

The Moral Force of Women

By Elder D. Todd Christofferson
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles



Your intuition is to do good and to be good, and as you follow the Holy Spirit, your moral authority and influence will grow.

From age immemorial, societies have relied on the moral force of women. While certainly not the only positive influence at work in society, the moral foundation provided by women has proved uniquely beneficial to the common good. Perhaps, because it is pervasive, this contribution of women is often underappreciated. I wish to express gratitude for the influence of good women, identify some of the philosophies and trends that threaten women's strength and standing, and voice a plea to women to cultivate the innate moral power within them.

Women bring with them into the world a certain virtue, a divine gift that makes them adept at instilling such qualities as faith, courage, empathy, and refinement in relationships and in cultures. When praising the "unfeigned faith" he found in Timothy, Paul noted that this faith "dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice."¹

Years ago, while living in Mexico, I observed firsthand what Paul meant. I recall a particular young mother, one of many among the women of the Church in Mexico whose faith in God graces their lives so naturally that they seem scarcely aware of it. This lovely woman radiated a moral authority, born of goodness, that influenced all around her for good. With her husband, she sacrificed a number of pleasures and possessions for their higher priorities, seemingly without a second thought. Her ability to perform feats of lifting, bending, and balancing with her children was near superhuman. The demands on her were many and her tasks often repetitive and mundane, yet underneath it all was a beautiful serenity, a sense of being about God's work. As with the Savior, she was ennobled by blessing others through service and sacrifice. She was love personified.

I have been remarkably blessed by the moral influence of women, in particular my mother and my wife. Among other women that I look to in gratitude is Anna Daines. Anna and her husband, Henry, and their four children were among the pioneers of the Church in New Jersey, in the United States. Beginning in the 1930s, when Henry was a doctoral student at Rutgers University, he and Anna worked tirelessly with school and civic organizations in Metuchen, where they lived, to overcome deeply rooted prejudice against Mormons and to make the community a better place for all parents to raise their children.

Anna, for example, volunteered at the Metuchen YMCA and made herself indispensable. Within a year she was appointed president of the Mothers' Auxiliary and then "was asked to run for one of the three women's positions on the YMCA board of directors. She won without opposition, and so joined the very council that only a few years before had refused to let the Saints meet in their building!"²

My family moved into the New Brunswick Ward when I was a teenager. Sister Daines took notice of me and often expressed her confidence in my abilities and potential, which inspired me to reach high—higher than I would have without her encouragement. Once, because of a thoughtful and timely warning from her, I avoided a situation that would surely have led to regret. Although she is no longer here, Anna Daines’s influence continues to be felt and reflected in the lives of her descendants and countless others, myself included.

My grandmother Adena Warnick Swenson taught me to be conscientious in priesthood service. She encouraged me to memorize the sacramental blessings on the bread and water, explaining that in this way I could express them with greater understanding and feeling. Observing how she sustained my grandfather, a stake patriarch, engendered in me a reverence for sacred things. Grandma Swenson never learned how to drive a car, but she knew how to help boys become priesthood men.

A woman’s moral influence is nowhere more powerfully felt or more beneficially employed than in the home. There is no better setting for rearing the rising generation than the traditional family, where a father and a mother work in harmony to provide for, teach, and nurture their children. Where this ideal does not exist, people strive to duplicate its benefits as best they can in their particular circumstances.

In all events, a mother can exert an influence unequaled by any other person in any other relationship. By the power of her example and teaching, her sons learn to respect womanhood and to incorporate discipline and high moral standards in their own lives. Her daughters learn to cultivate their own virtue and to stand up for what is right, again and again, however unpopular. A mother’s love and high expectations lead her children to act responsibly without excuses, to be serious about education and personal development, and to make ongoing contributions to the well-being of all around them. Elder Neal A. Maxwell once asked: “When the real history of mankind is fully disclosed, will it feature the echoes of gunfire or the shaping sound of lullabies? The great armistices made by military men or the peacemaking of women in homes and in neighborhoods? Will what happened in cradles and kitchens prove to be more controlling than what happened in congresses?”³

Most sacred is a woman’s role in the creation of life. We know that our physical bodies have a divine origin⁴ and that we must experience both a physical birth and a spiritual rebirth to reach the highest realms in God’s celestial kingdom.⁵ Thus, women play an integral part (sometimes at the risk of their own lives) in God’s work and glory “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.”⁶ As grandmothers, mothers, and role models, women have been the guardians of the wellspring of life, teaching each generation the importance of sexual purity—of chastity before marriage and fidelity within marriage. In this way, they have been a civilizing influence in society; they have brought out the best in men; they have perpetuated wholesome environments in which to raise secure and healthy children.

Sisters, I don’t want to overpraise you as we sometimes do in Mother’s Day talks that make you cringe. You don’t have to be perfect;⁷ I don’t claim that you are (with one possible exception who is sitting nearby at the moment). What I mean to say is that whether you are single or married, whether you have borne children or not, whether you are old, young, or in between, your moral authority is vital, and perhaps we have begun to take it and you for granted. Certainly there are trends and forces at work that would weaken and even eliminate your influence, to the great detriment of individuals, families, and society at large. Let me mention three as a caution and a warning.

A pernicious philosophy that undermines women’s moral influence is the devaluation of marriage and of

motherhood and homemaking as a career. Some view homemaking with outright contempt, arguing it demeans women and that the relentless demands of raising children are a form of exploitation.⁸ They ridicule what they call “the mommy track” as a career. This is not fair or right. We do not diminish the value of what women or men achieve in any worthy endeavor or career—we all benefit from those achievements—but we still recognize there is not a higher good than motherhood and fatherhood in marriage. There is no superior career, and no amount of money, authority, or public acclaim can exceed the ultimate rewards of family. Whatever else a woman may accomplish, her moral influence is no more optimally employed than here.

Attitudes toward human sexuality threaten the moral authority of women on several fronts. Abortion for personal or social convenience strikes at the heart of a woman’s most sacred powers and destroys her moral authority. The same is true of sexual immorality and of revealing dress that not only debases women but reinforces the lie that a woman’s sexuality is what defines her worth.

There has long been a cultural double standard that expected women to be sexually circumspect while excusing male immorality. The unfairness of such a double standard is obvious, and it has been justifiably criticized and rejected. In that rejection, one would have hoped that men would rise to the higher, single standard, but just the opposite has occurred—women and girls are now encouraged to be as promiscuous as the double standard expected men to be. Where once women’s higher standards demanded commitment and responsibility from men, we now have sexual relations without conscience, fatherless families, and growing poverty. Equal-opportunity promiscuity simply robs women of their moral influence and degrades all of society.⁹ In this hollow bargain, it is men who are “liberated” and women and children who suffer most.

A third area of concern comes from those who, in the name of equality, want to erase all differences between the masculine and the feminine. Often this takes the form of pushing women to adopt more masculine traits—be more aggressive, tough, and confrontational. It is now common in movies and video games to see women in terribly violent roles, leaving dead bodies and mayhem in their wake. It is soul-numbing to see men in such roles and certainly no less so when women are the ones perpetrating and suffering the violence.

Former Young Women general president Margaret D. Nadauld taught: “The world has enough women who are tough; we need women who are tender. There are enough women who are coarse; we need women who are kind. There are enough women who are rude; we need women who are refined. We have enough women of fame and fortune; we need more women of faith. We have enough greed; we need more goodness. We have enough vanity; we need more virtue. We have enough popularity; we need more purity.”¹⁰ In blurring feminine and masculine differences, we lose the distinct, complementary gifts of women and men that together produce a greater whole.

My plea to women and girls today is to protect and cultivate the moral force that is within you. Preserve that innate virtue and the unique gifts you bring with you into the world. Your intuition is to do good and to be good, and as you follow the Holy Spirit, your moral authority and influence will grow. To the young women I say, don’t lose that moral force even before you have it in full measure. Take particular care that your language is clean, not coarse; that your dress reflects modesty, not vanity; and that your conduct manifests purity, not promiscuity. You cannot lift others to virtue on the one hand if you are entertaining vice on the other.

Sisters, of all your associations, it is your relationship with God, your Heavenly Father, who is the source of your moral power, that you must always put first in your life. Remember that Jesus’s power came through His single-minded devotion to the will of the Father. He never varied from that which pleased His Father.¹¹ Strive to be that

kind of disciple of the Father and the Son, and your influence will never fade.

And do not be afraid to apply that influence without fear or apology. “Be ready always to give an answer to every [man, woman, and child] that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you.”¹² “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”¹³ “Bring up your children in light and truth.”¹⁴ “Teach [them] to pray, and to walk uprightly before the Lord.”¹⁵

In these exhortations to women, let no one willfully misunderstand. By praising and encouraging the moral force in women, I am not saying that men and boys are somehow excused from their own duty to stand for truth and righteousness, that their responsibility to serve, sacrifice, and minister is somehow less than that of women or can be left to women. Brethren, let us stand with women, share their burdens, and cultivate our own companion moral authority.

Dear sisters, we rely on the moral force you bring to the world, to marriage, to family, to the Church. We rely on blessings you bring down from heaven by your prayers and faith. We pray for your security, welfare, and happiness and for your influence to be sustained. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. 2 Timothy 1:5.

2. Orson Scott Card, “Neighborliness: Daines Style,” *Ensign*, Apr. 1977, 19.

3. Neal A. Maxwell, “The Women of God,” *Ensign*, May 1978, 10–11.

4. See Moses 2:27.

5. See Moses 6:57–60.

6. Moses 1:39.

7. “A century ago, attachment scholar John Bowlby found that the bond created through the innumerable caring interactions between a mother and child is the critical foundation for social-emotional development. ... And feminist scholar Sara Ruddick identified a mother’s ‘attentive love’ as the core of effective parenting. Through the ‘patient eye of love,’ mothers develop a special knowledge of their children—a knowledge that gives them unique insight into what the truly ‘best practices’ for each child

should be” (Jenet Jacob Erickson, “Love, Not Perfection, Root of Good Mothering,” *Deseret News*, May 12, 2013, G3).

8. It is true that many women over many generations have been exploited or saddled with unfair burdens both in family and employment, but selflessness and sacrifice need not and should not become abusive or exploitative. Elder Bruce C. Hafen observed: “If being ‘selfless’ means a woman must give up her own inner identity and personal growth, that understanding of selflessness is wrong. ... But today’s liberationist model goes too far the other way, stereotyping women as excessively *independent* of their families. A more sensible view is that husbands and wives are *interdependent* with each other. ... The critics who moved mothers from dependence to independence skipped the fertile middle ground of interdependence. Those who moved mothers from selflessness to selfishness skipped the fertile middle ground of self-chosen service that contributes toward a woman’s personal growth. Because of these excesses, debates about the value of motherhood have, ironically, caused the general society to discount not only mothers but women in general” (“Motherhood and the Moral Influence of Women” [remarks to the World Congress of Families II, Geneva, Plenary Session IV, Nov. 16, 1999], http://worldcongress.org/wcf2_spkrs/wcf2_hafen.htm).

9. One mother in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial observed: “With the exception of some Mormons, evangelicals and Orthodox Jews, scads of us don’t know how to teach our own sons and daughters not to give away their bodies so readily. ... Still, in my own circle of girlfriends, the desire to push back is strong. I don’t know one of them who doesn’t have feelings of lingering discomfort regarding her own sexual past. And not one woman I’ve ever asked about the subject has said that she wishes she’d ‘experimented’ more” (Jennifer Moses, “Why Do We Let Them Dress Like That?” *Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 19, 2011, C3).

10. Margaret D. Nadauld, “The Joy of Womanhood,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2000, 15; or *Liahona*, Jan. 2001, 18.

11. See John 8:29.

12. 1 Peter 3:15.

13. 2 Timothy 4:2.

14. Doctrine and Covenants 93:40.

15. Doctrine and Covenants 68:28.

Official Web site of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
© 2013 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All Rights Reserved