

BODIES, BABIES, BREASTS— MOTHERING IN ZION

The shared experience of motherhood forges a connection between many Mormon women—a metaphysical sympathy deeply rooted in the physicality of caring for children. Where two or three LDS mothers are gathered, there will immediately be lively, exasperated, hilarious, joyful conversations about the deliciousness of new babies, the intricacies of breastfeeding, and the challenges and blessings of including children in our spiritual lives and religious observances. Inviting small children of God, whose needs, as the song goes, “are great,” to a half-day of meetings which inevitably conflict

with the meeting of those needs is a recipe for cranky children and disgruntled mommies. We love our children, and we love our Church, and it is a painful love triangle. Fortunately, love triangles often provide fodder for comic relief, as some of the narratives that follow illustrate! These reflections on motherhood remind us of the intimate connection of the practical and the holy so fully embodied in the messy sweetness of our children, and invite us to consider what the experience of caring for young children in church can teach us about what it means to be “members of one body.” —K.H.

MY TESTING GROUND

by Caroline Crockett Brock



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SINCE BECOMING A MOTHER, I HAVE COME TO THE conclusion that Sunday worship services in our church are not what I call “user-friendly.” I have four girls—ages eight, five, three, and one—so for the past eight years, I have experienced the “young Mormon mom” life at church. Although in the past I have loved coming to church and feeling the spiritual renewal that takes place, I must say that nowadays I don't usually look forward to Sundays. As a mom I have begun to see it as a lot of work. Sunday has become an unknown quantity—I never know what the day will hold. My five-year-old may decide to throw her shoe out the car window and not tell me until we get to church. My three-year-old may decide to wet her pants in the middle of the sacrament. My squirming one-year-old may smash her head against the pew while the bread is being passed and start screaming, causing me to race out to the lobby, leaving my other small children alone in the chapel while my husband is speaking in the Spanish branch on the other side of the building. For me, the level of stress and frustration of getting my children ready for church, then having them sit through sacrament meeting, often results in my feeling angry, then guilty, and ultimately inadequate: I'm not a nice enough mom, I'm not a calm enough mom. Why can't I get it together?

One particularly difficult Sunday morning, my husband

had his usual early meetings and I had to get the four girls ready and to church by myself. We were running late after various Sunday morning dramas—one of my daughters was throwing a screaming fit over her “scratchy” dress, another was smearing yogurt into the carpet, and yet another was hitting and causing fights. I raced to the chapel while giving my daughters a verbal thrashing in the car for their bad behavior. I was desperate to get there before the doors closed for the passing of the sacrament. We would have just made it, but our little entourage took so long to actually get into the building and down the hallway (think three-year-old “princess” meandering twenty feet behind as I am charging down the halls, diaper bags swinging, baby on one hip) that the doors were closed and the bread had just come around. I remember closing my eyes and sighing, thinking to myself, why did I even come?

Turning around in the foyer, I spotted an older lady who frequently vacations in our town. As I asked where her husband was, she serenely replied that he was at the hotel, but she wanted to sit in sacrament meeting because it was the “spiritual high point” of her week. Her reply could not have hit me harder, as I realized that of all the moments of the week, sacrament meeting was the time where I felt the *least* spiritual and the *most* inadequate. For the past eight years, it had become my spiritual low point.

As I sat in discouragement later that day, I was drawn back to my patriarchal blessing and was lead to this passage:

In the pre-existence you were tutored and trained in the principles of the Everlasting Gospel by loving Heavenly Parents. You were there especially dear to your Mother in Heaven as you watched Her with great awe. You marveled at Her Loveliness, and Her grandeur, the power of Her being, and determined then that you would become very much like She is. It will be your privilege on this earth to feel the nearness of your Heavenly Parents and Their inspiration to you.

The phrase that came shooting out at me was, “you determined then that you would become very much like She is.” This verb “determined” resonated with my spirit. I felt as though I was remembering being there and feeling that way, instead of merely imagining it. I knew that this was true. I knew my spirit was just the type to look at Her and set my sights on doing whatever it took to become like Her. I also knew *She* would not leave Sunday mornings to chance.

I WENT ABOUT the next week determined that if nothing else, I would not only be at church on time, I would be there early. When I made this my intention, things began to open up and shift. Midway through the week, I was prompted to type up little checklists for the two older girls so they could simply go down the checklists to get themselves ready instead of waiting for me to direct them. Saturday morning, I decided to clean out my car, knowing that seeing all the paraphernalia that had built up during the week would add to the chaos of the next morning. Saturday afternoon, I began laying out the dresses, tights, hair ribbons, and shoes. That night I cleaned out the diaper bag from the previous week and packed all the items needed for the next day, including some different things for my three-year-old which would help her stay less fidgety during church. By the time I went to bed that night, the house was picked up, I had laid out my outfit and my husband’s shirt, and everything seemed ready for the upcoming day.

Sunday morning dawned, and it felt as though heaven were smiling down upon us. Everything went smoothly as we got ready for church. I had the checklists on the table, and the

older girls followed them. At the end of the list, I had added: help mom with your sisters. They each came and asked what they could do to help. To have my five- and eight-year-old daughters get totally ready for church by themselves, then ask what they could do to help, was just glorious for me! After my daughters were dressed, I actually had a whole fifteen minutes to get myself ready instead of the usual five. I began to realize that much of the frustration I was feeling as a mother was not necessarily due to my children, but was a result of unrealistic expectations and preparation on my part. As I walked out of the bedroom looking at my daughters dressed and ready, sitting nicely on the couch calmly watching a church video, I had to ask myself, “Is this really happening?”

As we all piled into the car and strapped into the various car seats, I was getting pretty excited that all this extra planning was going to pay off. Then I tried starting the car. One of my daughters must have left a door open the night before because the battery was dead. At this point, I saw the situation in an almost comical light—as though I had raced to the finish line and a step before finishing, someone had placed a banana peel in front of me to slip on. I told the kids that Satan was trying to stop us from being to church on time, and that they needed to be quiet so mom could think of a solution. I quickly ripped off my high heels and went rummaging in the garage for my battery starter, found it (a real miracle), hooked up the cables, started the car, and we were on our way!

That morning, despite the switch to daylight savings time and a dead battery, we were at church ten minutes early. We had no yelling in the car, no frustration, and no stress. We calmly picked our pew and greeted the people around us. I

was able to take a deep breath and prepare for the sacrament, and my children sensed my quietness and reverence. They were better behaved throughout the whole meeting because my planning had created an experience where that could happen. As I was thanking my Heavenly Parents while partaking of the sacrament, another phrase from my blessing came wafting through my consciousness: “Your children will look to you in reverence and you will be able to lead them in the paths of righteousness.” I knew that I was being told that by continuing this process of determining and planning for success, I could be the type of mom to be “reverenced” instead of the stressed-out, frustrated mom that I often was.



Since that Sunday, I have embarked on a pattern that I hope to continue. This pattern has made it possible for me to have the sacrament be my spiritual high point of the week, instead of a low point that left me feeling guilty and discouraged. Although the routine my Sabbath day preparation has created has gotten easier, disasters still occur. The difference now is that these disasters aren't exacerbated by my lack of planning and preparation. Being a young mom in our church remains a challenge and often leaves me feeling downright exhausted. Then again, I think God meant for us to have these types of challenges and weekly hurdles. As Latter-day Saints, we believe it is all part of the plan.

I now see the Sunday block of meetings for young mothers as a spiritual testing ground of sorts. Some days it's still a test of duty—I should be there, so I will be there. Some days it's a test of endurance—I'm exhausted and have morning sickness, but I will make it to end. Some days it's a test of motherhood—I go because my children need to be there even if I walk the halls for three hours with a baby. Week by week, I determine my experience of worship and thus my own spiritual refining by my level of commitment to the preparation and organization of the Sabbath day. ☺

FROM THE BLOGS

Worshiping Together and Other Fantasies

Originally titled, "Sabbath Day Happy Hour," the following is adapted from an 22 August 2007 post by COURTNEY K. at Segullah.

MY non-Mormon friends express shock and horror over the fact that there's no nursery for young children during sacrament meeting; that there's no nursery for children under eighteen months; that we're expected to stay in church for three hours and that we can meet at the most ungodly hours; and that there's no "cry room" where we can take unruly children when necessary.

I'm not sure what can be done about inconvenient meeting times. Everyone has her own idea of what times are "convenient," and since we're organized by geographic boundaries and not other demographics, no meeting time would suit the needs of every group of people in the ward. Still, I certainly think the three-hour block could be pared down a bit. If sacrament meeting were even fifteen minutes shorter, it would be an improvement.

Having a nursery operating during sacrament meeting sounds great in theory, but the implementation would require such a radical shift in how we do things—our expectations, our habits, our whole philosophy of what church should be like. On one hand, I like that we are expected to worship together as

families, rather than shuttling the children off. But in my experience, that idea has been a beautiful fantasy and nothing more. Sacrament meeting is not geared toward children in any respect. They are rightfully bored out of their minds. So while I expect my older children to behave themselves—i.e., not scream and run around during the service—I think it's ridiculous to expect a three-year-old to sit still for seventy minutes with nothing but Cheerios and a coloring book to entertain him. (Note: I fully appreciate that there are three-year-olds who *can* sit still for seventy minutes or two hours or more. Unfortunately, the Lord didn't bless me with any of those.)

So I guess it just sucks to take young kids to church, and that's how it is. I appreciate when people just acknowledge that instead of trying to tell you how you can get your twenty-month-old to act more like a seven-year-old.

It would certainly be nice if they took the nursery children a little younger. Even fifteen months would be younger enough.

I also see no reason why the entire bishopric needs to be on display for the entire meeting. Fortunately my husband has never been in the bishopric, but he has been ward organist. That's hard enough.

Need I also add that we wouldn't need larger mothers' lounges or separate fathers' lounges if women felt more comfortable breastfeeding in sacrament meeting? <grin>. Or if sacrament meeting weren't so boring and/or miserable that we jumped at the chance to escape from it? <grin>

How Low Will I Sink?

Originally titled, "Low Points in Parenting: Seven-year-old Boys in Sacrament Meeting," the following is adapted from an 28 March 2006 post by HANNAH at Mormon Mommy Wars.

I HAVE a seven-year-old son. In my experience with motherhood, seven-year-old sons are the low point. And please don't tell me to just wait until he's fifteen, because I'm barely making it as it is.

A few weeks ago in church, Dad was home with sick babies and I was in sacrament meeting with four older kids alone. Our stake has sacrament meeting last, so everyone is tired and hungry and ready to go home before it starts. My seven-year-old was on a roll. He decided to see how far he could push it in public, in church.

First he started talking loudly. I shushed him, and he smirked and went louder. I told him he wouldn't get his treat at home for being good if he wasn't quiet. He went louder. I threatened to take him out. He punched me. Hard. (Of course, we were on the fourth row, not having gotten to sacrament meeting quickly enough, so none of this was discreet.) I grabbed his hand. He kicked me. I told him he was going out. He told me that if I tried, he would kick everybody in our row on the way—in the face.

He had me there. We were in the middle of the row, with nice elderly couples on either end. He's a big seven-year-old, and I wasn't even sure I could get him out, let alone keep him from kicking the neighboring families in the face. There were still fifteen minutes left in sacrament meeting, and I was stumped.

I sat there trying to think while simultaneously holding his hands and feet as he kicked and punched me. The lady behind me said, audibly, "That boy needs a spanking!" I was close to tears. This went on for several minutes.

Then I had a revelation (I'm not sure from what source). I looked a couple of rows in front of me and saw a new family in the ward. The father was an officer in the army—something very impressive to seven-year-olds, in my experience. I leaned over to my son.

"If you don't stop punching and kicking, I will ask Brother Anderson to take you out."

"He couldn't!"

And here's the low point.

"He's in the army," I answered. "He could probably kill you with his bare hands."

"He wouldn't, of course," I added, a bit shocked that I had just threatened murder in church, "but he could."

My seven-year-old's eyes got wide. He quit punching and kicking.

And he went home quietly.

I had succeeded. I increased reverence in church by convincing my son I knew how to hire a hit man.

I wonder how low I'll sink when he's eight.

It Must be My Breasts

Originally titled, "Breastfeeding Incident," the following is adapted from a 28 October 2005 post by KERRI at *Feminist Mormon Housewives*.

TODAY at church I was sitting in the chapel watching over the kids practicing for the Primary program when the executive secretary asked me if I could meet with the bishop for a few minutes. I thought (hoped?) I was being released from Cub Scouts, but then he began by saying that being the bishop is hard and often unpopular (at this point I was getting the hint that I was in trouble). He then talked about how important the missionary program was and how we need people to feel comfortable in our buildings. I must have looked extremely confused because he said, "And I can see you wondering what any of this has to do with you. Our ward council meetings have been discussing the issue of breastfeeding."

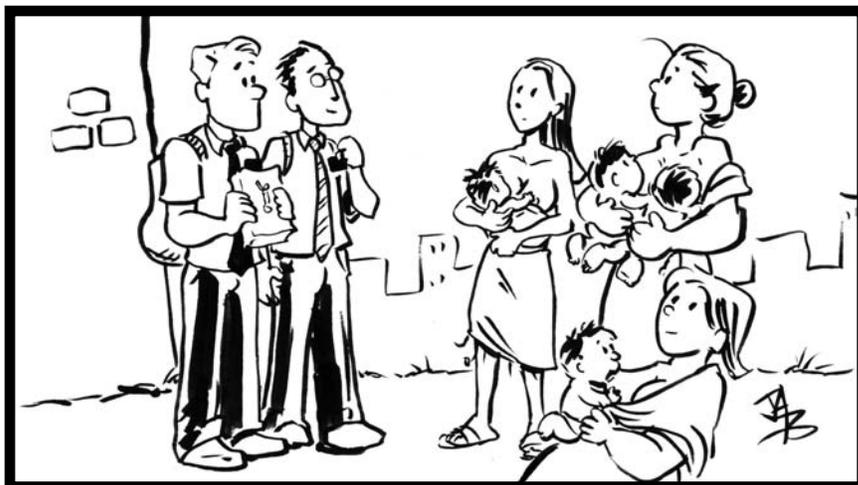
Apparently the "ward council" (I learned later it was just two chauvinistic, middle-class, middle-aged, white males present at said meeting) had decided, without the input of mothers, that we need to either nurse in the mothers' lounge or cover the baby with a blanket. Like the baby is the obscene part? Knowing breasts are under shirts is bad enough, I guess, but having a baby connected to them (and hiding said breast with babe's head) makes everyone squirm?

I was very up front and said I have huge issues with this, that this is a public health issue and the law says that women can nurse anytime, anywhere. He started backpedaling, saying he agreed with me but that the young men are uncomfortable with seeing a woman's breasts.

I said that this is a cultural issue, and this is a worldwide church. There is no Church policy on it, and the Relief Society manual talks about how important breastfeeding is. There are even passages in the Bible about nursing in church!

He kept saying he agreed with me but that he had to forward these concerns on behalf of the council. I just don't buy that. He is the bishop, and if people are talking about breastfeeding, he has the option to say "this is a non-issue" and move on. I do not believe that the young men in our ward are turned on or disgusted by breastfeeding. If they are, it is because our culture has taught them that breasts are toys and made them exciting and mysterious.





JEANETTE ATWOOD

I feel like they're accusing me of being a pervert. I am generally ready to fight for breastfeeding rights whenever it comes up, but I was so devastated I couldn't think clearly. But as we continued on, he agreed with everything I said. He had no reasonable argument or reasoning behind this new standard except that the ward council felt it would be best.

I fled the building, not wanting anyone to see me crying. Sobbed and sobbed in the van until church was over. Came home and buried my head in my husband's chest and bawled my eyes out. I'm trying to do my best. To attend my meetings, despite all my burning unanswered questions, and parent my children. I felt sick the rest of the day from the headache and red eyes and dehydration and overheating and lack of oxygen. And I'm mad at myself for letting it upset me. My husband says I should have said, "This is ridiculous," and walked out. But I was a good girl who wanted to be obedient. I'm mad about that too.

Please excuse the hysterical tone of this post. It must be my breasts. They seem to cause such confusion.

What Do I Want?

Originally titled, "Rediscovering Me," the following is adapted from a 12 February 2006 post by SHALEEN at Tales from the Crib.

I'M figuring out how to contribute to the world outside of my immediate sphere of influence. At the end of six kids (ages nine to six months, the last a set of twins). If you ask me what my interests are, I have to think to give you an answer. The first thing that comes to mind is . . . how to make the structure of my home and family work and work better. But then I think a little deeper and breathe deeply once or twice and, well, what are my interests, outside of what I must know and do in order to preserve my own sanity? I don't know. I love having red walls in my kitchen area. I love to hear my five- and three-year-old talking while looking through a magazine and saying "let's order this online and then it will come

in a box." Victory feels sweet when my son goes to the bathroom in the toilet. At the end of the day when the house is quiet and I think, this is now my time—what do I want to do? During the day, I can give you answers—my brain still works. But by evening, the desire must be strong or I can't remember.

What I used to want is not what I really want. I want peace. I want patience. I want laughter. I want interaction that is meaningful to me. I want a bit more energy when I am at my end. . . . I believe the energy is inside of me and need only be found when I figure out what inspires me, what are my interests. I'm excited to find out!

The Church of the Lastborn

Originally titled, "Sunday Morning Maternity Leave and the Church of the Lastborn," the following is adapted from an 11 February 2007 post by KRIS at By Common Consent.

FOR the past six weeks, thoughts of my having just had my last child have beat like a mantra at the back of my brain: This is the last time you will ever do this. This is the last time you will bring a baby home from the hospital. This is the last time you will button this tiny sweater. . . .

I stay in the rocking chair long after the baby has gone to sleep. Instead of attending my normal LDS meetings, I have worshiped at the church of the lastborn. This is a religion with different sacraments. Quotidian tasks become sacred acts. A baptism of water during a first bath; a special anointing of oil for tender skin. There is only milk, not meat.

Now the babymoon is over—six weeks of Sunday morning maternity leave has been enough time for an unhurried recovery. Today we venture out into the wider world together. Today you meet another part of your family—a community of Saints, who have prayed for your safe arrival and sent their love wrapped in foil-covered casserole dishes. Today we leave our nest, but we also come home. ☺