

Women and Education: “A Future Only God Could See for You”

EVA M. WITESMAN

It is wonderful to be here. This is not an opportunity I would have imagined for myself. It is truly a future only God could see for me. I am grateful for a Father in Heaven who knows me—who knows my potential and who wants me to become like Him. I can’t wait to someday see like He does—to know everything and to see the future and not just the past. But for now I will stand like a little girl on my Father’s feet, holding His hands and trusting Him as He guides me through the dance of this life. As His daughter, I hope someday to grow up to be just like Him. I am trying to become more like Him now by learning as much as I can and by working to refine the spiritual gifts He has given me.

Daughters of God

Revelation given in the book of Joel speaks of the role of women in the latter days when it says that, in preparation for the Second Coming of Christ,

I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, . . .

. . . and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit. [Joel 2:28–29]

Your *daughters shall prophesy!* In these last days we are meant to seek and receive spiritual revelation by the power of the Holy Ghost. Like

Rebekah, Hannah, Elisabeth, and Mary, women are meant to receive direct spiritual revelation through the gifts of the Spirit. Like Miriam (see Exodus 15:20), Deborah (see Judges 4:4), Huldah (see 2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22), and Anna (see Luke 2:36), we can develop the spiritual gift of prophecy and refine our ability to communicate with our Father in Heaven in ways that affect our own spiritual development and have a positive impact on the world around us.¹

These spiritual gifts bring us closer to the image of God, in which we were created. Through her choice to partake of the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, Mother Eve made it possible for each of us to exercise our agency in a world filled with choices, thereby providing a way for us to spiritually develop. I do not think it was an accident that by knowledge she opened a pathway that would allow us to become more like God. I believe this sets an eternal pattern. “The glory of God is intelligence” (D&C 93:36), and we must likewise enhance our own inherent intelligence in order to become like Him and receive His spiritual gifts.

Eva M. Witesman, associate professor in the BYU Marriot School of Business, delivered this devotional address on June 27, 2017.

How do we reach this divine potential? How do we strengthen these spiritual gifts that have been foretold? Eliza R. Snow wrote, “Let them seek for wisdom instead of power and they will have all the power they have wisdom to exercise.”²

An Expansive View

When God prepares a leader for the gift of prophecy, He expands their view; He does not narrow it. He provides context for the leader’s personal prophetic development through lessons on the vast science and history of the earth and of the people on it.

To Moses He gave a vision of

the earth, yea, even all of it; and there was not a particle of it which he did not behold. . . .

And he beheld also the inhabitants thereof, and there was not a soul which he beheld not; . . .

And he beheld many lands; and each land was called earth, and there were inhabitants on the face thereof.
[Moses 1:27–29]

To the brother of Jared He gave a vision of “all the inhabitants of the earth which had been, and also all that would be . . . , even unto the ends of the earth” (Ether 3:25).

And to all the Nephite women, men, and children visited by Christ,

he did expound all things, even from the beginning until the time that he should come in his glory. . . .

And many of them saw and heard unspeakable things, which are not lawful to be written. [3 Nephi 26:3, 18]

Formal higher education provides an opportunity to see more as God sees—not through a narrow and shrinking echo chamber but with “the depth of the riches both of . . . wisdom and knowledge” (Romans 11:33), with all things continually before Him (see D&C 130:7), “for he has all power, all wisdom, and all understanding; he comprehendeth all things” (Alma 26:35).

This vastness of knowledge must be earned through hard work and by leveraging a greater

perspective than our own. Like Eve, we must have our eyes opened not only to new information but to new ways of thinking about that information. If we seek discernment through the Holy Ghost as we engage in this process, we will be brought to new ways of valuing, understanding, and perceiving truth.

Education Is a Commandment

Multiple prophets and apostles have made it explicitly clear that “for members of the Church, education is not merely a good idea—it’s a commandment.”³ Speaking specifically to women, President Gordon B. Hinckley said, “You must get all of the education that you possibly can.”⁴ And Elder Dallin H. Oaks said, “We make no distinction between young men and young women in our conviction about the importance of an education and in our commitment to providing that education.”⁵

The Lord made clear that “all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal” (D&C 29:34). This means that the commandment to pursue education—no matter how temporally useful—is really about the development of our spirits and our spiritual gifts. We are commanded to receive education, and this is a spiritual—not merely a temporal—commandment.

Prophetic counsel to women has repeated the benefits of education in case we are called upon to become so-called breadwinners in our households. This is wise counsel, and I have seen its place in the lives of close friends and family members time and time again. But this counsel adds, “precept upon precept” (2 Nephi 28:30), to a deeper truth about the education of women: our pursuit of knowledge has its own spiritual value regardless of whether we ever enter the paid labor force.

President Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said:

Your mind is precious! It is sacred. Therefore, the education of one’s mind is also sacred. Indeed, education is a religious responsibility. . . .

. . . *In light of this celestial perspective, if you . . . cut short your education, you would not only disregard a divine decree but also abbreviate your own eternal potential.*⁶

Our learning is of value not only if we become mothers or workers, church leaders or community activists. We are of value because of our divine heritage and because of what will one day be our divine inheritance. Our value is not merely instrumental. It is intrinsic. And our learning is not merely instrumental. It is essential.

Education: “On Holy Ground”

I love this powerful quote from President J. Reuben Clark Jr.:

[We] who [invade] the domain of knowledge must approach it as Moses came to the burning bush; [we stand] on holy ground; [we] would acquire things sacred; [we seek] to make [our] own the attributes of deity. . . . We must come to this quest of truth—in all regions of human knowledge whatsoever, not only in reverence, but with a spirit of worship.

*. . . Our knowledge is to be coterminous with the universe and is to reach out and to comprehend the laws and the workings of the vast deeps of the eternities. All domains of all knowledge belong to us. In no other way could the great law of eternal progression be satisfied.*⁷

“A Future Only God Could See for You”

President Henry B. Eyring said, “Part of the tragedy you must avoid is to discover too late that you missed an opportunity to prepare for a future only God could see for you.”⁸

That sentiment is so important that I would like to repeat it: “Part of the tragedy you must avoid is to discover too late that you missed an opportunity to prepare for a future only God could see for you.”

That could have happened to me. Women’s stories are powerful, and they haven’t always been told. So I am going to tell you a little bit of mine.

After graduating from college, I worked for a couple of years at a local nonprofit organization, where I was inspired by the skills of a new

manager. I decided to pursue a master’s degree so that I could gain the kinds of skills he had used to improve our organization.

Between the time I was accepted to the program and the time I was to attend, we learned that I was pregnant with our first child. Pregnancy is always a challenge, but due to some medical complications, pregnancies are particularly difficult for me. I was sicker than I had ever been in my life. I could only stand up for a few minutes at a time, and I was virtually no help as my husband, family, and friends packed up our little apartment and sent my husband to Indiana, where I was to attend graduate school.

By this time I had been prescribed temporary bedrest and was unable to travel. I called my program in tears and asked if they would be willing to hold my spot, even though I would miss the first weeks of school.

When I finally arrived to begin my master’s program, the heaviest question in my heart was whether I should be pursuing the degree at all. After all, I was now anticipating motherhood. And though I did not yet understand the gravity of what that meant, caring for our unborn daughter was already the most physically, mentally, and emotionally challenging experience of my life.

In my new ward I was promptly called to be an assistant nursery leader. I was new to the ward and new to the state, and nobody there knew me, including the counselor in the bishopric who set me apart for my new calling. We had never had a conversation.

He laid his hands upon my head and bestowed upon me all the usual authority, gifts, and admonitions attendant on a calling in nursery—that I would have the strength to carry out my calling and that I would love the little children. And then, speaking to my most hidden fears and my deepest questions, he told me, in the name of Christ, to pursue and complete my master’s degree, that this was the will of God.

So I did.

Near the conclusion of my time working on my master’s degree, my husband received a good job offer in Washington, DC. I was preparing to

be a stay-at-home mom to our then one-year-old daughter. We were making plans, scoping out neighborhoods, and undergoing background checks. I felt unsettled by the move, like something wasn't quite right, and I wanted the confirmation of the Spirit to help soothe me. But the more I prayed, the more agitated I became. This was not a mere lack of an answer, which sometimes suggests that the Lord wants us to move forward and use our own agency. This was an active sense of dread.

So my husband and I prayed, fasted, and attended the temple to seek guidance about whether or not to take the job. As we were leaving the temple, we shared our independent messages from the Spirit and discovered that we had both received the same guidance: we needed to adopt a child. This was unexpected but exciting, and we began the long process that ultimately led us to welcome our second daughter.

The matter of our imminent move remained unresolved until the very last day of class in my master's program. I was sitting in a darkened room as the professor projected slides about collaboration in the nonprofit sector. During that lecture I felt a tremendous and unmistakable outpouring of the Spirit, and a clear, quiet, and calm voice spoke to my mind, telling me I would return for a PhD. I was at peace. I knew what the Lord wanted and why I had been so uneasy about the move to Washington.

I didn't tell my husband right away what my prompting had been—only that I'd had one and that I was at peace. We decided that when he had the same sense of peace, we could make a plan together based on our individual promptings.

Soon thereafter, he felt strongly that we should make a short-term move to Finland for an internship he had been offered. I had received the prompting about my education in May, and applications to the doctoral program weren't due until January, so we took the internship.

From Finland I applied for the doctoral program. In Finland my husband started his business—the business that has made it possible for us to raise our children with at least one parent always in our home.

I finished the doctoral program in about three years and soon found myself—most unexpectedly—on the full-time faculty at BYU. In addition to food, clothing, and shelter, our work has afforded us freedom, family time, fulfillment, challenges, and a great deal of happiness. We now have four children, and they are—individually and collectively—the central joy of my life. This was a future only God could see for me.

I remember telling this story to my friend Kris, who shared that her own story was very similar to mine but had resulted in almost the exact opposite educational path. Kris had always hoped to pursue a PhD fairly directly after her undergraduate studies and had planned to do so. But when she inquired of the Lord, He led her in a different direction. The experience was powerful and clear, so Kris focused on raising her young children at home, trusting the Lord and His guidance. Together, Kris and I marveled that God's voice could be so clear in each of our circumstances, and, trusting in His goodness, we wondered how His plans for her would continue to unfold.

Similarly, when I told my story to another friend, Debbie, she laughed, because for her God had made it clear that in her home it was to be—as she put it—all hands on deck at home, all the time, by her. Debbie deferred completion of her undergraduate degree and taught and nurtured her four children—sometimes homeschooling them to best address their unique individual needs—until her youngest child was five, when she was prompted to return to BYU to finish her bachelor's degree in linguistics, with minors in Chinese and Japanese.

In a world that values education primarily as a means to increase our value in the workplace, nonlinear educational paths may sometimes be considered nontraditional, but they are *not* non-essential. As Kristen Oaks observed, “Women's educational paths and experiences are often very different from men's.”⁹ As Latter-day Saints, we know that the pursuit of education is not merely about gaining marketable skills in an efficient and linear fashion but that education is a tool for gaining important spiritual growth and spiritual gifts that can be used in all facets of our lives.

When I reached out to Kris to ask if I could share her story, I learned that the Spirit has begun to open new vistas for her future. She shared that it can be difficult and overwhelming to try to see what the Lord has planned—especially when such revelation doesn't come all at once. I don't know what the Lord has in store for Kris, but I do know that it will be both challenging and beautiful.

When I contacted Debbie, she said that for her the Spirit seems to work by reawakening her own long-dormant dreams and goals when the time is right. She is now preparing to take the LSAT and hopes to become an attorney. "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

"Potentials for Her Future Life"

Pakistani education advocate Ziauddin Yousafzai—whose daughter, Malala, joined his fight for the education of women in the face of Taliban rule—says that, for a woman,

*enrollment in a school means recognition of her identity and her name. Admission in a school means that she has entered the world of dreams and aspirations where she can explore her potentials for her future life.*¹⁰

Our intellectual and spiritual growth through education is a righteous pursuit and represents our willingness to fulfill a commandment of God. Investments in our own development are worthwhile because we are daughters of God, and He wants us to reach our divine potential in every possible way. But it should also be acknowledged that it is virtually impossible for the influence of a Spirit-led education to end with only our own benefit.

In 1 Corinthians 13 we read:

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. . . .

Charity never faileth. [1 Corinthians 13:2, 8]

Elder and Sister Oaks wrote, "Our religious faith teaches us that we should seek learning by the Spirit and that we have a stewardship to use our knowledge for the benefit of mankind."¹¹

We seek knowledge because it makes us more like God and brings us closer to Him, and His central trait is pure and benevolent love for all of humanity. The more we become like Him through knowledge and the more we hone our ability to hear Him testify of truth through the Spirit, the more these things will lead us to service in every aspect of our lives.

Women's voices are needed in all echelons of human activity. President Spencer W. Kimball said:

We wish you to pursue and to achieve that education . . . which will fit you for eternity as well as for full service in mortality. . . .

*. . . We do not desire the women of the Church to be uninformed or ineffective.*¹²

Elder Oaks said:

*Our young women's primary orientation toward motherhood is not inconsistent with their diligent pursuit of an education, even their efforts in courses of study that are vocationally related. . . . A young woman's education should prepare her for more than the responsibilities of motherhood. It should prepare her for the entire period of her life.*¹³

President Hinckley said:

*You can include in the dream of the woman you would like to be a picture of one qualified to serve society and make a significant contribution to the world of which she will be a part.*¹⁴

President Hinckley also said:

Pursue educational programs which will lead to satisfying work and productive employment. . . .

*. . . Education will increase your appreciation and refine your talent.*¹⁵

And President Boyd K. Packer has taught:

We need women who are organized and women who can organize. We need women with executive ability who can plan and direct and administer; women who can teach, women who can speak out.

There is a great need for women who can receive inspiration to guide them personally in their teaching and in their leadership responsibilities.¹⁶

To this, President Nelson added:

We . . . need your strength, your conversion, your conviction, your ability to lead, your wisdom, and your voices. The kingdom of God is not and cannot be complete without . . . women who can speak with the power and authority of God! . . .

. . . I plead with my sisters of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to step forward! Take your rightful and needful place in your home, in your community, and in the kingdom of God—more than you ever have before. . . . As you do so, the Holy Ghost will magnify your influence in an unprecedented way!¹⁷

Sister Bonnie L. Oscarson said:

All women need to see themselves as essential participants in the work of the priesthood. . . . The kingdom of God cannot function unless we rise up and fulfill our duties with faith. Sometimes we just need to have a greater vision of what is possible.¹⁸

Sisters, never question the value of your education or wonder whether you will have an opportunity to learn and use the knowledge you have gained. God knows you, and even though you may not yet know His plans, He knows the end from the beginning. He is preparing and qualifying you for the work He wants you to do. He will continually guide you to ways in which your knowledge and skills can be of benefit to yourself, your family, your community, and His kingdom.

Preventing Friendly Fire

For the battles we face in this life, we need to allow God to arm us in His way, in His time, and with His spiritual gifts. But in preparation for

these battles, our women are frequently wounded from friendly fire, even as we stand at the armory. President Kimball acknowledged this when he taught the brethren:

Sometimes we hear disturbing reports about how sisters are treated. . . . It should not be, brethren. The women of this Church have work to do. . . .

Our sisters do not wish to be indulged or to be treated condescendingly; they desire to be respected and revered as our sisters and our equals. I mention all these things, my brethren, not because the doctrines or the teachings of the Church regarding women are in any doubt, but because in some situations our behavior is of doubtful quality.¹⁹

Virginia H. Pearce suggested that “when we feel that we must protect and defend ourselves . . . , our energy is used counterproductively and our learning and the learning of others is severely limited.”²⁰

Consider this experience: Once, in an elevator, I encountered a young woman who was pursuing a master’s degree. She hadn’t taken any of my classes, but I had seen her in the building and knew her to be a promising mentee of one of my colleagues. I asked her how she was doing.

Her response to me, a virtual stranger, was this: “I’m struggling today because my family thinks I have been led astray by the devil to pursue my education.”

I asked her if she herself was concerned that she was on the wrong path, as her family had suggested.

Between the first floor of my building and the seventh, this young woman bore testimony—and the Holy Ghost confirmed it to me—that the Spirit had guided her to pursue her studies and that she would continue to do what God asked of her.

Women frequently persevere in the face of insensitive comments on the part of those around them. We are prepared to soldier on through the attacks of the adversary, who seeks to deter the pursuit of our divine potential at every turn. We are often less prepared for the stinging and inappropriate attacks and judgments of our brothers in the gospel, fellow sisters, friends, spouses, and

sometimes—as in the case of the woman in the elevator—even parents. I would be ungrateful if I stood here today and didn't acknowledge the unyielding support of my parents, siblings, and mentors as I have walked my own path, as well as the love and companionship of my husband, who has walked his path beside mine. We are able to accomplish more good together than we ever could apart.

If God has directed—even commanded—a woman to pursue her education, who are any of us to turn her away or to add to her burden as she makes her way to the summit God has bid her to climb? If God is preparing the women of His Church to fulfill prophecy—both ancient and modern—about the role of women of the Church in these latter days, we should be celebrating and supporting the women in our lives as they prayerfully seek inspiration and use their agency and intelligence to grow spiritually and serve mightily.

Latter-day Saint women are courageous, particularly when they have been emboldened by the knowledge that Heavenly Father has a plan for each of us and that He will qualify us to do the work that lies before us. Once we know what God wants us to do, we are fully capable of following the counsel of President Hinckley to “sacrifice anything that is needed to be sacrificed to . . . train [our] minds and hands to become an influence for good as [we] go forward with [our] lives.”²¹ We will seek every good gift in the service of our God. All we ask is that others not stand in our way as we pursue the Lord's errand.

We hope instead that others will follow the example of Malala's father, who said:

*People ask me, what [is] special [about] my mentorship which has made Malala so bold and so courageous and so vocal and poised? I tell them, don't ask me what I did. Ask me what I did not do. I did not clip her wings, and that's all.*²²

Brothers and sisters, I have a testimony of this gospel. God is real. He loves us, He knows us, and we have the potential to become like Him. I am grateful to be here in a place where I can pursue that goal, and I am thankful to be here with you

today. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Guide to the Scriptures, s.v. “prophetess,” scriptures.lds.org.

2. Eliza R. Snow, letter to Mary Elizabeth Lightner, 27 May 1869, Church History Library; quoted in *Daughters in My Kingdom: The History and Work of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 45.

3. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Two Principles for Any Economy,” *Ensign*, November 2009; see also “Education Is a Commandment,” Prophets and Apostles, 27 July 2012, lds.org/prophets-and-apostles/unto-all-the-world/education-is-a-commandment.

4. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Stay on the High Road,” *Ensign*, May 2004.

5. Dallin H. Oaks, “Women and Education,” *Ensign*, March 1975.

6. Russell M. Nelson, “Education: A Religious Responsibility,” BYU–Idaho devotional address, 26 January 2010.

7. J. Reuben Clark Jr., “Charge to President Howard S. McDonald at His Inauguration as President of the Brigham Young University,” *Improvement Era* 49, no. 1 (January 1946): 15.

8. Henry B. Eyring, “Education for Real Life,” *Ensign*, October 2002.

9. Dallin H. Oaks and Kristen M. Oaks, “Learning and Latter-day Saints,” *Ensign*, April 2009.

10. Ziauddin Yousafzai, “My Daughter, Malala,” TED talk, March 2014, ted.com/talks/ziauddin_yousafzai_my_daughter_malala/transcript?language=en.

11. Dallin and Kristen Oaks, “Learning and Latter-day Saints.”

12. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Role of Righteous Women,” *Ensign*, November 1979; emphasis in original.

13. Oaks, “Women and Education.”

14. Gordon B. Hinckley, “How Can I Become the Woman of Whom I Dream?” *Ensign*, May 2001.

15. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Ten Gifts from the Lord,” *Ensign*, November 1985.

16. Boyd K. Packer, “The Relief Society,” *Ensign*, November 1978.

17. Russell M. Nelson, “A Plea to My Sisters,” *Ensign*, November 2015.

18. Bonnie L. Oscarson, “Rise Up in Strength, Sisters in Zion,” *Ensign*, November 2016.

19. Spencer W. Kimball, “Our Sisters in the Church,” *Ensign*, November 1979.

20. Virginia H. Pearce, “The Ordinary Classroom—a Powerful Place for Steady and Continued Growth,” *Ensign*, November 1996.

21. Gordon B. Hinckley, “First Presidency Message: A Prophet’s Counsel and Prayer for Youth,” *Ensign*, January 2001.

22. Yousafzai, “My daughter, Malala.”