

# PENTECOST, GETHSEMANE, PRIESTHOOD

By Marni Asplund-Campbell



*We describe spiritual growth as a hero journey, an upward progression through lines of authority. Those who live for others do not have these heroic stories to tell. They clean and cook and build the fires around which the legends are spoken.*

[N]o living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that is often difficult to penetrate.

—MIKHAIL M. BAKHTIN<sup>1</sup>

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I AM SITTING on the deck with Eliza, sunning my legs, hoping to write something worthy of this small presence in the basket. I cannot begin to imagine that this child is mine.

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I stare at her birth pictures—the one where her head has just been born, and we are like a two-headed beast, Dr. Doolittle's pushmi-pullyu. I push: she is pulled. I thought her neck would snap as the doctor grasped the head with both hands, finger looped under her arm, twisting her shoulders through one by one. He said, "Babies are pretty hard to break. They're almost made of rubber." She's known me from the inside out—traced my inside shape with her fingers, watched my blood move through the silver filter of her eyelids. I could feel her head buried between my legs for the last few weeks, making me walk slowly, cautiously, like Mother on the icy driveway in high heels.

Labor was far different than I expected. I thought that it would be a Gethsemane, that childbirth was a woman's opportunity to identify in a physically intimate and exclu-

sive way with Christ's passion. But I wasn't even certain I was having contractions. You spend so much time wondering what it will feel like, and asking other women what it feels like. It's the worst pain you've ever had, I'd heard, taken to the power of ten. It is indescribable, a sensation of overwhelming tension and compression, not a topical pain, not the damaging pain that warns you when something's wrong. It is a forceful gathering, centered deep in the belly, of pure electric energy. Suddenly, I was leaning hard against the stove while I stirred curried rice, feeling like all of the strength had left my legs, arms, and head. I'd eaten two pints of ice cream—Ben and Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk—with my mother that afternoon.

When we finally went to get Greg at work, I knew that I couldn't drive. Swearing as she negotiated the four lanes and potholes of State Street, Mom squinted at her tiny watch to time my progress. When we got to the hospital, the nurse told me, with a thumbs up, that I was five centimeters dilated. The next two hours are a blur. I wanted to stay in control. I didn't want to scream. I'd read dozens of books—Lamaze, Bradley, and my favorite, *Immaculate Deception*, where Suzanne Arms states that doctors "anesthetize women to anesthetize themselves."<sup>2</sup> I was going to have a natural, spiritual childbirth experience. Mom rubbed my feet, and Greg did the most dangerous work of all—bearing with my impatient, uncomfortable, face-to-face anger. "Come here and breathe with me," I demanded, and then, "Get away and brush your teeth." As all of my energy became focused inward, any exterior stimulus, sounds, smells, became inordinately irritating, interrupting the quickening tempo my body was setting. I saw the contractions as a hill where I used to jog on my mission. I would close my eyes and hold on until I reached the peak, breathing deeply, and then let the force of gravity pull me down the other side—such relief reaching the bottom. But quickly, they became more like the waves at Martha's Vineyard, building on each other, smashing me full force before I could get up and shake the sand from my ears. I was losing control. My breathing became a steady moaning. "Oh gosh," I said. "Oh gosh"—I maintained a civil tongue.

My eyes were still closed, but I couldn't see the hill any more, only dark lightning bursts. I felt a warm stickiness between my legs, and opened my eyes long enough to see that it was dark, red, thick blood. A good sign, I remembered. Bright red blood was dangerous, indicating a separated placenta, leaking the specially oxygenated blood

meant for the baby. We give the best of ourselves to our children, the brightest blood, and what was left was oozing out of me now, old and tired, phlegmatic. The nurse told me that they had a birthing room available, and so I walked across the hallway, fully dilated, half naked, caring nothing for modesty.

The birth itself was astonishing for the contrasts—awed silence and extraordinary gore—blood from a small incision, blood on the baby, and a bucket of placenta—pain and then sudden relief. I was surprised by her beauty, even with a squashed nose and bright red eyelids. Her face was round, with full, drooping cheeks, her hands broad and sturdy, like Greg's. It was more like Pentecost than Gethsemane—jubilant, boisterous, rushing waters, rushing Spirit. I have read of people giving birth in the dark so that they could see the angels attending the newly arrived soul. I saw nothing but smooth, slippery flesh, flat, purple feet, divine.

She still feels like a foreigner to me, and she intimidates me. I have only played Beethoven in the house so far, the late string quartets, just to keep things holy. She is a small heliotrope, following light, any light, religiously, focusing on little else. Her eyes are still a cloudy, deep, denim blue, and I'm certain they'll be brown. Her hands are curled. There is an entire world in her hands. My love for her is like a dark bruise I must

press from time to time, around its edges, just to remember how it hurts. I make myself picture her falling from the high edge of the deck, or accidentally flying through the car window, and I play through the horror in my mind. But there is another brief, more deadly sensation that I don't have to invent, a violent betrayal at the edge of the bruise, behind the fear of losing her—the relief of losing her, the peace of a return to myself.

1995

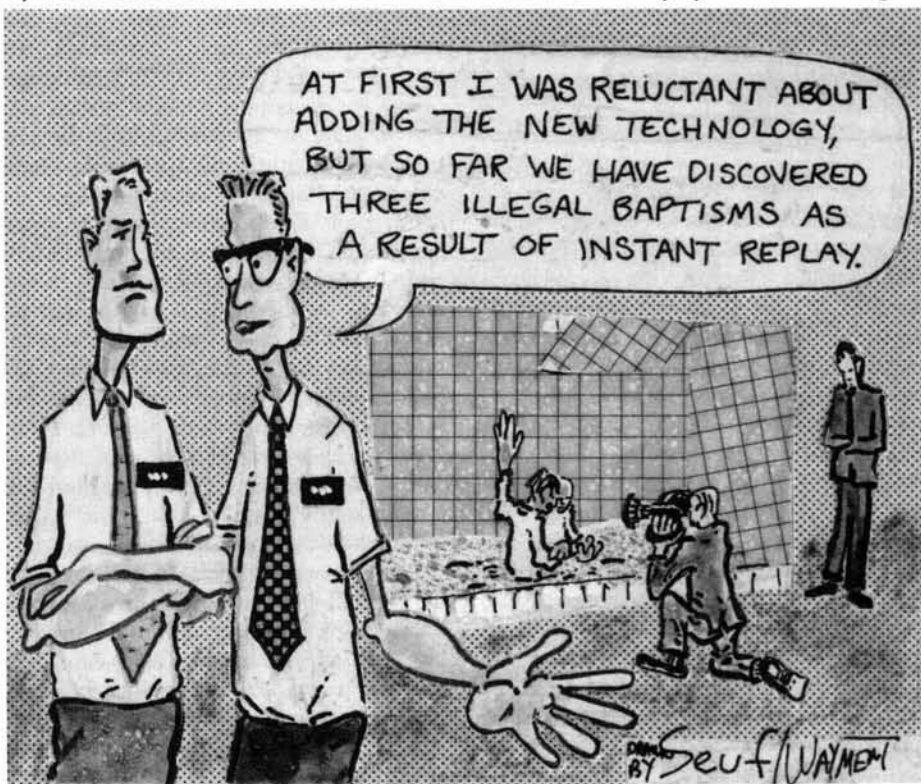
**M**Y daughter now plays complex games that only she fully understands. She is sometimes a fairy in her black leotard, pink tights, and pink plastic shoes. I have to ask for the right favors in the acceptable sequence, and after they have been granted I'm supposed to thank her, she says. But she needs to disappear first, so that I can wonder aloud where the fairy has gone. This can take hours, because she can read boredom and detachment in my eyes, even if the rest of my face is fully posed in rapt involvement. And then the game starts over. Yesterday she had a stick, which she thumped on the ground, chanting Spanish-like syllables—a-way-lama-nee-oh-tay. Then I got the stick, and I was supposed to chant, too, but I didn't know what to say, so I improvised. But it was wrong. After a few false starts she started to like my syllables, and the game

succeeded.

I don't know where these games come from, and it irks me, frankly, that she has begun so soon to possess a life within her mind so utterly distinct from mine. This is the tragedy and triumph of motherhood—to have known with precise intimacy the moment of a person's creation, to feed the young life, count its daily movements, weigh its growth, and hold off disaster with a thousand inward prayers, instinctively blessing the belly with spread hands. To give birth, forcing the new shape and mass with pain into the world, and then to reach the shocking recognition that this life is yours to command, a relentless stewardship. And just when you have learned the rhythms of infant life, feeding, cleaning, catching and soothing, with unconscious, exhausted grace, the person pulls away. She has her own thoughts, her own rules. And now I am the initiate, learning to play wish with the fairy and bang the stick.

I am always captivated, and held captive, by her need to develop. Adrienne Rich describes the mother's subordination in a less personal and more political context as the "powerless authority."<sup>3</sup> That is, mothers are ultimately responsible for the care and nurture of children, they are accountable to the state for the impact those children have on society (there are only "welfare mothers"), and yet they have no power within the political realm commensurate with this extensive responsibility. In fact, the motherhood responsibility is a liability in the policy-making, power-exchanging world.

In the Old Testament we read the stories of two parents, a mother and a father. Abraham, the great patriarch, promised a vast and righteous posterity, is asked to kill his only son as an emblem of his commitment to his God. Abraham obliges, makes ready with a dagger and with wood to divide and burn his son's body on an altar, and is miraculously blessed, first with an angelic command to stop, and then with a ram in a thicket. (See Gen. 22.) His willingness to surrender his child in the name of Truth, to violate the divine stewardships of parental hospitality and protection, endures as an emblem of righteousness and a hallmark of his superior fatherhood. Then there is the nameless mother who brings her child before Solomon. (See 1 Kgs. 3:16–28.) Like Abraham, she needs to prove her identity. But there is no angel to stay the dagger, so she chooses to sacrifice the Truth, surrender to her emotions, and deny her motherhood rather than divide her child asunder. We



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forget this mother's choice, and the lesson it teaches about the ambiguity of truth. I imagine that to the nameless woman, being mother meant, at that moment of public decision, not being mother. And I love her for her decision and her genius, knowing that she could maintain her identity only by denying it.

I do not intend to make generalizations about motherhood, womanhood, or even the feminine in order to isolate and reduce my experience to a biological or socially constructed phenomenon. I describe the mothering experience that has shaped my identity as a woman and as a spiritual being in order to clarify, through representation, a fundamental flaw in the reasoning that concludes that by ordaining women to the priesthood in the LDS church we will help, as Scott Fisher writes, "solve all the problems of discrimination, insult, and abuse that women sometimes receive in the Church," or even "build a better bridge" over which we can pass to achieve the unity that characterizes Zion. To achieve these ends, we need to think much more deeply about change, focusing on our most basic assumptions about power, authority, and spiritual progression. We must question the assumptions that allow us to forget the identity of the mother who, emulating a holy order, chose relationship over Truth. We must remember that Christ made a similar choice, accepting the indignity of anonymity for his children's sake.

By motherhood I mean, on a narrative level, my own experience with bearing and raising children. I cannot escape these tangible metaphors, these small children, who continually remind me of the perils of spiritual commitment, the covenant of duty. But there is a much broader, and I hope more universal, significance to "mothering" behind the narrative, beyond the children, which has to do with the ideal of Christian living; motherhood is a way of choosing, and not choosing, to live for others. It is the promise we make as followers of Christ to love one another as he loves us. To love one another more than we love ourselves. Always. And although offering the women of the Church the very real social authority of priesthood ordination may be a step in achieving a more

constructive spiritual society, it is not enough. We must restore to our theology, and the practice of that theology, a sense of the primacy of this living for others that transcends hierarchy, and values the face-to-face relationship more than systemic efficiency. We must acknowledge the life-giving, life-bearing properties of God.

One fast Sunday, a woman in my ward stood to bear her testimony. She wanted to tell the story of helping her friend through the early stages of labor. She struggled to find words to describe the religious relevance of the shared breathing, the rocking and moaning, and finally dwindled into a vague apology. "I don't know why I wanted to tell you this," she said, and she quickly closed with an amen. She realized, as the words took shape, that she was telling the wrong story. As we have forgotten that God is creator, not just organizer, we have come to describe the process of spiritual growth as a hero journey, with royal sons seeking reunion with their fathers, encountering monsters of sin, temptation, discouragement. The journey is marked by an upward progression through lines of authority and ordination. Those who live for others do not have these heroic stories to tell. They clean and cook and build the fires around which the legends are spoken. They attend the births of heroes. And they are silenced by the mundane, never-finished nature of their tasks. There are no titles to be achieved.

What we have forgotten is the spiritual richness of living for others. The richness is apparent in the troubling paradoxes, the absence of completion, the eternal nature of the work of genuine self-sacrifice. My father died in the year that my daughter was born, and I felt I would never recover from the wounding shock of the news on our answering machine, or the vision of his cold, yellow flesh. But I have learned to live without him. I have an accommodation with grief. I still haven't learned to live with the children. I have learned to live a life of sensation without vision. I can hear pain or fear or boredom at the edge of a child's voice. I can smell an infection on a baby's breath. I can chart subtle variations in temperature with my cheek pressed to a small head. But I can't

see my children. Themselves. All I see are fantastic visions of cars smashing through the fence right where they're playing in the sandbox, or their hands and feet mangled by the electric mixer and the lawn mower, the hands suddenly playing Beethoven on a broad stage. Malevolent strangers linger in parks, church corridors, even at the top of the night stairs, and I see the children in dark places, lonely and frightened, abused by strangers. And I see health rising in them as I feed them lentils and whole milk, bananas and wheat cereal. I see my children, I tell my husband, through my third eye, through a filter of superstition and reluctant prophecy. They are always in potential. Only occasionally, when they are still and sleeping, am I blessed with human eyes that mark with amazement the slenderness of the little girl's wrists, the sudden length of the baby in his crib.

This is my spiritual experience, the experience of motherhood, slowly relearning the meaning of the world, its malevolence and benevolence, through the eyes and nerves and hearts of other bodies. I have become a visionary, reluctantly, seeing a terrifying future in the transparent present, feeding the future with my hands, so that one day I will become an unnecessary peripheral in my own visions. I have bled for my children. And yet my religion offers me a bloodless theology. The priesthood that is compared to my motherhood is a state of being that is acquired, practiced, and exercised. It is heroic and optional. Our folklore is full of the stories of priesthood in practice. And I am still hesitant to tell the story of motherhood because it is sentimental. It violates my intellectual and spiritual training to talk of the biology of birth and daily work of tending to the children as equal to Pentecost, Gethsemene, or Priesthood. There are no hero mothers because we need a language that speaks of the living religion, of the word made flesh, to unify and equalize the disparate elements of human experience.

I am willing to accept these contradictions, to work through the contrasts of sublime and earthy that I face as I bear and raise my children. I can accept the challenges of Christianity, which include taking upon my-



self my sisters' and brothers' burdens; which include, beyond that safe filial duty, loving my enemies, those who disagree with me. I can accept the challenge to work within these loving, difficult relationships and to actively create a space, as a Mormon and a feminist, for the expression of women's experience. I cannot accept an analysis that concludes that extending the priesthood to women is just the thing to equalize the balance of power between the sexes; to lay to rest, finally, that tricky women's issue and, incidentally, free up the men's time once and for all. Fisher presents Rosa Parks and the civil rights movement as a model for change within the Church, implying that alterations in policy and practice will eventually lead to deeper changes in thought and attitude. Rosa Parks's brave and brilliant stand, and the subsequent accomplishments of the civil rights movement, did not, of course, eradicate the inequity of power between races. Racial inequity still thrives in the United States because we continually underestimate the power of the unspoken norm. Equal still means white. Priesthood will always mean man.

We need to follow Christ, who told us to radically rethink spiritual journeys, and who reminds us that the kingdom of God is within our hearts. We need to follow Christ, who deliberately undermined the hierarchy of power, and taught that the first shall be last. We need, more honestly, to tell our spiritual stories, and universalize and institutionalize the lesson of Gethsemane, which is that we are the most exalted when we have surrendered our authority. Women alone have known this far too well for far too long.

I WASN'T prepared for the speed of Thomas's birth. When we met the midwife at the hospital, I was still feeling sheepish for jumping the gun. I asked if I could keep my own clothes on for a while. I knew I had at least a few hours yet. I stood by the hospital bed, leaning forward, elbows on a pillow, during the contractions, while Greg rubbed my back. The midwife must have seen a change in my face; she told me to lie down. Suddenly, I was convulsed by a powerful, irresistible urge to push. The baby surged into the birth canal, his head crowned, and I was suddenly terrified. There is a moment in labor when the emotional trauma matches the physical, and you realize, as at no other time in your life, that there is no turning back. I was yelling, "I can't do it!" but I wasn't doing anything; it was happening. I needed to calm down so

that the midwife could control the delivery of the head, but I was paralyzed with pain, my knees tightly locked. Greg quickly took my hand and placed it between my legs, where I could feel the top of the baby's head. I was instantly calm, my eyes opened wide, and I pulled the baby gently into the open air.



## RECOVERING

First

you are a storyteller  
emerging feather-gowned  
from asphalt mists of blown bunkers,  
dazzling them with all you've seen, heard,  
worked for under war's heavy iron manhole:  
fear, waste, seasons of crime, war, disease;  
jungle tracers, flowering nights green and red,  
shrapnel strips, phosphorous blips,  
the crematorium smell of claymores.

Women screaming.

Women. In war.

Latin bullhorns erupt  
under bougainvillea arches  
clearing paths for  
the orchid-colored cardinals smiling  
through the genuflecting fools  
and shaking ants from tear-smearred bulletproof linen.

Second

you are a storyteller hidden  
with other homeless mystics under collapsed bridges,  
in deep storm drains echoing the message of water's  
violent washing away of progress and regress:  
holy floods leaving you and you and you  
gasping atop alluvial plains of razor gravel  
crying for entrance through the ark door.

You are a storyteller  
dodging the grease, dust, and rule of racist legislature,  
your creativity savaged from left-handed sides  
of bottom-down piles of charred books,  
your conviviality pulled from the mobs,  
your sanguine lyrics lifted from the bricks, shards,  
fragmentary songs of alcoholic priests.  
Storyteller. Skittish, when at all moved:  
lamed in the rush to pull down statues,  
handcuffed by assassins then abandoned,  
bloody, dazed and cordial,  
stumbling home to tell anyone all you've seen.

—SEAN BRENDAN-BROWN

## NOTES

1. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Discourse on the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Carol Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259-422.
2. Suzanne Arms, *Immaculate Deception, Immaculate Deception: A New Look at Women and Childbirth in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), ?.
3. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, (NY: W. W. Norton and Co., 1986), 52.