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“Mom” is Only One of My Names

Humans tend to want answers. They want to know why things are the way they are so they come up with reasons. Sometimes these reasons are justifiable and work. Other times, we answer questions with false answers and accept them as truth. What happens when this “truth” isn’t truth at all? In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan shows the world an ideal—the mystique that America created about women. After World War II, people longed for stability and the nuclear family, so they created a binary that separated men from women by claiming that the man’s job was to provide for the family outside of the home, and the woman’s job was to be the housewife. Friedan argues that this binary isn’t accurate and actually doesn’t hold. Because of this mystique, many women found themselves feeling confused with their feelings of dissatisfaction and depression in their situation as mother and housewife. Although Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in the 1960s, it is uncanny how similar the culture of her time is to that of the LDS culture today. Church leaders and normal members (including women) often reason that men and women are separate but equal because men hold the priesthood and women bear children. Just like Friedan’s argument, this binary between men and women is neither satisfactory nor logical. Holding the priesthood and bearing children are roles that different genders hold, but they are not equal nor comparable to each other based off of the conditions necessary for both. Because people feel the need to have an answer for everything, they create

these binaries that really create more questions. Friedan believes that women shouldn't be characterized by the fact that they are women and the roles that come with a person's gender, but that they are humans who all have an individual self. Once we stop trying to create order or explanation through binaries the abject (or those who don't fit into these binaries) will not feel so alienated and unfulfilled. They will stop striving to gain happiness solely through the role that the feminine mystique places on them by being a certain sex.

Because we tend to categorize or organize ourselves to make sense of the world, we often create binaries. Binaries show balance and create a structure in which things can be placed. If we are to compare men and women's roles, we may talk about husband and wife or mother and father. If we are to continue in terms of binaries, one would assume that the binary of husband and wife or of mother and father is what our society focuses on. Because it is a binary, they should be different but equal in a sense. Husbands and wives hold different roles, but those roles should hold the same amount of fulfillment and importance. For example, in "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" it states, "By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children." Not only this, but it stresses the balance when it continues, "In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners." These are roles that men and women hold because of their sex, but it is not what defines them. As husband and wife they should be equal partners; they may not live the same exact lives, but the binary works.

In *The Feminine Mystique* Friedan focuses on a binary that doesn't work like husband/wife binary. This is when the idea of the husband as the breadwinner, and the wife as the housewife became the ideal, the goal. Notice how the focus of the term "housewife" isn't on

the wife being a mother, but a housewife. It doesn't even include "home" in the title, but house because that's basically what her life was. Her occupation became housewife and somehow she had to find fulfillment in this, while her husband actually did things. Friedan explains the absurdity of this situation when she states,

"Could women be prevented from realizing their full capabilities by making their role in the home *equal* to man's role in society? "Woman's place is in the home" could no longer be said in tones of contempt. Housework, washing dishes, diaper-changing had to be dressed up by the new mystique to become equal to splitting atoms, penetrating outer space, creating art that illuminates human destiny, pioneering on the frontiers of society. It had to become the very end of life itself to conceal the obvious fact that it is barely the beginning" (199).

Splitting atoms, and penetrating space might be an exaggeration considering most men don't perform such amazing feats themselves, but her argument is intriguing nonetheless. Because women didn't have jobs like their husbands, they tried to make their housework hold just as much meaning. Because of that binary, they wanted to make their job of housewife equal. But as Friedan argues, the two are not equal and that is why women will eventually want something more.

The Feminine Mystique can be a dense read and many people may create false images of the novel, but overall, Friedan just wants women to reach their full potential as individuals. She drives this point and calls the reader to action in her last few sentences of the book:

Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves? Who knows what women's intelligence will contribute when it can be nourished without denying love?...It has barely begun, the search

of women themselves. But the time is at hand when the voices of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women on to become complete. (Friedan 313)

Friedan realizes the worth of women and isn't satisfied with simply the role of housewife because it doesn't allow her to reach her potential. She wants them to be free from the mystique so that they are "finally free to become themselves." Her solution seems so simple, but it can get complicated. Roles outside of the church and inside the church of men and women are so easy to judge people off of. You are a woman, therefore you can have babies. You are a woman, therefore you should stay at home, cook, clean, and pamper your children while your husband is out in the world making a living. You are a woman, so this should fulfill you. Friedan argues against this when she states, "The problem that has no name stirring in the minds of so many American women today is not a matter of loss of femininity or too much education, or the demands of domesticity. It is far more important than anyone recognizes...We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home'" (Friedan 24). Friedan is arguing that educated women aren't the problem, it's the fact that although no one is openly saying it, it's very common for all types of women to feel dissatisfied with their life in the home and to long for more. This idea that men go to work and women stay at home causes problems because women then try to find their identity as just mother, or worse, housewife. These things are not bad, but they don't allow for much outlet like the husband's career might, and this is when women have problems. If all they ever wanted was a husband, home, and children, and now that they have it, many found/find

themselves depressed because that was their one goal in life, and now that they've reached it, they don't know how to find fulfillment.

Some may think that *The Feminine Mystique* was important to starting a new wave of feminism in the 60s and has since lost importance, but as I mentioned earlier, it still holds many similarities to the LDS culture. The main role of a woman in Friedan's work may be housewife, but in the LDS religion it is very clear that women hold the divine role as mother and nurturer. Church leaders are constantly teaching and preaching that the role of a mother is one of the most blessed roles and callings that a woman can hold--and I agree. I think that everyone can agree that a mother is irreplaceable and crucial to a child's emotional and physical well-being and can find much happiness and fulfillment as a mother, but the problem is once again, the binary that church leaders and members created. When I cited "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" I focused on how they stated the roles of the husband and wife. Husband and wife is a binary that can hold because they work together for the same cause and provide the same amount of fulfillment. The problem is, that's not what people usually refer to when they try to explain the importance and balance of men and women's roles in the church. As members of the Church we often hear "Men hold the priesthood, women have children." They might continue to argue for the woman's worth and importance by saying "Bearing and rearing children is one of the most sacred callings someone can hold and men cannot do this, only women." They try to focus and rationalize that men cannot have children therefore men are subject to women like women are so often subject to men.

In Lori Beaman's article, "Molly Mormons, Mormon Feminists, and Moderates: Religious Diversity and the Latter Day Saints Church," Beaman interviews many LDS women and looks into this contrast between men and women's roles in the church. She found all different types of women and different ranges of answers to her questions, but as you read the

following quotes you will be able to see how some women try to rationalize why men have the priesthood based off of the roles and characteristics that men and women have. Beaman quotes one woman who supposedly believes that men are weaker spiritually than women, which is why they need the priesthood,

The men hold the priesthood, but see I have my little, have my feelings on the priesthood...um....see women, I think women are more, I don't know, more spiritual sometimes, just inborn in us. We're more sensitive, do you know what I mean? We're...we're just different, than men. And with the priesthood, men, that helps men, I think, to become more sensitive, because they have to be, you know, like they have to learn to be meek, um, submissive, like a child. (Beaman 78)

To be fair this is an interview, so the woman is answering off the top of her head and doesn't speak very smoothly, but it's interesting to see how this woman's reasoning for men having the priesthood was so subjective, when her last reason is basically quoting scripture that isn't actually referring to men, but humankind in general (Mosiah 3:19). Another woman has a very similar idea when she explains, "There are some out there that are just awesome women that do that, that build their husbands up, um, really neat examples of people that I know. Women, I think a lot of times women have to set the example, and then he kind of...has to keep up with her" (Beaman 79). As much as I am proud to be a woman and believe in our strengths, I don't believe that discovering women's strengths by focusing on men's weaknesses is a valid argument.

There was a lot of rationalizing from those women that Beaman cited, but it's most interesting when they bring it back to the priesthood/motherhood binary:

No, I don't think so [that the priesthood would ever be extended to women] because I...I should say we do enough, but we do enough. We have children, we're the, I mean, we're the Moms. I think if...a father's role, and yes he has a big roles too but, I think it puts him as a co-equal with a woman by having the priesthood, and I think if we had it, it would make us unequal...yeah, the man really needs it, but if the prophet were to say women can hold the priesthood then sure, I'd be all for it. but ultimately it comes from the Lord, so whatever is the will. (Beaman 79)

What this woman suggests is that if women held the priesthood this would make them unequal to men, so in order to balance things out, God decided to give men the priesthood. She then ends saying that she wouldn't be opposed to holding the priesthood as a woman, but she was ok with accepting the Lord's will. Thus far there is no official explanation for why men hold the priesthood and women don't, but the problem is when people start to rationalize why this is so. They start to create reasons why things are the way they are and then we feel like we have to live up to these rationalizations. Once we try to equalize men and women with the priesthood the argument loses all credibility. The priesthood/motherhood binary cannot hold which is why it causes so much grief for women. As we saw from the women Beaman interviewed they try to reason their way through their questions with a binary with which they can't explain confidentially.

Rebecca J. reveals the flaws of the priesthood/motherhood binary in her blog article, "Why I don't like the priesthood-mother analogy: Part one of a million parts," by admitting that she doesn't mind motherhood as a metaphor for priesthood, but what she doesn't like is the "framing [of] the priesthood-motherhood analogy as explanation and justification for ordaining only men to the priesthood." It just doesn't hold. In order for a man to be ordained to the

priesthood he has to meet a criteria of worthiness, but ultimately, the only thing that determines whether he holds the priesthood is his personal worthiness. Rebecca continues that motherhood, on the other hand, isn't determined by worthiness. "You don't have to be baptized a member of the church to become a mother. You don't have to live the law of chastity. You don't have to abstain from alcohol, tobacco, coffee and tea. You don't have to do anything but conceive a child in your womb by any means necessary. You may be an angel or a monster, but you can bring life into the world either way." Rebecca brings up an interesting point with this argument because it is not often spoken about in the church. Yes, motherhood is a wonderful and sacred role, just as priesthood, but it does not have the same requirements as holding the priesthood. Not only that, but there are plenty of women that would make wonderful mothers, women whose biggest goal in life is to build a family, but cannot. Unlike the priesthood, there are many factors that determine whether a woman can be a mother, and many of those factors are out of the woman's control. Rebecca claims, "Some of them are infertile. Some of them are unmarried. Some of them are financially unable to get in vitro fertilization or adopt. It really doesn't matter why; what matters is that the circumstances of their lives have rendered motherhood impossible. It is beyond their control. That is just not true of men and the priesthood." Because of this binary women feel like in order to be worthy, they must have children and raise a happy home in order to fill their role.

Although we realize that childbirth has many complications, often women who cannot bear children may feel a major loss. They can't find an identity. Katie Jennings shares her experience: "As a childless woman in the LDS church, it's hard to not feel like an outcast or a failure on a daily basis. I've spent my adult married life comparing myself to the women around

me—more specifically, the mothers around me. As a young married woman, I dreamed of being a mother. And it just never happened. Twelve years later, it still hasn't" (Jennings). It was a struggle because she felt like an outcast in a church that focuses on motherhood so strongly, but eventually she was able to gain some perspective and peace of mind by building relationships and friendships with other women who were in the same situation as her. "I want other childless women to understand that they're not broken; they're not unworthy of motherhood; they're not failures. And most importantly, they're not alone in this world. There are people who understand and feel empathy for their daily struggle, because we've been there too." Often binaries create abjects. They are the few that don't fit into the binary. But in this case, any woman who doesn't have children is part of the abject. And as we can see from Jennings' words, there are not just a few women who are the abject, but actually a lot of women that share her experiences. There are a lot of women who cannot become mothers for many different reasons.

So there are women who feel like outcasts from this feminine mystique because they can't fulfill the calling of mother, but what about the women who actually are mothers of a supposedly happy home? Because LDS women have been taught their whole lives that motherhood is one of the most sacred and blessed callings they can have, it's only natural that LDS women make this their biggest goal. A woman who goes by the pen name, Thunderchicken, writes honestly in her article, "The Imbalance of Stay-At-Home Motherhood,"

So, wanting to be faithful, and wanting to fulfill my purpose as well as do what's best for my children, I followed that path. But a few years in now, I'm not liking this "best thing" very much. If this is the best I could ever do with my life, then life is kind of depressing. That's not to say that I

don't enjoy my kids, and being with them, or parenting them. In fact, I do love it a lot...Still, I realize how the current path is draining my soul, despite how much I love being with my kids – mostly because it lacks balance...What we hear from the pulpit certainly has an impact. Without even realizing it, it impacted me, and naturally led me down a path that I may not have chosen like that, had I been raised to consider more options than simply having EITHER a family or EITHER a career.

(Thunderchicken)

Thunderchicken enjoys being a mom, but because it takes over everything, she can't find balance in her life. She thought that she had to choose between family or a career, when she realized that you can't just do one and feel happy. The purpose of this life is to continually improve ourselves, but what if those who are mothers don't feel like they're reaching their full potentials? Men may hold the priesthood, but this isn't the only source that fulfills them in life. For some reason, many women feel like they have to find all their happiness and growth through raising children and building a happy home.

The binary of breadwinner/housewife and priesthood holder/mother does not hold because it ignores the individual. In order to find fulfillment and happiness in life we have to recognize that we all hold roles as humans, but those roles don't define us. They aren't everything. An anonymous guest writer for the Feminist Mormon Housewife blog expressed a healthy view as her role as mother in her article "Motherhood and Priesthood: Pregnancy is not my Birthright," "But pregnancy is not my birthright. Childbirth is not my birthright. They were experiences I chose to have that have dramatically altered the course of my life. I honor those

experiences. But they do not define me. They are not my essence. They are part of me, not all of me. To claim otherwise insults women who desperately desire to share similar experiences but cannot. To claim otherwise diminishes the contributions of women everywhere” (Anonymous). Once again, motherhood isn’t everything. It is a very important part of this woman’s life, but she doesn’t let the role of “mother” define her. It was a choice that she was happy to make, but a choice nonetheless. Thunderchicken agrees when she states, “We’re all different, and so each woman will have different things to offer up. But we’ll never get to enjoy the benefits of all these different attributes and abilities, when everyone will abandon their natural inclinations for the sake of one single life path – as if it can only be one thing.” Many women may share the role as mother, but that doesn’t mean their lives are the same, and that doesn’t mean that they don’t find fulfillment through various sources. They are not defined by this role, therefore they are their own person.

I was a pretty hardcore Tomboy when I was younger. I didn’t want to be a boy because I wanted to be that actual sex—I wanted to be a boy because of all the opportunities they were given that girls couldn’t enjoy. I remember openly questioning my father why women didn’t have the priesthood. He prepared a well thought out lesson for my Sunday School class in response to my angry question, but I wasn’t satisfied. I was young, but I knew his reasonings didn’t really answer my question. I may ask questions, but I’m okay with not knowing all the answers. My problem is when people try to make up answers because those answers often trap us in roles and binaries that we often don’t fit into. As Friedan is so adamant about, we are all individuals, and won’t find happiness if we allow ourselves to be labeled and grouped to satisfy

man's need for order. We can find happiness as housewives and mothers, but that isn't everything and it doesn't have to be.

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