



Emily Fox King
Detail from "Mother's Day"
oil on canvas

CONDEMN ME NOT

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Condemn me not because of mine imperfection, neither my father, because of his imperfection, neither them who have written before him; but rather give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than we have been.

—Moroni's words in *Mormon* 9:31

Years ago, in 2015, it was announced that women leaders were being added to Church leadership committees, including the temple committee. I hoped this meant changes would come to the gendered language of temple ordinances.

I had mourned when the most recent temple films were released in 2013 and I realized they included no changes to the script. Here was a perfect opportunity for such changes, complete with a new score and individual creation and garden depictions. But the archaic language remained.



I do not lend the weight of truth to the language of ritual. Such language is symbolic. But even in the context of symbolism, language that is so preferential toward men and dismissive of women—especially when such language more aptly demonstrates the bias of the writers than the purpose of the ritual—needs to be removed.

I have encountered historical accounts regarding the early development of temple ritual: there was much discussion and rewriting of the ceremonies, sometimes within a day, when Joseph was trying to figure it

all out initially. And there were many subsequent changes made by leaders and committees soon after Joseph, and in the years since then. This history need not alarm us or surprise us—after all, the concept of truth in the Restoration is that which is built up “line upon line, precept upon precept; here a little, and there a little” (Doctrine and Covenants 128:21).

I can only imagine the possible discussions held by the temple committee over the recent years, the black and white script in front of them, red pencils in hand. How many of the letters written by people—by women sharing their experiences, their concerns, and their pain—were read by this committee? How many comments were considered as the blood red lines were drawn by this generation, through the black and white words? How many pleas were heard? How many times was a phrase, or even a word, considered and debated, with some insisting it remain and others asking for cleansing. I don’t know how long it might take a committee of various people—as well intentioned, and as biased and flawed, as any of us—to embrace a completely equitable and inclusive language for a ceremony with ancient roots that has gone through countless changes, but that simultaneously has as many different meanings as participants.



Near the end of 2018, several friends and I discussed the rumors of coming changes to the temple ceremonies. A friend asked me for my wish list containing all of the changes I wanted to see. Since I have often spoken with temple and Church leaders regarding my own temple experiences, giving feedback at any opportunity about language and policy that has interrupted what can be a powerful learning experience in symbolic ritual, I had no problem coming up with a wish list.

But I surprised myself when I hesitated for a moment about what I would put at the top of the list. Initially, I had immediately thought of the crucial need to make the language of all ordinances completely

equitable, having no reference to gender specific roles. Then, for a moment, I thought of something else that I bring up every time someone asks me to help them have a healthy experience at the temple. I almost put it at the top of the list. So many tend to assume the ceremonies are literal, and have lost the practice of figurative learning. At the beginning of every endowment session, I want there to be a reminder and short instruction that what follows is a symbolic ritual, and to be understood as an individual journey for each person. I want every temple preparation class to include a history of symbolic ritual as well as pragmatic instruction on how to practice experiencing the power of symbolism.

While the top of my wish list for temple changes remained a wish for gender equitable language, I could not ignore the significance I placed on creating opportunities to better understand the temple ceremonies themselves as symbolic. Both of these wishes grew out of the central thematic tension of the temple experience itself: our individual significance and our potential for one-ness, both with each other, and with God.



There have been changes. I heard about and then experienced the most recent changes in the temple by January 3, 2019. I have mixed feelings about it.

I am grateful for what was removed, which consisted of much of the sexist language and action. There are still words that distinguish gender roles, and there are still differences in some of the ordinances between men and women. I see the changes as a step toward more equitable language, but not as achieving true gender equality at the linguistic level. I am concerned about some of the added phrases. The new, temporary intro gives some reference to the many and ongoing changes to the ceremony, but does not do much to indicate the nature of symbolic ritual, nor teach how to approach and learn from symbolic ritual. Other phrases can be interpreted as being more exclusive rather

than inclusive, depending on how one reads scripture and proclamations. The most valuable additions are the words spoken by Eve at the end, and I will return to these later. Many of these changes correspond with items on my wish list; however, there still remains more that I continue to hope for.

As soon as the most recent changes were implemented and reported on, many more people wanted—even needed—to talk about the temple language. I have had calls and messages every day since then from people, usually women, who are trying to process their feelings about these changes.

Friends of all ages, some very active and some no longer attending, struggled with wondering if the language of the covenants they had made prior to these changes was still binding for them, or whether those covenants automatically “updated” to their current form, with its more equitable language.

Several times, women messaged me in the middle of the night, unable to sleep. They wondered why, if these were changes positive for women, did a difference in wording for the men and the women remain? Why was language added that could trigger thoughts of polygamy? Many asked, “Why is it so hard? Some changes I have wanted to see for so long are finally here, but I still wonder if God loves me as much as His sons?”

These conversations reaffirmed my belief in the importance of receiving regular reminders and instruction concerning figurative learning and the history of symbolic temple rituals.

But all the education in the world cannot erase or minimize the pain that existed, and continues to exist for so many, when sexist, archaic language has long been a core part of rituals that are presented as being essential to salvation.

All of the blood red lines that were painstakingly drawn through the harmful words in the ceremony script—words that have pierced so many hearts with deep wounds—remain in our collective consciousness. The knowledge of these invisible lines cannot simply be ignored or erased.

This type of pain and trauma—the pain and trauma embedded within words that literally shaped an entire people’s concept of their present life and their potential eternity—this type of pain and trauma was felt for generations. True healing does not come through redaction only; this pain needs to be acknowledged in order to help temper and quell its destructive force.



Sometimes, all we can do is sit with each other, listen, and mourn that which burdens us in our journey to seek God.

I hear of the trauma felt by those who took what they heard about the temple as being doctrinal, or as an eternal truth. Much of the rhetoric about the temple is that it is the only way we can attain salvation, and that if everyone in our family did not attend and remain “temple worthy,” we would not be together in the eternities. The ritual, which was developed and designed to be a depiction of an ascension journey for each of us, instead became for many a literal depiction of literal beings, and binary gender roles were narrowly defined as only fitting the limited role of Adam, or of Eve.

I am in several LGBTQ parent groups. One of the most common fears I hear expressed from mothers whose child just came out is, “I am so afraid they are not safe staying in the Church. But I want them to stay so we can be together after this life.”

I wonder how we lost sight of the purpose of symbolic ritual, seeing it instead as a literal requirement with the power to separate us from those we love.

I kept sensing that in trying to fulfill a covenant to offer all to God, people felt they had to sacrifice not only themselves, but also everyone they loved on the altar of a stone building that we call a temple, for the sake of that stone building. The temple itself shifted culturally into a literal and physical entity into which people seemed to feel they had to

conform their own wills and experience. Significantly, this conforming always occurred according to someone else's narrative perspective—what they had heard, or saw, or interpreted, in an external narrative.

They were losing the spirit of Christ's message—that grace is constant, love is unconditional, and the Kingdom of God is within us—by trying to make the temple into something it isn't, instead of embracing it for what it can be.

I do not minimize or dismiss the trauma felt by those who struggle with the temple rituals. This trauma is very real.

I think anytime you take something that was designed to be symbolic (however imperfectly and however deeply biased the agenda of its creators), but then see it and try to experience it as literal, the result can be traumatic.

Are the recent changes going to make a difference for those who choose to attend? Can they bring comfort for those who felt struggle and pain with past language?

I think the answer is as individual as the journey.



No matter how much we try to teach the history of ritual, or the power of symbolic learning, I think we will struggle with any ceremony that holds such meaning for us.

I think it is what we do as humans. We want to have a clear answer; we want to know what something *means*. We want to be told what to do, and rely on someone else to be in charge.

I think this desire helps explain why the Garden story is common among so many civilizations.

When I experience the story of the Garden symbolically, I understand the entire narrative in all its parts and characters as all applying to me in different ways. When I see myself in all of it—all parts, all characters—then I can sink into a place of potential enlightenment concerning

what applies to me at this moment in my journey. The Garden story is a powerful archetype, and the powerful archetypes are the ones that apply to the human journey.

We are all in the Garden: a place of innocence, where all is laid out clearly and we are given the answers. We don't have to figure anything out. The Adam part of us is good with this.

There is also a part of us that is wondering if there is something more. The Eve part of us recognizes that we are meant to grow, even in ways that are unknown. We have a hunger for wisdom.

It is human to want to be safe in the Garden, to be told the answer, and to then blame someone else when things don't turn out or are difficult. And it is human to seek wisdom and to struggle with the difficulty of it.

It is also human to create, to want to be in power, and to be the messengers bringing good news.

In ritual, we can see that we are part of creating the very Garden in which we live, that we then feel led to leave. We create our world, piece by piece. We follow rules that provide order, we try to seek answers when we wonder, we turn to what inspires, and try to create again when things don't work out and opposition occurs.

Ritual in the temple symbolizes the human journey, in which we seek to ascend. And in that journey, we leave the Garden for a world—a world of fullness, of community, and of richness—in which we continue to seek God

I have moments nearly every day where I realize I am trying to remain in the Garden. A choice exists: we can move toward complexity and wisdom, or we can try to remain in a place of no opposition. The symbolic journey depicted in the temple ritual helps remind me of this choice and brings to mind what I have learned for myself in moments of enlightenment. There are a number of ways this choice is described, this moment of choosing the fruit and leaving the Garden: a paradigm shift, a dark night of the soul, an existential crisis, letting go and moving on, a loss of innocence. I think of the inexplicably heart-pounding,

breathless moments when I somehow know that going forward with a thought, or choice, or action will mean the end of life as I know it, and the beginning of a new way of being, full of unknown challenges. But to not move forward into this new existence when the possibility of deeper wisdom calls to me—that is something less than living. The Tree, an archetype for the Goddess, does not offer easy life. She invites me to deeper living.

I hope the new changes will encourage all to seek deeper understanding of ritual history, including what inspired the temple ceremony.



I have been thinking about what shaped my own temple experience, which started when I was a child.

I remember walking through a building that was under construction in 1963. I was about five and we had recently moved to Palo Alto. I was with my parents and we were visiting a friend who was working on the Oakland Temple. I saw rolls of carpet and wet paint signs. On the grounds, I saw the sprinkler lines being laid out and the space for the fountain. Later, after the Oakland Temple was finished and I knew that it was dedicated for ceremonies, I thought of how it was also still a building, made up of the same materials as any other. I could honor and revere what the purpose of the building was, without making that honor about the building itself.

Near that same time, during a visit to Salt Lake, my grandpa took us through the new annex of the Salt Lake Temple, which was under construction. He would talk very freely about the efforts to build this annex and the challenges and frustrations with other Church and temple leaders he encountered. He was quite candid with his feelings when he thought someone was being foolish about the project. I grew up realizing that everyone, including General Authorities, were subject to bias

and flaws, and could do some harmful things, sometimes at the same time they were doing great things.

I learned that the details of the temple buildings as well as the workings in them were designed by a committee of men who had different ideas and opinions, rarely agreed, sometimes broke their word, sometimes sought or followed inspiration, and occasionally were willing to try something different from their own usual way of doing things.

Grandpa had a deep love and reverence for temple work, and he would talk about it with us from the time we were little. This practice helped me see the way one could speak of something sacred with reverence without getting tripped up by the idea that you couldn't say anything about sacred things. He wanted us to be prepared to take part in something that was uniquely symbolic, and he, like many adults I knew during my life, recognized that being prepared and educated about the purpose and nature of something so unique could help me have a valuable experience. I heard him refer to the endowment as a spiritual play. I loved theater, and learned early that great theater was an excellent way to learn vicariously. The model of the Salt Lake temple looks like a theater, and the actors ascend up ramps and stairs as we journey through the rooms, to higher places.

I remember many parts of the temple ritual being spoken of in conference talks and in sacrament meetings. I remember prayer circles being held in my parent's house after fireside discussions. I even remember special prayer meetings patterned after the prayer circle, held in my student ward chapel, usually to pray for a member who was in extreme need. Temple ritual was a practice that carried over into life.

When I was twenty-five, I prepared to receive my endowments for no other reason than that I felt ready. I am grateful I did not attend as a requirement for a mission or marriage—for me, this was the right path, and I did it because I wanted to learn from my own ritual experience.

As I prepared, I especially appreciated my dad reminding me that the ritual was about me, and that what I learned is personal to me. I didn't

need to think that what anyone else thought the temple was about was true for me. And if anything did not lead me to see my connection to an all-loving God, I could set it aside. He reminded me that the rituals were designed and revised by men, starting with Joseph Smith and his fellow leaders, and then many others over the years. It had been changed many times. He expressed great trust that I was capable of seeing what was valuable, and what was not.

I think this preparation really helped me for the complex experience of the temple. Some parts spoke to me, and I felt I could find value in the ritual repetition. Other parts were so clearly relics of the isolated, defensive culture Brigham Young tried to create that I almost felt like I was getting a Church history lesson. I practiced setting aside those parts and relishing the others. I appreciated the prayer circle. This place where I could set aside any unkind feelings that might impede the spirit and connect with everyone to create one body, unified in seeking guidance and healing for the world, proved a powerful practice to take into my life.

The recent changes mean there are fewer words and layers that separate people in the temple. Will it be a place where more can find this kind of unifying practice?



Last week I heard from a woman who had been upset when her daughter became engaged a few months ago. This woman was not really sure why she did not look forward to her daughter getting married, especially since she really liked her future son-in-law. When she experienced the temple changes in January, her concerns about the marriage went away. She realized how much she had been hurt by the former language of the ceremony, and how much she did not want her daughter to experience this pain. Now that the ceremony had changed, she looked forward to sharing this ritual experience in which her daughter covenanted directly with God. Even though I still hope people will learn to see all the temple

rituals as symbolic, including the covenants, I find it hopeful that there are fewer words that could impede a unifying experience.

I hope the recent changes help more women find the experience of symbolically hearing and speaking directly to God one that empowers them to do so more completely in real life. There are so many messages in our society, our rhetoric, and our human nature that suggest we give up our seeking, our listening, and our divine connection, ceding our own rights to intermediaries. Anything that reminds us that God loves, knows and reaches out to each of us individually, and that nothing can separate us from that love, can encourage us to look for that in our own way.

About twenty-five years ago, I saw a PBS documentary about a woman on a ritual journey to a monastery high in the mountains of Japan. She kept a video journal as she traveled through the country, receiving instruction, hearing people share the limited information they were willing to give, and gradually leaving behind more and more of what she carried. Eventually, she could only go on foot, and climbed to a place in the mountains where she went through a ritual bath. From there, she was allowed to continue to the temple above, dressed only in simple clothes, taking nothing else. She was required to promise to only share the rest of her experience in a single Haiku, written after she completed her journey. The few words of the haiku described how her sleeve was wet with the tears she had shed, because of the moving sacred experience at the temple.

Those words told me all. I could not gain more by knowing the details of what precisely was powerful to her, or why it was so. She had immersed herself in the journey, and found her own self. This realization provided me with another reminder to let go of the concept of an external, inherent truth in a sacred ritual. Instead, I look for the truth that is mine alone, and encourage others to find theirs. I look for ways to experience deeper seeking in my life journey.

I thought, for a time, that the more fulfilling journeys would be found outside familiar ritual. About twelve years ago, I was rarely making

time to attend the temple. I had had some powerful experiences there, and had appreciated being in a space where there was little distraction from contemplation, or conversation with God and ancestors. I felt I had learned what I wanted from the ceremonies, and did not feel much need to be there often, other than to seek a peaceful place of meditation. Then, one day, I sensed my dad (years after he had died) asking me to go once a week. It was not clear why I felt this request, but I was willing to see what happened.

It was not too many years before I felt I could also wet my sleeve with the tears shed because of what I learned in sacred ritual.

An Offering of Certainty

There is nothing that is more difficult, or more important to let go of, and to sacrifice in this way, than my firm ideas of how things should be. No amount of time or money or resources I offer can compare to offering up my firmly held certainty that I already know all I need to about something. My certainty in the sufficiency of my own knowledge is precious to me—that is why I practice laying it on the altar. And in the space that is created through this offering, my heart and mind might find room to create new worlds.

Connection through Names

The practice of finding names, preparing them, and carrying them has become just one part of a larger structure designed to experience deep connection. Much of the vicarious work many have done in recent years has been performed for temple names, about whom we know nothing. I invite you to consider, when you speak the name you hold, that in a sense you become them, for a short time. I invite you to think of their life, and how it might be similar to yours. In practicing this conscious connection through names, for a moment, time and distance have little power, and I feel a oneness and a love that reaches through the veil. Death is overcome. For me, the sealing power is love. All external structures and

processes are simply various means to help me experience the presence of others about whom I would know nothing if not for this experience of vicariously being them in their journey toward God.

My heart is turned to them, and I trust their heart is aware of me. My fears, challenges, and joys become theirs, and theirs are mine.

From this, I learn to turn my heart to those around me, and try to let differences in opinions, ideology, choices, and experiences have as little power as time and distance and death have when I am one with the names in the temple. Christ's teaching to learn to love my enemies, because they are no longer my enemies in Christ, is now connected to the call to turn hearts to each other through this sealing power of love. The deep and confronting lesson of Christ is to love one another. If there is anyone I don't love, then I don't love anyone. Godlike love has no limits. When I seal myself to each and all with this kind of love, there is nothing that can overcome me, and the world will not be destroyed by any curse of division.

I wonder how many times those beyond the veil might have felt the shared pain of the former ritual language. I wonder how much our ancestors still try to influence our ritual that has ancient roots.



A few years ago, I stayed to do initiatories for several hours. I just kept asking for more names and was practically on autopilot, going through the motions, repeating the words and promises of the ordinance in my head. Then came a moment in which countless people from past generations seemed to be present, their voices rushing into my mind, wanting me to be aware. I could almost hear the pleas from Joseph, and Brigham, and Emma, and my ancestors: "We can't be there to cleanse you from our blood, our sins. We did what we knew how to do. Please. Cleanse each other. Be clean from our mistakes, our fear. Love each other. Take care of each other. Please."

I tried to be present to the countless beings who seemed to be trying to finish a work they could not see how to fully accomplish during their life. The work is not about fear, or sin, or punishment, or differences, or conditions. It is about love. God's love is what makes us all worthy to be in Their presence. It is what makes us all Their anointed. This love is what the journey is about.

When any of us reach out to bless, or witness, or offer anything in the promise of symbolic covenants that are meant to last beyond death, I see a connection beyond the persons who are physically present. This moment of connection reaches through each of us to all those we know and love, and all they know and love, sealing us all, through past and future generations, forever.

The words of an early Mormon hymn speak to me, as they might have inspired my ancestors.

There is no end to glory;
There is no end to love;
There is no end to being;
There is no death above.¹



The recent changes include added language that I find powerful. The instruction I still hope to see added at the beginning now has some presence near the end.

In great theater, the most important lines are spoken by the final voice. Now, the final voice is the voice of Eve, reminding us that the life that leads us to God is the one where we dwell in opposition and still find the joy in it, and where we multiply and replenish when we grow in wisdom. This concept is what I value in the Book of Moses.

1. LDS Hymn #284 "If You Could Hie To Kolob" Text: William W. Phelps, 1792–1872

And in that day Adam blessed God and was filled . . . saying: Blessed be the name of God, for because of my transgression my eyes are opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again in the flesh I shall see God.

And Eve was glad, saying: Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient. (Moses 5:10, 11)^v

In 2015, I was an ordinance worker in the Denver Temple. Days after the release of the November 2015 policy excluding children of LGBT parents from baptism, I struggled to go and work my usual shift at the temple. I was sad and hurting. My coordinator noticed. She pulled me aside and asked me to share my burden with her. I wept as I told her of the deep hurt of this destructive policy. She only expressed love for me, and told me that God looks on the heart. She knew God saw my heart, and cherishes me and everyone. She told me to take all the time I needed, and to do what I felt I needed to do.

I sat for a long time in the celestial room, where there were no distractions.

At different times I felt my dad there, and my grandma Josephine, whose name I have. There was a presence of Divine Parents, and Christ. I felt Their message: “Yes. This hurts. I am so sorry for the pain. I am here. You can stay as long as you want. You can be where you need to. You don’t have to do anything. I am here”

And: “There are people here. Some might be here for the last time. They are also hurting. There is work to do. I will help you.

I am here.”

After a long time, I went and worked in initiatory for several hours. They were unusually busy. There were women there who were weeping quietly the whole time. Some seemed worried, some calm, some happy.

As I placed my hands on their heads and spoke blessings, pronouncing forgiveness and cleansing, I saw that I was reaching through them and the name they carried, back through all ancestors, forward to all

that would follow, out to all people in their life, speaking, pleading, blessings: clarity, life, strength, repentance, power, cleansing, forgiveness. This is one-ness. We experience God by experiencing each other with no barriers.

My deep, sacred experiences with God have not been in the safety of the Garden. They have been in the broken woundedness of wisdom seeking, where the opposites can't offer simple answers. A deeper love is present in wisdom seeking, and joy is felt in connection with the divine.

Perhaps the recent changes will invite a deeper connection with God, and with each other.

My hope is that every journey we choose, symbolic or otherwise, will help us find our way to each other in oneness.