

MY PERSONAL RUBICON

ELEANOR RICKS COLTON

LIVING IN OUR NATION'S CAPITAL during the recent ERA controversies has been a learning experience for me. After the turmoil of the 1975 IWY Conference in Utah, I spent a good deal of time trying to understand the basic issues giving rise to the controversies. As Washington D.C. Stake Relief Society President, I was embarrassed that I knew so little about these questions. I decided to telephone friends in other states to learn what I could from them. The more I listened, the more I became disturbed about what seemed a mockery of a process that had been touted as a truly democratic one. I came to think of the whole slate of women's conferences as a carefully orchestrated plan to insure a hardline feminist platform. Furthermore, I was surprised to learn how many civic-minded Mormon women had not even bothered to attend the conferences and so hadn't become involved. Opinions of women who did attend seemed to fall into two categories. Those supporting ERA and abortion rights felt the conferences were well-managed. Those opposing these causes felt that so much care had been taken to muzzle opposition that they had been out-manuevered and under-represented. The more I studied the states' conferences the more I began to realize that much of the trouble stemmed from the National Committee which, although funded with tax money, did not fairly represent a cross-section of the political views of American women.

About six weeks before the national conference in Houston (chaired by Bella Abzug, who was to accuse the Mormon Church of planning to disrupt the conference), a former stake president under whom I had worked as a Young Women's President called and asked me to attend a meeting at the home of Eleanor McGovern. This meeting was designed to bring opposing women's groups together with leaders of the IWY conference. He advised me that if given the opportunity, I should explain the Church's stand against the

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ERA. "Brother Ladd," I said, "I am not sure I understand that myself." He chuckled in his good-natured way. "Well, you have three days to find out."

I hung up the telephone stunned at what I had agreed to do. I have never been a debater. I consider myself a peacemaker, and I have always gone out of my way to avoid confrontation. The more I thought about what I had been asked to do, the more upset I became. I decided to retire to the special place in the woods behind our house that I think of as my own "sacred grove," there to think and to pray. As I prayed, I asked forgiveness for all the hours I had spent in "idle pursuits." I expressed fear that my hearing disability might prevent me from understanding the statements of others at the meeting. In fact, I outlined every fear and inadequacy I could think of. Then I went on to review the great blessings of my life. I pledged that I would do everything I could to understand the reasons for the Church's opposition to the ERA and try to explain them through my own firm testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I decided it would be hypocritical of me to sustain President Kimball with my upraised hand only to oppose him with my mouth. As I left the woods that day, I felt I had crossed my own personal Rubicon.

I also felt alone. Remembering the wisdom of sending missionaries and visiting teachers two by two, I made two phone calls, one to Marilyn Rolapp, a delightful, intelligent Social Relations leader on our stake board and one to Nona Dyer, a dear and admired friend in Salt Lake City. Marilyn I asked to be my partner, and Nona I asked for information on the Church's position on ERA. By noon the next day, the information had arrived, and Marilyn and I buried ourselves in paper.

Eleven P.M. the night before the McGovern meeting, I found myself mentally exhausted from cramming and insecure because my husband was out of the country and so unable to give me his reassurance. Just then the phone rang. It was my daughter Carolyn calling from BYU. She was suffering from senior panic. I shared mine. She said, "Now, Mom, the Lord doesn't expect you to become Rex Lee overnight! Stick to the issues you understand, and before you go to bed, read Section 100, verse 5 of the Doctrine and Covenants and Chapter 4, verse 5 of Ephesians." This wisdom from my only daughter. I fell asleep refreshed.

The next morning one of our sons entered my room "Mom, since Dad isn't here, would you like to have a prayer with me?" We knelt together as my football captain son offered a short, sensitive prayer in my behalf that will be engraved forever on my heart.

By the time Marilyn and I arrived at McGovern's, we were ready to spar with Bella or anyone else who might take us on! But, alas, the leaders of the conference had cancelled the meeting on the grounds that it would be "counterproductive" to meet with us and other anti-ERA groups. Although we were not tested that day, we knew we were stronger, better informed women than we had been before. Since there were other women there with the same feelings, we were able to meet with them for a few minutes. We found them intelligent, dedicated women with legitimate concern for the meaning of a constitutional amendment and its effects on future court decisions. It was nice to have company.

A short time later Bella Abzug held another press conference announcing twenty-six goals for the National IWY meeting which supposedly set forth major concerns of women and labeled "subversive" those groups that disagreed with her. The Mormon Church was among them.

This labeling angered me. I asked myself why should one woman have the power to decide for all women? I became so angry that I wrote a letter to the *Washington Post*. A good friend, Lee Roderick, edited it for me and suggested I change it from a letter to an editorial. It appeared on November 21, 1977.

Breaking into print not only made me feel better, but it brought me in contact with neighbors and other acquaintances who engaged me in lively discussions on many sides of the issue. Interested in learning more about the proposed extension of the ratification debate, I decided to attend some of the Congressional hearings. I had been told that proper attire for such occasions included a button indicating my stand as a lobbyist. Pro ERA people wore green buttons; those opposed to the extension wore red buttons. I felt somewhat shy about this because of my natural repugnance to the steam-roller tactics employed by leaders of both groups. To assert my independence I made my own button from a red paper plate with the carefully printed words, "Stop ERA Extension." When I timidly stepped on the elevator to the House Chambers, I was taken aback to hear a woman say to a group of green button wearers, "We don't need to ride with her," and they stepped aside to wait for the next elevator. This experience was repeated on three other occasions!

Later when the extension was debated in the Senate, I invited a niece to accompany me and to wear one of my homemade buttons. After we found seats in the chambers, a woman with fire in her eyes approached us and hissed, "You've been reported!"

"I have?" I replied, bewildered.

"Yes," she snapped. "You're not allowed to wear buttons in here!" I looked around. All the other women in our section were dressed in white, the chosen symbol of the ERA supporters and easily recognized by any Senator who might cast his eyes upon them. I couldn't help but laugh: "Thanks for telling me!"

Unfortunately both sides of the political fray were guilty of name-calling to a disappointing degree. On voting day a friend and I stood in a crowded lobby by one of the doors to the Senate chambers when a huffy woman behind me said, "If these two Judases in front would move over, there would be room for more of us!" I turned, and said as kindly as I could, "Remember that in a political contest all wisdom and good motives and all good people are seldom found on only one side. If we're going to have to stand here all morning, let's at least be kind to each other." A man dressed in white who stood beside her seemed relieved as he struck up a conversation with me.

The circus atmosphere was unbelievable. Crowds of women positioned themselves to be seen by Congressmen as they came to vote. Men, experts in political influence, were herding groups of women from both camps like sheep. Many of the women seemed lost or puzzled. A few women stood just inside the chamber. I watched them hug congressmen and ask, "We can count

on your vote today, can't we?" Wives and daughters lobbied husbands and fathers. Feelings were intense. If I had not been there and seen with my own eyes, I would not have believed Congress could extend the time for lobbying without at the same time giving states the right to rescind.

When the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights convened in August, 1978, I was there to hear Sonia Johnson testify. In writing of this experience, she has stated that she felt she was carrying on the work of her foremothers. I could only wonder that day how our foremothers could possibly have applauded her criticism of church leaders. Here was a wholesome-looking, tart-tongued Mormon woman belittling the leaders of her church in a public forum. No wonder she was welcomed with open arms by the National Organization for Women.

Her testimony was reported in detail by the media. In most of the reports, Birch Bayh was painted as a hero and Orrin Hatch as a villain who had overstepped the bounds of good taste and good sense. It is true that some of Senator Hatch's words were not well-chosen, but he was obviously frustrated in his attempt to clarify the fact that Sonia should not be considered as representing all Mormon women. It was reported that he shouted at Sonia. Though he was emphatic, he did not shout. Birch Bayh was just as abrasive. In fact, I would describe him as a "smart aleck." (I can no longer read a newspaper without realizing how difficult it is for a reporter to be objective.)

Sonia states in her book that when she walked out of the hearing room into the foyer, "the anti-ERA women surrounded me at once." I was the first to greet her, and the woman with me was Jewish. I was not aware of any rush. In fact, I was disappointed that so few Mormon women were present at the hearing. We see what we want to see. We hear what we want to hear.

Looking back, I don't believe Sonia had any idea how offensive her words were, how belittling of church leaders and of Mormon women who in good faith disagreed with her point of view. I think she was carried away with enthusiasm for her cause and with the applause of her supporters. I felt sorry for her then, and in the months to come, I was to feel even more sorry to see her excommunicated, not only for her sake but for the Church's sake as well. I felt the excommunication only poured gasoline on the fires of misunderstanding.

I experienced more of that misunderstanding when I became involved in the Maryland White House Conference on Families. Believing that women in our stake could exert a positive influence on the proceedings, I eagerly offered my services. At the first organizing meeting in our district, I was dismayed to find the groups already politicized into two warring camps: Pro-Life and Pro-Choice, as they were called. When the meeting's goals were obstructed because of the feuding, I stood and pled with the groups to concentrate on areas of agreement. In desperation and because of the late hour, the State Chairman finally said, "I will appoint Mrs. Colton temporary chairman of the Washington Suburban Conference and ask her to meet with you next week to choose a permanent chairman. Perhaps then we can complete our agenda." Although I was already in charge of a Family Preparedness Conference on

Saturday, I accepted and in my politically naive way offered the stake center for their Monday meeting.

Sonia Johnson's excommunication hit the media that weekend. By Monday the news was everywhere, including our meeting. The rooms were overflowing with three times the expected number of men and women, most of them hostile and impatient. Within minutes I was replaced as chairman and asked to complete the agenda only because the new chairman had not attended the organizing meeting.

I have never before or since witnessed such rude behavior among women. It took every ounce of energy I had to maintain an orderly meeting. It was apparent from the beginning that I had been branded a red-eyed Mormon, unfit to represent liberal Montgomery County. In fact, the delegates had already decided that no Mormon would be allowed to represent the state of Maryland, and that Maryland was going to do everything it could to avoid following Virginia in choosing a slate of conservative delegates. (Later however, a Mormon delegate was to win decisively at the local conference.)

Determined to prove that my years of experience in conducting church meetings were not in vain, I completed the agenda in record time and offered my help to the new chairman. A few people apologized to me afterwards, but I was bruised by the ill will directed at the Church because of Sonia's troubles. I resented being told I could not be in favor of women's rights and against ratification of the ERA. The intensity of feelings over abortion rights was also incredible to me and was too much mixed in with the ERA.

Disappointed by the biased reporting of Sonia's excommunication, I wrote a letter to *The Washington Post*. One of the editors called me on Christmas Eve to say that since Sonia had written an editorial the week before, perhaps I would like to write one too. Although this was the last thing I wanted to think about on Christmas, I told them that if they would allow me a few days to prepare, I would oblige. This was my second positive experience with the *Post*. Although a number of other Mormon women could have been more articulate than I, few could have been hurting more than I was at that time. My editorial appeared December 28, 1979.

I have listened to legal experts debate the ERA; I have read the legislative history of the amendment; the Yale Law Review papers, papers prepared by the League of Women voters and I have subscribed to publications touting all aspects of the controversy. I sincerely feel that because women can achieve equal protection under the law without the ERA—as the steady progress of the last ten years has shown—the risks outweigh the benefits. I believe, however, that the movement to enact the ERA has done some good by helping to bring changes in laws and improved professional opportunities for women. But many feminists, by minimizing the importance of the family and by seeming to embrace lesbianism, abortion and rebellion against the patriarchal order, have polarized women into positions more extreme than they really feel.

Even Betty Friedan now agrees. In *The Second Stage*, she says, "Woman has a double set of needs: power, identity, status and social security through

her own work or action in society, which the reactionary enemies of feminism deny; and the need for love, status and security and generation through marriage, children, home and family, which those feminists still locked in their own extreme reaction deny. Both sets of needs are essential to women and to the evolving human condition."¹

I for one am weary of the strife and the exaggerated promises on all sides of the ERA issue. I am eager to bind up the wounds they may have caused. Negative publicity about Mormon women has been bruising, but I hope it will cause us all to become better informed, more articulate in explaining our beliefs and more willing to share the leadership, compassion and love we develop as members of the Church.

Women have a responsibility to help their fathers, husbands, sons and the other men with whom they work to understand their needs. We must do it through persuasion and love. I have been blessed throughout my life by being close to men and women who understood the power of the priesthood and used it to benefit others. Because of this I have tried to search my feelings honestly and my attitudes of appreciation and resentment toward the priesthood in my own life.

My father died when I was only six years old. My mother was forced to move her brood of five from the farm to the city in the middle of the Depression. As strangers in a sad and trying situation, we were warmly accepted by a ward of loving, caring people led by a bishop who understood his stewardship. My first impression of priesthood authority, then, was one of love and concern.

As a teenager who led her Sunday School class out the front door of the church in rebellion over the unrighteous dominion of a teacher, and again later when I refused to transfer to a new ward after a division, I learned from two other bishops the spirit in which the priesthood should be exercised. That is the spirit of persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness and love unfeigned.

The most sustaining priesthood influence in my life has come from being married to a man who understands the 121st section of the Doctrine and Covenants, who views our marriage as an equal partnership, not only in the rearing of the family, but in helping each other to attain eternal goals. I don't hesitate to point out his erring ways, and he freely calls me to repentance. I have felt from him a constant, loving support in all my responsibilities. He has pitched tents for girls' camp, blown up thousands of balloons, rolled out of bed in the middle of the night to rescue stranded youngsters, delivered endless loads of food and decorations all over the country, washed dishes and cleaned house when I have been ill or when extra families have lived with us, helped feed high school football teams, co-hosted dozens of slumber parties and counseled our children with pride and wisdom. His special blessings on members of our family during illness, heavy responsibility and stress have sustained and strengthened us.

I have always enjoyed "running the show," being in charge, up front, giving orders. So has my husband. We have bounded back and forth in the giving and taking of turns. He has not shown signs of intimidation at my

leadership ability, nor have I been threatened by his organizing skills. We have felt only pride in one another's accomplishments. While holding various ward and stake positions, I have worked with some men I consider outstanding leaders. I can't remember ever feeling repressed by them. In most cases, I was given free rein and encouraged to use my own initiative. There have been times when I have been disappointed in a man's dependability, but I have had the same experience with women. Sometimes I have felt a priesthood holder was overimpressed with his own importance, but I have always considered this to be his own problem and not the fault of the priesthood.

We vain, insecure, bumbling mortals are all the Lord has to work with, and yet he sees in each of us divine possibilities. Each time I have been released from a church position, I have been shocked to realize the false sense of righteousness I felt because of the applause and visibility the position brought. The regular turnover in church positions wisely reminds us that none are indispensable but all are important.

Too many dump their problems on the Church, blaming it for their unhappiness. Whenever I hear "There is no place in the Church for me!" I wonder, "Who is the Church?" We as a community of believers in Jesus Christ need to accept some of the responsibility for solving injustices, and we need to realize that life's major problems must be solved by the individuals themselves. We believers can share our testimonies, can encourage others to read the scriptures, can give service, but each woman must build her own relationship with the Savior and with her own family.

I have felt the rage of women who have been held in low esteem for generations. I have been upset after asking a sister to do something only to have her respond, "Oh, my husband won't let me do that!" In my heart, I have thought, "Your husband won't let you? What kind of partnership is that?" or "Is this sister using her husband as an excuse?" I also feel sorry for men who feel they must dominate their wives to assert their priesthood. They are wrong. I feel sorry for women who let their husbands dominate them. They are wrong too. As President Kimball has said in addressing the men of the Church: "Our wives, mothers, daughters, sisters and friends are all the spirit children of our Heavenly Father. I hope we will always bear that in mind, my brothers, in terms of how we treat women. . . . Let us always remember that God is no respecter of persons, but he loves us all, men and women, boys and girls, with a perfect love."²

Some women in the Church are hurting as they cope with real or imagined prejudice and bias. Much can be done by bishops and stake presidents to counsel and give assurance to men and women as they build a better support system. Auxiliary presidencies need to be recognized for what they do. They should have an opportunity to address congregations and conferences, to be asked to sit on the stand, to be heard in the councils of the Church as true partners in the Kingdom. This is happening in some wards. I feel confident that it will happen in all wards as men and women become more sensitive to each other's needs. I believe that it is the responsibility of women to become more assertive in meeting their own needs. Too few understand the potential of the visiting teaching program. Too few spend time with the scriptures and

other good books in building their own testimonies. Our potential to love and to influence for good is tremendous! Not one spiritual blessing is denied us. As President Kimball told the women of the Church "Much of the growth that is coming to the Church in the last days will come because many of the good women of the world will be drawn to the Church in large numbers. This will happen to the degrees that the women of the Church reflect righteousness and articulateness in their lives and to the degree that women of the Church are seen as distinct and different, in happy ways . . . from the women of the world."³

My husband's experience as bishop of a singles ward has made us both more aware of the loneliness and alienation many are struggling with. At this stage in my life I am concerned with giving succor rather than in worrying about who is in charge. I believe that a woman commits herself to priesthood guidance only when that guidance is righteous. This is not a problem for me. Each of us, male and female, is entitled to personal revelation in keeping with our spiritual desires and in wrestling with the challenges of our lives.

I am not blind to the imperfections and hypocrisies we struggle with. But I have witnessed and experienced great blessings because of the priesthood. I appreciate and respect the army of priesthood bearers who do their best to further the work of the Lord. I also love and appreciate the army of women engaged in this work. Together we are partners in building the Kingdom.

NOTES

¹Betty Friedan, *The Second Stage* (New York: Summit Books 1981) p. 114.

²Spencer W. Kimball, "Our Sisters in the Church," *Ensign*, November 1979, pp. 49–50.

³Spencer W. Kimball, *My Beloved Sisters* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Pub. 1980), p. 44.