

Line upon Line



Is there a Downside to Idealizing Motherhood?

By Julie de Azevedo Hanks · October 12, 2015

"All I've ever wanted in life is to be a mother," she sobbed as she slumped over burying her hands in her face. Through her tears she muttered, "My whole life I've been taught that being a mother was the most important role. Now, I'm getting so old that I will never be able to have a child. What meaning is there to my life without the role of mother?"

I've heard sentiments like this over and over again in my twenty years of clinical psychotherapy work with LDS women. In our efforts to acknowledge and validate the crucial contribution of mothers are we unintentionally sending a message that women who aren't able to bear or rear children in this life are somehow less valuable to the Church and to God? A deeper understanding of our doctrine reveals that this is not true; we know that "all are alike unto God" (2nd Nephi 26:33) and that an individual's worth is not dependent on his/her accomplishments (is there not something strange about considering children an accomplishment?).

LDS doctrine teaches the vital importance of creating bodies for God's spirit children and of raising children up in the Lord. None of us would be living if it weren't for the sacred work of mothers. I personally am forever grateful to my mother, to be a mother to four children, and for the opportunity to teach them and learn from them. However, there is something about certain discussions regarding motherhood that leaves me feeling uneasy. We often pedestalize motherhood. We often idealize motherhood. We talk about how noble it is—how important it is. And it *is*...but there's a point at which overemphasizing and pedestalizing motherhood and its importance backfires, creating division and distress instead of celebration.

Part of my concern is that we often talk about motherhood as if it is women's only valuable source of identity and meaning for a woman. Being a mother is an important aspect of my identity as an LDS woman, but it is not the *entirety* of my identity. While mothering my children is an important contribution, it is not the source of my



worth. When we talk about motherhood as *the* defining aspect of a woman, the *core* of her identity, or the *only* valuable contribution, it can isolate and alienate women who are not able to, or who haven't had the opportunity to, or who have no desire to bear and raise children in this life.

Here are a few key ways that overemphasizing and idealizing motherhood can hurt us culturally, socially, and spiritually:

1) When we categorize women only or primarily in the sense of *mother* or *not a mother*, we may unintentionally pit women against each other and create a sense of separateness instead of connection and unity.

I have heard the heart-wrenching stories of women – married or single—who feel that they are on the outside of most Mormon social circles. In some way or another, (almost) all of us feel like we don't belong; let's not exacerbate this painful feeling by inadvertently categorizing ourselves based on our family status. Children or not, there is so much that women in the gospel have in common. We are all individuals, sisters, and we are trying our best to lead righteous lives and be close to the Lord.

2) When we idealize motherhood, we risk diminishing the worth and contributions and of women who do not have children.

I believe that one of the purposes of our efforts in the Church to elevating motherhood is in response to the perceived devaluation of it in the broader culture. It's clear that the work of creating families is not the most highly valued and certainly not the most highly compensated monetarily. So the question becomes, how can we value motherhood without overidealizing it? How can we value the work of mothers and the importance of motherhood while *also* highly valuing the contributions that *all* women make to our society – at home, at church, in the community, in the workplace, in the world (I'll suggest a few possible solutions later in the article)? Do we fear that if we value women's contributions outside of mothering and homemaking that women will choose not to become wives and mothers? How can we more effectively convey that women are valuable as individuals, not solely based on their reproductive status?

3) When we idealize motherhood, we run the risk of setting young women up for unrealistic expectations, disappointment, and depression when they experience its realities.

Perpetuating the belief that “if you get married in the temple and start your family, you will find never-ending bliss, and the deepest yearnings of your soul will be satisfied” sets our young women up for unrealistic expectations. To be clear, I am *not* saying that we should abandon teaching the importance of temple ordinances and covenants, of marriage and motherhood to our youth. What I *am* saying is that painting a romanticized picture of motherhood as the path to bliss, the cure to loneliness and suffering, and the *only* path to a purposeful life, is doing our young women a great disservice. Instead of idealizing motherhood, we would be wise to arm

them with a deep testimony of Jesus Christ, a strong sense of their individual worth, and relationship and emotional skills that will contribute to resiliency and fortitude.

Can we teach that motherhood is a godly pursuit and will also come with the unpredictability of all other areas of life? Can we teach our young women resiliency skills to help her navigate a variety of family situations she may experience? She may not get married. She may get married and not have children. She may get married and get divorced. She may marry someone with an addiction or someone who leaves the faith. She may marry and have children who have health or mental health problems. She may have a child without a marriage. And the list goes on.

Motherhood is important not because it will magically complete you as a human being, but because it will provide many soul-stretching growth experiences that will help you become more like your Heavenly Parents. And...there are many *other* valuable paths that provide tremendous growth experiences, too.

4) When we define a woman only by motherhood, we may neglect the development of other important parts of a woman's life.

Sometimes in a sincere effort to praise and honor women who have children, we inadvertently diminish other creative contributions they might make as individuals. Several years ago I spoke to a stake women's group about self-care and preventing burnout. We were talking about the activities that bring us joy. One woman who found joy in painting and was a gifted painter, told of how she made a poster to advertise a community event. Her young child was in awe of the artwork on the poster and commented, "Wow mom. Did you make that?" This woman was surprised to realize that her children had never seen her paint. She had been so consumed by motherhood that she hadn't shared with her children this important aspect of her life.

Women are multi-dimensional individuals and have unique strengths, talents and callings! Understanding that although motherhood may be a central aspect of a woman's experience, there are other parts of her life to celebrate. Perhaps a woman (young or old) is learning a new skill, pursuing further education, running a company, developing a new product or theory, or creating something "virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy." Let's make sure we value these qualities, aspirations, and contributions as well.

5) When we pedestalize motherhood, we may be unintentionally diminishing the value of involved fatherhood.

Children need mothers, and they also desperately need engaged and involved fathers. Young people whose fathers are intimately involved in their lives are more likely to thrive in all areas of life; they are more resilient, more likely to excel in and enjoy school, less likely to be sexually assaulted, have more positive peer relationships, a higher sense of self-worth, are more empathetic, are more economically stable, and generally grow up to have more satisfying and successful lives. The temporal and spiritual advantages of having an engaged father are truly endless.

In LDS culture, starting at age 12, our young men are taught about priesthood responsibilities, but are they being taught how to be engaged and nurturing fathers? The Young Women are taught the importance of motherhood, so it makes sense to me that the Young Men would also be taught the importance of as well as the practical skills of engaged fatherhood.

Suggestions to Balance the Motherhood Discussion:

1) Motherhood is a Relationship, not just a Role

I've noticed that talks and discussions about womanhood and motherhood are often linked with the word *role*, yet manhood and fatherhood are rarely linked with the word *role*. I think that is a fascinating difference that feels significant and adds to my discomfort in how we talk about motherhood.

A few weeks ago I was pondering the topic of motherhood in preparation for an upcoming TV segment. All of the sudden it occurred to me: motherhood is a relationship, not just a role! When we define motherhood as merely a role, we also attach socially prescribed behaviors and societal functions that may feel restrictive and narrow. I prefer to focus on talking about *motherhood as a relationship*, an emotional bond with another human being, instead of a list of prescribed duties. For example, my grandmother died twenty-five years ago, when my mother was around my age. My mother still has a mother, even though she is not living, even though her mother is not currently playing a certain *role* in her life, she is connected to her mother through a relationship bond.

2) Redefine “Good Mother”

When we pedestalize motherhood it often comes with unattainable expectations: women who sacrificed *all* of their own goals for their children, who *never* complained, who never raised her voice, and who was *always* there for her child. When we think of the definition of a “good mother,” it’s often an idealized image based on societal roles, behavior or tasks – the happy, well-dressed mom with milk and hot cookies waiting for her children to arrive home from school. Maybe you think of a woman who has never missed a day of family prayer, or who makes organic home lunches every day for her 10 children, or who attends every sporting event.

The older I get, the more I tend to define “good mother” on the *quality of connection* between my child and me and less on the execution of certain tasks and behaviors. Being a “good mother” is more than a checklist of good mother activities and traits. I find myself reflecting more on questions like, “Does my child know that I am there for them? Do they feel known and understood by me? Am I tuned in to their lives? Do they feel comfortable coming to me for help and support?”

3) Emphasize the Importance of *Parenthood*, including Fatherhood

What would happen if we consciously included fatherhood in our discussions about nurturing and raising children (instead of focusing primarily on motherhood)? What if we balanced our discussions about being a worthy priesthood holder with those concerning how to be a loving and nurturing father? What if we talked to our Young Men about the importance of fatherhood as much as we talk to our Young Women about the importance of motherhood? Given the importance of family relationships, these seem like important questions to consider.

I know that the topic of motherhood is a sensitive subject that brings up many varied emotions. You may have had a mother who was absent, neglectful, or abusive. You may have children and yet not always be the kind of mother you would like to be. You may long to be a mother and have not had the opportunity. You may *not* want to be a mother and feel guilty because you should want to be a mother. Whatever your circumstance, let’s try to be sensitive to the varied experiences of our sisters and value all of their contributions. We know that “the worth of souls is great” in God’s sight (D&C 18:10), and this includes every individual woman (and man) on this earth.

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