

Women have the capacity for developing deep friendships that provide safe spaces for discussing anything and everything—well, almost everything. How might women better learn to celebrate their differences in an enriching way? How might LDS women truly become “Sisters in Zion”?

TOWARD A MORE AUTHENTIC SISTERHOOD

UNMASKING HIDDEN ENVY AND COMPETITION AMONG LDS WOMEN

By Julie Munteer Hawker



SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I WAS PURSUING A MASTER'S degree in communication studies at San Jose State University while teaching a general education course there. I was also a wife and a mother with four children. During this hectic time, my husband Rick coached our son's soccer team. Rick and I had decided that one of us would always attend our children's athletic events, and most of the time, we were both present. This particular soccer team included several LDS boys whose mothers were friends of mine. During games, we sat together and cheered for our sons. Due to the demands of graduate school, I missed a few Saturday games. Months later, one of these friends tearfully confessed that during one of my absences, she and some of the other LDS moms had engaged in a “gossiping session” about me. They had judged me guilty of “neglectful” mothering because I had failed to attend every game. Interestingly, the presence of fathers was not an issue; their judgment was aimed exclusively at mothers.

I was annoyed at these women's pettiness and somewhat disappointed by their lack of support toward my personal and professional goals. But I also recognized in their behavior the all-too-familiar pattern of women comparing and measuring themselves against other women. When we compare, we find difference. And difference often feels threatening.



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I continue to teach communication courses part-time at San Jose State—a liberal, leftist university. Most of my colleagues are aware of my membership in and devotion to the Church. They have often asked about my ability to successfully function in and embrace a patriarchal church without feeling “oppressed” by men. In pondering their queries, I have realized that my social experience within the LDS community is actually quite the opposite: I have rarely if ever felt “oppressed” by men in the Church because of its patriarchal nature. Unfortunately, I have consistently felt disapproval from some LDS women as I strive to carve out my individual role as a Latter-day Saint woman, wife, and mother. Most LDS women have been my biggest champions! But at times, I've sensed a shadowy counterpoint—envy—and in speaking with other LDS women, I know I'm not alone in this experience.

I've done extensive academic research on communication between women and have heard painful stories from many including my women students. I've come to realize the devastating results that often follow when women compare themselves to one another. This destructive byproduct is hidden envy and competition between women. These twin emotional experiences are at the core of women's conflict with each other. The poison of this envy and competition spreads because women find it so difficult to acknowledge, let alone speak of, its existence.

Of course, men envy and compare as well; it's part of the human experience. But competition among men is more socially acceptable than it is for women. Generally, men can acknowledge and discuss their rivalries more easily than women

can. Thus, competition doesn't seem to undermine and derail men's relationships as often as it does women's.

Surely, most, if not all, women will at some point, feel the painful effects of envy and competition. We might be the envier or the object of another woman's envy. Perhaps we engage in both roles simultaneously. In the following discussion, I examine the notions of envy and competition, why women's need for connection makes them in general more prone to envious feelings than men are, and finally, how women can use their power over each other more ethically. I do not mean to foster contention nor to denigrate women. On the contrary, I hope to enhance our sisterhood by shining a spotlight on this significant but unspoken issue. Let's face it: envy hides in the dark! And that is precisely how it gains its power.



THE MANY FACES OF ENVY

When we seek what belongs to someone else and reject what is ours, envy leads to spiritual laziness and emotional frustration

THE TERMS “ENVY” and “jealousy” are often used interchangeably, yet they really involve two different emotions. Jealousy means to fear losing what one already has—for instance, a friend—and it usually involves three or more people. On the other hand, envy is based on wanting what another person has. Both emotions are rooted in one's own insecurities.

In her book, *The Snow White Syndrome: All About Envy*, Betsy Cohen compares the words “envy” and “invidious.” Both stem from the Latin word, *invidere*, which means to look hatefully at someone or to make hateful comparisons. Cohen further discusses the varying degrees of envy as a continuum of emotions that begin with admiration and emulation but can denigrate to resentment, hatred, and, finally, the wish to harm the envied person and/or what the envied person has.¹ In short, envy is admiration turned rancid. Perhaps this is why friendships are especially vulnerable to envy's corrosive effects. Envy crosses social, cultural, religious, and economic lines. According to Christian tradition, envy is one of the “seven deadly sins,” and a proverb proclaims, “Envy [is] the rottenness of the bones” (Proverbs 14:30).

The scriptures contain many examples of envy. Saul's destructive envy became so virulent that, after having once loved and mentored David, he sought to kill him. Laman and Lemuel's relationship with Nephi was so tainted by envy they, too, were overcome with the desire to kill. Even Jesus Christ was ultimately crucified by Sadducees and Pharisees, who both envied and feared his power and growing popularity.

Interestingly, these enviers, like most others, struggle to or never admit their envious feelings. Because humiliation and shame are associated with envy, most of us typically attempt to hide our envious feelings. Saul was guilty of this, although he finally admitted his envy when David confronted him. In their dramatic exchange, Saul sits helplessly as David's servant urges

him to kill Saul because Saul had tried to kill David. David refuses as Saul is an anointed king. Saul, moved by David's humility and compassion toward him, succinctly summarizes his pathetic plight when he says to David, “Thou art more righteous than I: for thou hast rewarded me good, whereas I have rewarded thee evil” (1 Samuel 24:17).

Another insidious element in envy is the self-deception that so often accompanies it. Envious people consistently project their own negative feelings onto the person they envy. For instance, Laman and Lemuel masked their envy as self-pity and criticism. Consequently, Nephi became the target of their relentless fault-finding and was subjected to their constant whining about life's injustices. Today, we as a society acknowledge anger, gossip, hostile jokes and teasing, putdowns, slander, rivalry, martyrdom, avoidance and/or withdrawal, withholding approval, pretending not to care about the envied person and/or what they have, and evoking envy in others—but we never call it envy.

Today, envy seems to be more pervasive among women than ever—probably because more opportunities are now afforded to women than ever before. Whereas historically women might have envied each other's beauty, wealth, and social status—accidents of birth—we now enjoy professional and educational opportunities that allow us to be less reliant on beauty or circumstance. These increased opportunities give us many more life choices, which equate to greater differentiation. As a result of these disparities, many of us feel unsure of how to relate to and remain connected to each other. The “success” of another woman may bring out emotions of longing and conflict about our own wants and choices, which sometimes lead to our questioning our own worthiness and value.

Our LDS culture naturally has its own brand of envy. Perhaps we've noticed or experienced the unspoken and unacknowledged envy and pain that is so often a part of the process of receiving and holding Church callings (whether it be our own calling or that of our spouse) along with the subsequent attention and “power” that accompanies the calling. Another area ripe with potential for envy is the ideas associated with temple marriage. For some, a temple marriage means more than just the fact of being married for “time and all eternity,” it also implies that the marriage is healthier or more stable than other marriages. It can be very painful when we compare our “less righteous” children to those of other families in the ward whose children have served missions, married in the temple, and stayed morally clean. In addition to envy of callings and marriages, some envy or resent others who are especially talented in art, music, or drama.

Surely we can understand the upset some might feel when they believe themselves to be less fortunate, able, or less worthy than their LDS friends or acquaintances. But the envied person suffers, too. A couple of years ago, a friend I'll call Renee confided to me the devastating fall-out she experienced when she was called to be the ward Relief Society president. When her good friend, Amy (who lived in her ward) heard of the calling, she immediately withdrew her friendship. When Renee repeatedly approached Amy about the disconnect be-



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tween them, Amy denied any problem. Hence, their relationship grew very strained and has never fully recovered. As I listened to the pain in Renee's voice, I understood her frustration completely; I had seen and experienced similar situations.

One might question whether envy precipitated the friend's hostility and withdrawal. Humiliation often accompanies envy—especially when it might flirt with the taboo of “aspiring” to Church callings. Would an envious person honestly say to the envied, “I wish I were getting the attention and admiration that you receive from Church members because of your calling . . . or because your husband is the bishop (or stake president, or whatever). Why wasn't I chosen? Or . . . why wasn't *my husband* chosen?” Most people would never admit to these feelings. And because of the denial, envy festers and friendships or associations suffer.

One woman expressed to me her heartache over a friendship tainted and scarred by envy. She had been forced into the role of the envied, but out of a desire to salvage the friendship, she reached out to her friend. They began to speak about her friend's envy toward her. The envious friend bravely admitted her envy, and both women have worked through the years to rebuild their friendship. Their truce is fragile at times; the envied's loss of trust in her friend has never been completely restored, nor has the resentment of the envier been completely quelled. Nevertheless, I shared with my friend how fortunate she was that her envious friend had the rarely found courage to admit her envy.

The studies I've read reflect my own experience with envy and friendship. I have tasted the bile of envy from three close friends at different times in my life. Like the above-mentioned woman, in each instance, in an effort to save the friendship, I tried to discuss my friend's increasing hostility toward me. And each time, they stonewalled me, denying any such feelings or refusing to speak with me. At first, I tried to be sensitive to the

pain and insecurities troubling my friends, but after months and, in some cases, even years, I decided that my own feelings mattered, too, and that I had to be my own champion. Besides, I was stymied as to how to connect or relate to them. Subsequently, I allowed each friendship to die its own death, and, at times, I still mourn.

Ironically, we women readily confide to each other our frustrations with our husbands, children, in-laws, or whomever. But when frustrated with each other, we often fall into the trap of what author Phyllis Chesler calls “inauthentic niceness.”²

I have two women friends who speak truthfully to me without fear or hesitation. At first, I was taken aback and somewhat frightened by their honesty. And their fearlessness in disagreeing with my viewpoints intimidated me and, admittedly, sometimes offended me. Over time, however, I learned to appreciate their forthrightness. I decided I'd rather have a pointedly truthful friend than a “nice” friend who gossiped about me behind my back! I'm not suggesting that we women senselessly “bulldoze” each other in our differences, but we can surely learn to respectfully differentiate.

The biggest casualty of envy, however, is the envier's own spirituality. Ann and Barry Ulanov, authors of *Cinderella and Her Sisters: The Envied and Envyng*, examine the spiritual plight of enviers. They define envy as sinful partly because of the way its emotional roots intertwine with the sin of coveting. Envy causes a person to feel demeaned by another's good fortune. In order to protect him- or herself, the envier wants to belittle the envied or what the envied has. Hence, envy looks closely for evil in another person and finds satisfaction when any fault is found.³ And if evil cannot be found, envy often drives the envier to conjure up or pretend that evil exists in the envied's heart anyway. The Ulanovs further elaborate on this aberrant intrusion of the spiritual self:

The envying do not want their own person but

someone else's. When we envy we are not willing to find and live with our own self, with all the hard nasty work that that involves. Instead we want to seize another more glittering self. We may severely damage other persons with this violent thrust at their being, but even more seriously, we refuse what is our own. We hunger and desire to be a person of substance, but we are unwilling to nurture the only substance we can ever possess—our own. The refusal of ourselves strikes a major blow against our spirit—that center of our integrity as unique and original persons.⁴

When we seek what belongs to someone else and reject what is ours, envy can easily lead to spiritual laziness and emotional frustration.⁵ Rejection, resentment, hate, and anger eclipse hope, gratitude, and joy.

In his insightful story, "Abel Sanchez," Miguel de Unamuno tells of a talented, brilliant doctor who is overcome with envy of his best friend, Abel, a gifted portrait painter. In his torment, the doctor replaces his own sense of self with a constant, painful awareness of his friend. The doctor cannot appreciate his own uniqueness and talents, or even the love of his wife and children. He rejects everything good and worthy in himself and his life; he can focus only on the abilities of Abel and those of Abel's wife and children. Not surprisingly, the doctor comes to despise himself, his friend, and even God—whom he comes to believe plays favorites. In feeling rejected by God, the doctor comes to resent God and distance himself spiritually from him. He begins to see Abel as the biblical Abel, and in feeling that God rejected them both, he develops a sense of kinship with the biblical Cain. Though the doctor eventually comes to some understanding of his own contribution to his hatred for Abel, he is never fully able to get past it. On his deathbed, he cries, "Why must I have been born into a country of hatreds? Into a land where the precept seems to be: 'Hate thy neighbor as thyself.' For I have lived hating myself."⁶ The doctor's story poignantly shows envy's tragic consequences when we separate ourselves from sources of light and love in seeking our neighbor's demeaning through envy. We begin to imagine insult and injustice, and we feel vengeful. We cannot truly love others unless we love ourselves. And envy keeps us from loving ourselves.

Truly, to envy is part of being human. To aid in developing our sense of self, we can learn to recognize envy when we encounter it and refuse to personalize it when it strikes. The Ulanovs suggest that we need not believe others' envy to be absolutely true statements about ourselves—whether the envy manifests itself as criticism or effusive praise.

Envy usually reveals more truth about the envier than the envied. When we recognize this principle, we open the door to feeling compassion toward the envier instead of feeling victimized by them. In an *Ensign* article, "The Fruits of Peace," Patricia Holland, wife of Apostle Jeffrey Holland, shares how she learned this lesson:

At one time I worked with another woman in the presidency of an organization. She often teasingly belittled me, but because it was done in jest she felt she

could get away with it. However, it became a great source of hurt and irritation to me. While trying to practice [the] concept of forgiveness, I realized that every time I received a jab in jest, it was because of an inadequacy this sister felt in herself. I really believe that she was a frightened woman. In the privacy of her own life and out of earshot or eyesight from me, she was so busy nursing her own hurt that she simply was not able to consider anyone else's. In some unfortunate way, I believe she felt she had so little to give that any compliment or virtue extended to another would somehow demean her. She did need my love, and I was foolish to take offense.⁷



THE CONNECTION/COMPETITION CONUNDRUM

Paradoxically, women nurture each other during times of need yet often struggle to applaud or rejoice in another woman's success

COMPETITION WALKS HAND in hand with envy.⁸ Many women seek the admiration and attention of other women. As little girls, and later teenagers, most if not all of us wanted to be popular or part of a popular group of girls. Gaining acceptance and approval was important to our self-worth.

As women, we still have the same desires. How many of us, when moving into a new ward, are able to distinguish different groups of women and find ourselves drawn to become part of certain circles? On the other hand, how many of us have witnessed the pain of some women who did not feel included in women's circles within their ward? Regardless of our age, we as women need the love and acceptance of other women. But with that need comes the inevitable upset and conflict that connections bring.

I love the poignant line from the movie, *An American Quilt*, in which a woman character confides to another woman following a conflict with a girlfriend: "The hardest thing about being a woman is having women friends." During times of conflict with other women, I've heard several LDS women say that they feel like they're in high school again "playing all these silly games." Only once have I heard a woman use the word "compete" or speak of "competitive games," but that is exactly what these games are.

In their book, *Between Women: Love, Envy, and Competition in Women's Friendships*, authors Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach discuss how women's relationships can be soothing, safe, protective environments that, when competitive feelings arise, can abruptly transform into a frightening, disappointing, painful place:

What distinguishes women's friendships is the easy reciprocity that envelops the relationship, allowing so many things to be safely discussed and felt. Such is the positive, nurturing side of women's relationships. . . .

But women's positive feelings toward each other have a counterpoint in equally powerful negative feelings. Women's relationships produce a rainbow of powerful emotions. As much as we value and trust these relationships, we should be able to face the reality that they are not idyllic. They may provoke feelings of hurt and anger, envy and competition, guilt and sorrow.

The authors speak of some women's friendships as "merged attachments"—a sense in which close women friends might no longer feel individuated—and of the "emotional ambience" in which they operate. "Ambience" means to surround on all sides, and our powerful connections as women, whether in conflict or peace, truly encircle our emotions, often determining our moods and sense of well-being. That is why negative and competitive feelings can cause so much "havoc and distress [that they] can be almost unbearable. And yet equally unbearable is the thought of talking directly to one's friend about the upset."⁹

The last sentence highlights something very important: the tendency in many of us to avoid confrontation at all costs, which unfortunately only serves to push conflict further underground. Truly, women hold great power over each other! (See sidebar, page 37) Why then do we sometimes use our power unethically to hurt and undermine each other? Once again, the poisons of insecurity, competition, and envy lie at the heart of these power struggles.

Eichenbaum and Orbach's research shows that historically, "there are many examples of women who sought each other's approval and often competed amongst themselves to attain it."¹⁰ This need for approval fuels competitive behaviors which evolve into attention-seeking behaviors. Hence, competition is really a need for attention.

Juxtaposed with competition is our need and ability as women to nurture—enabling us to form substantive ties. This irony causes conflicted feelings in women. Eichenbaum and Orbach further explain that our "competitive feelings are rooted in a struggle to be seen as a separate identity from other women,"¹¹ yet at the same time, our desire to stay in a merged attachment with women can be overwhelming.¹² They stress that this attachment is one that distinguishes women from men: "Whereas women search for self through connection with others, men search for self through distinguishing themselves from others."¹³

Consequently, for us women, differentiation can feel like a threat to our self-identity even though we may compete with each other to achieve it. For this reason, many of us can look at another's difference and feel angry and envious while simultaneously admiring her courage to differ. Unfortunately, because many of us fear disapproval from other women, we will hold ourselves back or purposely downplay our achievements.

Cohen describes an attorney who "has a good life [but] would rather be liked than respected." The attorney writes, "even with good friends, in order to be liked, I have to downplay my happiness, material success, academic achievements, or pride in my children's achievements."¹⁴ This "holding back" reflects another facet of women's power to influence each

other. But holding back out of fear of disapproval is a force we must resist. As Chesler writes:

It is important that a woman find her own voice and that she discover ways of projecting it into the universe. A woman must learn how to express her views clearly and firmly without being afraid that this will offend, fatally injure, or drive her intimates away. Difference does not have to mean disconnection. Each woman must find her own way of balancing a woman's oversensitivity with a woman's right to hear authentic female voices and a woman's obligation to become that authentic, spontaneous female voice.¹⁵

As Dr. Phil McGraw often says on his show, "Peace at any price is no peace at all."

Women's relationships are underpinned by our ability to support and nurture each other during times of need, difficulty, and disappointment. Unfortunately, many of us haven't learned how to rally round each other in solidarity when some among us are thriving and successful. Because we may feel left behind or abandoned, during good times we sometimes withdraw our support and withhold our praise.

Competition is also about the desire for recognition because outside recognition grants us visibility. This is important to remember, for in our envy and competitive feelings, we may not actually *want* the Church calling or professional advancement or whatever particular success the person we envy has but rather the perceived status, recognition, attention, and value they seem to enjoy.

Eichenbaum and Orbach stress that when we feel isolated, undervalued, ignored, or passed over, feelings of competition erupt and represent a fight for selfhood.¹⁶ Sadly, many of us feel that in forging our identities, we must compete with other women. We compete to be respected and admired, have a nicer home, have better behaved or more accomplished children. We also sometimes compete in our outer appearance.¹⁷ At one time or another, all of us struggle with feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. But many of us don't know how to gain confidence in our own capabilities, so we hide these emotions, and our feelings of inadequacy become shameful and humiliating to us. If we add fear, the emotions can easily transform into the opposite feeling: I can do better than you.¹⁸

As with envy, our denial of the existence of competitive feelings perpetuates the problem. I have heard other women claim that competition never enters into their relationships, and, undoubtedly, that is true for many. But realistically, what one of us would say to another, "I'm envious that you have a nicer house (or whatever) than I have, so I'm going to compete with you in other ways to show you that I am just as successful, if not more so, than you"? Who wouldn't hide such feelings?

I have seen this tendency to deny envious and competitive feelings firsthand. I once taught a workshop on envy at a Relief Society Enrichment Night. Halfway through the workshop, one woman, whom I'll call Suzanne, insisted that in her circle of friends, no such envy or competition existed. She told me, "Julie, we women have no need of this workshop."

I knew Suzanne's assertion was false because four years pre-

WOMEN'S POWER OVER WOMEN

WOMEN HOLD GREAT POWER OVER EACH other. In an *Ensign* article, "Fruits of Peace," Patricia Holland observes:

It seems tragic to me that women are often their own worst enemies when they ought to be allies, nurturing and building each other. We all know how much a man's opinion of us can mean, but I believe our self-worth as women is often reflected to us in the eyes of other women. When other women respect us, we respect ourselves. It is often only when other women find us pleasant and worthy that we find ourselves pleasant and worthy. If we have this effect on each other, why aren't we more generous and loving with one another?¹

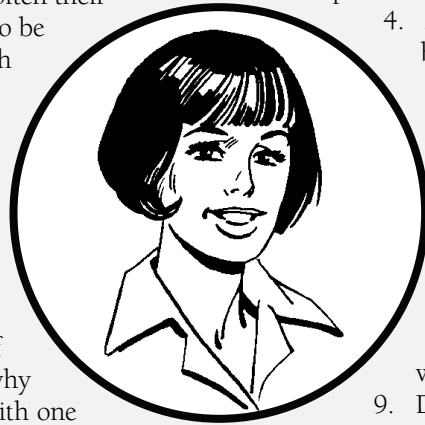
Phyllis Chesler carries this notion a step further in her book, *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*:

Since women depend upon each other for emotional intimacy and bonding, the power to form cliques and to shun each other functions to enforce female conformity and to discourage female independence and psychological growth. How women view and treat each other matters. Women long for female approval and friendship. [But] they judge each other harshly, hold grudges, gossip about, exclude and disconnect from other women. Women envy and compete against each other, not against men.²

Because many women would rather be liked than respected, they undermine their own success in order to please their controlling sisters. Consequently, only stronger, more confident women are able to swim against the tide of disapproval to define their own destiny.

Are we allowing other women to define who we are? To find out, Betsy Cohen suggests pondering the following questions:

1. Are you afraid of becoming too successful?



2. Are you afraid your best friend won't like you if you do too well or look too good?
3. Do you hold yourself back from fulfilling your potential?
4. Are you afraid to make others feel bad by surpassing them?
5. Do you play down what you have for fear of disapproval?
6. Are you afraid someone will want what you have?
7. Are you afraid to speak too eloquently in front of other women?
8. Are you afraid to tell your best friend, who didn't get a promotion at work, that you just got one?
9. Do you avoid a colleague in the restroom for fear she won't want to be your friend once she finds out about your success?³

If we answer "yes" to any of these questions, then we are allowing other women to exercise their power over us.

Conversely, we may be exercising unrighteous power over other women. We should honestly ask ourselves:

1. Do we feel threatened by another woman's success?
2. Do we look at another woman's figure (or house, or job, or whatever) and want it for ourselves while hating our own?
3. Do we watch other women whom we define as "successful" and gossip about them or behave rudely toward them?
4. Do we rationalize away another woman's success?
5. Do we look at a successful woman and call her a "bad" mother?⁴

If we answer "yes" to any of these questions, then we suffer from envy and are using our power in a destructive way.

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viously, one of her good friends, Mary, had confided to me about her frustrations with Suzanne. Mary had spoken specifically about Suzanne's competitive feelings and how she felt they were coloring their friendship. I was ten years older and not a member of this particular group of friends, so I was a "safe" confidant for Mary. But isn't it interesting and sad that Mary felt comfortable speaking to me about her then-contentious friendship but could not find the courage to speak directly to Suzanne about it? In turn, Mary's failure to acknowledge her frustrations to Suzanne led Suzanne to make false conclusions about at least this particular friendship.

Chesler states:

Many women learn to pretend that they are not really aggressive or competitive, because such traits are not socially desirable in women. But if a woman pretends to herself that she is kind to other women when she is not, she will have no reason to learn how to resist her own normal, but emotionally primitive, human inclinations. Once a woman acknowledges that normal women are aggressive and competitive, she may become more realistic about what to expect from other women and clear about her own limitations as well.¹⁹

Surely, admitting our own vulnerability to these emotions is a crucial step in the healing process. Betsy Cohen describes an

interview with Marlene who had been stung by her envious friends and her own mother.²⁰ While visiting a good friend, Marlene began to suffer from her own envy. She described her misery in this way:

I went home feeling frustrated and angry at myself—and my friend. I was really envious and felt awful. I would conjure up mean fantasies about my friend's life. But I remembered my other friends' envy toward me, and I stopped myself. I told myself that this feeling of envy pointed out something I wanted in my life. I could either sit around and feel bad or make my life more like hers. It was a turning point for me, a fork in the road. I could see all the years ahead I would spend justifying myself by cutting down other people's successes. If I didn't do something, I knew I'd become embittered. If you have enough success, you can temper your envy.²¹

Marlene's admission—even to herself—took courage. How easy it would have been for her to continue to blame her friend for her anger rather than take ownership of her dissatisfaction with herself. Furthermore, Marlene used her dissatisfaction to propel herself to a new level of achievement.

Being the object of envy and competitive feelings can also be unbearable. No woman wants to be criticized and ostracized by women envying and competing with her—especially when they are her friends. If we are the envied woman, we may try to soothe the envier with praise and positive reassurances, but often, they are to little or no avail. In fact, our “being nice” often further inflames the envier as she interprets our “niceness” as condescending and artificial. A proverb summarizes this no-win snare: “Who is able to stand before envy?” (Proverbs 27:4).

Chesler gives further insight into the competitive dilemma:

To be envied . . . is to be vulnerable to [the enviers] spoiling you. For example, Abel had Cain, Mozart his Salieri. Psychologically, enviers wish to be the one God loves most, the Chosen One, the one whose being radiates excellence. Many women wish to star in this role, and many do. The male universe has room for many more stars; the female universe is therefore much smaller, and the competition quite fierce for the limited number of starring roles. Some women cannot bear to experience themselves as lesser lights; in order to shine more brightly, they must rid the stage of greater lights. Originality, creativity, generosity, excellence, especially in the service of humanity, offends and threatens them. Envious people experience excellence in others as a form of persecution.²²

I have witnessed some women's purposeful attempts to gain the admiration, even the envy of other women. There is nothing innately wrong with wanting admiration, but we are wrong to make others feel less worthy in order to build ourselves up.²³ I once had a friend who often initiated friendships and volunteered her services to women and then advertised her positive interactions to our mutual friends. Later, she

would confide to me her “dilemma” that these particular women now desired her friendship, but she really had no interest in being friends with them. I wondered about this incongruence and decided that perhaps she felt some sense of power in garnering women's friendships and admiration and then wielding her power by rejecting them. Furthermore, I suspected she was attempting to win my admiration and envy by recounting to me her good deeds and subsequent popularity.

Now, let's contrast my friend's subterfuge to the words of Brigham Young University professor Donna Lee Bowen when she spoke at a BYU Women's Conference some years back:

Much of what we do in life is directed at garnering admiration from those around us. Admiration, however, is usually at odds with love. If we seek to be admired, we seek an audience. An audience lacks the close involvement that generates love. In wanting admiration, we want to be perfect. Love, however, tolerates and even welcomes imperfections.²⁴



TOWARD A MORE AUTHENTIC SISTERHOOD

How can we truly become “sisters in Zion”?

IN OUR CHURCH culture, we often refer to each other as “sisters in the gospel,” or “sisters in Zion.” But how can we create authentic sisterly bonds when we engage in envious and competitive behavior? I suggest the following:

1. **ADMITTING OUR ENVY.** If we feel envy and can admit to it and examine it, we will recognize it as a signpost to other feelings, or as some sort of defense mechanism. Phyllis Chesler highlights the strong denial of our own potential culpability:

The women whom I interviewed about woman's inhumanity to woman mainly talked about how other women had disappointed or betrayed them. Few were able to recall the ways in which they had disappointed or betrayed other women. No one admitted to remaining part of or profiting from a group in which members were gossiped about or ostracized.²⁵

As discussed earlier in the example of Marlene, owning up to our envious and competitive feelings can be a wonderful key, unlocking the door to creative freedoms and new levels of accomplishment. Denying our envious feelings will only ensure that they will continue to work their poison.

2. **RECOGNIZING THAT BEING DIFFERENT IS NOT A NEGATIVE.** Difference does not have to mean disconnection from each other. We must allow ourselves the option of being different. Chesler explains that women may sometimes confuse a difference of opinion, personality, or life choice with unfair criticism and rejection. She adds, “A woman has to be able to endure opposing views without collapsing and without feeling personally betrayed by those who hold such views.”²⁶ In short,

to be authentic sisters, we need not think and act exactly the same.

The “soccer moms” incident I described earlier is one of many I’ve experienced with women over the years. I don’t want to sound like a victim, however, because I am not. In working through many painful experiences, I have eventually learned how not to feel victimized by other women, to “dig deep” within myself and find the determination to pursue my own path without the approval of some women. Additionally, I have learned to distinguish a difference of opinion from unfair criticism stemming from envy. And finally, I refuse to allow other women to define who I am or to allow women (and men) to hold me hostage with their own definitions of womanhood or what it means to be obedient to gospel standards.

I’ve come to embrace the attitude of the late Julia Child, the famous TV chef. When asked about being envied, she said: “I know what I think of myself. . . . I am in charge, the captain of my own ship.”²⁷

3. TALKING ABOUT OUR FEELINGS. If we are ever to achieve authentic sisterhood, we must learn how to talk about our true feelings. As stated previously, the difficulties discussed here are exacerbated by our reluctance to discuss and/or disclose feelings of envy, betrayal, guilt, competition, abandonment, and anger.

The term “justice” can mean many things. We LDS women can choose justice by speaking up and defending fellow sisters who are criticized for choosing a different path. We can learn to tell our truth and hear another’s truth ethically and constructively. Chesler advises women to ask directly for what we want and not wait for others to guess at what our needs are.²⁸ These new ways of relating take effort and courage. But in applying them, we build faith in each other and learn to trust that speaking up in constructive ways will not sever but strengthen our ties to each other.

4. REFRAINING FROM PROVOKING ENVY IN OTHERS. Isn’t it true that seemingly perfect women are hard to love because we cannot relate to them? Don’t we truly empathize and cheer for those who struggle and are open about it?

We must recognize that one of the many paradoxes of envy is: when women seem too happy or too successful and don’t seem to struggle enough, our empathy can very easily evolve into envy. I’m not suggesting that we go out of our way to showcase our miseries, large or small, in order to avoid being envied. Instead, I’m highlighting the real dangers of falling victim to “Perfect Mormon Woman Syndrome” and calling too much attention to our family’s successes, or to the personal standards by which we live the gospel, and so forth.

5. SEEKING THE LORD’S APPROVAL OF OUR LIFE PLAN. Forging ahead without the approval of others takes a strong

sense of self. We can develop this through cultivating a close relationship with the Lord and seeking his will instead of the will of others. I was lucky to learn this lesson as a young woman. I was a twenty-six-year-old serving as a counselor in the stake Primary presidency when a woman whom I had known for years began to criticize me behind my back and even fired put-downs directly at me. She was not pleased at how I performed my calling. She even claimed I had “a bad spirit” about me! It’s funny to me now, but at the time, I began to question *my* ability. I turned to the Lord for comfort and



ADMIRATION . . . IS USUALLY AT ODDS WITH LOVE.

If we seek to be admired, we seek an audience.

An audience lacks the close involvement that generates love. In wanting admiration, we want to be perfect. Love, however, tolerates and even welcomes imperfections.

—DONNA LEE BOWEN

counsel. In answer to my prayer, I received as a clear impression the question: Who was I trying to please—God or this woman? Jesus Christ was the essence of perfection, yet he still had enemies who eventually killed him. If he couldn’t please everyone, neither could I! Because of this epiphany, I no longer question myself as long as I feel my efforts have divine approval.

6. MAINTAINING OUR SPIRITUAL HEALTH. We must be vigilant in honestly examining and working to maintain our own spiritual health. If caught in envy’s snare, as Marlene described earlier, we can use our recognition of it as a motivating force to discover what our needs are and then to work to fulfill those needs. After all, at its most primitive, envy is a hunger for goodness and yet not knowing how to get it.²⁹

Jesus Christ is the antidote for envy’s poison. His love and goodness fills our empty vessels because through his love, we feel worthy and good. Thus, we learn to embrace and feel gratitude for our own unique goodness instead of focusing so intently on someone else’s. As we labor toward a deeper spirituality, we feel a greater awareness of the Savior’s love and approval.



CONCLUSION

I’VE HAD SERIOUS reservations about writing this article and making my voice heard on this subject. I fear that some will accuse me of focusing on the negative in women’s relationships and not on the positive. Yet I truly believe that we will never reach a level of sincere, pure sisterhood if we do not admit that we are bleeding—and stop the bleeding in order to heal our wounds. The power is within each of us to

bind up and heal one another's wounds. We must honestly and consistently ask ourselves, "In which way am I using my power? Is it to hurt or to heal others? Am I ostracizing, criticizing, and gossiping about women I feel are more successful than I? Or am I inclusive and respectful of women who pursue a different path than my own?"

Just as important, we must periodically check for personal wounds. When we feel wounded by another woman's success, we know we are bleeding. We might feel that she's using her success or power to wound us, and at times perhaps she is. But far more often than not—and here's the tough part—we will find that we, not the woman we begrudge or resent, are the cause of our own wounding.

As individuals and as a large, diverse group of Mormon women, we must find or create a balance between individual autonomy and group connectedness. We must acknowledge our need for each other but also our need for self-actualization. We should not have to fear negative retribution when we pursue our own path.

Mary, the mother of Christ, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, were cousins, and they truly exemplified authentic sisterhood. In sharing this message about their sisterhood, I refer again to Patricia Holland's article, which underscores this sense of authenticity:

I have always been touched that in her moment of greatest need, her singular time of confusion and wonder and awe, Mary went to another woman. . . . It was their very womanhood that God had used for his holiest of purposes. Elizabeth is not petty or fearful or envious here. Her son will not have the fame or role or divinity that has been bestowed on Mary's child, but her only feelings are of love and devotion. To this young, bewildered kinswoman she says only, "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:42–43)³⁰

As women, we know how to love, nurture, care for, uplift, praise, comfort, advise, and be each other's soft place to fall when we are feeling needy, low, and vulnerable. But like Elizabeth and Mary, let us also be a place from which we can fly, revel, glory, and delight in each other's great news. Let us be each other's cheering sections not just in times of need but also in times of glorious triumph!



NOTES

1. Betsy Cohen, *The Snow White Syndrome: All About Envy* (New York: MacMillan, 1986), 20.
2. Phyllis Chesler, *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2001), 459.
3. Ann Ulanov and Barry Ulanov, *Cinderella and Her Sisters: The Envied and the*

Envy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 95.

4. *Ibid.*, 108–09.
5. *Ibid.*, 108.
6. Miguel De Unamuno, *Abel Sanchez and Other Stories* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1998).
7. Patricia Holland, "The Fruits of Peace," *Ensign*, June, 1984, 53.
8. Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach, *Between Women: Love, Envy, and Competition in Women's Friendships* (New York: Penguin Books., 1987), 113.
9. *Ibid.*, 20–21.
10. *Ibid.*, 114.
11. *Ibid.*, 118.
12. *Ibid.*, 70.
13. *Ibid.*, 122.
14. Cohen, 179.
15. Chesler, 479.
16. Eichenbaum and Orbach, 124.
17. Oftentimes, this competition over appearance is not about being more beautiful or thinner. I have sometimes seen the opposite tendency, as I've listened to comments in Relief Society lessons or in conversations by women who subtly criticize their thinner or more beautiful sisters in the Church. I've heard some imply that beautiful, thin women "care too much about their looks" or are "vain." And I've heard some sisters use their lackadaisical appearance as a badge of honor. One woman said, "I don't care about my looks as I use my time for more important things." Clearly, this is a subtle form of putdown, competition, and envy of women who choose to concern themselves more with their appearance. I'm not arguing that we all need to be thin and beautiful. Our goal should be to appreciate differences—even in our appearance. It is wonderful whenever a woman empowers herself by accepting how she looks. But we need not empower ourselves at the expense of other groups of women.

18. *Ibid.*, 126.

19. Chesler., 473.

20. Marlene's mother's envy is too complex to go into here. But though there is a real taboo in society regarding mother/daughter envy, it is quite common. As children, we hear and read fairy tales condemning envious "wicked stepmothers." But envious mothers is another story, and one rarely told. A mother's envy may not be easily detected by her or her daughter because in one instance, the mother feels love and concern for her daughter's welfare. But a mother's love can turn hostile in the form of unfair criticism and withholding of praise. Furthermore, it's difficult for a daughter to empathize and comprehend that her mother would feel so conflicted and hostile toward her.

According to Betsy Cohen, a mother's envy is "aimed at two primary targets":

1. Opportunities [daughters] have that she did not have.
2. Competition over advantages she previously had but no longer has (Cohen, 67).

Envious mothers are often ambivalent about their daughters' successes. On the one hand, mothers feel pride in their daughters' accomplishments. Conversely, they feel resentful that their daughters' success has surpassed their own. Feeling shame fuels the envious fire and thus mothers attempt to suppress and deny these feelings.

21. Cohen, 188.

22. *Ibid.*, 464.

23. Cohen calls this "The See How Great I Am . . . Don't You Wish You Were Me?" syndrome. *Ibid.*, 27.

24. Donna Lee Bowen, "Real Women," in *Women Steadfast in Christ*, Marie Cornwall and Dawn Hall Anderson, eds. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 268.

25. Chesler, 468.

26. *Ibid.*, 478.

27. Quoted in Cohen, 237.

28. Chesler, 479.

29. Ulanov and Ulanov, 80.

30. Holland, 55.

Notes for the sidebar, "Women's Power over Women"

1. Patricia Holland, "The Fruits of Peace," *Ensign*, June, 1984, 50.
2. Phyllis Chesler, *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2001), dust jacket.
3. Betsy Cohen, *The Snow White Syndrome: All About Envy* (New York: MacMillan, 1986), xiii–xiv.
4. These are questions I created based on statements in Cohen. *Ibid.*