Religious activity which is its own end is just so much ethics and discipline. If we would rise above it, we must employ this beehive of religious activity we call “the Church” to invite God into our lives.

BEHOLDING AS IN A GLASS THE GLORY

By Kathleen Flake

We have all said or heard it said, “That cat thinks it’s a dog.” What we mean is that the cat acts like we expect a dog to act. Maybe she prefers the company of dogs or waits at the door for the family to come home or even eats dog food. Of course, the cat probably doesn’t think she’s a dog any more than she thinks she’s a cat. Unlike those of us here today, cats don’t have conferences to consider the nature of their being.

Notwithstanding our human capacity for awareness, we can get as confused as some cats. There are many examples around us of people who seem to be something they are not because they have learned to act in ways that obscure who they really are. For example, people of average or even extraordinary intelligence are sometimes placed in institutions for the mentally impaired. When they are discovered, the question naturally arises, “How could this have happened?” The explanation is always that the behavior of these unimpaired people was superficially indistinguishable from the legitimate patients. Maybe they imitated the patterns of speech or the particular stiffness of gait they observed in others. Maybe they didn’t object to the institutional food and clothing or ask for more sophisticated forms of entertainment. In short, as all humans are wont to do, they conformed to the world as they experienced it, imitating the norm that was known to them and not expressing a desire for opportunities unknown to them. And, just as important, their institutionalized society validated these choices, approving of them for acting like everybody else.

These influences, which make cats act like dogs or the able act unable, operate in all areas of our lives. The pervasiveness of the influence may be such that we do not observe it. It is simply what life is to us on its most elementary level. Like fish in water, we do not know what this wetness is. It has always seemed to me that seeing life “steadily and whole,” as is our theme today, can only be done by acknowledging these influences that encourage us to be what we are not or to be less than what we are. It is not an easy thing, especially if we have grown to like this dog-like life, or if disabled people are our only models. Acknowledging these influences can be even more difficult with regard to our spiritual lives where social convention can masquerade as divine will.

Yet, here is where I find the question we are considering today most compelling. If we were to see spiritual life steadily and whole, what would we see? Are we cats acting like dogs? Are we imitating—through ignorance and lack of imagination—a dominant spiritual style, foreign to our own capacities and aspirations? For example, do you remember how for years we listened to lessons about “our sister from Chad” and made plastic grapes, without noticing what a strange thing that is for a religious community to be doing? Didn’t Joseph Smith tell the sisters in 1842 that the purpose of the Relief Society was to “save souls”? Yet, it wasn’t until the Society’s program was included in the Sunday worship schedule that we realized its curriculum was so secular as to be largely inappropriate to the Sabbath. Consequently, the Society’s curriculum has quietly, but exhaustively, been rewritten in the last decade.

Other things are not as easy to acknowledge. My great grandmother left a journal of everyday life in a Mormon town on the Arizona Frontier, where she served in a Relief Society presidency. In the same tone as we today speak of visiting teaching—very matter-of-factly and with confidence that it is our responsibility and gift—she writes of her many visits to heal the sick by the laying on of hands. More intriguingly, she records without fanfare the blessings of comfort and promise, again by the laying of hands, which she received from and gave to the other members of her presidency when the weight of their responsibilities became heavy to bear. One hundred years later as I serve on another Mormon frontier, the inner city, I am vaguely aware that I am imitating social norms when I limit my ministrations to praying for, presiding over, advising, and exhorting others. I can sometimes even admit to myself that I imitate the norm at the expense of what I know to be the
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responsibilities and gifts given to me by God. Yet, I rationalize my choice in terms of what others are doing and what they would do to me if I acted differently. Also, I confess to you that I don't even consider it possible to do what my grandmother actually did so routinely. Hers were opportunities unknown to me and so I have trouble seeking them. Besides, everybody tells me I am doing such a great job.

What will I say when Grandmother asks me how this could have happened? Will I get away with saying, "It was what was expected of me and, besides, I didn't know that alternatives existed"? Doubtful. The harder question, I imagine, will come when God asks me why I cared so little for these gifts or why I was so vain as to think I could "save souls" without them. Then, I will be forced to admit that I was "running a program," not saving souls. In this nightmare, God then says, "Okay. Off you go to the kingdom of middle managers, program runners, and presiders." What a bitter moment that will be for me. I will protest that this is not where I want to live, but I will be forced to admit that this is what I am: competent, organized, well-intentioned but not very faithful. What does Moroni say: "Wherefore, if these things have ceased, then has faith ceased also"? (Moroni 7:38). So, the nightmare ends as I go take my place on the stand—next to all those other competent, organized, well-intentioned but not very faithful souls—trapped in a meeting that drones through time and throughout all eternity.

WHAT is the alternative? What is it we have the "power to be" that goes beyond organizing programs and counseling people? The answer to that question is so commonly held in the Church that it has been reduced to an heroic couplet: "As Man is God once was; And, as God is Man may become." For a Latter-day Saint woman to understand what she is to be, she must begin here then: with who God is.

One of the first things we are taught about God is that they are our parents but, in certain very significant respects, we are not what they are. We may resemble them in form—or, in other words, we are in the image of God—but in capacity we are merely potential to their accomplished fact. We are human, subject to spiritual and physical death, and they are Eternal, not merely timeless but the source of life. And, as our childlike understanding of them as our Heavenly Father and Mother matures, we learn that our Heavenly Parents are defined as such by their capacity, not merely to embody our spirit intelligences—to give us form—but to direct our spiritual development, progressively in stages, until we become more like them: possessed of the life that characterizes them. Indeed, we call
God our Heavenly Parents because they are able to engender in us the quality of this, Their life, or, in other words, Eternal Life. We are—we exist here—for the purpose of receiving that direction and gift from them. When we do receive it in its fullness, we shall be like them. This, to us, is the heaven referred to by other Christians. It is the object of all our religious endeavors and spiritual desires—it is Eternal Life.

How is it, then, that we can become like God by having this quality of life called “Eternal” life? The Savior says, “This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3).

What a curious formula this is. What does it mean, this equating of knowing God with Eternal Life? I’ve never heard this formula explained beyond an equating of “having Eternal Life” with “going to the Celestial Kingdom” where God is, ergo, we will “know” God when we live with God. Because, however, Eternal Life is a quality of life, a state of being, not a place, that answer has never satisfied me. The mysteriousness of this formula is only enhanced by its having been used in the temple to explain the purpose of the temple ceremony to persons receiving their own endowments. A curious formula for a curious place.

How is it that knowing God can give us Eternal Life by making us like God? What kind of “knowing” is this that can change us so much? Although this sounds like a very tough question, the answer is, I think, well within our ken. We see a version of it in our daily lives. We grow and change emotionally not by what we eat, own, or read but by being in close association with others. We see this all around us. The power of intimacy to change us causes parents of all generations to warn their children of the danger of poorly chosen friends and mates. Children, too, acknowledge the effects of intimacy when they laugh as their two parents use the same words, express the same preferences, even seem to look alike. What we know by common experience has been confirmed by science. Psychology teaches us that it is by intimately knowing and being known by others that human beings grow and develop on the non-biological level. Infants who are not loved do not develop the full range of human feeling or capacity to enjoy life. Adults who do not keep love in their lives stagnate. Likewise, we spiritually change and mature, live or die spiritually, through the level of intimacy we are able to maintain with God. We do not change spiritually by going to church on Sunday, taking meals to the sick, or paying tithing. Rather, we change to the degree that these things draw the Holy Spirit into our lives. People who do not keep the Spirit in their lives, but merely obey the written law of the Church, do not develop the full range of spiritual capacities and eventually stagnate. Religious activity which is its own end is just so much ethics and discipline. The Pharisees will ever be our example in that regard. If we would rise above it, we must employ this beehive of religious activity we call “the Church” to invite God into our lives. I believe this is what Nephi means when he warns us to pray that God will consecrate our “performance” to the “welfare” of our souls (2 Nephi 32:9). It is only God’s involvement in our lives that enables us to do the kind of good that changes us, that enables us to be more than simply ethical and disciplined. If we speak of this at all, we call it “having the Spirit.” I do not believe that we are given this and other endowments of the Spirit merely to awaken our conscience and increase our religious skills. I believe that such endowments are meant to change us by giving us increasing intimacy with our Parents until we become like them.

BEFORE going on, let me say something about why I want to talk to you—as women—about this subject of becoming like God by knowing God. I suppose the human race will have significantly evolved when it can observe differences in men and women without judging them to be weakness and inferiority in the one and strength and superiority in the other. In the last twenty years, more research has been committed to identifying such differences, though we have only begun to distinguish fact from prejudice. One of the more intriguing areas of study has to do with the ways in which women and men “know.” The psychologist from whose work I am about to quote prefaces his conclusion, regarding differences in the ways in which men and women know, with a warning that he uses the terms “male element” and “female element” to describe what is characteristic of each gender, not what is exclusive to it. Each sex has both male and female elements in its fundamental, psychological makeup. Each gender has, however, a greater sophistication with the psychological element named after it (largely because of the different demands nature places upon us in bearing and rearing children). Women have a more highly developed capacity “to be”; hence, this is called the female element. Men have a more highly developed capacity “to do”; hence, this is called the male element. The significance of this is, in part, that each sex experiences and comprehends the world through its dominant element. Consequently, these characteristic elements affect the ways in which various life activities—such as “knowing”—happen for men and women. Thoroughly confused? Listen to his conclusion and see if it doesn’t make sense notwithstanding my introduction:

“It is the essence of the female element that it can relate, know and communicate in a more fundamental way of feeling, than the mere external relating, knowing and communicating of the male element. . . . Put simply, the silent relating, knowing and communicating of love is a profounder thing in human experience than
science. Science never knows the "person"; it only has information about the "person."[^1]

This kind of knowing by being, rather than by doing, often occurs on a silent level and is most easily observed in the healthy relationship between mother and child, especially the newborn infant. What the mother knows of the infant, and its wants and needs, arises not from the mother knowing about the infant because, as yet, there are no meaningful facts to be known. Such facts as its weight and length, baldness or hairiness, don't tell her very much about who the child is, what it needs or wants in a given moment. What the mother knows comes from her capacity to be with the child in a psychological, emotional sense, not merely a physical one. Gradually, this knowing that comes from the psychological symbiosis between the infant and its mother will necessarily weaken as the child matures. The capacity, however, to know another on a level of feeling—rather than external facts—does not cease, neither is it limited to mothers.

I f science is right, and from my experience it seems to be, nature has equipped women with a highly developed faculty for communicating, relating, and knowing on this level of feeling rather than on fact-gathering. It is not uncommon for men to conclude that women know what we know because we exchange private facts—namely, gossip—rather than feelings. It is just as common for us to conclude that they know nothing at all because they are not as adept in our ways of understanding by feeling. Each is being unfair to the other, of course. Much can be said about this different way in which men and women "know"; even more can be speculated. I will limit my speculation to one hypothesis having to do with our spiritual development.

I believe that women's capacity to know—not simply to know about—another has power to mold more than our emotional lives. What may have begun as a function of biological necessity for childbearing has, for most of you, become a highly developed, though hardly noticed, talent for knowing another by being with another. Again, this is not to say that men do not have this capacity. They do have it; just as we have a capacity to know by doing. Remember, this is not a zero sum game. Everybody wins; nobody loses. Today, however, we are talking about what women are and their power to be. Our capacity, as women, to "relate, know and communicate in a more fundamental way of feeling, than the mere external relating, knowing and communicating of the male element" is no different from other talents or personality traits which serve us in our efforts to mature spiritually. This aptitude, however, directly relates to the process of exaltation as we understand it, namely, to know God.

Do I go too far in supposing that this capacity to know on a level of feeling, not fact, which characterizes our way of relating, is the way we are to know God? The Savior says to the Pharisees: "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me" (John 5:39-40, emphasis added). So much for the science of theology. What about the significance of knowing by good works, even God's work? Consider Joseph Smith's retranslation of Matthew 7. The King James Version reads, "Many will say to me in that day of judgment, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matthew 7:22-23). Joseph Smith makes one change in the verses. No, the Lord does not deny that their works are marvelous or nullify their works for lack of authority. But, the last verse now reads "Ye never knew me..." (JST Matthew 7:33). So much for doing good works independent of a relationship with God. This, to me, is at the core of what we call the Restoration. All our doctrines and programs and priesthoods only have meaning in the context of this invitation to know, not simply to know about, Jesus Christ. What has been restored in this dispensation are the principles and ordinances through which God may be known by us (D&C 88:67-69, 74-75; D&C 93:1, 19-20).

I t is possible, however, not to take this idea of relationship far enough. Certainly, there are some benefits to simply analogizing the elements of a healthy, human relationship to a relationship to God. For example, it is worthwhile to remember the importance of listening to God, as well as speaking to God, honestly; and of being open to what God is, not just what you imagine God to be; and of making time to be with God and not just when on some errand you think would please Them. Such common sense approaches can even revolutionize your present "activity" in the Church. If we were to stop here, however, the idea of being in a relationship with God for the purposes of eternal progression would be reduced to trite and vapid sentimentality and so anthropomorphize God as to deny any possibility of experiencing the divine. In fact, it is just such sentimental talk that makes our belief in eternal progression anathema to our Protestant and Catholic cousins. Why? Because it obscures, even denies, a fault in humankind so great as to defeat any human effort at genuine intimacy with our Heavenly Parents. We call this fault in us the effects of the Fall.

Whatever capacity we have to relate to God in a way that transcends theology, or the science of knowing about God, only works if it is exercised through the guidance and gifts which God has given us for overcoming the Fall, namely, the principles and ordinances of the gospel. While we as women may be potentially more adept at knowing God, not simply knowing about God, because we employ this capacity to relate

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and communicate on a level of feeling, we are also less likely to appreciate the necessity of exercising this capacity through the doctrines of the Gospel, especially those rituals and the teachings related to them that make the abstractions of theology real in our everyday life. Unfortunately, our more highly developed capacity “to be”—to experience life fully, to understand our existence by being in relationship to others—has led us to easily accept the idea that it is our relationship to our loved ones, not our God, that exalts us. Just as unfortunately, it may be men’s more highly developed sense of doing that invites them to see these ordinances and other priestly activities—rather than the being in a relationship to God—as the purpose of their religious endeavors. What I want to suggest to you today, sisters, is that this notion that we are exalted through our earthly relationships is, like most half-truths, a very dangerous lie. It can rob you of your spiritual potential, your “power to be” as God is. If, however, in addition to cultivating earthly relationships, you will devote yourself to knowing God, then you can receive Eternal Life through the ordinances God has ordained for that purpose. Though you have heard these ordinances and principles described many times, permit me to describe them again, if only because they are so beautiful, but also because we as women have seldom if ever articulated them in the language of our experiences and values.

As a consequence of the Fall, we are in a broken relationship that needs to be reestablished, and reestablished on new terms, this time not out of the symbiotic harmony and dependence of the Garden but with a conscious awareness that we are separate—not just independent, but different—from our Heavenly Parents. Our challenge is “to be” willing to sacrifice those differences which come between us and our Parents. With Laman’s father, the wisely naive King, we must say, “If thou art God, wilt thou make thyself known unto me, and I will give away all my sins to know thee” (Alma 22:18). We are empowered to give away all our sins through the process known to us as the first four principles and ordinances of the gospel: Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, Repentance, Baptism and the Gift of the Holy Ghost.

This is, of course, not the end of it. It is only the point at which we receive the First Comforter, the Holy Spirit, which purges us of our sins or, in scriptural terms, “justifies” us. If we would be like God and not merely sinless, we must also receive the Second Comforter, or the presence of Christ himself that sanctifies us, or makes us holy. After all, God is not merely sinless but is holy, full of light and truth. This change from sinlessness to holiness is accomplished through what might be called the “second four principles and ordinances of the gospel” which have the power to exalt, not just save us; to sanctify us, not merely to justify us.

Earlier I spoke of how God is our Parents because they are able to engender in us their own capacities, even to endow us by direction and gift with the holiness that defines them. This direction and gift is received in the temple. In the temple ordinances, we take upon us the very signs and tokens of the divine life and, ultimately, at the veil the identity of this life is named for us and upon us. Having known God by experiencing their presence in this life, as symbolized by the veil, we are prepared to enter into their presence (D&C 132:22–24). These temple ordinances are the ordinances of knowing and, in the temple, they communicate to us “in a more fundamental way of feeling, than the mere external relating, knowing and communicating of the male element,” which is the method of knowing that we use in the tabernacle and chapel. This may be one of the reasons why the temple is such a traumatic experience for most. We are more comfortable with external or scientific ways of knowing about a thing—through lessons, talks, or sermons—than with ways of knowing the thing itself. Hence, we do not appreciate how we the living are given “life more abundantly” as we receive the knowledge that is in the temple. Rather, we speak of “doing work for the dead” as our exclusive purpose in returning to the temple. In doing so, we turn what is to be an initiation into Eternal Life into a kind of service project for the dead, and remain ignorant of the knowledge God would give us as we act the role of Savior for the person whose “work” we are doing.

The temple ordinances only have effect in our lives as we live the principles which accompany them. As it says in the Doctrine and Covenants: “Sanctification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true, to all those who love and serve God with all their mights, minds, and strength” (D&C 20:31). Just as we actually receive the Gift of the Holy Ghost, which remits us of our sins, only by exercising faith and repenting, so also we actually receive the endowment of knowing God by loving and serving God with all, by consecrating all that we have and are. These two principles of loving God and serving God plus the temple ordinances of endowment and sealing could be considered the “second” four principles and ordinances of the gospel which follow the first four described above.

Temples have always been and are today where God appears to those who are prepared by principle and ordinance “to know” God, for “this is life eternal that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (compare John 17:3 and D&C 132:29). This knowing is had on a level of feeling, not through intellectual analysis. It relies upon the processes of our hearts, not of our heads. This knowing through our hearts is as real a knowing and results in as real a knowledge as that which comes through our minds. Indeed, unlike intellectual knowledge, this knowing of, rather
than about, God has the power to change us to be what we were meant to become when we came here.

If we would suffer this change, we must yield to God through the process of the justifying and sanctifying principles and ordinances. As King Benjamin says in inviting his people to receive the Holy Ghost, we overcome the spiritual death occasioned by the Fall, by “yield[ing] to the enticing of the Holy Spirit” (Mosiah 3:19). And, as Helaman explains to us, the Nephites lived the sanctified, holy life, or established Zion as we call it, by “their yielding their hearts to God” (Helaman 3:35; see also Moroni 7:43). Given our cultural preoccupation with striving and our belief in the efficacy of our own effort, the significance of yielding can be lost upon us. It is not our task to fight Satan. Christ has already done that, and he won. What we must do, if we would realize our “power to be,” is yield to Christ as he communicates with us through the Holy Spirit. Obviously, this will require effort, but it is not the competitive effort identified with running the good race and fighting the good fight or even managing the corporation. It is the effort of conforming our will to the righteous will of another. It is the work of every good relationship we have ever known.

No, we are not Christian soldiers. Warfare is not the work of the spiritual life. We are in a relationship, sometimes described as a covenant or marriage, which is designed to change us by revealing to us ourselves and the other in a manner which empowers us to change until we not only do good but are good, not only do what God would have us do but be what God would have us be. Otherwise, what we do is so much discipline and optimism but does not engender spiritual life in us or others. And, this is what we are here to learn to become: as God is, even capable of engendering spiritual life or, as it is sometimes phrased, worthy of being called saviors on Mt. Zion—not merely acting the part for the dead but also being the thing itself for the living.

TODAY, I have tried to articulate the process by which all persons—Jew and Gentile, bond and free, male and female—may become “heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28-29). What is the promise? That we may know God and, thus, have Eternal Life. Admittedly, in describing this process, I have used those scriptural metaphors which are most understandable to me, to my experience and values as a woman. I have also tried to act my conviction that we, as women, must begin to learn and live the truths of the Gospel as it has been restored, not simply as ethical guidance which governs our earthly relationships. Then, when we see who we are after living these principles and ordinances of the Gospel, we will know what women have “the power to be” and will, at the very least, know our ecclesiastical roles. On the other hand, if we continue to live spiritually imitative and derivative lives, we shall never know who we are, for no man can tell us what we will see when “we all, with open [or, in other words, uncovered] face, beholding as in a glass [or, mirror] the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

NOTES


CALL FOR MISSIONARY POETRY

When you were on your mission, did you write any poetry? Expressing thoughts in verse is fairly common among missionaries. Some have written poetry before and continue it after their missions; others write only while they are serving missions, and they never do it again. The poetry may be devotional, humorous, or personal. It may be for public exposure or left in the pages of a missionary journal. It may be rhymed and metered, or written in blank or free verse. It may be totally original, or perhaps it is a parody (whether serious or humorous) of a hymn, song, or existing poem. Poems may serve an “official” purpose such as performance at a mission conference, or they may be highly unofficial satires of mission life.

We want to look at the poetry that missionaries write, why they write it, and what it means to them and those around them. (I’ll host a session on missionary poetry at the Sunstone Symposium in August). We don’t expect all of it to be “good” poetry in the academic sense, but we expect that it will be valid—that is, it will be an expression of some of the deepest, most honest thoughts that missionaries have.

Please send us samples of your missionary poetry. With each example, please include some background on when, where, and how it came to be written. Also, please give us a brief biography of yourself (or the writer, if the poetry you send is not your own), and give us permission to reproduce the poems for the purposes of this study. Authors’ copyrights, registered or not, will be respected. Please include your name, address, and phone number with all submissions. If you wish your name withheld from public knowledge, please indicate this desire, but do not leave your name off the submission.

Send your poetry to:

Elaine Thatcher
Sunstone Foundation
331 South Rio Grande Street
Suite 30
Salt Lake City, UT 84101-1136
801/355-5926