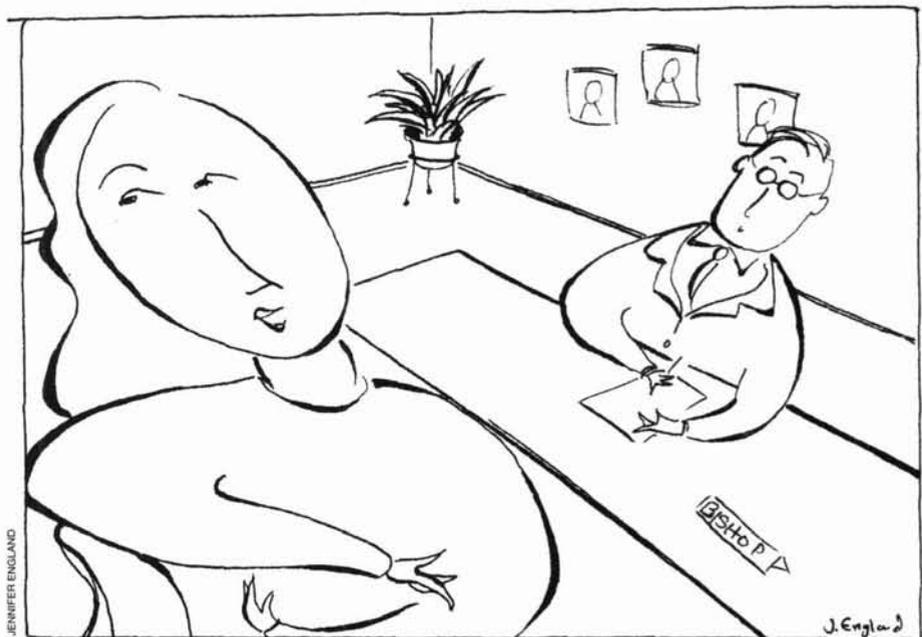


L I G H T E R M I N D S

A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR
REDUCING THE POPULATION OF
SINGLE MEN IN THE CHURCH

By Miriam A. Smith



"Don't get me wrong, Bishop . . . singles dances . . . are a step in the right direction. But based on my experience, it isn't a group dance that's needed, it's group therapy."

I T STARTED OUT as the typical, new-to-the-ward, meet-the-bishop interview. "Smith is a strong Church name," Bishop Price¹ said. "Are you related to Joseph Smith?"

"My forebears were among the pioneers in Nauvoo," I answered, "but, no relation—though I've always thought it would be great to be a descendent of Mary Fielding Smith. She was truly an example," I explained.

Mary Fielding Smith, despite the death of her husband, discouragement, and disparaging remarks from pioneer leaders,

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packed up her children and crossed the plains. She had strength and courage of heroic proportions.

Bishop Price and I chatted pleasantly for a few minutes. I had been in the stake for several years, so we weren't complete strangers. And then . . .

"Sooo," Bishop Price intoned. His voice carried both hesitation and warning. I knew what was coming. "Why aren't you married?"

Yep, the infamous "rite of passage" question. Hadn't most of my friends who, like me, had "graduated" from a singles ward, been confronted with that question in one form or another?

I think it a fair question. The obvious an-

swer is that most single Mormon women are not married because we outnumber the males of the species. But the possibilities exist that we have chosen to never marry, or that our journey through life has been such that marriage has been, so far, well, let's just say, impractical. Some of the stories and personal insights from my single friends make for interesting conversation.

Anyway, my silence appeared to fluster Bishop Price. "I don't mean to intrude . . ." he stammered. "I . . . I . . . well . . . are you interested in marriage?" Since marriage offers the only sanctioned opportunity for sex, I immediately responded.

"Yes, I would like to marry. I just don't know anyone to marry," I offered, hedging my bets. I actually could name a few men I would marry—if only they were marriageable.

"Well then, Sister Smith, what can I do to help you?" Bishop Price asked. Impressive—a very wise bishop. He obviously knew that one should volunteer assistance but never give advice unless it's requested.

"To be perfectly honest, bishop," I said, "I think the big problem is lack of proper labeling."

Bishop Price looked puzzled. Usually people complain about being "labeled" or decry the harm of labeling others. "What do you mean?" he queried.

"It's very simple. My big problem is that I tend to misread men. I spend far too much time pursuing a man before I realize he just isn't interested. Of course, I usually determine that he isn't interested in marriage in general, but it is unfathomable that he wouldn't be interested in me." The key is to say such things with just enough sarcasm that one thinks you are joking. Of course, deep down, you really aren't joking, but it is far better to be perceived as a comic than as a megalomaniac.

"So the labeling system I propose consists of just four letters," I explained. "Each single Mormon man over the age of thirty would be required to wear the appropriate letter to church and social functions. It would make things so much easier."

Bishop Price had determined I was joking and wanted to see where this "joke" was leading. "And what might those letters be?" he asked.

"G, S, W, and L," I replied. "G for gay—wonderful men but not likely to marry. S for selfish. Bishop, did you know that there are single men out there who actually think they will be able to find a 'no-maintenance' relationship?"

I paused for a reaction. Bishop Price

didn't seem too surprised. He's probably talked to some of the S men. I continued.

"W for the walking wounded. That would include all the commitment and responsibility phobes. It's probably easier to convert a non-member than to heal the sick. And L for late-bloomer. If you know an L, let me know," I said with a hint of hopefulness.

"That's an interesting idea," Bishop Price said. "But what about those men who are divorced or widowed?" he asked. "How would they be labeled?" As I said, he was impressive. Bishop Price had uncovered one of my biases: I'm anti-previously-married men.

"Well, it all depends on the baggage they are carrying," I offered. "Some people learn a lot from a divorce, and some just repeat all the mistakes they made the first time around." Even though Bishop Price nodded, I somehow knew he wasn't committed to implementing my label system, so I moved to phase two.

"There's more," I said. "I have no idea what lessons are in the priesthood manual now, but I think on the first Sunday they should add a few lessons on relationships. I mean lessons like Dating 101, which could explain that dating is somewhat essential to getting married. I have actually met men who wonder why they aren't married even though, to my knowledge, they seldom, if ever, ask anyone out. And one lesson on Beyond Friendship, that physical contact is a good thing, followed by Relationship Maintenance."

Bishop Price seemed to be nodding more intently now. I quickened my pace. Talking fast made it all seem so much more exciting and compelling.

"Some men understand perfectly well that unless you put money into your retirement account you won't be able to get anything out of it. Others are very much in tune with nature and have instinctive knowledge about plants and animals and caring for nature. Why, then, they are so clueless about relationships is a mystery—unless they are missing the relationship gene."

In about ten years, science will demonstrate that everything is genetic. How this will impact our notions of sin and repentance and exaltation, of course, is a matter of fascinating conjecture.

"Bishop, I don't need to tell you that relationships are about being together and that sometimes you do things you are not very interested in just to be together. But someone needs to explain that to some of the single men." I'm serious; Bishop Price was in full agreement. I was ready to pull out a pen and start scheduling these lessons.

"To be perfectly honest, there are days I wonder why I didn't marry that nice Irish Catholic boyfriend I had," I confided. "I guess I just didn't know how unusual it is for a man to call to invite you to do things and to actually want to know how you are feeling. Not only that, John-the-Catholic knew his feelings and could talk about them." Bishop Price looked intrigued. He had no idea of my previous inter-faith romance. Even us meek and mild types can have a past. "I guess that's why in Young Women's we were cautioned against dating non-members." I reflected. "Once you find out how fun and caring those worldly men are . . ." At this point, my self-monitor told me to quit this line of thinking while I was ahead. Besides, my best idea was yet to come.

"I do have one other idea. I think some of these single men would benefit from a 'T-patch,'" I proposed. "Somewhat like a nicotine patch, except that the 'T' stands for testosterone. I understand it can provide that extra push that some men need to take the marital plunge," I earnestly stated. "Studies have made it clear that men benefit the most from marriage. Married men live longer and happier lives and make more money than single men do. But, evidently, research findings just aren't enough to motivate some men to action," I said.

"That leads me to another lesson idea—a lesson debunking the myths about love. Love at first sight is not essential for a happy marriage. I think love at first sight is largely a hormonal response. And without the T-patch, some men might never get that surge at any point in a relationship. But many men need to be told that if you are willing to get to know someone, without that initial flood of emotion, you may fall in love with someone for who she is and who you are when you are with her. Attraction will come. The hormones will start pumping . . ."

Sensing that Bishop Price may be better acquainted with testosterone than I (though I am in my sexual peak years according to the biology books), I decided to let him fill in the gaps.

"You have given me a lot to think about," Bishop Price said. "I can't promise anything, but I have enjoyed our visit. It has been, for lack of a better description, quite singular."

"Thanks for your time," I said arising from my chair. As I turned to go, I provided Bishop Price with one last bit of wisdom.

"Don't get me wrong, Bishop. I do think these singles dances and activities are a step in the right direction. But based on my experience, it isn't a group dance that are needed, it's group therapy."

And then with singleness of heart, and soul and life . . . I went home.² ☞

NOTES

1. Not only have the names been changed to protect the innocent and the not-so-innocent, but this interview never even took place. Everything else in this story, though, is true.

2. If you know any Is, please call. Thank you.



LUNAR ECLIPSE

Not every shadow wears ash on its face; not all our Wednesdays stoop with forehead

blessed. Some labor under orange dust to leap across cloud cover. Nine o'clock. They said the moon

would be a harvest bowl, the citrus fruit piled closely to the brim, and falling farther out; we recognize the

peel, rough, pitted skin exposed to midnight jeer. The sky is thirsty for its juice, the blade of equinox curves smooth

and sharp. We watch, and only watch. The ground rules never change, once kept by Aztec, Mongol, Bedouin

and Jew; this black aroma, their innocence. Nine thirty-five. We taste our awe, hold in our breath—the

moon will swallow whole what we deny; its cold lung, poised, inhales the oxygen under our masks.

—SOFIA M. STARNES