that "our Western psychology is a transmuted version of our Judeo-Christian tale."⁷

Our basic Western developmental psychology is as follows: the infant is born in a fused, happy state with its mother; the developing child must break from this relationship in order to find its own identity and become an autonomous self. Only after full individuation can the self come into relationship and intimacy with another. Our notions of childrearing, selfhood, self-esteem, relationships, marriage, and mental health all stem from this same cultural story. Does this story sound familiar?

Adam and Eve, we are taught, were in a fused or merged, peaceful, symbiotic relationship with God. Then Eve chose to disobey (or understand more) in an act of selfhood, and left the Garden of Eden with Adam in order to develop agency and, ultimately, selfhood. Only after they proved themselves and overcame their "selves" through obedience could they come into the much longed-for reunion with God. This is a tale of breaking away from a symbiotic relationship with God, a quest to find selfhood and agency, then conquering the self in order to obey God in order to gain the much desired reunion with him.

This is not only our Adam and Eve story, but it is also our Plan of Salvation, with the premortal life (rather than the Garden) as our symbiotic state with God, and with this life as our chance to prove our selfhood, to gain individuation. By conquering the self and submitting to God's will, we can gain proximity to him. The Plan of Salvation brings us from a merged state into separateness, and when we are firmly separated, we can again be with God.

This story nicely follows our Western model of psychological development—separation, individuation, and reunion after the self has been "proven." Our Judeo-Christian tale, our Adam and Eve story, and our Plan of Salvation have all been interpreted through a male construction of experience—just as our theories of psychological development have been. Our entire Judeo-Christian heritage, our models of power, our notions of right-

eousness and sin, our ideas of self, other, love, and service are all male constructs, a retelling of the male dilemma between separation and union, a troublesome relationship between self and other.

Women have been saddled with this story of spirituality and psychology, and its resulting practices, beliefs, and language. In the secular world, we have recently found these models to be incomplete, and have begun to research and understand the female psychological story. It is not one of separation, but one of connection. Nor is our growth story one of obedience; it is, rather, a story of understanding and knowing. Now it is time for us to further question, explore, and understand what our spiritual story is.

WE MUST ACT

Women must define a priesthood that reflects our spiritual styles and interests.

WOMEN need to understand our spiritual selves and spiritual interests and work to define a practice of priesthood that would incorporate these interests. It is something only we can construct; men cannot give it to us, though they can encourage us to do it. As women, we have been trained from early on to wait for things to be given to us—Church callings, speaking assignments, dates, marriage. Perhaps we have not had the confidence to move forward in a system where we didn't fit. We have been socialized to think that if our experience does not fit the model, the problem lies in our experience—not in the model. We can no longer wait for someone else to change the model for us. We need to be engaged in the work of taking our ideas seriously and expanding the models and metaphors of spirituality and theology. As women, we are in a difficult position. Religion, spiritual language, and practice have already been defined. We cannot completely divorce ourselves from that which has come before us, but in some way we have to work to understand the language and the concepts that do not resonate with our experience, as well as those that do.

In moving beyond the priesthood debate, we must go beyond debating how and when we can insert ourselves into a male construct. Then, and only then, can we find the spiritual archetypes, language, and practices that will ultimately validate our experiences, empower us, move us. The practice of the priesthood may very well serve to help men achieve a relationship with God and enable them to love and serve. If we women are to hold the priesthood, we will have to under-

stand how its practice and conceptualization can reflect our spiritual needs and interests. If we do not work toward this, we will have to continue placing our spiritual interests into a male spiritual hegemony that will ultimately fail us.

We must act—just as Eve in the Garden—to find understanding and knowledge. Adam was uncomfortable that Eve had broken the rules—but the rules seem to have been his rather than hers. Eve's action was a spiritual quest for discovery and knowledge—and that was just a beginning. We need to take the spiritual courage of Eve, rather than passively waiting for someone to tell us what to do, or grant us permission. We need to take our spiritual understanding seriously. We have much to contribute to humanity's understanding of spirituality, Christ's life, and what it means to be in relationship with God. Just as the apple intrigued Eve, the apple intrigues me. We, as women, need to take a bite. God is waiting for us to do so. ☐

NOTES

1. Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of the Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 27.
2. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
3. Lawrence Kohlberg and R. Kramer, "Continuities and Discontinuities in Child and Adult Moral Development," in *Human Development*, no. 12 (1968): 93–120.
4. See Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
5. Jean Baker Miller, *Towards a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976).
6. Miller, *Towards a New Psychology of Women*.
7. Suzanne Kirschner, "Anglo American Values in Psychoanalytic Developmental Psychology," in *Psychological Anthropology: Fifty Years after Freud*, ed. D. Spain (New York: Psyche Press, 1992), 177.

RESEARCH REQUEST

A photo historian, who is compiling a book on "Americans in Kodachrome," is looking for slides of Utahns taken from 1945–1965.

If slides are selected, contributors will receive a copy of the book and two Dye Transfer prints.

The author assures all slides will be handled with care and returned within three weeks.

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