

The Soul's Center

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Feeding the Inner Self

I wish to assume a special prerogative this morning and speak to the *women* in the audience, my “sisters” if you will. Not only are the women on this campus of very special interest to me, but if I know men—and I think I do—they will now be listening with even more than normal interest. So let me greet you at the start of this new year and new semester with a bit of straight “girl talk.”

For several years now I have had what has been both an exhilarating and sobering opportunity to observe rather closely the sisters of my own sex. That has included seven wonderful and event-filled years on this campus with you—including two of those years when I also served in the General Young Women Presidency of the Church. During this time I have, like other Church leaders and mothers and sisters, worried over the statistics on teenage pregnancies, drug abuse, and the spread of disorders like anorexia and bulimia. At the same time I have been reading those statistics, I have also seen data showing that six million women in this country, with children under six years of age, have hung up their aprons, picked up their briefcases, and marched into the career world.

I also read of a new and very real illness called the Epstein-Barr syndrome, which has come into our popular medical jargon as the malady of the eighties. Its symptoms are low-grade fevers, aching joints, and other flulike symptoms—but it isn't the flu. It carries with it overwhelming exhaustion, muscular weakness, and physical debilitation—but it isn't the dreaded AIDS. Its victims are often confused and forgetful but, no, it isn't Alzheimer's. Many feel suicidal, but this disease lacks the traditional characteristics of clinical depression. And yes, it can strike men, but three times out of four it doesn't. This illness is primarily a *women's* disease, and those most vulnerable are the so-called “fast-track” women in high-stress, conflicting roles.

Is it appropriate to pause now, right here in safe and sane Happy Valley, USA, and ask woman-to-woman, “What are we doing to ourselves?” Is this that female curse Isaiah spoke of in his prophecies? Is this some special last days' dilemma into which we are entering and

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from which we may find it near-fatally difficult to withdraw?

I believe that as women we are becoming so concerned about having perfect figures, or straight A's, or professional status, or even absolute motherly success, that we are being torn from our true selves. We often worry so much about pleasing and performing for others that we lose our own uniqueness, that full and relaxed acceptance of ourselves as a person of worth and individuality. Too many women watch helplessly as their lives unravel from the core that centers and sustains them. Too many are like a ship at sea without sail or rudder, tossed to and fro (as the Apostle Paul said) until more and more of us are genuinely, rail-grabbingly seasick.

Where is the sureness that allows us to sail our ship—whatever winds may blow—with the master seaman's triumphant cry, "Steady as she goes"? Where is the inner stillness we so cherish and for which our sex traditionally has been known? In the shadow of the twenty-first century can we find what Charles Morgan once described as "the stilling of the soul within the activities of the mind and body [as] still as [the center] of a revolving wheel is still"? (cited by Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *Gift from the Sea* [New York: Pantheon, 1955], pp. 50–51).

I believe we *can* find it—the steady footing and the stilling of the soul—by turning away from the *fragmentation* of physical preoccupations (whether it be thin or fat) of superwoman careers or endless popularity contests and returning instead to the *wholeness* of our soul.

One woman not of our faith but whose writings I love is Anne Morrow Lindbergh. In commenting on the female despair and general torment of our times she writes:

The Feminists did not look. . . far [enough] ahead; they laid down no rules of conduct. For them it was enough to demand the privileges. . . . And [so] woman today is still searching. We are aware of our hunger and needs, but still ignorant of what will

satisfy them. With our garnered free time, we are more apt to drain our creative springs than to refill them. With our pitchers [in hand], we attempt. . . to water a field, [instead of] a garden. We throw ourselves indiscriminately into committees and causes. Not knowing how to feed the spirit, we try to muffle its demands in distractions. Instead of stilling the center, the axis of the wheel, we add more centrifugal activities to our lives—which tend to throw us [yet more] off balance.

Mechanically we have gained, in the last generation, but spiritually we have. . . lost. [Gift from the Sea, p. 52]

[For women] *the problem is [still] how to feed the soul. [p. 51]*

I have pondered long and hard about the feeding of our inner self. It is no coincidence that we speak of "feeding the spirit" just as we would speak of feeding the body. We need constant nourishment for both. The root word *hale* (as in hale and hearty) is the common root to words like *whole, health, heal, and holy*. Our health and our wholeness are unquestionably linked with our holiness. We need very much for body, mind, and spirit to come together, to unite in one healthy, stable soul.

Finding the Inner Stillness

May I give you my own analogy of something I read years ago, a process that helped me then, and helps me still, in my examination of inner strength and spiritual growth. The analogy is of a soul—a human soul, with all of its splendor—being placed in a beautifully carved but very tightly locked box. This box is then placed and locked inside another, larger one, and so on until five beautifully carved but very securely locked boxes await the woman who is skillful and wise enough to open them. Success will reveal to her the beauty and divinity of her own soul, her gifts and her grace as a daughter of God.

Prayer is the key to the first box. We kneel to ask help for the tasks and then arise to find that quite miraculously the first lock is now already open. Our excitement upon gaining entrance to a new dimension of our divinity leads us readily to the next box. But here our prayers alone do not seem to be sufficient. We turn to the scriptures for God's teachings about our soul. And we find that the second box now yields its own mysteries and rewards to the probing key of revelation.

But with the beginning of such success in emancipating the soul, Lucifer becomes more anxious, especially as we approach box number three. He knows that to truly find ourselves we must lose ourselves, so he begins to block our increased efforts to love—to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves. True charity takes us into the beauty of box number three.

Real growth and genuine insight are coming now, but the lid to box number four seems nearly impossible to penetrate, for we are climbing, too, in this story, and the way inward is also the way upward. Unfortunately, the faint-hearted and fearful often turn back here—the going seems too difficult, the lock too secure. This is a time for self-evaluation. To see ourselves as we really are often brings pain; but true humility, which comes from that process, *is* a godly virtue. We must be patient with ourselves as we overcome weaknesses and remember to rejoice over all that is good

in us. This will strengthen the *inner* woman and leave her less dependent on outward acclaim. When the soul reaches the stage that it pays less attention to praise, it then cares very little when the public disapproves. These feelings of strength and the quiet triumph of faith carry us into an even brighter sphere. This fourth box, unlike the others, bursts open like a flower blooms, and the earth is reborn.

The opening of the fifth and final box can only be portrayed symbolically, and perhaps the temple is the best symbol of all. There, in a setting not of this world, where fashions and position and professions go unrecognized, we have our chance to meet God face-to-face. For those who, like the brother of Jared, have the courage and faith to break through the veil into that sacred center of existence, we will find the brightness of the final box brighter than the noonday sun. There we will find peace and serenity and a stillness that will anchor our soul forever, for there we will find God.

Wholeness. Holiness. That is what it says over the entrance to the fifth box. Holiness to the Lord. "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). I testify that you are holy, that just by being born, divinity is abiding within you, waiting to be uncovered—to be *reborn*. God bless you in your search for the sacred center of your soul, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.