

TURNING THE TIME OVER TO. . .

Lorie Winder Stromberg

POWER HUNGRY



IN “WHY DON’T Women Hold the Priesthood? A Brief but Insightful Interview,” Betina Lindsey wrote:

On a June morning in 1988, I was cooking pancakes for my eleven-year-old son and his friends after a sleepover. Twelve-year-old David had recently been ordained to the priesthood, and the other boys were asking how many times he’d passed the sacrament. While slapping a few more pancakes on their plates, I asked, “Why don’t women hold the priesthood?” Their answers were as follows:

DAVID: (age 12) “Men have better looks.”

ROBERT (age 13) “Some women have their priorities wrong, and men are more distinguished.”

STRYDER: (age 11) “My sister’s Sunday School teacher said giving women the priesthood would be like giving them an open-ended credit card.”

RICKY: (age 11) “My grandpa says maybe they’ll get it in heaven.”

ROBERT: “Women aren’t strong enough because it would fatigue them like when Jesus blessed people, he would get weak.”

DAVID: “Yeah, if women had the priesthood, they might beat the men up.”

ROBERT: “And women have

their times when they aren’t cooperative, and I give you my permission to quote me.” (He’s a lawyer’s son.)

ERIC: (age 8—interrupting impatiently) “Hey, you guys, let’s go play Power Lords.”

RICKY: (Hurriedly stuffing the last bit of pancake into his mouth) “Well, I think (long pause with a shake of his head) I don’t know why.”

End of pancakes. End of interview. Exit Power Lords.¹

David’s comment, “If women had the priesthood, they might beat up the men,” is revealing. In David’s mind, and the minds of countless others, power is perceived as devouring and dominating. This is why feminists are derisively accused of being power hungry, as if wanting power were necessarily a bad thing. And it is, if power is seen only as coercive and controlling. But I’ve spent too many years on the defensive. It’s time I owned the term. Perhaps I am power hungry. And my question is: Why aren’t we all?

If by power hungry you mean I desire the ability not only to accept responsibilities in the institutional Church but also to be part of defining those responsibilities, then, yes, I’m power hungry. Over the years, many Church leaders have asserted that we should be talking more about taking responsibility than exercising or demanding rights.² But for women, this priv-

ileging of responsibility over rights is problematic. In a discussion I had with Margaret Toscano, she suggested that Mormon women seem to have plenty of delegated responsibilities. What is lacking is their right within the organization to oversee and establish their responsibilities. Responsibility devoid of rights is servitude.

I’m weary of the false dichotomies set up for women in the Church. Former Relief Society General President Barbara B. Smith and Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve have both suggested that Mormon women ought to choose integrity over visibility, charity over charisma.³ What is wrong with having both integrity *and* visibility, both charity *and* charisma? Members of the Church’s male hierarchy don’t have to make such choices, so why should women?

If by power hungry you mean I believe women must have a voice in the Church, then, yes, I’m power hungry. In a 1993 BYU Women’s Conference panel discussion on working with women, several male panelists admitted that they had never been forced to take women seriously until they became colleagues.⁴ While the panelists’ experiences were from secular settings, the question and answer period exploded with faithful, mainstream Mormon women wondering how they could get their Church leaders to listen to them. It was obvious to me, and I said so during this session, that women in the Church will never have a voice until, as in the secular arena, they are seen as colleagues—in this case, spiritual colleagues—within the power structure of the Church. How else will women truly be heard?

If by power hungry you mean I believe that women should not only be represented but should also be an integral part of every major decision-making body of the Church, then, yes, I’m power hungry. I’ve often said that I’m passionately ambivalent about priesthood. I’m not fond of hierarchies and am leery of structures that promote them because they are almost always abusive. However, having power within an institution is preferable to institutional powerlessness, particularly if we are able as women to bring to the center of our religious community the consciousness of what it is like on the margins.

Positional power in the Church is granted primarily to those who hold the priesthood. This is particularly true above the local level. While a charismatic woman might have significant influence on a ward or perhaps even a stake level, beyond that point, positional power for women evaporates. Since, for the



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most part, we as a Church no longer recognize charismatic power—only positional power—is it possible for women to have equal status to men in the Church without being ordained to the priesthood?

Perhaps recognizing the inequity inherent in an all-male priesthood, Bruce Hafen tried to minimize its importance. In his keynote address, “Women, Feminism, and the Blessings of the Priesthood,” given at the 1985 BYU Women’s Conference, Hafen listed several of the blessings that were available to both men and women in the Church. As if it were a mere trifle, he added, “The one category of blessing in which the role of women is not the same as that of men holding the priesthood is that of administering the gospel and governing all things” (my emphasis). As I read this, I wondered, how could Hafen deliver this line with a straight face, and perhaps more disturbing, how could an audience of women listen to it in silence?

If by power hungry you mean I would welcome a heightened ability to bless the lives of others, then, yes, I’m power hungry. Aside from its administrative function, if priesthood is merely a sort of temporal permission to tap spiritual resources already available to the faithful, then it is superfluous. If, however, priesthood truly is a real, bestowed power that can enhance our ability to bring comfort and peace and joy into the world, then, yes, I’m power hungry and unambivalently so. Who would not righteously want such a power?

Finally, if by power hungry you mean I want the ability to participate in a model of power based on partnership rather than patriarchy, based on empowerment rather than domination, then, yes, I’m power hungry. Scott Bartchy, UCLA professor of Christian origins and early church history gave a Sunstone symposium presentation in which he asserted that Christ came to overthrow traditional models of power, which were based on dominance, coercion, and control.⁵ In their place, Jesus offered a model in which power is used to empower. Power used to dominate, coerce, or control will always burn itself out, Bartchy suggests. Only power used to empower is everlasting.

BY now I’ve given sufficient weight to the word *power* in the term “power hungry.” Alas, I’ve neglected the word *hungry*. Just as by *power*, I do not mean domination or coercion, but rather voice and influence and empowerment, so by *hungry* I do not mean gluttony.⁶ Rather, I’m talking about sustenance. I’m talking about a soul-

deep yearning for a life-sustaining, sacramental meal to which all are invited. ☪

NOTES

1. Betina Lindsey, “Why Don’t Women Hold the Priesthood: A Brief but Insightful Interview,” *Mormon Women’s Forum*, 1, no. 1 (October 1989): 5.
2. See Gordon B. Hinckley, “Ten Gifts from the Lord,” Relief Society General Women’s Meeting, 28 September 1985, published in *Ensign*, November 1985, 86; Patricia T. Holland, “A Woman’s Perspective on the Priesthood,” *Tambuli*, 6, no. 5 (June 1982): 21; Russell M. Nelson, “Woman—of

- Infinite Worth,” *Ensign*, November 1989, 20.
3. Nelson, “Woman,” 20; Barbara B. Smith, “The Legacy Remembered and Renewed,” Relief Society General Women’s Meeting, 27 March 1982.
4. “Relating to the Other: Building Bridges, Working Together,” panel discussion with Kate Kirkham, Todd Britsch, Olani Durrant, Mack Lawrence, and Steven C. Walker, BYU Women’s Conference, 29 April 1993.
5. Scott Bartchy, “Jesus, Power, and Gender Roles,” Sunstone Symposium, 18 August 1994 (tape SL94–190).
6. The material in this paragraph was developed during a discussion with Stacy Burton.



RECITATIVE OF A MOMENT’S FUGUE
after Hart Crane

In Havana the old street vendors
sell their coconut death masks,
fiber-wigged, a kiss of crimson lips
by the barbershops and news-stands,
cluttered street corner trash,
a boy holds a cage of *azulejos*,
blue buntings captured in the distant
mountains where the royal palms sway,
another sells orchids
The color of love’s breath (heaven’s perhaps)
his eyes milked to so much regret,
of having cut the stem
from the flower, desire flung from the cathedral’s
bell tower, shattered on the cobble stones,
this daily exchange of mortals
what is ravaged from this land, beyond the vendors,
birds, flowers, beyond anguish,
el desespero de cada día,
each day’s despair, broken, swollen, a rock
thrown at memory’s crystal veneer,
fractured light everywhere.

—VIRGIL SUAREZ