

Roots and Wings

BARBARA B. SMITH

Thank you, Sister Hodge, for that introduction, and thank you for those beautiful musical numbers; they could not have been more fitting for what I have to say today. And, President Oaks, Sister Arnold, Sister Bybee, thank you for allowing me to address the student body of Brigham Young University this morning. I have long loved this institution for its influence in my life—and that influence goes back a very long way. My grandmother was a member of the first graduating class of the Brigham Young Academy. Her achievements as a student of Dr. Karl G. Maeser have blessed the lives of many people, including me. You heard that she was the physician and surgeon who delivered me and cared for my health needs during the first, early years of my life.

I am grateful for the influence that BYU has had on the lives of three of our daughters, who have been students here; and I see the influence of the school now, as we have the husband of our other daughter attending here. It is a privilege for me to serve as a member of the Board of Trustees. In this capacity I am made aware of the progressive plans being made for the University and I am happy to have a part in supporting the growth and the achievements of this great and unique institution.

One more thing I would like to mention. As the general president of the Relief Society I am proud of the achievements of the Relief Society organizations on this campus. They do many outstanding things with the attitude of doing more than they are commanded, and I know that from here Relief Society members “go forth to serve” and influence other units of Relief Society worldwide.

I appreciate the students, the faculty, and the friends of Brigham Young University who are here this morning to begin the 1978 Women’s Conference, and I would like to say at the outset that I feel this is the most wonderful time in the history of the world for a woman to be alive! She has more opportunities, more advantages, more options, better health possibilities, more knowledge, and more spiritual strength available than she has ever had before.

I suppose there has never been a time when there has been more discussion about women more widely heard through public media, nor has there been a time when women

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everywhere have been more actively involved in searching for direction and in seeking to change traditional attitudes and practices concerning women. With the power of the media, law, and government, major societal changes are now possible. Your generation will be more affected by these changes than mine has been. You young men and women will find it increasingly imperative to make choices and meet challenges that have never even been articulated before.

Change should not be viewed with undue anxiety; it is a necessary part of the ongoing human experience. The great challenge today is to meet the ever-changing conditions with purpose and direction born of faith in God and knowledge of his eternal principles. With this foundation, changes in our own lives and in society can be influenced to move in the direction of heaven.

In May of 1975 I attended the American Mothers Convention in New York City as the new general president of the Relief Society. You are probably aware that each year each state of the Union selects a woman who has been an outstanding mother to represent the state. (Stella Oaks, the mother of President Dallin Oaks, was once our Utah state mother.) These mothers compete and one is honored with the name "American Mother of the Year." In order to help make that selection, each mother is given three minutes to describe her achievements and her philosophy of life.

I will never forget one mother who stepped into the beautiful gold frame. She was in the late years of her life. She spoke with love as she looked at us quietly and declared, "My children are my greatest accomplishments. My success has come, I feel, because I gave them roots and wings—roots because I helped them to have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and wings because I gave them faith in themselves."

I would like to take her thoughtful summation as the theme of my remarks today; for in a world which is complicated, confusing, and

harsh at times and unacceptable at others, with the struggle for equality for women and with many problems of personal responsibility demanding our attention, I find myself thinking that one of our greatest needs is to know that the good from the past should be preserved and protected and that the good from the present should be embraced and encouraged.

The problem seems to be this: What can you and I do to bring others to a commonality of this understanding with us, that we all might gain the strength of purpose that can only come from a firm foundation of faith coupled with the endless potential inherited by the sons and daughters of God?

One way seemed to open up when we were given approval by the First Presidency to ask the women of the Church to contribute funds to build a monument in Nauvoo as a memorial to the place where Relief Society was organized under the direction and the inspiration of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Here such a statement about faith in God and faith in self could be made. We sought earnestly for an artist's conception that would convey this important message, and we accepted the plan of Dennis Smith. In his plan he suggested thirteen sensitively sculpted figures, representing the gospel concept of women and their relationship to the world, to be placed in a lovely garden setting. People could come not only to enjoy the beauty of these statues but hopefully to take a few moments to contemplate the truths being expressed in artistic form. There the centuries-old contributions which women have always made as individuals, wives, and mothers could be told. The magnitude of their responsibility throughout the years to give birth to and nurture new life could be recognized as a contribution to be honored, not to be tossed away in the name of progress when indeed no meaningful progress is possible without it.

The roots of faith we seek are necessarily those of the eternal principles of righteousness which govern both heaven and earth. The

wings will come as we master ourselves and discipline our talents and seek to become like our Father.

Consider some of the eternal truths appropriate to a discussion about a woman's destiny that we must see as we step into that garden setting in Nauvoo. Think first of the central figure in the first circle of the monument. It is an heroic-sized statue of a woman. She represents the central, fundamental teaching of the gospel concerning women. Let me illustrate.

Some years ago when one of my daughters was a small, exuberant child we were all sitting around the fireplace as families do at the happy Christmas season. It had been a good, satisfying, full holiday, and the stress of the hustle and the bustle of the day was behind us, leaving the warm after-glow of this happy day. Fathers, mothers, cousins, aunts, and uncles all chatted quietly by the fire, and into this large group of people who loved each other bounded my child with the exclamation, "Look who's here, everybody!"

Our curiosity was piqued by this enthusiastic announcement. We looked beyond her with interest and inquired, "Who is it?"

And she returned our questioning glances with sparkling eyes and a face wreathed in smiles and announced, "Me!"

It was not what we had expected, somehow, but I shall never forget that moment. This little bit of a girl taught her older kinfolk an important lesson. In a sense she was saying what the central figure represents: "There is no one more important than the individual." The individual human being is the most important entity on the face of the earth. The child of God is the one thing in mortality that was coexistent as an intelligence with God himself. As intelligences we chose mortal experience with all its hazards, and once we pass the portals of death we will have the opportunity for continuing our progress eternally.

C.S. Lewis once said that we would never meet a mere mortal, that every day we meet

gods-to-be or devils-to-be and we will not know until it is an accomplished fact which is which (see C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, pp. 14–15). That is true, but the simple and magnificent message of the restored gospel is that godhood is the birthright of every child born into this world.

The scriptures say that God made us "a little lower than the angels" (Psalm 8:5) and that he made it possible for us to become like him by doing the things we could not do for ourselves in mortality. He has, first, guaranteed us the right of agency; and, second, through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, he has provided the way to salvation and exaltation, that we may indeed be gods-to-be. To accomplish that noble goal, we must love the truth—love it enough to seek for it, love it enough to understand it, love it enough to live it. The truths of the gospel will make us free from doubt, from ignorance, from sin. They will give us hope for the future, faith in ourselves, strength to meet adversity, and a direction that will lead us to do much good.

I hope all of these points will be seen and understood in that garden in Nauvoo. I hope each woman will realize that she is a child of God sent here to act as an individual, born with all the potential of unlimited growth and achievement. I once heard a woman say that a woman is her Father's daughter about her Father's business. This implies an essential beautiful relationship between the individual woman and her Creator. God values his daughters. He places an infinite value on his children, with no arbitrary inferior or superior comparative labels. He wants us to be about his business, just as he wanted Jesus Christ to be about his business, and his business is eternal, life-giving work. God's dealings with us are not capricious. He loves us too much for that. His dealings with us are predicated upon eternal principles of righteousness.

I hope every woman that looks at that central figure sculpted in bronze will see herself

stepping forward into the future, confidently, with her head held high, knowing that there is within her the capacity for eternal progression, the strength to meet whatever situations life has to offer, and the right to choose the direction of her life. The four supporting statues in this first circle represent four great root systems upon which a woman's life should grow if it is to have a place in the plan of the Lord. One is to develop her talents; a second, to gain knowledge and with it wisdom; a third, to learn to pray; and a fourth, to give compassionate service.

Let us consider the life-giving potential of each root system. The Lord has commanded us to develop our talents. Remember the parable of the talents? The Lord was well pleased with the two who doubled their talents, but he was not pleased with the one who was afraid and hid his talent, and he took it from him.

One time I was to give a lesson on talents. I talked with one of our outstanding musicians and asked him how he felt having been given such a marvelous talent from the Lord. His reply surprised me; he said, "Most people feel a musician is automatically given that talent. I admit that a musician must have a mental capacity to comprehend and retain musical composition and that he must have hands that are whole and nimble and workable and that he must have a sensitive nature; but any musician of worth will have to work hard, day after day, year in and year out, to develop his talent."

Traditionally we have acknowledged talents in the performing arts as gifts from the Lord, and they are. Those who study and write about the whole person point out that there are many other talents to be acknowledged. Gifted people in many areas have the power to enrich lives. Perhaps your developed talents will be used in volunteer work—full-time, part-time, or occasionally. Perhaps your talents will be needed in improving the quality of Church service given in the name of the Lord. Perhaps

your talents will be most useful in enriching the lives of your family, either your brothers, sisters, mother, and father, or the husband you choose and the children who will come into the home you establish.

That is where you are now: you are learning, developing talents, and having experiences that may never come your way again; and hopefully you will understand that the more you partake of life's enrichment, the greater will be the enrichment in the home you create. I see the gospel urging us to develop every talent we have, seeking the virtuous, the lovely, and those things of good report and praiseworthy (see Article of Faith 13).

The root system based on learning is a fundamental part of our faith. When the Lord placed Adam and Eve on earth he gave them two commandments: one was to multiply and replenish the earth, and the other was to subdue it. And the subduing was the learning. We should learn all we can learn about the earth and how it functions, and learn the laws of mortality so that we might have sufficient knowledge upon which to base our life's decisions, removing ignorance from our path.

You now have access to the best learning in all the world. The men and the women who devote their lives to teaching and counseling you are constantly engaged in sifting through ideas and in giving you helpful direction in your academic pursuits. You can continue to build upon this foundation, starting where they leave off and seeking answers to the remaining unknowns in the universe.

We will never know everything; that is one of the glories of the eternities. But the pursuit of knowledge, the learning little by little—one step at a time—and the setting of the mind to the ongoing excitement of learning is a part of what we should all do with our lives. It is an exciting adventure. I have seen this love of learning in my doctor grandmother and in my teacher mother, and I hope I can pass it on to my children and they to theirs; for when true learning

takes place, we realize how much there is yet unknown and feel the thrill of accepting the challenge to pit ourselves against the unknown.

The root system concerning prayer puts us in touch with the power and the light of heaven. Prayer is the way that each human being may be in touch with heaven personally. The Lord has told us that he will send each of us knowledge to guide our lives if we will but ask. Again and again he says, “Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Matthew 7:7; see also 3 Nephi 14:7; D&C 4:7). He is the source of the knowledge we need most, and his invitation should be accepted daily. Just as we can no more afford to shut the door on the fine opportunities of education that exist in our day, neither can we afford to refuse to kneel in prayer and seek the guidance of our Heavenly Father. Both systems are essential to that quality of learning which will bring us one day to the threshold of God.

Can you see why I feel that this is such a glorious time to be born a woman? For centuries the world did not provide an opportunity for women to learn or to use their talents or to feel that they had a significant part in the great drama of life. For many centuries ignorance darkened the world and made it difficult, if not impossible, for most of the human race to grow intellectually. The wonders of the written word were scarcely available, and the truths of the scriptures were not accessible to most common people. But now they are, along with an increasing and almost overwhelming flow of knowledge. Women today are freed from many of the time-consuming household tasks of years gone by; their challenge today is to choose wisely from the multitude of offerings to discover through prayer what blessings the Lord wishes them to have.

The fourth root system that our bronze figures explain is compassionate service. Some of our greatest learning experiences will come as we give compassionately of ourselves. We may forget to be compassionate, but God never will.

It is important for us to remember that this is a significant part of our human experience. In fact, it seems to be that, of all our learning, that which we obtain by way of giving compassionately is the most significant learning we ever do.

When it was time for Jesus to leave this world, he gave his last great sermon to his disciples and said that their eternal lives would be judged upon that which they had done to alleviate suffering (see Matthew 25:31–46). Suffering is the great common denominator for all mortals. When we suffer we often feel that no one else suffers as we do—and yet I think back to a time when I took a little granddaughter to the hospital to have some foot braces checked. I was pained that she had to wear those heavy braces. As I waited for the doctor, many women with crippled children came to empathize and sympathize with me over her condition. Then my heart really ached, because while I knew that her correction would be full and complete soon, I could see that their children might never know full health or activity. Standing by and watching them suffer made me suffer and realize how helpless I was; but I know now of the great compassion of those women. They had developed this great compassion for others who have problems, and perhaps it is possible for me now to share more deeply in others’ sorrows.

The perception the Lord has given us in this gospel is that in giving compassionate service we can become more like him. It was in order to further the work of compassion among his people that the Relief Society was organized. The compassionate work given to the Relief Society over the years was not imposed upon the women. Good women in Nauvoo in 1842 looked around and saw the suffering that existed there among the poor, and they knew that they could do more and better work if they were organized and if they would help one another go about the business of finding and succoring those in need. The proposal was taken to the Prophet Joseph Smith, and he told them that it was the will of the Lord that they

be organized after a pattern of the priesthood, which would allow them to partake of the inspiration of heaven in their dealings with His children. And this they did.

The work of compassion in Relief Society has been both consistent and adaptable over the years. As new needs arise among our people, the work of the Relief Society is modified to meet those needs. So today, as a worldwide organization, our purpose exists as it always has: to encourage us as women in the compassionate work characterized by the Prophet Joseph Smith as “according to your natures” (Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* 4:605). Instead of a small group of women in Nauvoo, there are now more than 1,200,000 women around the globe teaching and fostering this idea.

Interlacing these four root systems is another essential backup system. We might call it responsibility. Responsibility is a key word as we try to understand and relate to any idea in the world today. We have many options as to how to spend our lives, but we must not forget that option and agency do not mean license. The fundamental concept of agency is that one who makes choices must also accept the responsibility for whatever comes of that choice.

If we choose not to study during a semester, then we must take the responsibility for failing those classes; we cannot blame the teacher. If we are sullen in our conversations, we must accept the responsibility for the likely result that nobody will enjoy being with us. If we waste our paycheck, the result is that we will lack the money we need for our schooling or supplies or food or clothing. If we do not read good books, we are poorer in ideas than we would have been.

If we come to school and never attend cultural events, we have denied ourselves the enrichment that can come to our souls. If we have heard the gospel from our youth and never knelt to ask if it is true, we have rejected

the opportunity for the motivating power of testimony in our lives. If we have heard about compassionate service and yet never have given any, we have lost the greatness of this opportunity.

If we marry and have children, we have a responsibility to those children. Some of society’s most difficult problems have come because of the lack of acceptance by parents of responsibility for their children and, in later years, by children for their parents.

The second circle of the monument is designed to bring to our attention relationships with others. Central to all relationships is the relationship between the man and the woman in the marriage covenant and the relationships which ensue in the family. The Lord intended man and woman to be together. He said, “Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:11), and in accord with that statement it is our understanding that exaltation and ultimately godhood is not possible unless a man and a woman be united and come together as one before the Lord. It is understandable, because the great creative work for exaltation requires both the man and the woman.

I understand that there are many in this life who may never marry. But I feel confident there are many people who may not need that particular schooling during mortality and that they will be judged, as we all will be, according to their worthiness. They will be given all that they have earned, even a celestial mate if they have not found one in mortality. One of the great single women on the Relief Society general board has said: “For all we see confirms our knowledge that to be born female and a daughter of God is a privilege, wonderful and encompassing; becoming a woman our ultimate and creative responsibility.”

Marriage, in our understanding, is not for time—it is not for convenience—it is not for expediency. Marriage is a sacrament entered

into by two people and it is designed by the Lord to be eternal in nature. It requires the best efforts of the man and the woman if it is to be a successful venture, one sufficiently sound in comradery, in mutual support and trust, and in love to last beyond mortality.

A good marriage requires mutual agreement on major decisions. A good marriage requires that each gives to the other the best of what both are and the best of what both may become. This is not the kind of a marriage that comes because of an infatuation; it is the kind of a marriage based on love—not selfish love that is immature or purely romantic, but the selfless love described in the scriptures. With that kind of a marriage foundation, the family unit is born; and into the family come the spirit children of God, clothed in mortality by earthly parents, with every right to assume that they will have a loving place in which to grow to maturity.

There is perhaps no greater laboratory in the world for the expression of Christlike love than exists in the family. In the close day-to-day contact, we come to know more about giving love than in most situations. If our family situation is incomplete in this life, we have to search for those opportunities which will school our spirits in the practice of giving love. In either case, the primary responsibility of learning how to give love in its fullest, most life-giving sense lies with the individual. We must seek after those opportunities.

In the center of the second circle is the delightful sculpture of a woman playing with children. This woman could be a mother with her children, or she could be a woman enjoying someone else's children—a teacher, an aunt, a friend, or anyone who shares some joyful moments of life with children and makes it possible for their beginning years to be filled with remembrance of love. Children need loving, caring adult companionship during those early years; they need to know that there are adults who care for them on a one-to-one basis.

Traditionally, such love and sustenance has been provided primarily by the mother and the father.

There is no question in my mind that the woman who gives birth to a child is by that very act assuming responsibility for that child. Of course, in the ideal situation, both the father and the mother share in the responsibility for that child, and each fills an important need. When we choose to have a child, we assume an awesome responsibility. We should nurture that child and give it the warmest, richest, most rewarding environment of which we are capable. Children are not an encumbrance; they are a great and noble challenge. They will teach you more about yourself than you ever thought possible.

No training you will ever receive will be as revealing to you as your parenthood. In connection with your creative experiences, it will be the most significant training you receive for the eternities. Those who pass it by or give it to someone else will never know the power of that life-giving, life-training opportunity. There cannot be a greater work, for those who have the opportunity, than to bring forth the sons and daughters of God and teach them right principles in order that they may choose happiness and learning rather than dead ends and sorrows. The second circle of this monument draws that sacred duty to our minds.

The challenge of being a wife and a mother in today's world is great. All of you should look forward to that opportunity when it presents itself. But, like everyone else that speaks to you, I too warn, "Be sure you marry the right person, in the right way, and at the right time." Marriage is not an outlet nor an escape from the realities of life. Marriage is a schooling of oneself and a giving of loving service

A beautiful young mother, a graduate of a prestigious women's college and mother of five, expressed these thoughts to me recently in a letter:

The bearing and nurturing of children in a home filled with love and with the spirit of the Lord is a great and glorious privilege of women. . . . As women we can ignore that calling by seeking personal pleasure or power to the exclusion of home-building and motherhood. We can defile that calling by misusing those sacred powers of procreation. We can abort that calling by abandoning the responsibility of mothering to others. We can belittle that calling by feeling shame before the world for begetting life. We can misunderstand that calling by allowing devotion to children to exclude the development of the whole woman. We can diminish that calling by failing strenuously to engage our time and to recognize our opportunities as mothers. We can obscure that calling by becoming independent of the home and its responsibilities. We can subordinate that calling by yielding to the pressures to postpone childbearing in favor of that which could wait for a later time or for eternity. We can cripple that calling by failing to prepare well for marriage and motherhood, failing to build the confidence and the faith to wait (even throughout time) for a worthy companion, or failing actively and continually to build a strong marriage.

And at last, in the maturing years of a woman's life, she will find herself with new perspectives, perhaps with new opportunities, as her family responsibilities decrease. No two women will face the same problems; but as you continue to pursue your education here and as you look forward to your life after you leave this campus, know that you are capable, with the help of your Heavenly Father, of meeting all the challenges that will come to you. If you have the roots of faith in God and the wings of faith in yourself that will carry you forth into the unknowns, upward toward the eternities, they will let you soar beyond the disciplines necessary in day-to-day living.

Go forward into the events of this conference on women and find yourselves challenged by what you see and hear. But never forget that the individual is the most important creation of God. Value yourself and be about your Father's business for your personal exaltation, and then love your fellowmen so much that you will help them do the same. Let this garden in Nauvoo, which is a reality because of you and women like you, be a constant reminder of the roots and the wings of your joyful living now and forever, I ask in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.