

The Joyful Surprise of Motherhood

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When our first son, Mark, was born, I was quite shocked to discover that motherhood was the most satisfying and fulfilling thing I had ever experienced. Now that I have a few years of mothering under my belt, I have become troubled that it was such a shock – that I hadn't expected it to be wonderful. Somehow I had received the impression that motherhood would only be time-consuming, underappreciated, dull, nonstimulating, and simply not enough to make one fully happy.

The scriptures tell us that “children are an heritage of the Lord” (Psalm 127:3). I wonder if many in my generation know this – not just in their minds because it is part of Latter-day Saint doctrine, but in their hearts as well.

I know that not everyone will have the chance to marry and have children in this life. For this reason and others, it is not appropriate for women to set their sights only on marriage and motherhood. Nevertheless, I'm alarmed at the growing tendency of some women – even in the Church – to show more interest in their careers than in motherhood, or to fear motherhood so much that they do not look forward to taking this step with gladness.

That is how I was. I planned to have children someday, because I knew that is what Latter-day Saints were supposed to do, but I wasn't excited about the prospect at all. In fact, when my husband and I were engaged and newly married, I had such a negative idea of what motherhood was going to be that I secretly hoped I wouldn't be able to have children – at least for a few years. When I unexpectedly became pregnant with my son just two months after I'd been married, I felt angry and depressed.

I think it was difficult for me to look forward to mothering because of some common myths and misconceptions perpetrated by magazines, the media, ideas of social “freedom” for women, and even some of the negative jokes, anecdotes, and warnings passed on by mothers themselves. Perhaps many young women feel as I felt, so I would like to dismiss some of the common myths about motherhood that we may be tricked into swallowing.

Myth number one: Before you have children, you need to do everything else in life that is important to you, because after you become a mother, you'll never be able to do that again.

This is the most common thing I heard in the later stages of my pregnancy. What a terrifying phrase – “never be able to do that again” – as if I were going to have a terrible and disabling accident instead of becoming responsible for one of Heavenly Father's spirit children.

Truth: Even with a child, a mother can make time for herself and some goals outside of her children. It isn't the will of the Lord that all of the individual parts of our lives end with children. It is true that I can't do as much as fast as I did without children, and I imagine that this will increasingly be the case as I have more children. But it is also true that having children has helped me develop in other ways. I like to think of it as getting a second degree, a new job, or a promotion – because really, that's what it is.

Myth number two: When you have children, you won't be able to progress intellectually.

Truth: As a mother, you will read books, learn to build things, and learn more about nutrition and health, budgeting, taxes, cooking, and running a home. You will learn to teach. Some women even learn to quilt, sew, crochet, do artwork, and do many other things. I have also learned some even more important lessons – one of which has been to relax and enjoy quiet times with my son.

Myth number three: You will lose yourself to your children.

Truth: You will lose yourself to love. Not having a baby for fear of losing yourself would be like saying, “don’t ever make any friends, and certainly never, ever fall in love, because both of these things will take time and will change your life.” I did not resist falling in love, but I did mentally resist parenthood. I was convinced that having this baby so early on was going to ruin my carefully plotted life. He did not ruin my life – in fact, in many ways he saved it. What I mean is this: We are going to lose our lives to something. I had lost mine to school goals, career dreams, plans, and other people’s demands and expectations for what my life should be. I had listened to the world and its requirements for me as a modern woman. Mark brought me back to myself and to God. He brought me back to the saving fundamentals of faith, hope, and charity. First Corinthians 13:13 does not say, “And now abideth enough money to travel, a great body, and a successful career, these three; but the greatest of these is a successful career.” It doesn’t even say this for men, because even though the proclamation on the family designates fathers as the main providers, their primary and most important job is also in the home and with the family.

I have learned more about the gospel and about myself from getting married and having a child than I learned from four years of seminary, seven years of under-graduate and graduate work, and from my mission. These other steps were important for my growth, maturity, and knowledge. They were important so that when I did have children, there would be certain things I could teach them. But I have come to realize they were *steps* leading me on to bigger and better things, and one of those bigger and better things is having a righteous family.

Myth number four: Having children will stunt your relationship with your spouse.

Truth: It will add another dimension to it. I won’t say there aren’t times when I wish for a little more time with my husband and a little more money to use when we do have time together, or that it’s always easy to agree on how to be a parent. But Mark has had a wonderful binding effect on us. He has given us a common goal. Many couples take a class or start a hobby together to improve their relationship. A baby is like the ultimate class and the ultimate hobby. A class will not last so long, will not be so funny, will not be so beautiful, so challenging, so living. It will not be something you have created together. It will not look like you. It will not love you. And in my experience, the strength children provide makes it easier (and more fun) for a marriage to endure as well.

I hope that my generation and those who are younger are not afraid to learn that marriage and parenthood are the most beautiful things – that they are the buds of that charity which “never faileth” (see 1 Corinthians 13:8). I hope that mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers let their children and grandchildren hear about the beauties of their responsibilities, not just the task and the pressures and the sacrifices. The Lord promises the faithful the chance to be with a family through eternity, working with them and loving them. To my knowledge He does not bind us to anything else so completely. “but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away” (1 Corinthians 13:8). Our jobs will not be eternal; much of our formal education will be forgotten; our Church callings will come to an end. Only our eternally linked families, the knowledge we have gained, and the Christlike love we have developed will never fail.