

ARTICLES AND ESSAYS

THE PINK DIALOGUE AND BEYOND

LAUREL THATCHER ULRICH

SOME TIME IN JUNE 1970, I invited a few friends to my house to chat about the then emerging women's movement. If I had known we were about to make history, I would have taken minutes or at least passed a roll around, but of course I didn't. All I have now to document that momentous gathering are memories. I remember Claudia Bushman sitting on a straight oak chair near my fireplace telling us about women's lives in the nineteenth century. Since she had just begun a doctoral program in history, she was our resident scholar. If we had a resident feminist, it was Judy Dushku, who came to that first meeting with a rhymed manifesto she had picked up at the university where she taught. We laughed at the poem's pungent satire, then pondered its attack on "living for others." "Isn't that what we are supposed to do?" someone said. Our potential for disagreement was obvious, yet on that bright morning we were too absorbed in the unfamiliar openness to care.

The talk streamed through the room like sunshine. None of us recognized that we were beginning a discussion that would continue for more than a decade. We only knew that it felt good to talk, and that we did not want to stop when it was time to go home. Before many weeks had passed, we were not only meeting regularly but had volunteered to put together a special issue of *Dialogue*. For us, publishing was a natural thing to do; most of our group had been involved in producing *A Beginner's Boston*, a Relief Society-sponsored guidebook that was already in its second edition. Meeting on weekday mornings to discuss forbidden issues was not natural, however. Like most Mormon women, we had more to do than to say. Our basements were full of wheat and our station wagons full of children, and if we screamed, we screamed in private. Yet our success with *A Beginner's Boston* had given us an astonishing belief in our own powers. Secure in the knowledge that our Relief

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Society had made a smashing success of a project which our ward elders quorum had turned down, we took on the most explosive issues in Mormonism.

When I say that we made history, I do not mean to imply that we were more forward looking, more courageous, or more intelligent than any other Latter-day Saint women. (Nor do I mean to suggest that we *solved* the problems we tackled.) By 1970 there must have been dozens of individuals and maybe even some groups who had begun to grapple with feminism, but by a fortunate combination of circumstances—our prior publishing experience, the particular mix of personalities and talents in Boston that year, and the providential appearance of *Dialogue's* editor, Eugene England, at the Bushman house in July—we were the first group of Mormon women to find our way to print. Gene certainly took a chance on us; I think we were all surprised at how easily he accepted our offer.

For me, the autumn and winter were both exhilarating and exhausting. I had moved to New Hampshire in September, yet I continued to drive the hour and a half to Boston once or twice a month for the *Dialogue* meetings, usually bringing a friend, Shirley Gee, with me. Shirley and I continued each discussion on the long ride home, missing stoplights and taking wrong turns as we simultaneously threaded our way through city traffic and through the tangle of emotions these meetings aroused.

Our group talked about Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, Rodney Turner and the latest Relief Society lessons; about birth control, working women, church politics and homosexuality; about things we knew well, like housework, and about things we knew not at all, like the relevance of feminism to working class women. In our most extravagant moments, we did not know whether to be angry at our mothers, at our husbands or at God. To our dismay we often found ourselves angry with each other. Claudia Bushman believes we took on the *Dialogue* project as a way of containing our conflicts. I am not sure that anyone knew how deep those conflicts were in those first weeks of summer when we made our offer to Gene. Whatever our motive, the decision to publish heightened the tension in our meetings.

By the following June, Claudia would write in a bitter mock preface to the now almost completed issue:

What do we learn from this experience? That our detractors were right when they felt that our meetings were evil? That the spirit of the Relief Society with its careful suppression of dangerous ideas is the only true model? That women cannot cooperate on a project without becoming shrill and combative?

At this point, wearied by wrangling, disagreements and hurt feelings (some of them my own) I'd have to admit that the group is a failure . . . The amiable and close sisterhood of the early days is still felt from time to time, but members feel defensive, require approval while refusing to give it and feel threatened by others whose lifestyle is dissimilar to their own.

Bit by tortured bit, the pink issue of *Dialogue* rose from this maelstrom of emerging consciousness.

I do not wish to exaggerate our struggles. A certain amount of turmoil is probably characteristic of any group project, as most Mormons know. Yet in a church context, both our pain and our achievement were different. We had called *ourselves* to this task. Without a confirming priesthood blessing and without any clear historical precedent, we had taken upon ourselves a project which would neither build buildings nor win converts and which by its very nature would disturb the equilibrium of our lives. That Claudia Bushman could refer to our issue, even with tongue in cheek, as the *Ladies Home Dialogue* says much about our insecurity and about our self-conscious conservatism at the time. That we persisted in publishing our work despite our conflicts has been for all of us a source of pride.

At the close of her introduction to the Summer 1971 *Dialogue*, Claudia wrote:

We offer our issue of *Ladies Home Dialogue* without apology. For a woman eager to do something unique and meaningful, but bogged down with the minutiae of everyday life, the pattern of another woman who has surmounted the same obstacles has real worth. Women have always been valued in the Church but not encouraged to say much. We hope that now and in the future more ladies will speak out and, what is more, be heard.

In assessing the gains of the past ten years, it is tempting to focus on the last phrase in Claudia's statement. Considering IWY, the excommunication of Sonia Johnson and the resurgence of the radical right, it is not at all certain that the "ladies" have been heard or ever will be heard in high places. I would prefer to focus on Claudia's invitation to the women themselves. As I think of the achievements of the past decade—the publication of *Mormon Sisters* and *Sister Saints*, the founding of *Exponent II*, the establishment of the BYU women's conferences, the securing of a feminist presence in *Dialogue* and *Sunstone* and in the Mormon History Association, the blossoming of women's fiction and poetry and especially the developing of an informal network of thinking Mormon women—I am warmed and enlivened.

The pink *Dialogue* was not responsible for this outpouring of women's voices, but it did begin it. In my manic moods, I like to remember that. If I could somehow figure out the exact date of our first meeting, I would propose it for historic recognition. A handsome brass plaque would look nice, set in the front lawn of my old house at 380 Dedham Street in Newton, somewhere between the peach tree and the birch. "Here," the inscription would read, "in this ordinary looking, gambrel-roofed house, the second generation of Mormon feminists was born."

A feminist is a person who believes in equality between the sexes, who recognizes discrimination against women and who is willing to work to overcome it. A *Mormon* feminist believes that these principles are compatible not only with the gospel of Jesus Christ but with the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I can speak with authority for only one member of the second generation of Mormon feminists—myself—yet I am quite serious when I say that *for me* that first meeting in my living room in

Newton was historic. Although I had encountered "the problem with no name" long before Betty Friedan described it, I was ambivalent about solutions. By 1970, I had begun to make small adjustments in my own life, but I still believed that my deepest conflicts were personal rather than general. If I were a better person, I reasoned, a more Christ-like and less-neurotic person, I would not find it so difficult to "live for others." Taking night classes was my strategy for keeping up my spirits so I could carry on the more important work at home. As my husband and I used to joke, "tuition is cheaper than a psychiatrist."

In the past few weeks, I have been rereading some of the correspondence I saved from the year we were working on the pink *Dialogue*. As in going back to an old journal, I have been amused, dismayed, embarrassed and encouraged, recognizing my own shortcomings and at the same time discerning direction in what at the time seemed chaos. That meeting in Newton now seems like the beginning of a long journey outward from self-pity and self-condemnation. The year of talking helped. Seeing myself in others' reactions, I was able to objectify my problems. I remember the amusement on Judy Dushku's face during a meeting at Grethe Peterson's house when I confessed my embarrassment at coming home one day and finding my husband sitting at the sewing machine mending his pants. I also remember one intense meeting at Bonnie Horne's house when the whole group responded in an unbelieving chorus to my tearful proclamation that I would give up my children rather than my courses. Identifying my own worst fears helped me climb over them.

Equally important to the development of my own feminism was the editing process itself. Since I had done pretty much what I wanted with *A Beginner's Boston*, I was unprepared for the endless negotiations. Claudia and I made a good team. She took a hard line with the local sisters while I played gentle mediator; when it came time to deal with our editors in Los Angeles, we reversed roles. Much of my attention in the spring of 1971 was directed at Bob Rees, who took over as editor of *Dialogue* after we had already begun work on the women's issue. We had expected little more than last minute copyediting from Bob and were dismayed at the criticism arriving in Boston weeks after we had sent our first material to California. Many of our problems at this stage can be attributed to tangled communications—having since been in a position to offend several guest editors of *Exponent II*, I can identify with him—yet certain key conflicts were probably inherent in the very process we were undertaking. Among these was our disagreement over Juanita Brooks' piece, "I Married A Family." Bob simply could not understand what we saw in it; I got tears in my eyes whenever I read it. He wanted us to tackle tough issues, like polygamy and the priesthood and was puzzled by our fascination with Juanita Brooks' nursing baby and her curdled tomato soup.

Bob's criticism hit at about the time our group was threatening to break asunder over a certain paragraph in one of the local essays. As I recall, the offending passage said something about middle-aged Mormon housewives spending their time "polishing the polish." Since the author of this piece was newly married and childless, the matrons among us were incensed. Was she

implying that we—or our mothers—had wasted our lives? She was equally distressed, convinced that they were not attacking her paragraph so much as the liberated objectives she had outlined for her life. I still remember the conciliatory phone call I made to her after one explosive meeting. “Thank you,” she said coolly, “but I really must go. My husband has cooked dinner, and I’m afraid it’s getting cold.”

Tough issues indeed! How did Bob Rees expect us to write about polygamy or the priesthood when we couldn’t even write about housework without risking a schism? In our situation, Juanita Brooks’ self-revelations were of immense value. To us it really mattered that the foremost female scholar in Mormondom once hid her typewriter under the ironing.

Somewhere in all this uproar, a not-to-be named male member of *Dialogue*’s staff urged us not to produce “just another *Relief Society Magazine*.” I was furious. Like most college-educated women of my generation, I had been taught to laugh at ladies’ books (any self-respecting English major preferred Hawthorne and Melville to the “damned scribbling females” who were their competitors), but I had not yet learned to question the social structure or the attitudes that kept women out of the world of serious letters. The comment about the *Relief Society Magazine* hurt; for the first time I recognized a slur on women’s writing as a slur on me.

So it was that my first feelings of feminist outrage were directed not at “the Brethren” but at the kindly gentlemen at *Dialogue*. Who did they think they were, presuming to tell *us* what Mormon women should want? Without doubt, we were a difficult bunch to deal with. In the long run, Bob let us have our way on almost every point, though we were long convinced that some genie in Salt Lake City had conspired with the printer to present us our finished issue in pink.

I referred earlier to our self-conscious conservatism. I think this was feminist at base though we didn’t yet know it. Certainly we experienced the usual queasiness about countering the brethren, a genuine fear of being wrong, of being caught out of bounds—that worry eventually led some of our sisters to withdraw their support for the issue—yet there was affirmation as well as fear in our collective reluctance to abandon the housewife pose. As *Ladies Home Dialogue* we could speak out for all women, not just those who considered themselves liberated, and at the same time turn up our noses at the male intellectuals who were interested in being our guides.

In September 1972 Bob wrote to inform us that a number of the judges of the fourth annual *Dialogue* prize competition had cited our issue. “The whole was suffused with the religious culture of Mormonism, portrayed as a culture in tension between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (perhaps not the twenty-first).” So it was! It is no accident that the most fully developed personal statements in the issue were written by Jaroldeen Edwards, a mother of twelve, and Christine Durham, a law student with two children and a testimony. Jerry had earned her lyricism. Aside from admitting that she sometimes served her family canned spaghetti, she had fulfilled the highest expectations of traditional Mormon womanhood. Her life was “filled with being.” Chris’s voice was not lyrical, but it was equally clear. She had chosen

another path and was willing to defend it. The rest of us were, as Grethe Peterson put it, “somewhere in between.” The radicals were without children; the mothers were without jobs. As a consequence we skirted the subjective. Dixie Huefner polled the General Boards; Cheryl May wrote about a hypothetical sister named “Carol”; Judy Dushku (in a never-to-be-published article) erected an elaborate analogy to African tribal government, and I, despite a few self-revelations, hid behind humor. We were too conflicted—too untested—to share our lives with the world. A few of the single sisters talked but wouldn’t sign their names, and those who did sign refused to commit more than a page or two. Despite endless and anguished discussion, our article on housework became a medley of aphorisms, assembled anonymously, like a quilt.

The pink *Dialogue* proclaimed the value of women’s voices, yet in 1971 few Mormon women were really prepared to speak. Before we could write with any depth about Tough Issues, we had to do a little more experimenting with our own lives. We also had to learn more about our own place in history. I will never forget the exhilaration of walking in late to one of the *Dialogue* meetings and hearing Claudia reading the story of Ellis Shipp from Leonard Arrington’s newly submitted manuscript on women in church history. When she came to the fateful passage in which Ellis defies her husband to go back to medical school, the whole room cheered. “Yesterday you said that I should not go. I am going, going now!” With Ellis’s words Leonard let the pioneer generation of Mormon feminists out of the closet, and there was no putting them back.

In a year when Relief Society lessons, conference talks and *Church News* editorials routinely condemned working women, we proudly published on the back cover of our pink *Dialogue* this quotation from Brigham Young:

We believe that women are useful, not only to sweep houses, wash dishes, make beds, and raise babies, but they should stand behind the counter, study law or physic, or become good bookkeepers and be able to do the business in any counting house, and all this to enlarge their sphere of usefulness for the benefit of society at large. In following these things they but answer the design of their creation.

In time we would discover the complexity in Brigham’s statement (after all, a vacuum cleaner is *useful*), but for the moment it was enough to know that activities now condemned were once approved. Some eternal truths were only fifty or sixty years old.

Recognizing change in the Church, many of us were better able to deal with change in our own lives. In the autumn of 1971, I took a part-time teaching job at the University of New Hampshire and quit attending Wednesday morning Relief Society. I suppose I expected the sky to fall down. Instead, I was called to be Gospel Doctrine teacher in my ward. My new schedule (and perhaps a growing professional identity) had rescued me from Primary. I remember wondering why it had not happened ten years before when I was pining for just such a calling.

The pink *Dialogue* arrived in Boston just before Christmas 1971. Our group spent the early winter selling copies and modestly accepting the congratulations of friends (studiously ignoring the silence of some long-time associates in the Church). By the next fall we were off and running on a new project, a lecture series to be presented at the LDS Institute in Cambridge in the spring of 1973. Doing research for her talk, Susan Kohler discovered a complete set of *The Woman's Exponent* in the stacks at Harvard's Widener Library. Here indeed was a voice speaking to us from the dust! These women were saying things in the 1870s that we had only begun to think. In June of 1973 we celebrated the 103rd anniversary of the founding of the original *Exponent* and our own good fortune with a dinner at Grethe Peterson's house in Cambridge. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher of the church historian's office was Boston's first annual Exponent Day speaker. (Juanita Brooks was the second, and this June, Lavina Fielding Anderson will be the tenth.)

During the summer of 1973, my friends in Boston debated our next step. Should we revise and publish our lectures? Or found a women's newspaper? At a two-day retreat organized by Carrel Sheldon at the stake girls' camp in western Massachusetts, the fateful plans were laid. When the first issue of *Exponent II* appeared in July 1974, it proclaimed itself "the spiritual descendant of *The Woman's Exponent*," but it was the literal descendant of the pink *Dialogue*. In its pages that first Boston discussion circle has been revived and enlarged. Remembering our own early struggles, we refused from the first to promote any other platform than diversity. Our objective was to give Mormon women space to think and grow. Occasionally someone complains about the cheap paper we use. *The Exponent* crumbles and turns yellow, they say. Although I see the practical problem, I wonder if the symbolic value of newsprint isn't part of the paper's appeal. Most Mormon women have had too much indelible ink in their lives—lessons written seven years in advance, slogans engraved in gold. It is reassuring to know that some thoughts can be thrown out and thrown away.

By the time we published *Mormon Sisters* in 1976, we had already weathered the familiar conflicts. Two male scholars who read the essays in manuscript found them lame ("This book says nothing new"). Several of our local sisters found them threatening, and one would-be author withdrew her finished chapter because she found the tone of the whole too critical. Unable to find a publisher, we incorporated as Emmeline Press, did our own typing, paste-up and distribution, and at the end of the year paid ourselves a small royalty and a few cents an hour. By this time, the "Boston group" was hardly to be found in Boston. Our workers were spread from Pittsburgh to Provo, and though most of the chapters in *Mormon Sisters* had originated in our Institute forum, others had been completed by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Jill Mulvay Derr, and Chris Rigby Arrington at the church historian's office in Salt Lake City.

Mormon Sisters, Sister Saints, Sisters and Little Saints, Elders and Sisters. Think of the outpouring of *sisters'* titles in the past five years! The promise of the pink *Dialogue* is being fulfilled. Mormon women are writing articles, essays, poems, stories and reviews. They are making films and producing

television documentaries. They are exploring history, literature, theology, politics and their own lives. Yet this new growth has not been achieved without pain. At the very moment Mormon women began to discover their lost history, they were swept up by history and thrust into the arena of politics by the Church's pronouncement on the ERA. Suddenly in 1978 Mormonism and feminism seemed incompatible.

Marilyn Warenski, whose *Patriarchs and Politics* was published by McGraw-Hill in 1978, was not the first to see the irony in our history, though she was the first to exploit the contrast between the pro-suffrage stance of the church in the 1890s and its anti-feminist stance in the 1970s. In both eras, she concluded, Mormon women had simply been manipulated by the brethren. Warenski wrote in response to IWY, but her book hit college bookstores just as Sonia Johnson was making her stand against the Church's position on the ERA. When Mormon history became a topic of conversation in corridors at the University of New Hampshire, when a local Unitarian Society invited me to speak then questioned me about IWY, when a country band refused to play at our ward square dance "because of your Church's attitude toward women," I knew that my adulthood as a Mormon feminist had begun.

About a year ago, Mary Bradford gave a writing workshop in Cambridge for the *Exponent II* staff and other interested persons. In one session she tried to use an essay I had written in the Summer 1974 *Dialogue* as an example of what to do or not to do, but she never got to her point because my friends were so busy discussing how my ideas on the subject had changed. I had insisted in that essay that I simply did not feel like a second-class citizen in the Church.

Precisely because it is blatantly and intransigently sexist, the priesthood gives me no pain. One need not be kind, wise, intelligent, published, or professionally committed to receive it—just over twelve and male. Thus it presumes difference, without superiority. I think of it as a secondary sex characteristic, like whiskers, something I can admire without struggling to attain.

At one level of consciousness, I *still* think of the priesthood as a secondary sex characteristic. In my psyche the whole concept is bound up with warm feelings and secure, predictable patterns. Growing up, I never resented seeing the males in our family rush out early on Sunday morning, smelling good, while I sat at the kitchen table drinking Postum. Nothing in my church service as an adult has made me feel deprived. Because I have always preferred teaching to administering anything, I have never missed being denied the opportunity for high church calling. In my iconoclastic moods, I suppose I have even enjoyed being outside the structure. I could carp without having to assume any real responsibility for change.

In the past five years, as the saying goes, my consciousness has been raised. IWY helped. It wasn't the issues that upset me so much as the spectacle of grown women rushing out to vote against proposals they had not read. The priesthood is "the principle of order in the kingdom," I had written in 1974. In 1977, I saw that order in a new and frightening light. I had always

believed in the importance of unity in the Church, but I thought that true unity was achieved “by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned.” Now, I was told, it was simply a matter of following one’s “file leader.” I don’t know where this term came from, but I don’t like it. For me, it conjures up images of marching infantry—or geese. Why should children of God waggle along in single file, each a paper cut-out of the other?

In November of 1979, a professor in my department at UNH stopped me on the way to class one day to ask why I wasn’t “out in Salt Lake City” defending my sister. I explained that excommunication is a local matter in the Mormon Church, that Sonia Johnson seemed to have run into some problems with her bishop, but that I was quite sure the Church would never let a woman be excommunicated for her political beliefs. At that point, I had scarcely heard of Sonia Johnson. I could no more imagine a bishop excommunicating a woman for supporting the ERA than I could imagine a ward organist flying a banner over stake conference proclaiming the support of Mother in Heaven. The next few weeks taught me a great deal about the Church and about myself. The Sunday after the excommunication a good friend and I found ourselves shouting at each other in the kitchen at Church. Why should we have to defend *either* Sonia or her bishop? Wasn’t the bitterness in Virginia enough, without having it spread through the Church? I resented the excommunication because I resented what it taught me about the priesthood. I was astonished to discover that an endowed woman could be tried at the ward level though her husband could not. Through the next months I identified with Sonia’s cause in the way I had once identified with the *Relief Society Magazine*, not because I liked it, but because I could recognize an attack on it as an attack on me. The vision of that all-male council trying a woman’s membership was more revealing than any of the rhetoric on either side.

In the shadow of such events I have gradually become aware of the immense contradictions within the Church as it struggles to stretch and grow with the times. Listening to General Conference never made me feel second-class; it has taken the new “Women’s Broadcasts” to do that. Hearing women’s voices for the first time over direct wire, I have been forced to look beyond the egalitarian partnership of my own home and the comfortable give and take of my ward to the blatant sexism of the general church structure.

I am glad that the General Relief Society President now conducts the women’s meetings, but I wonder why a member of First Presidency must preside. I am pleased to hear the voices of our female leaders, but I wonder why the first and last speakers and the most honored guests must be male. I am happy that the Apostles can sit with their wives in the tabernacle, but I wonder why, if these men are welcome at a women’s meeting, other men aren’t invited too, and I wonder why our women’s leaders cannot address all the membership of the Church in a general conference.

If my ward Relief Society president can conduct weekly meetings without the presence of the bishop, if the sisters of our ward can be trusted to instruct each other without the guiding hand of the elders, if women can pray in

sacrament meeting and preach to the ward as a whole, why must we be subjected to this humiliating parade of authority at the general church level? To sit in such a setting and hear President Kimball proclaim our equality or Elder Packer extoll our great circle of sisterhood is almost as disconcerting as to hear Elder Benson tell us our place is at home. The structure of the program and the assembly of dark suits on the platform proclaim our second-class status even when the words do not. Why, I wonder, must the women of the Church endure a women's meeting that is not a women's meeting at all?

There is not space here to explore the full range of these contradictions; they are evident for anyone who cares to look. That the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints simultaneously enlarges and diminishes women should hardly be surprising since it was born and has grown to maturity in a larger society which does the same. In my opinion, the solution is neither to keep quiet nor to picket the tabernacle. To do either is to accept the very heresy we want to overcome—the misguided notion that the Church is somehow to be equated with the men at the top. We must relearn an old lesson from Sunday School—the Church rests upon the testimonies of its individual members. I resist teachings and practices which diminish women not only because I am a feminist but because I am a Mormon.

As I have reconsidered the past ten years, I have come to believe that one reason I had difficulty recognizing discrimination in the Church was because I tended to confuse the spirit of the priesthood with its form. When President Kimball (in October 1979 General Priesthood Meeting) encouraged Latter-day Saint men to be "leader-servants" in their homes, he was teaching the spirit of priesthood. When Joseph Smith urged the brethren to cultivate "gentleness, meekness, and love unfeigned" he was speaking of the spirit of priesthood. When Christ knelt and washed the feet of his servants, he truly taught what it meant to be a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. I have felt the spirit of priesthood. I have seen men stay up at night with crying babies, sacrifice professional goals to pick apples at the welfare farm and give up football games to rake a widow's yard. I have seen restless men learn to sit and listen to people's problems, and I have seen ordinary men develop Christ-like qualities of love and compassion. In a very real sense, the priesthood has allowed men to develop the feminine side of their natures. In a world which assumed male dominance, Christ's priesthood turned the whole notion of dominance upside down, but in a world which is beginning to recognize equality between men and women, an anxious clinging to the form of the priesthood can only violate its spirit. It is the old story of Peter and the gentiles. Neither maleness nor Jewishness is essential.

A second reason I had difficulty recognizing discrimination in the Church grew from my own reluctance to assume power. "Men pass the sacrament and collect tithing," I wrote in 1974, "but they have no monopoly on spiritual gifts. Those are free to all who ask." Most of the time, to be perfectly honest, I wasn't asking. Me give a blessing? Me speak for God? If such a notion had suggested itself, I probably would have laughed. I had all the power I could handle already. For a long time, I approached my professional life in the same way. One of the reasons I found editing *A Beginner's Boston* so satisfying was

that someone else had *called* me to do the very thing I wanted to do—write. When it came to the next step, I had a great deal of trouble making up my mind. I argued with myself for months over the merits of entering a doctoral program. I thought I could probably do the work; I just had trouble believing the work was worth doing. How tedious, I thought. How dull. Me pass an oral exam? Me write a thesis? Surely I had more important things to do. As a former teacher reminded me, “Your talent is to delight.” I clung to my guidebook image just as Claudia and I had clung to our housewife image, out of affirmation and fear—affirmation for a whole wonderful world outside the range of male credentials, and fear at assuming power I had never associated with women.

For me, learning to question the present structure of the priesthood has been a positive as well as a negative experience. With feelings of anger and betrayal has come a new sense of responsibility; with recognition of discrimination has come renewed conviction of the essential message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I am convinced that an effective challenge to male dominance can only be built upon “principles of righteousness.” Trusting the spirit of the priesthood in the Church, Mormon women must recognize the potential for priesthood in themselves.

In the past few days I have been reading I Nephi 8–11. Although I love Richard Poll’s use of Book of Mormon symbols to characterize contemporary Latter-day Saints, I wonder if the Liahonas among us have been too willing to give up the imagery of Lehi’s dream. There are so many folks out there peddling maps to the Celestial Kingdom—“Straight and Narrow Path This Way! Grasp Iron Rod for Safe Trip!”—that it is easy to picture the Iron Rod as an unending railing of manuals, conference addresses, lessons and programs leading from baptism to the hereafter. I don’t think that is the message Lehi intended. In his story, the Iron Rod is discovered in an existential crisis, in darkness and mist. Those who grasp it find themselves, not in some final safe place, but with a new vision of the meaning of life, through having tasted the love of God.

Lehi’s story has particular relevance for Mormon feminists. As the wrenching struggles of the past five years have forced us to reach for the eternal and enduring amid the transient and temporary, we have felt and grasped the Iron Rod—sometimes to our own amazement. For so many years I have been a questioner, a protester, a letter writer; I had begun to think that words like *faith* and *testimony* belonged to other women, the ones who sat quietly in the congregation, meekly acknowledging the authority of the brethren. Gradually as I have found myself in front of a class or down on my knees or back at my typewriter after each new crisis, I have begun to realize that those words belong to me.

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” To care enough about the Church to want to see it better, to cherish the past without denying the future, to love and respect the brethren while recognizing their limitations, to be willing to speak when no one is listening—all of these require faith. Because I am not at all certain that the next decade will be any easier for Mormon women than the last, I offer these

personal experiences as a kind of testimony. Ten years ago, in a small gathering in a living room in Newton, a few women began to talk to each other. Struggling to produce an issue of *Dialogue*, they not only discovered the value of the personal voice, they learned the importance of accepting responsibility for their own perceptions. Risking conflict, they grew in their ability to serve. Opening themselves to others, they were unexpectedly strengthened in knowledge and in faith.

