Pillars of My Faith

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WE BELONG TO ONE ANOTHER IN FAITH

By Cecilia Konchar Farr

YOU MAY RECOGNIZE MY NAME, BUT I FEEL A BIT detached from what you may associate with it. Lately, I have been much more talked about than I have talked.

There are several reasons why I haven’t spoken much about my experience at Brigham Young University. The first involves the activism of the student feminist group VOICE (BYU’s Committee to Promote the Status of Women). My policy and that of my co-advisor, Tomi-Ann Roberts, was that students should speak first when reporters called, because VOICE was a student organization. We also tried, in the entrenched hierarchies of BYU, to get students to be the ones the administrators approached, the ones who were responsible for the actions of that group, because, in actuality, they were. The second reason for my silence was that after my incident with BYU, I had an attorney whose policy was that if I had something to say, I should say it in my appeal hearing with the administration or save it for court. Finally, BYU’s policy that “Cecilia should most definitely keep her positions to herself and be an objective academic like the rest of us,” free of the corruption of politics, made it difficult to speak without repercussions.

So, I have been created and constructed and reconstructed and deconstructed until I feel there’s very little of me in the public image, because the images that most people have of Cecilia Konchar Farr are the heretic, the feminist, the unorthodox, the challenger of patriarchy, and the in-your-face activist. I am also the oldest daughter in a working-class family of eight children from a town near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. My dad was a millworker, a truck driver, and a construction worker, and my older brother, my grandfather, my uncles, and my cousins all worked in steel mills; my brothers are still truck drivers, and my sisters are waitresses. Three or four of us are still Mormon. My dad never was, but my mom is fiercely, faithfully, eternally Mormon. I, myself, am committed passionately to two things—two things that give me stories to live by, two things that give me a voice to speak and a life that I feel blessed to be living: education (especially feminist education) and the LDS church.

FIRST, education. You would have to have grown up in a town like Butler, Pennsylvania, to understand what I mean when I say my options were limited. I lived on the outskirts of that decaying, perennially Democrat, union-loyal town right out of a Bruce Springsteen song. My parents, both children of Eastern-European immigrants, created a wonderful family life for us, encouraging everything we did, but they knew very little about education and where it could take us. In my high school things were grim. It was a huge school (just over 1,000 in my graduating class), so I never, that I can recall, attended a class with fewer than forty people in it. In spite of almost constant academic success, I never knew that I could do anything significant. In that atmosphere, I seldom felt special in any way. Even so, I did go to college, because that’s what my Mormon friends in the stake were doing, and that’s what my patriarchal blessing told me to do. And college, of course, meant the Y. Now, that was culture shock! I lasted two semesters, and I retreated, painfully, back to Pennsylvania. At that moment, as an eighteen-year-old woman, I realized how few my options were, and I, pretty literally, had a nervous breakdown and started over from scratch.

When I started over, it was literature that reclaimed me—Jane Austen and Louisa May Alcott novels, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Emily Dickinson poetry. The idea that there were more things out there for me to learn tugged at me and gave
me reasons to go on. I decided then that I was going to make more options for myself. I got an education at that great bastion of the intellectual elite, Slippery Rock State College, which you may know for its football team. After graduation, I worked as a reporter for a few years. Then I started to get a feminist education, which was a different education than I had gotten before. Reading feminist thinkers gave me words to describe what I had felt for a long, long time; it helped me understand what I was seeing as a reporter and experiencing as a woman. It gave my thoughts life, gave me a voice.

NOW, the LDS church. Through the Church, I created a vision of myself beyond what Butler would allow me. I tell my students that sometimes I still think I am a fraud, that I should be living in a trailer park surrounded by children and working as a waitress. But I knew there was something different for me out there. My sense of my own divinity—my belief in myself, the knowledge of my divine potential—comes from being a Mormon. Like the characters I love in the scriptures, Joseph sold into Egypt, David the King, Joseph Smith the seer, John the Beloved, and Mary the Mother of Christ, I have personal, moral integrity and agency. I can speak with God, and God can speak with me, and wants to. Those were important lessons for a little girl in a large family, in a large school, in a working-class town in Pennsylvania.

I have a sister, Elaine, two years younger than I, who never learned those lessons. She was beautiful, talented, intelligent and conflicted. She was alcoholic, and she died when her car crashed into a parked tractor-trailer truck after she passed out at the wheel late one November night. She was only twenty-one. I knew by then that my problem of a life narrowly circumscribed by gender and class expectations wasn’t just my problem. My feminism turned from philosophical to activist as I determined that what happened to my sister—the despair, the lack of vision and of options—wouldn’t happen to anyone that I had access to and could love. Never again would I stand idly by and watch a woman’s life fritter away into hopelessness. I would love women—our art, our music, our literature, our conversation. I decided that I would see the divine potential that so many fail to notice in women, and then I would encourage that potential. I would create spaces where women could grow. I would share stories that would give shape to our lives and ideas that would give life to our dreams. So I followed my heart, powered by my Mormonism and my feminism, and that’s what I try to do as a feminist educator.

I should probably also add, especially for my husband, that I also love men and believe in their divine potential. I even helped create a little man, who is now eighteen months old. (I confess I had a hard time at first figuring out why Heavenly Father would send me a little boy, but I sure like the little guy!) I believe in men’s divine potential as well, but so do a lot of other people.

So I have chosen to focus where I can do the most good, because I am dangerous enough to really believe that I can change the world. You won’t often find me criticizing patriarchy (surprise, surprise: that’s not all feminists do!) or condemning literature by men for not being feminist enough. I never purposely undermine the Church or what I believe to be the inspired authority of its leaders. I am Mormon to my very core. I believe in Jesus Christ with a perfect brightness of hope. For me, no logic of my intellectual being can undermine or do justice to the power of this statement: “I believe.” And I do believe, even though I have rigorously questioned and contested that belief many times.

I want to get to what has happened to my beliefs in the last four years, but let me take a brief detour. Let me add that as I affirm my faith, I don’t mean to affirm an orthodoxy or an unrighteous exercise of authority that harms people. I hope that my continued participation in the Church is seen for what it is, a belief that I locate in Jesus Christ, and that you—my friends, my brothers and my sisters, who have been put in a position where this institution has hurt you—won’t view this as adding to your pain. Many people I love have chosen to leave the Church, and I don’t want them to feel condemned in any way by my professions of belief in Christ’s gospel.

FIRST, let me offer a list of my crimes from the perspective of the BYU establishment. I am an activist, a feminist, an intellectual, and a Mormon, and I believe, with Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and many of you, that those identities do not make me an “oxyMormon.” You can be a Mormon and a feminist. But my greatest crime is that I act on my feminism. I am committed to social change, or, in Mormon terms, to bringing about Zion. I came to BYU expressly to fulfill the greatest desire of my heart: to affirm women’s divine potential, to acknowledge that God speaks to us as well, and to share that belief through both the literature and the feminist theory that I teach.

As you may have heard, I did several things that incurred the ire of some administrators, some members of BYU’s board of trustees, and some adherents of the radical right in Utah and elsewhere. I assume they first determined that they should be noticing what Cecilia Konchar Farr was doing when VOICE became involved in some really interesting activism around violence against women, such as Take Back the Night and our Teach-in in 1992. Shortly after, I was invited by some local feminist groups I participated in to repeat a position I had taken publicly several times in favor of choice for women on the issue of abortion. Now, I would never call myself an abortion rights activist, though I am very much pro-choice, a distinction lost in the current heated political climate and, as
many of you know, a distinction that is controversial even among feminists. My position, which is against abortion and concerns, mainly, who should legislate this very sensitive moral issue, is one that I (and my bishop and stake president) found to be in harmony with the Church's statement on abortion, otherwise I would not have stated it so confidently and so publicly at a large pro-choice rally in the Utah State Capitol Rotunda. Parts of that free choice speech were televised, and the story, as I understand it (as it was repeated to me on different occasions by BYU administrators Bruce Hafen, Todd Britsch, Rex Lee, and Stan Albrecht), was that a member of the board of trustees saw it that night on the local news. He was angry about my having given a speech that he perceived to be pro-abortion and unbecoming a Mormon, so he called the administration and said, "Fire her, now!" The university administration, to their credit, said, "Thank you for your input, but we can't really do things that way."

Instead, several months later, I was "called in," not by my bishop but by an administrator who told me that the Church has a policy that no Church employee, including a BYU faculty member, can take a public pro-choice position. He read a statement from a board of trustees meeting to that effect, a statement that followed a discussion of my speech in the minutes. Well, I was as upset as any Mormon would be that genuinely, and without anger—in fact, without much emotion. These incidents were, of course, reformulated to demonstrate my movement "from difference to contention, from discourse to divisiveness, and from conversation to confrontation." I interpreted that as meaning I wasn't nice—I am, after all, an Easterner.

Though I can joke about them now, comments such as these were really quite devastating to me as I read through my university file in the summer of 1993. Some of the things my colleagues on the College Review Committee wrote, for example, can't be more kindly labeled as anything but lies. I felt especially betrayed by my department chair who had had one-on-one discussions with me on several occasions. I bore my national difficulty, I went into avoidance mode. I decided not to think about it anymore. Sometimes I was successful at not thinking, but I never managed to stop feeling, so I cried a lot.

Eventually, the administration fired me. They fired me because members of the board of trustees told them that they must. They fired me for my feminism. How they did it is another story. In several documented instances, administrators interfered with the faculty review process that is part of the third-year review for promotion and tenure. My sense is that faculty members who were involved were "prudent Mormons" who believed, as Allen Dale Roberts wrote in a recent essay, that any mere suggestion from a general authority should be taken as a commandment. At the department level, the review said I had an impressive scholarly record and an impressive teaching record, and though, the committee wrote, there had been questions raised about my university citizenship, these were not sufficient to undermine my review. When the review file got to the college level, I had bad articles and bad teaching and bad citizenship. And by the time it got to the university review committee, I had no articles and horrible teaching and university citizenship that was just too appalling to discuss. The only difference in that time period was the power of suggestion from the interference of people who were not, or should not have been, involved in the faculty review process. Thus, my scholarship disappeared. My positive student evaluations were suddenly testament only to my power as a dangerous, charismatic leader out to undermine my students' faith. My collegiality was characterized by negative reports of two incidents where I had spoken my mind openly, honestly, and without anger—in fact, without much emotion. These incidents were, of course, reformulated to demonstrate my movement "from difference to contention, from discourse to divisiveness, and from conversation to confrontation."
about it. I have a quote from Terry Tempest Williams that has been my mantra this summer:

"Writing becomes an act of compassion towards life, the life we so often refuse to see because if we look too closely or feel too deeply, there may be no end to our suffering. But words empower us, move us beyond our suffering, and set us free. This is the sorcery of literature. We are healed by our stories." Thank you for this opportunity to share my story.

LET me tell you, finally, what I think I have learned from this experience. The hardest part was learning that the men who had caused me the most harm were also men who had done others, including some of my dearest friends, a lot of good. I wanted to hate them with wild abandon. I called them Satan on many occasions—but they weren't. These were the kind of guys you go to church with every Sunday, your stake presidents and your bishops. Except for a few blatant exceptions whom I still insist on calling Satan, these men, I came to realize, are all, in fact, good people. So what do you do with that—when good people make bad things happen? When their good trees bear bad fruit? It didn't fit.

I learned a long time ago, on a local level, that leaders are fallible—and some of you who grew up in the east, with the dearth of male leadership many of us had in our home wards, can testify that it was a good lesson to learn. I also learned that my testimony can survive that knowledge, that my testimony was not about whether or not my leaders made mistakes. It would do Utah Mormons a lot of good to talk more about the humanness of our leaders than of their authority. When was the last time you heard a good Joseph-Smith-leg-wrestling story about one of our current leaders?

My testimony, four years after coming to BYU, is still the same one that I had when I was baptized, when I was eight years old and listened to the missionaries and felt the Spirit for the first time. It is a testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I know that God lives, that Joseph Smith restored Christ's gospel, that God communicates to us still through the scriptures and through the power of the Holy Ghost. I believe that Mormons should feel heavily our responsibility to practice hearing the still, small voice so that we can recognize it when it communicates to us. It is our responsibility, always, relentlessly, to exercise that great gift.

As Eugene England and Margaret Toscano and others have written, it was no accident that Eve chose, in the garden, between two paradoxical commandments, and that one of them was to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.9 The action of making that choice was what revealed truth to her and Adam. It is in choosing that we learn. It is in exercising our divine gifts that we become divine. When Adam and Eve exercised their divine gift they rejoiced—now the Atonement could happen. As Lehi says in the Book of Mormon, we have “become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for ourselves and not be acted upon” (2 Ne. 2:26). To act, to choose, to think, to exercise agency—this is our gift, and this is our divinity.

But it is also our humanness, because inherent in the ability to choose is, of course, the ability to make really bad choices. I do that quite often, and I still think I'm a pretty good person. So I can live with what happened to me at BYU because I rejoice in my humanness and in my divinity, and I rejoice in the humanness and the divinity of my colleagues and my Church leaders. I don't expect them to be more than human, yet I hope for them to be divine. That's how I love the people I love most deeply. That's how I hope to love my enemies.

A passage from Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road resonates with me, where she writes about what it's like to be an African-American woman riding a train and seeing her people doing things that embarrass and humiliate her because they reinforce the stereotypes that white people use to belittle and oppress them. But she looks at these other African Americans, and she doesn't push them away; she sees them, still, as her people. And in her shame and embarrassment, there is pride in her unity with them as she exclaims, "My people! My people!" I've felt that many times—that pain, that embarrassment, that joy as I look at other people who are my Mormon people. Since the day I was baptized, certainly since I joined that polygamous Farr family which goes way back to Kirtland and beyond, Mormons have been my people. And they, even the "theys" we push from us in our dread of repression, the "theys" who enforce narrow orthodoxies, the "theys" who think their violence and lies serve God, they are also our people. We belong to one another in faith.

So, after four years in what my dad would call the School of Hard Knocks, what I would leave with all of you, especially all of you women, is this message: Know your divinity. Believe in it, exercise it, embrace it. But when you see humanness, know it, too, and embrace it. Learn to love it. It is also you, and it is me. And it is our people, our Mormon people.

NOTES

2. The AUPF's 1940 “Statement of Principle on Academic Freedom and Tenure” is reprinted with permission in Freedom and Tenure in the Academy, William W. VanAlstyne, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). 407-409, which also includes several helpful contemporary interpretations of the document, especially with reference to private religious schools.
3. For more details, see Bryan Waterman's and Brian Kagel's Sunstone Symposium session, "BYU and the Farr/Knowlton Cases: A Preliminary Sketch, (SL94-134).
4. From letters in my official university review file, now in my possession.
8. From various readings in Strangers in Paradox by Margaret and Paul Toscano (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990) and Dialogues with Myself by Eugene England (Salt Lake City: Orion, 1984).