

Heavenly Mother and Paradoxical Embodiment

Today in the church, one of the greatest mysteries is Heavenly Mother. Mormon women have long been acknowledging her presence and power in their lives and their personal theology, and Mormon feminists more recently have been calling for the silence around Her to be broken. Still, our language, our symbolism, and our worship points to God the Father, and leaves Heavenly Mother as an abstraction and a mystery yet to be revealed.

I believe that our silence surrounding Heavenly Mother has created a view of her embodiment that is paradoxical: that on one hand she is defined by her female body, and on the other, she is denied embodiment.

My position is that our paradoxical concept of her can be reconciled and our limiting knowledge of her can be expanded by a new tradition of Mormon mysticism that is led by Mormon women and enriched with feminist understandings of language and symbolism. I believe that the secrecy surrounding Heavenly Mother can be transformed from a source of spiritual frustration to a source of spiritual liberation- that our limited knowledge is a form of freedom, and that it might be her very mystery that feeds our deepest and most authentic spirituality as women. I believe that the Heavenly Mother mystery can and is prompting a new tradition of Mormon mysticism focused on an individualized search for a more whole picture of our Heavenly Parents.

First of all, it seems to me that our knowledge about her has been constricted by our cultural tendency to think of her only in terms of motherhood, which limits her divine power to that of her body. Our narrow conceptualization, I think, is the result of having so few titles by which to call her- which in turn limits the characteristics by which to know her.

In Janice Allred's Sunstone article "The One Who Never Left Us," for example, she talks about David Paulson and Martin Pulido's survey of church teachings about Heavenly Mother, saying that the survey "reveals an important problem with the discussion about God the Mother: a lack of names. The article uses "Heavenly Mother" sixty-two times, "Mother in Heaven" sixteen times, "Mother" fourteen times and "heavenly parents" twenty-seven times. The few other titles it uses all refer to her roles of wife and mother. We have many names for God, but having only one way to refer to God the Mother makes it difficult to imagine her in any other way than as a mother."

According to Allred, having only one name for the divine feminine means that she has only one role in our lives; that we only know one of her qualities and have only one way to know her. There are a few uses of feminine imagery of God in the bible, but these are mostly ignored in mainstream LDS dialogue and we have set her title as Heavenly Mother- a name that is not inherently limiting, but can be when it is not balanced and enriched by a variety of names.

For example God the father has been worshipped as God the king, Jehovah, Eloheim, Lord and master, teacher, ruler, creator, judge, and father.

This variety of names facilitates a vivid portrait of who God the Father is, and attributes Him with a number of divine characteristics for which we worship him such as intelligence, mercy, power, omnipotence, benevolence, wisdom, love, righteousness, majesty, for being all-knowing, infinite, eternal, and kind. These attributes transcend gender yet are ascribed to God the Father as if they are masculine, while God the Mother is linguistically locked in the motherhood role, and motherhood in its most basic sense encapsulates virtually everything that we know of her. Because of our limited language and restrictive metaphors to describe Heavenly Mother, it seems she is defined by motherhood.

Here we reach another contradiction, that as a figure who is defined by motherhood, she is denied the ability to mother her children by a strain of orthodoxy that says that our relationship with her is at worst heretical, and at best simply too speculative. The one attribute allowed her is then reduced from a dynamic and intimate relationship- the whole range of pain, joy, sacrifice, and teaching that mortal mothers know- to a simple pseudo-biological function.

I think Holly Welker said it best when she wrote "Mormon discourse tells us that to develop spiritually, we must know Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ as deeply and personally as possible, but we do not need to know anything of our Heavenly Mother- except that she exists."

"If this is the proper order of things," she asks, "why are Mormon women encouraged to stay home with, nurture, teach, and care for children? Why are mothers not instead encouraged to do as Heavenly Mother does, and have as little contact as possible with their children, leaving their care and guidance entirely to their father and an elder brother?"

Here Welker points out the contradictions inherent in our doctrine of Heavenly Mother- that we are told to emulate our Heavenly parents, and yet presented with an absentee mother- one who in some fashion gave birth to our spirits, and then retreated into darkness and silence.

So Heavenly Mother, rather than existing as a divinity full of power or compassion, is simply fulfilling a simplistic version of the motherhood role. She is, as Margaret Toscano says, a "vapid placeholder." Unlike God the Father who is an embodied divinity, she fills an embodied role. Rather than existing through her body like God the Father does, she exists because of it. So in our current conception of Heavenly Mother, her female body defines her rather than the full range of divine qualities that God the Father is granted.

So while in this sense she is defined by her body, it seems to me that she is also denied embodiment by our silence, which keeps her invisible in our collective imagination. In Margaret Toscano's 2012 Sunstone lecture *Images of the Divine Feminine*, she said, "We women are formed in the image of God our mother. But what is she like? What are our pictures of her like? Do we see her as a white-haired counterpart to the father? Do we see her only in the maternal role? How has our limited discourse of her also limited our pictures of her?"

Toscano's question- how has our limited discourse of her also limited our pictures of her - points out the link between our dialogue and our pictures of Heavenly Mother- that when the conversation is limited, so is the imagery. We are familiar, for example, with the iconic paintings of God the Father and Christ that hang

in every church building and in LDS homes. Our iconography has centered on male divinity and given us a rich variety of images for Heavenly Father and Christ, but it has done so at the expense of a more balanced image of the heavenly parents.

The body of God is articulated and glorified through our imagery- we believe he is an embodied god and we can picture him in our mind and through our art. But where are our images of the wife of God, the other half of God whom we are asked to emulate? Where is she represented in our imagery? In her lecture, Toscano goes on to state “there is great power in images. Visual and spoken images are the means by which we shape reality and give meaning to the world around us. They become reality for us. They are the mirror through which we see ourselves and shape our lives.” The absence of imagery of the divine feminine in Mormonism means that Heavenly Mother is to a large extent invisible in Mormon consciousness. We believe she is embodied but have not yet imagined her body. It is this that convinces me that our silence and secrecy have disembodied Heavenly Mother in our minds.

So herein lies the paradox- that Heavenly Mother is reduced to her body by being defined by an essentialized version of motherhood, and then she is denied embodiment by our insistence that she remain invisible.

For me, this has been frustrating. Mormon women are told to be placated by the idea of a divine Mother who is ‘too sacred’ to be made known in our lives and who needs the benevolent protection of Heavenly Father, yet mortal women are exposed daily to objectification, belittlement, and abuse. Heavenly Mother supposedly needs protection from the very things to which mortal women are exposed, and yet we are told we are wrong to desire a divine role model in coping with these things. A confusing and contradictory view of her embodiment only compounds the need for a change in the conversation surrounding Heavenly Mother.

I propose that these contradictions are not hopeless, however, and that they can in fact be fertile ground for a transformative and liberating spiritual search. Perhaps the paradox of Heavenly Mother’s embodiment creates a space wide enough for Mormon women to articulate her in their own terms, unmitigated by authority and unrestricted by dogma. Perhaps our silence surrounding Her can allow us a more personal, even mystical encounter with her. Perhaps her invisibility can allow us to create her in our image, to imagine her with new metaphors and describe her in our own language.

In her book *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong reminds us that the words “myth,” “mysticism,” and “mystery” all have linguistic roots in the Greek verb *musteion*: to close the eyes or the mouth. “All three words,” she points out, “are rooted in an experience of darkness and silence.”

Armstrong also describes the archetypal mystical experience as being characterized by a sense of ineffability, transcendence, oneness, universality, and wonder; that it brings the individual to feel connected to an ultimate reality; that it

is often too grand and beautiful for words. It seems to transcend the individual's gender, religion, culture, or place, and connects the seeker to a unifying source of all.

Joseph Smith taught that "the things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind...must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity- thou must commune with God." For Smith, confronting the darkness of the unknown allowed the stretching of our minds as high as heaven- uncertainty was not something to be feared or forbidden, but encouraged in search of direct communion with God. Although Smith did not refer to his process of communing with God as mystical, he clearly believed in the individual's capacity for direct and personal communication with God, and that transcendent yet personal knowledge could arise out of our questions.

According to both Smith and Armstrong, encounters with the divine proceed out of darkness, space, and silence – that from the abyss our minds can be lifted to that which is beyond human understanding.

In the opening of her article *The One Who Never Left Us*, Janice Allred asks, "To what shall we attribute the silence surrounding the Mother in Heaven? Is it the silence of holiness? Is it the silence of fear? Are we awed by the weight of eternity or do we take sacred things lightly?" I think Allred's question is important because it means that our silences can be interpreted and used in more than one way.

One day, for instance, when talking to a lifelong Mormon woman about the church, she told me that she prays to Heavenly Mother all the time. This surprised me because she had always seemed to me to be the perfect example of a faithful and orthodox LDS woman.

When I reminded her -probably more for my own clarification than hers- that her leaders would call her blasphemous, she said matter-of-factly, "I don't care. Heavenly Mother understands me."

I was twenty at the time, and had recently become inactive. Conversations like these had become commonplace in my phase of searching for what I perceived to be genuine Mormon spirituality, but this was the first time that I became aware of the reality of women's relationships to Mother in Heaven- dynamic, living, and intimate. Church leadership would hardly encourage this reality, but even among the orthodox, She is finding Her way into our prayers, our questions, and our conversations. What seems for many to be a heavy, gaping hole in our dialogue about the divine can become a transformative space in which Mormon women design their most basic act of worship as an encounter with the Mother in Heaven. The silence of fear, in other words, can become the silence of creation.

For example in her essay *Toward a Theology of God the Mother*, Janice Allred describes her imagining of Heavenly Mother as an immanent yet personal divinity. She says "I believe that she is ...the immanent God, the invisible God, the unrecognized God, not the God whom we worship but the God who brings us to worship, not the God we search for but the God in whom we live, and move, and have our being." Our lack of official knowledge about Mother in Heaven allows Allred the spiritual freedom to experience the divine directly, intimately, and on her own terms. With this freedom, Allred imagines Heavenly Mother as a being who

transcends gender or embodiment, and who can be experienced directly- in quite a similar way that the mystics would describe their encounters with that unifying, mysterious source of all.

Allred goes on to say “The reality of human freedom means that any essence named is really a metaphor. As we speak and write the meaning of our lives as women, as men, as human beings, we create metaphors and use metaphors, but these symbols can never contain the fullness of our lives, which are an inexhaustible source for the creation and finding of meaning. We are finite beings but we are surrounded by, immersed in, and filled with infinity.”

As we recognize the power of the metaphors we use to speak about God, we also realize how limited our metaphors are, especially when they have traditionally excluded the experiences of women. Our religious tradition has not yet created a language by which we might access and describe the feminine aspect of the divine specifically, which provides for us a linguistic and imaginative space for us to write her into existence. The absence of metaphors puts us in an ideal position for creating our own new metaphors based on personal experience. In fact, it could be argued that female-centered spirituality is inherently mystical since it relies on direct experience rather than authority, tradition, or religious text. What if Heavenly Mother did become explicit in our official church dialogue? What dogma would replace the wonder and mystery that prompts so many women to find divinity on their own terms?

Historian Grace Jantzen, in her book *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, describes the historical pattern of female mystics. She says “Their writing arises out of their own visionary experience; and consequently the language they use of God is not rooted in the study of the mystical meaning of scripture, as we find in male writers. This means that they have a far wider range of possibilities, especially for female imagery; and they use it to the full.”

I suggest that we as Mormon women and men follow this pattern and begin to write Heavenly Mother out of her obscurity, out of her simplistic role, and into a creative and empowering new theology in which personal experience is central.

We can follow the path laid out by Gail Houston and Lynn Whitesides, who wrote about their prayerful relationship with Mother in Heaven, and Carolynn Perhson, who portrayed the relationship in her play “Mother Wove the Morning.” We can build upon the authoritative work of Janice Allred and her reimagining of a theology in which God is both mother and father, Margaret Tuscano’s scholarship on our concept of Heavenly Mother, Joanna Brooks and her prompting us to know our own doctrine surrounding Heavenly Mother and speak about our experiences with her. We might follow the example of Maxine Hanks, Linda Wilcox, Levina Fielding Anderson, and all the writers who contributed to the book “Women And Authority,” especially its chapter on emerging discourse on the divine feminine in which Latter-Day saints from around the country wrote their experiences with God the Mother. We might take after Robert A. Rees and his call for a feminist Mormon midrash in which he writes “Why do we not know more of this mother of all creation, this mistress of light and space?... I believe that hers is also a powerful voice, rolling at times like thunder and cutting through the darkness like lightning. What explains

the fact that many Mormon women, and perhaps a few Mormon men, are beginning to feel her presence in their lives, other than that our consciousness of her identity has been awakened?...An increasing number of Mormon women testify to hearing her voice and are finding lyric modes in which to tell us about her.”

Of course, no discussion of Heavenly Mother should go without acknowledging the fear that many feel about talking openly about her- a fear that has been legitimated over and over by their excommunication, release from callings, and accusations of apostasy simply for talking about their relationship with Her. However, as the dialogue continues to unfold in new ways among more and more people, the silence of fear is losing its power and we are finding new modes of expressing that relationship.

For example we can continue the Mormon women’s tradition of writing, especially as laid out by the publication the Women’s Exponent, and now blogs like feminist Mormon housewives, in which the Mother in Heaven is common in the dialogue.

We can follow the tradition of the March 2012 Sunstone magazine that focused entirely on motherhood, and included a liberating range of women’s experiences with their bodies, their struggles, and their relationship to God the Mother. This special edition of the magazine had what must be one of the first LDS artistic depictions of Heavenly Mother as its cover- a rendition of Michaelangelo’s famous painting *The Creation of Adam*, except in this version by Galen Smith, a Heavenly Mother reaches out to touch the finger of one of her daughters. The edition’s editor Holly Welker said “Our depiction here puts the divine feminine and the human feminine-as well as the relationship between them- front and center. The image was created as a celebration of the unique, nourishing, and powerful doctrine of Heavenly Mother.” The edition also includes four paintings of the Goddess in her variety of roles- Mother teacher, Mother protector, Mother nurturer, and Mother creator.

The power and beauty of these images is in their ability to expand our consciousness of Heavenly Mother and the multitude of ways she is made manifest in our lives. They give us a variety of ways to know her and sense her power, and provide women with a vision of femininity that includes- but is not limited to- motherhood.

The Mother in Heaven mystery has so far been a rich resource of spiritual exploration for both women and men. She has been a mystery that has moved many of us to our deepest questions and facilitated a spiritual exploration that has kept a small element of the mystical experience alive in modern Mormonism. I believe that the mystery and silence surrounding Heavenly Mother can continue to be a vehicle for regenerative and creative expression, and that it can reconcile the contradictions that limit our ideas about her. Let us allow the space of uncertainty to become a space of spiritual freedom that nourishes us. As Clarissa Pinkola Estes wrote, “Let us sing her back into our bones.”