

BLOGGERNACLE VOICES—THE “SINGING MOTHERS (and Wailing Toddlers, Serious Christians, Brilliant Scholars, Single Romantics, Fashion Mavens, Grumpy Moms, and Assorted Poets and Pundits) CHORUS”

Weblogs, or “blogs,” are websites where entries (called “posts”) are published in chronological or reverse chronological order, a bit like a journal. Unlike a journal, however, blogs can allow readers to comment on the posts, and communities of commenters spring up on popular blogs. There are blogs devoted to every conceivable topic, and it is estimated that there are more than 100 million blogs in the “blogosphere.”

The Mormon corner of the blogosphere, often called “the bloggernacle” is full of women engaged in what was once considered part of the feminist project—taking their own lives and thoughts

seriously and expecting others to do the same. If the personal is in any way political, these writings constitute a veritable revolution. Hundreds of Mormon women, able to easily publish their thoughts via the Internet, are talking, arguing, connecting, sharing their thoughts and the details of their lives. Stay-at-home moms, graduate students, world travelers, computer programmers, artists, novelists, entrepreneurs, medical residents—all make up an intricate polyphony with complex harmonies, dissonances, and resolutions.

—K.H.

THAT WE’RE “NOT FREAKS”

A conversation about the bloggernacle with Heather Oman, Janet Garrard-Willis, and Rory Swensen



HEATHER OMAN lives in Virginia with her husband, two children, a dog, and a snake. She has a master's degree in speech language pathology, and is a licensed speech therapist. She is the founder of Mormon Mommy Wars blog and is a member of the editorial board of Segullah Journal.

JANET GARRARD-WILLIS has an MA in literature from Saint Louis University where her Ph.D. is also forthcoming. She dabbles in a variety of subjects, hosts everything from bluegrass to punk on her iPod, loves to teach, cook, and spend time with her hubby and son.



RORY SWENSEN is a husband and a father of four. He is a technology and software manager, serves on the Sunstone board of directors, and writes for the Sunstone Blog.



The audio of the full interview is available for free download at SUNSTONEONLINE.COM/EXTRAS.

RORY: How did each of you first become involved in blogging?

HEATHER: My husband Nathan had been running his blog, Times and Seasons, and it had begun to become a sticky point in our marriage because he was spending so much time on the blog. So he would encourage me—“Well, why don't you blog?”—initially as sort of a way to get me off his back.

But I started my own blog for two reasons. Number one, a post on Times and Seasons about miscarriage had upset me, and I wanted to respond to it in more than just a comment. I wanted to have a forum where I could respond in my own way. The other reason was because being a stay-at-home mom was a big shift from what I had been doing. I had been working full-time as a speech language pathologist before I had my son, and suddenly I went from a forty-to-fifty-hour week to being home and in my house all day. I needed an outlet—a creative outlet of some kind. And I do like to write. I've always liked to write, and it was a way of expressing myself creatively that did not require leaving my house. That's where Mormon Mommy Wars came from.

RORY: Did you explore participating in other group blogs, or did you always just plan to create your own?

HEATHER: At the time, there actually were very few female Mormon group blogs. Feminist Mormon Housewives had not been going very long and did not have much momentum. It certainly didn't look anything like it looks now. Had there been one that was really going, I probably would have tried to participate.

Even today, there really aren't that many female group blogs in the bloggernacle compared to male group blogs. To be fair, the bigger blogs like Times and Seasons and By Common

Consent have incorporated more women and have made, I think, a definite effort to do that. But when they started, they were definitely dominated by male voices.

RORY: Janet, you come at blogging a little bit differently. You came in as a frequent commenter turned permablogger.

JANET: I actually started out as a pretty tentative commenter. I was doing a guest stint as a teacher at BYU for the summer, and one of my students said something to me like, “Yeah, I really like feminism, but it has no sense of humor.” So I was just googling Mormon feminist humor to find proof for her that not only could feminists be funny, but Mormon feminists were, of course, *especially* funny. And the first post that came up was Lisa’s now quite infamous Poop Chronicles. [Lisa is the founder of Feminist Mormon Housewives.]

HEATHER: The Poop Chronicles, yep.

JANET: I know some people are incredibly offended by the Poop Chronicles, but I literally laughed myself off my chair in my little BYU office. And at that time, I didn’t have children.

HEATHER: You will find it funnier in about six months.

JANET: (*Laughing*) Or more frightening. I’m not sure which.

HEATHER: You will find it funnier—give yourself some time. You have to laugh, or you will scream.

JANET: I ended up showing it to a couple of feminist professors at BYU, and I just kind of lurked [on Feminist Mormon Housewives] for a while. But it took me a couple months of reading before I ever commented, and then I very carefully worded my comment into the box and re-read it twelve times before I could hit “post.” And I was very nervous because even though I had already published in the print medium, to me this was somehow much more frightening. And the ironic thing is, I had no idea, even when I became a permablogger, how many people read Mormon blogs.

Then I started commenting a little more and a little more and a little more, and then [Feminist Mormon Housewives] asked me to guest post about six months after that, and I procrastinated and put them off for another six months because I was intimidated. . . . I know that sounds quite weak-spined for a feminist, but I think you’ll find with a lot of professionals that what you believe about other women you’re not always so good at applying to yourself. You might believe women are strong, but that doesn’t mean you believe *you* are. So they asked me to guest post, and then they asked me to stay, and I did. Still having no freaking clue how large it was.

HEATHER: Which is probably a good thing.

JANET: Oh yes. Fairly early on in my tenure, I did a post entitled, “The Bloggernacle Scares Me,” on this very topic. And then I asked people what sort of a rhetorical space is the bloggernacle? What purpose does it serve for you? Because I’d suddenly realized how big it was, and I was scared out of my mind. It was a great conversation, I think.

RORY: I read both of your blogs, and there does seem to be a difference between By Common Consent and Times and Seasons and the tone of your blogs.

JANET: Funnier?

RORY: Funnier, but they’re also much more personal. And, as a man, it really feels like I am almost prying in or spying on. . .

JANET: So it’s voyeuristic to you?

RORY: It is, in the sense that I see conversations I don’t normally see as a man. And it’s very interesting, and it’s pretty enlightening.

JANET: I wonder if that sense of voyeurism is why the snarkernacle likes to poke at us at FMH a lot. Perhaps it stems from the fact that they maybe feel like these are conversations men just should not hear, I don’t know. [The snarkernacle refers to a blog that specializes in sarcastic commentary about the bloggernacle.]

RORY: No, it’s much more of an enlightening. It’s an ability for me to see something that if perhaps I walked into a room where this conversation was happening, the conversation might not continue.



RORY: Moving on. Janet you talk about being nervous to post. There’s an interesting dynamic on the blogs in that it’s very easy to push “send,” and it’s very easy to actually create a blog, and I want to know what each of your vetting processes are. How do you determine what you’re going to post? What kind of editing do you do, and do you consider how somebody might react to this as you’re writing it? Or is it very much—as Lisa talks about—just a way for her to get her thoughts out there no matter what.

JANET: I can speak only from my own experience and can’t represent the rhetorical strategies of my colleagues, but I think you are right about some of Lisa’s posts. She will, in fact, sometimes precede a post with a title that includes the word “rant.” Which to me is a warning that this post is not representational of what she thinks every minute of her life, and that she’s trying to blow off some steam. I get quite defensive of her when people attack her when she already said she was venting.

For me, it depends on the topic. When I posted about peeing on pregnancy tests—no, I didn’t give that a lot of thought. I wrote it in five minutes and posted it because it was funny. But when I wrote about liminality—the experiences of liminality in the Church—yeah, I thought about it quite a lot. I tried to consider how people from the very orthodox side of the Church would view it and how people who feel quite disaffected or on the margins would feel, because I see the role I would like to play as a Latter-day Saint as a bridge. The cultural divide that has formed around a unified gospel of Jesus Christ really, really deeply pains me, and so with a post like that, I obsessively think about different ways to read something. But then, of course, basic linguistic theory is going to

tell you a signifier and a signified cannot mean the same thing to every person, so there's no way to anticipate response. But that's how I go about posting; it depends on the topic.

But comments are different. With comments, it's really easy to hit "send." Ten or eleven times since I've become a permablogger, I've taken advantage of my access to the edit function and gone in because I've felt I have been a bit too defensive or harsh—not because I felt like I was attacking, but because I realized that it might really appear that way to [the person I was addressing]. I have been described by an acquaintance as pathologically nice, so I try to be careful when I comment, but the chatter, the textual chatter, really is more like chatter. You know when you talk to somebody, what you say is gone once you say it. There's a memory of it, but it's not permanent; yet online your comments are permanent, and that is sometimes a little uncomfortable because what I say one moment, I don't necessarily believe five weeks later. So I guess the short answer is: I think quite a bit about the posts. For my comments, I think less but probably wish I thought more.

RORY: How about you, Heather? Do you worry about how you come across?

HEATHER: I do. I'm constantly stunned by the way somebody has taken what I have written. I wrote a post about anger management, and I thought very carefully about it, not wanting to come across as a crazy person but wanting to see if other people had similar experiences with losing their temper, or losing their cool, as a mom. You know: How do we control ourselves as mothers? How do we, in a sense, protect our kids from ourselves when we are out of control? What do we do to keep ourselves in control? Later, I ran across a link to that post, and everybody who was discussing my post on that forum made me sound crazy.

JANET: It was a great post. Such a necessary conversation.

HEATHER: So that's only one example, but many other times I've stumbled across another conversation about my blog and about me, about something that I have said, and I am stunned at how it was taken. So yeah, I do sometimes think about it. Like Janet said, I probably should think more about what I write. Oftentimes though, I'm writing just to be funny, and I'm not thinking very hard about that—I'm just writing a quick little funny thing, trying to make people laugh. I've talked to the other posters on Mommy Wars, and one of our goals is just to make people laugh and enjoy our experiences that otherwise would really make us cry.

I also think about my writing in the sense of, is this well written, is the language tight? Those kinds of things. There are times I have gone back and read posts and thought, "Oh my gosh, I could have edited that," or "Boy, that sentence is too wordy." And so I do try to keep up a certain quality of writing—*(Laughing)* I know that may surprise people who read the blog! I really respect people who can keep up very high quality writing on a blog because sometimes I'm just writing to get it done. So, yes, if I'm going to address an issue that I know is going to strike a chord with people, I do wonder

how people might take it, and I do try not to offend.

What Janet said about comments, though, is very, very appropriate. Posts aren't necessarily offensive to people; where people start to get offended or upset is in the comments. And, as Janet also said, it's easy to fire off something that you're thinking, just click that "send" button and jump into the fray. Then two days later you go back and scroll through the comments, and you think, "I can't believe I said that!" And: of course people are going to be offended by what I said; of course that sounds so awful. One problem with the conversations in the bloggernacle is that they happen very quickly, and if you take too much time to edit or think it through, you're going to miss out on the conversation. So you jump in, and you say what you want to say, and you send it off. And . . . you've offended somebody.

JANET: But, of course, to a degree it's good that we do that because women self-edit too much. I think it's good that we're honest. It's just so sad when what you say then gets significantly misread and you don't even realize it's been misread until twenty-five comments later.

HEATHER: Right. Another sort of limitation of the medium is that often things that would sound okay spoken, look awful in written form. Online, you form an idea of somebody that may or may not be what they are like in real life. There are all kinds of people on Times and Seasons who I really thought were unpleasant. But then I met them and got to know them, and then I read comments by them that beforehand would have sounded really offensive, but now that I know them, I think, "Oh well, he's just trying to approach it from this-and-this point of view." So that's one of the limitations of conversations in the bloggernacle. We don't know each other very well, and things that would sound okay if said out loud look awful on the screen.



RORY: There are a lot of informal posts that are just trying to be funny. But you also expose yourselves in very . . . uh, intimate, ways. I mean, Janet you've talked about infertility, and you share with people the frustrations and the processes but then also the celebrations and the birth announcement. And Heather, you too—you've posted about your very personal experiences. How do you both feel about opening yourself up in this way, because it is a very permanent and very broad medium, and a lot of people are going to be reading what you write?

JANET: I'm different from many women who blog, at least those I've spoken to at 'snackers and on the telephone. ["Snacker" is shorthand for "bloggersnacker," which is a blogger party.] A lot of them are introverts who find their only means of being extroverted through the computer. I'm pathologically extroverted. You say it takes a lot of courage to share. I don't know that I'm capable of doing anything but share.

I decided a long time ago that usually our virtues are also our vices, depending on what we do with them. And the fact



*Group photo from a Feminist Mormon Housewives “snacker” held in April, 2007.
Janet Garrard-Willis is sitting on the right end of the front row.*

that I’m extremely friendly and extremely open scares the pants off of a lot of people; but as a teacher, I continually have students who are terrified of my red-headed extroversion on the first day of class, and then a month later, they wind up bawling their eyes out in my office, unburdening themselves. So I think with my personality—this may sound really high-falutin’ and pretentious—I honestly believe that since I’m so comfortable being open with personal struggles that I have a responsibility to bring those struggles into a broader conversation.

The only brave part of doing that first post on infertility was that I was afraid of getting repetitions of the very few comments I’ve had through the years, of someone telling me that if I were only more righteous I could conceive a child. And none of that came. Generally, then, for me, sharing very personal things is not an issue of bravery; it’s personality combined with a sense that since most people might be uncomfortable talking about this and I’m not, I’m going to start the conversation because the conversation needs to be had.

HEATHER: I think one of the reasons people are drawn to Feminist Mormon Housewives or people come back to Mormon Mommy Wars is because they make a connection. When you’re putting yourself out there, it is a very private thing, like you say, and there are some private moments—but that is what makes the connection and what builds the com-

munity we’re talking about, this bloggernacle. If nobody pulled the curtain aside about what they were thinking, I’m not sure the community would be as strong as it is.

RORY: You bring up community. What does this community mean to you? It’s a creative outlet, you’ve talked about that, but talk about your blog, the commenters in the blogs you participate in, and the overall bloggernacle community.

JANET: May I share a vignette?

RORY: Absolutely

JANET: Two days ago, I received in the mail a baby gift from somebody I have never met. And this isn’t the only time. I’ve gotten maybe five baby gifts in the mail from people who have never seen me, and I am so deeply moved by these gestures. In this case, this is a man who had adopted his child after he and his wife had struggled with infertility, and reading about our adoption made him so happy he handmade me a baby gift.

When I first started doing this, I don’t know that I would have really said it was a community so much as a discussion forum. But it is a community to me because people genuinely care. They care that we have our son.

HEATHER: A friend from Times and Seasons was in town a year or so ago, and we had dinner with him, and he asked us how many friends we have made through the bloggernacle. And I

don't know that I could even have really counted. It is bizarre, I have to say, how this community is formed. It's completely bizarre, but nevertheless it's there.

JANET: People joke about how we can spend so much time on the computer with people we don't know. . .

HEATHER: Yeah, it's an addiction—we probably all need help.

JANET: Bloggers Anonymous.

HEATHER: But, yeah, the community is there.

RORY: Heather, you've been doing this just over two years now; Janet, almost two years. In that time, how has Mormon blogging changed, and what do you see for the future?

HEATHER: There are more Mormon blogs. I also find more women blogging. I have become aware of more solo female bloggers than I ever have before, which is nice to see. I think that initially Times and Seasons and By Common Consent sort of foresaw a revolution. But I don't know that the revolution has really come to pass.

So where is it going? I hope more people will engage in the conversation. But, in fact, it has become a less-intimate space. As you've mentioned, Janet, *a lot* of people read blogs. When I started mine, I felt like there were maybe fifty . . .

JANET: What exactly do you think the early bloggers thought would be the revolution?

HEATHER: The idea that massive changes could be made or that blogging would revolutionize, or at least have a significant impact on, Mormon studies. I don't know what kind of impact it has had, but I don't think it has been as significant as people may have thought in the early days of the medium.

JANET: Would you agree that it's democratized Mormon studies a bit though, because people who don't know Greek or Latin or anything about the stuff you're supposed to know to, say, write for FARMS or something, read Times and Seasons and comment and get treated with respect?

HEATHER: I think so. I think it certainly has made the conversation more accessible to people who probably wouldn't have had access to or even been aware of it. So, yeah, in that sense, I guess it has changed.

JANET: That's one of my favorite things actually. The blogs seem to really have democratized the ability of LDS people to look at scholarship in such a way that hopefully Mormon doctrine conversations in localized wards will perhaps have more nuance.

One of the things I've seen, which is both a blessing and a burden, at least with our blog, is that exponential growth becomes, at some point, unmanageable. There's no way we can read all the comments, and you want to get rid of the really, really, really nasty comments. We try to get them all, but when you have a thread with two hundred comments and seven threads going on at once, and half of us have new babies or jobs or whatever, it's really, really, really hard. So I think that blogging has become in some ways messier.

HEATHER: I'd agree with that.

JANET: Messier and, in that way, more representative of the world outside of the computer.

But as far as how I see blogging changing things, even though it might not be as revolutionary as some have wanted, I hear people saying stuff in Gospel Doctrine class every now and then that I don't think I would have heard five years ago.

As a feminist, I'm also very much invested in the idea of women feeling like they can openly share their stories without being shoved into a particular perspective of how Mormon women ought to be. And, of course, not all Mormon women are sweet, soft-spoken, overly fertile people with half a dozen children whose husbands make enough that the women don't have to work outside their homes. The idea of the stereotypical Mormon woman, I am convinced and have always been convinced, is a lie. There's no such thing as a stereotypical Mormon woman, and when you get women from all over the spectrum of the Mormon church—and I honestly believe that Heather's blog and ours get those—it's really easy to blast aside the assumption that there's something we should be, and that if we're not, we can't somehow still love Christ and be committed to the gospel. I



JEANNETTE ATWOOD

"A pair of keys was found in Relief Society. It has a key to a Ford, a house key . . . a gym pass . . . and what appears to be a miniature Chippendale!"

don't know that I'd call that a revolution, but if it's a revolution in one woman's life to realize that she's okay, that it's okay that she can't get pregnant, or that she's gotten pregnant so many times, or that she's working outside the home, or whatever—that's my kind of revolution.

We [at Feminist Mormon Housewives] get emails and comments, not infrequently, from people just thanking us and saying, "I never knew there was a place where I could safely talk about my doubts without having people assume that my doubts negate what I believe or what I hope to believe." And the more open they can become, even if it's anonymously online, the more open they'll be able to become in their wards. And the more open a ward becomes, the more you get true *communitas*, the more you really get the gospel of Jesus Christ, the more you get people who love each other, genuinely, rather than for some falsified image. And that is my kind of revolution.

RORY: We need to draw this conversation to a close, but before we do, I'd love you each to share your most cherished experience, or your favorite story, about your blogging. Perhaps you have already shared it.

JANET: When I announced that we were adopting our baby, Margaret Young, for whom I have immense respect and absolute admiration, added a comment saying that she couldn't imagine a better mother than me. And after so many years of not being able to have children and assuming that perhaps it was because I would suck as a mother, that comment sort of is, for me, the signifier of everything that happened afterwards: an outpouring of such amazing, authentic happiness from people who've never met me, like the people sending me baby gifts and playing with my baby at a snacker.

I know that's a very self-involved experience, but it's also to me a confirmation of my long-standing insistence that humans, though we all, of course, have darkness in us, are primarily made of light, that we're good. If you can care that genuinely about someone else's pain and the joy that they felt after pain, how bad can you possibly be? It's really blown me away, how kind people have been in the face of our story.

HEATHER: In addition to the kindness that Janet is talking about, I would have to say it's the friendships. It's the friendships that I have developed particularly with the bloggers at Mormon Mommy Wars. I shoot emails to them, I talk to them regularly, and I am just very touched by these relationships that we have forged, even though some of us have never actually met in person.

JANET: And everybody's so willing to help on whatever topic, even things that are so private. Everyone will just say, "Oh no, you're not a freak. Here's how I can help you." (*Laughing*) It's so kind.

HEATHER: (*Laughing*) Really! It's the validation of "not being a freak" that is the best part of blogging!

JANET: Don't we all just want to be validated as "non-freaks"? ☺

A BLOGGERNACLE SAMPLER

I Hope I Get to Keep My Scars

Originally titled, "Scars," the following is adapted from a 15 July 2007 post by QUIMBY at Feminist Mormon Housewives.

FROM an early age, we are taught that our physical imperfections will be removed when we are resurrected. Our scars will disappear, the hair will be returned to our heads, our eyesight will be made perfect, and our fillings will be made redundant.

How boring! I kind of hope it's not the whole truth.

Sure, I'd love to have perfect vision. I could live with a resurrection that included 20/20 eyesight and no more fillings in my teeth. And though I can't speak for him, I'm sure my dad would love to have a full head of hair. I don't doubt that there are people out there who dream of the day their legs and arms will be restored, and I can't begrudge them that. But I hope I get to keep my scars.

I love my scars. They remind me of some of the happiest moments in my life. They hold spiritual significance. They make me who I am.

By far my coolest scar—the scar that is always voted, hands-down, the winning scar in any scar competition I have ever been in—is on my thigh. I was born with hip dysplasia. I have a huge dimple on either side of my thigh from the traction. My hip dysplasia was treated by Shriners Hospital. Left untreated, I wouldn't have been able to walk without a noticeable limp. I love this scar. It is a constant reminder of the blessing of mobility. It is also a constant reminder of the kindness and charity of the Shriners.

Then there is the scar on my face. I have a vertical scar of about a centimetre just under my nose, on one of the ridges between the nose and the lips. It is the result of an accident I had when I was about three, when I fell out of a moving car. My mother raced me home, and my father and neighbor gave me a blessing. I healed with only this small scar to show for it. That blessing was the means by which the neighbor returned to full activity in the Church. I hope I never lose this scar. Every time I see it, I remember my mother's faith in the healing power of the priesthood. I remember my father's love for me and his constant priesthood worthiness. I remember that, sometimes, miracles happen.

Exactly 362 days ago, I received another scar when my child was delivered via Caesarean section. This scar runs almost the length of my abdomen, just below the bikini line. After three attempts at inducing, and two days of contractions that never quite turned into labor, my daughter's heartbeat started to fall. The doctors took me in for an emergency

Caesarean. For the rest of my life, I will have this thin purple line as a constant reminder of my child's birth. I love that line. I see it, and I think of the dedication and care of my medical team, who tried for so long to give me a natural childbirth. I see this scar, and I think of my daughter. I love that she has imprinted herself, not only on my heart, but also on my body.

When I'm resurrected, they can take my bad eyesight, my three fillings, and my excess flesh—but I hope I get to keep these scars.

How Far Do They Dangle?

Originally titled, "Modest about Modesty," the following is adapted from a 21 February 2007 post by COURTNEY K. at Segullah.

WHEN I moved into this ward, I had a neighbor tell me she thought I'd be the next Young Women's President. "No way," I countered, "I don't dress modestly enough."

To which she replied, "Then it's about time you start."

A year later, that calling came, and I thought I'd feel a massive spiritual attack to clean out my closet in preparation for a more reserved collection. Instead, I have felt somewhat of an undertaking to redefine LDS fashion. . . . And truth be told, this is a lonely calling in life. I get a lot of "What in Lucifer's House are you wearing, child?"

Ah, the fine art of dressing up for church. I'd like to think that I give it my full attention (it's a spiritual gift really). Before I head out the door, I look in the mirror and ask, "Is this lovely or is this sexy?" Because to me, that is the all-important difference. (But what do you do with those of us who feel that nothing is lovelier than feeling sexy? There, I said it.)

I had a remarkable experience at the Worldwide Leadership

Training a couple weeks ago. There was much to learn and insight given. But I will never forget the beautiful woman in the front row of Elder Holland's "class" who wore knee-high black boots, tights, and a short plaid skirt topped off with a black turtleneck. In all my life, I had never seen someone from Church headquarters in such a semi-hip outfit. It was as though the clouds had parted and the sun shone through. "There is room in this church for me and my knee-high boots!" I warmly proclaimed in my head.

I'd like to think that there is also room in this church for pencil skirts and converted kimono dresses matched with high heels. Ultra-feminine. I mean, if you are going to be a woman, why not go all-out? As someone who was raised in the heart of Mormondom, I have seen enough women hiding underneath floral tents, once claimed as dresses from the Dress Barn. Since when did modesty mean clothing lines of subtle deviations from men's clothing wear? Where in the handbook does it recommend jumpers?

How far do we go with modesty? Can we go too far? I mean some of us are one step away from wearing *hijab*. And part of me would like to teach the youth of the ward that feminine doesn't need to be hiding all the time. Don't we believe that a woman's body, though absolutely sacred, is also virtuous and of good report? Where is the marriage between celebrating a figure and using it for detrimental plots?

And most importantly, does "one pair of modest earrings" dangle? How far?

Pretty Special

Originally titled, "Looks Aren't Everything," the following is adapted from a 27 April 2007 post by REBECCA at Feminist Mormon Housewives.

I TELL my daughter every day how pretty or beautiful she is. I tell my sons how handsome they are. I also tell them all daily how smart/strong/brave/special they are.

This comment on a recent FMH thread got me thinking about this issue:

While dressing our daughter for church, I caught myself motivating her through promises of being "pretty." "Don't you want to wear a pretty dress?" "Let's do your hair and make it pretty." I only had to hear myself do that once or twice before I put a stop to that. I realize that my usage was probably innocent, but I have decided that being pretty will not be made into a virtue in our home.

I have thought about this quite a bit since having my daughter. And I've thought along similar lines. I'm aware of the possible effects of focusing just on a child's looks—looks aren't everything—but they are part of who you are and can affect how you view yourself.

For me I guess it goes back to being a child/teen. I remember my mum on occasion telling me I was pretty, but I



FROM ASHLEIGH BRILLIANT. / FEEL MUCH BETTER NOW THAT I'VE GIVEN UP HOPE, 1983

was bullied from about age seven until I was seventeen. As part of that bullying, I was told repeatedly that I was ugly. As a consequence, I believed the constant negative reinforcement, and I have never felt pretty and still rarely do. That has always been extremely painful for me. I know that what I look like isn't all of who I am, but it is a part of me. Over the years, it has affected my confidence greatly.

My natural instinct is to not want my children to feel that same pain. I want to build them up instead of them feeling ripped down like I was. I want them to know their own worth—physically, mentally, and spiritually. I want them to know all the wonderful things about themselves.

Is telling a child that they're pretty/handsome detrimental in the long run? As long as this isn't the only positive reinforcement you give, isn't it OK? Or in a world which seems increasingly obsessed with how you look, is it sending the wrong message?

What's in a Name?

Originally titled, "Name Changing," the following is adapted from a 24 May 2005 post by ARTEMIS at Feminist Mormon Housewives.

MY feminism has mostly been evolving since college (BYU) although I remember that as a seven- to ten-year-old, I would periodically wonder why the scriptures mentioned all these promises to firstborn sons but not firstborn daughters (I'm one). So I guess it was probably only a matter of time before I became a full-fledged feminist. Now I name my cats after Egyptian goddesses. . . .

I think my family didn't realize the extent of my liberalism until I got married—and kept my name. I experimented with hyphenating, but it was a compromise nobody much liked, especially me. It didn't help that my husband's and my last names each have three syllables—talk about a mouthful! Anyway, my husband had a difficult time of it at first. He knew my feelings before the wedding, and while not the type to force any issue, he was somewhat disappointed for a while. I will say that for his sake, I did try to psych myself into the possibility of taking his name, but every time I did it, a deep inner sorrow would take over. Eventually I decided that I couldn't change my name because to do so would betray myself and I would resent "my" new name anyway, which seemed to defeat the purpose of the change in the first place.

My husband has since come around and now fully supports my decision. However, there has still been quite a bit of social pressure or non-acceptance of the practice. My husband has defended my decision several times when I was not around, including keeping after the ward clerks to make sure my name is printed correctly on the rolls, etc. . . . And my mom is on a perpetual campaign to get me to change my name, manifest in thank-you cards, checks, and letters in which she "fixes" my name for me. My husband (after he came around) once had a discussion with our bishop about the issue, and the bishop

said the Church has no policy regarding married women taking their husbands' names.

So my question to FMH is, how do you feel about this issue and its social repercussions? I am very happy with my decision, though I respect other women's decisions to do otherwise. My frustration is that there's such overwhelming social pressure within the Church to do something that has no doctrinal foundation . . . and is just based in tradition. It makes me want to print up Elder Scott's "tradition vs. gospel" talk from several conferences ago and somehow make everybody read it and leave me alone.

In case you're wondering, when we have kids, we're going to give them a first name, middle name, then my last name, then my husband's last name. Obviously that's a little longer than most, so for practicality's sake, the kids will go by first name and last-last name. I feel this is the best option as it reflects the heritage of both families.

A Unique and Valuable Perspective

Originally titled, "Being Single and Adult," the following is adapted from a 16 June 2006 post by LYNETTE at Zelophehad's Daughters.

I'VE been a legal adult for more than a decade now. However, as a single woman without children, in a church context, I often feel relegated to a kind of pre-adult status. Don't get me wrong: I'm perfectly willing to concede that there are quite likely unique life lessons and experiences involved in marriage and parenting that can't be gained elsewhere, and I'm not out to downplay the value of those things. Nonetheless, I'd like to find a way to talk about adulthood which didn't assume that it necessarily included those elements.

The thing is, I don't see myself as being in some preparatory, not-yet-real phase of life where I'm simply passing the time while awaiting the possible arrival of a husband and children. Yes, I'd like for those things to happen. But I'm living a real life right now. I have challenges and problems and things I'm learning and opportunities and stresses. And it stings to hear comments about those who don't yet know what life is about because they aren't married or don't have children. Likewise, I have no desire to be an object of pity. The truth is that my life is actually pretty good. I study something I love. I have some amazing friends (as well as a bunch of lively if not always completely sane siblings). Sure, there are things that are awfully hard at times, but that seems to be a fairly universal aspect of the human condition.

I'm currently watching several of my single friends struggle to stay active, ones who have far fewer doctrinal difficulties with the Church than I do. I wonder what would make it easier. I've long been a bit jealous of the Catholic view that adults can follow a variety of legitimate spiritual paths, marriage being only one of them. As I said, I'm open to the possibility that some things can be learned only through marriage

and raising a family. But I also think I've learned important things from my own life circumstances, perhaps things I wouldn't have learned if my life had gone in another direction.

Talks to singles tend to go along these lines: "Marriage and children are the greatest of all blessings, and we have great compassion for your difficult state. Try not to feel too bad, though, because God will fix it all in the next life." And while I know it's well-meant, I'm rather tired of hearing about singleness as some kind of tragic affliction to be endured and single adults (women in particular) as victims in need of sympathy. (In many ways I think single men have it even worse, as they are more likely to be blamed than to be pitied.) It's difficult to remain in an organization that sometimes seems to see your very existence as a kind of problem in need of explanation. I would far rather hear something like, "You have a unique and valuable perspective on life, and we hope you'll bring it to the table." As much as anything, I simply want to feel that I too have something to contribute.

I honestly don't mind that the church places a lot of emphasis on families and parenting; I think they're tremendously important. But ultimately I think our focus should be on becoming better Christians, in whatever life situations we might find ourselves. And in that endeavor, I don't think that any particular group of people can claim a privileged position or inherently greater insight; surely we all have much to learn from each other.

No Answers. Only Grace

Originally titled, "The Summons that Abides," the following is adapted from a 23 March 2007 post by EVE at Zelophehad's Daughters.

THE last couple of years have been a hard time for my life in the Church; the last several months, particularly hard. A few weeks ago, to my own surprise, I came to the edge of my ability to go on. I broke with certain of my conceptions about the relationship between the norms of the human community and the will of God, telephoned my stake president, and asked to be released from my calling.

Although almost no one in my ward even knows about my current trials with the Church, somehow I just haven't been able to face anyone there. The first week after my break, I stayed home. But I always miss church when I don't go, so the next week I drove across town to attend a ward where I could be relatively anonymous. I sat in the foyer, which is where I like to sit at church, and I sat alone, which is how I like to be at church. I went mostly to take the sacrament, which wasn't brought out. I almost left. But I couldn't bring myself to walk out and drive the twenty minutes back home without anything to show for my pains.

The talks were all on the Great Apostasy. There were the liberal quotations from Bruce R. McConkie, the rhapsodies to Luther and Tyndall and Wycliffe, and an extended analysis of

the Catholic Church's various doctrinal failings. I all but groaned aloud. The casual demolition of Catholicism's nonsensicalities, the unqualified veneration of the Reformation, the equally unqualified denigration of the dark Dark Ages—it seemed all the evidence I needed to prove to myself, yet again, that the Church is not for me.

At times over the past few months, and especially this past month, when everything connected with church has been so hard, when the endless Relief Society announcements in my inbox look like they came from the Mars of Babyshower Land written in the Greek of Motherese, it's been like watching myself crash down a well whose bottom I cannot see, periodically clanking against the sides as I hurtle into the dark. How far will I go? I've found myself picking up cheddar-beer soup in the grocery store or looking at the array of coffees while I stand in line at school for hot chocolate and thinking, in self-pity and exhaustion: Why not? Who cares? My husband's long gone from the Church. I have no children to set an example for. What difference does it make what I do? Why should I try to keep living and living this strange and hopeless Christian life, why should I observe these bizarre customs—the alcohol and coffee prohibitions, the seemingly endless activities and service projects, the funny underwear?

THEN sitting there in the foyer by myself on that bleak February afternoon listening to talks I couldn't decide if I believed a word of, I felt the strangest, most unaccountable sense of mercy. There were no answers to the complexities of the Great Apostasy, or to the more pressing, personal complexities of how on earth it is that I am to go on in this church. There was no sense of clarity about what to do or even what to think. There was just a sense of not being alone in my aloneness, as if some divine, compassionate hand had brushed the tears from my cheek. There were no answers. Only grace.

At moments like that, I recall the scriptures that claim for the quiet voice of God an endurance beyond the heavens and the earth created by its still power, and I remember the voice that calls me, that never ceases to call me beneath the tumult of the world and my daily cares and sins and sorrows, that calls me in the name of Christ. I want to kneel and press my ear to the earth to hear the voice that never ceases beneath it, that indeed founded it, the voice that speaks with the unwavering constancy of song, of a single note sustained and sustained, too deep and piercing for human words. I want to hear that voice with such resolution, such devotion that I cannot waver in any other consideration. I have been so foolish and so wrong. I have mistaken the voices of well-meaning human men and women for the voice of God.

As I try to rebuild my spiritual life from yet another of these inevitable minor crises that constitute a human one, I want to cast away the last shreds of my concerns for what others think of me. . . . I want to hear true, the truth of God and the truth of my own life with an entirety that disallows every hint of polite and empty lies, of false and timorous conformity. I want to fill my ears with nothing but that voice of fierce truth as it resounds and resounds in my own quailing, human heart. ☪