

Fig Leaves & Choosing THE PATH OF AUTHENTICITY

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By Kate Kelly • Washington, D.C.

Mother Eve

Mormons revere her as the wise and noble mother of all living. I find our unique theology that helps us see the pivotal role she played in the plan of salvation empowering. And, with scarce few female scriptural role models to look up to, I really admire this woman who emulated fearlessness for all of us, her children.

Faced with an eternal conundrum, she chose the lone and dreary world. She knew the necessity of the fall but had to choose it willingly. Therein lies her nobility. I imagine she was a bright and curious soul. I imagine she couldn't stand not to know. And so she did eat.

Yet, when first her eyes were open she felt shame and an urge to hide. Unlike the emperor who was so caught up in his hubris he could not see his own nakedness, Eve knew immediately the game was up. She couldn't go on living as if nothing had changed. She impulsively grabbed fig leaves to hide the new knowledge she had gained.

Perhaps she saw the glimpse of the lone and dreary world and ducked under that bush as one last pavilion; a respite before taking the path out of the garden. It must have been so tempting to deny what she knew and stay comfortable, innocent, and safe.

And so she was cast out of her safe haven. But I imagine she knew all along that she could not stay. She later acknowledged that the truth had set her free: to experience not only discomfort and hardship but also "the joy of our redemption." She set out for the lone and dreary world, but it was on her own terms and of her own choosing. She knew she would "surely die," but Eve intuited that ignorance, hiding, and stagnation are worse than death.

Ordain Women

Unlike Eve, I have no children, but I am one of the founding mothers of the Ordain Women movement. I decided to start Ordain Women in January of 2013. I wanted the name of the group to be a clear and unequivocal imperative. "Ordain Women" was actionable. We would know when our goal had come to fruition. I had come to a point where I could no longer hide from myself or from others what I knew: you can feel respected, supported, and validated in the Church, but equality can be measured. Equality is not a feeling. In our church men and women are not equal.

In part, it took me thirty-two years to get to this point because it felt like it was easier to feign ignorance and stay in the garden. The lone and dreary world of the fight for female ordination was daunting. Others had fought for women's ordination before me, and many had not fared well. I feared broken relationships, social ostracism, and the thought of formal Church discipline. The thing I feared most was admitting to myself, at last, that I had willingly participated in an institution for three decades that did not see me as an equal to my brothers. But, like Mother Eve, I cannot hide what I know.

I discovered that the first step away from blissful naiveté was glorious and joyful. The day I pushed the button to launch OrdainWomen.org—March 17, 2013, the anniversary of the founding of the Relief Society—was a Sunday. With one click I launched the live version of the site with twenty profiles we had begged, called in favors, and made promises to get, among them many Exponent women. And with one click I was free. Going to church that Sunday was the most joyful worship I had felt since my mission, many years before. My whole authentic self was out there for all to see and I was unashamed.



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Nothing was different about the church services that day. We filed into the wooden pews in the back, a few minutes late, as always. Yet the entire experience was transformed for me. My relationship to the rituals and words being spoken had changed. Even my “amen” felt like it was on my own terms.

Without the Bitter We Cannot Taste the Sweet.....

That same day we launched ordainwomen.org my grandmother posted her deep disappointment online, saying, “This is a sad day for the Church, a sad day for our family, and a sad day for me personally.” Many people had similar negative reactions to our cause but along with the steady flow of hate mail that flowed in came messages of joy and courage. Women reached out to say that they had been waiting for our words and our movement their entire lives. I have been heartened by messages like these:

“I just wanted to write and thank you, all of you who have been influential in getting this website started, for your work. I check OrdainWomen.org almost every day because the testimonies and stories uplift and encourage me. I find so much strength in the words of these many people, old and young, male and female that I’ve never even met. It is so incredible to be able to fellowship in that way.”

“I have wondered what impact seeing your tearful dignity in the face of rigid gender politics has and will have on your sons and daughters. I really believe in my heart that they will carry the torch across the finish line, if Mormon women and men don’t begin quietly re-examining their own hearts in the coming weeks and months. I will hope for the latter. . . . You are right. I’m sure you know that in your hearts. Don’t give up!”

“It may be 100 years, but as long as we are paving the paths for our daughters and granddaughters, I believe

it is all worth it and I know all of you do obviously the way each of you has been so courageous and so brave. I just wanted to tell you that with all the negativity, there are so many people rooting all of you on and who care about you deeply and this movement deeply.”

These messages of support have given me strength. They dilute the bitter and enshrine it in sweetness. The victory of the movement we have formed is embodied in these messages. We cling to each other and find feminine strength and heroes all around us. I have been overwhelmed at the variety of people willing to join with us and speak out.

After that first day, hundreds of Mormon men and women have joined with us. A former bishop, a woman in her stake Relief Society presidency, a currently-serving senior couple, a sister missionary, a sixteen-year-old Laurel, a young man about to enter the MTC. They have all spoken up in support of female ordination. The lone and dreary world feels a lot less lonely knowing they are in it.

Move Us Forward

On August 26, 2013, Ordain Women held an interfaith fast and service called Equal in Faith, with events both in D.C. and Salt Lake City. Our creative Catholic sisters of the Women’s Ordination Conference helped us come up with a Litany of Naming Ritual to celebrate women of faith. Each verse was read aloud, and the entire congregation repeated together the words “MOVE US FORWARD.” It was a powerful experience.

Let us join together as equals in prayer. Let us open our beings to the power of truth and love, and name our strength and its source in the silence of our hearts. Together we seek equality, in the name of what is holy and just.

Through our coming-together, let us bring joyful awareness to our sacred connections, as we journey side by side for equality.

Together we lift up the names and stories of our foremothers, so that we might know grace, find courage, and proclaim a vision of justice. May their stories bring us the strength to move forward—and be a movement for change. We share the names of these women now, as we name ourselves as their descendants.

As Mormons we contributed the following verses to the ritual:

Emma Hale Smith and Eliza R. Snow, president and prophetess, you gave Mormon women a voice from the founding of the Church, you modeled for us the pattern of revelation and spoke about our Heavenly Mother, you established the Women's Relief Society, and you were ordained into the highest priesthood. EMMA AND ELIZA, MOVE US FORWARD.

Emmeline B. Wells, you led the Relief Society as president, published a Mormon suffragist periodical, the *Woman's Exponent*, and wrote forcefully about women's rights; and Martha Hughes Cannon, you also

advocated tirelessly for women's rights and suffrage, and, as a practicing physician, you were the first female state senator elected in the United States, defeating your husband, who was also on the ballot. EMMELINE AND MARTHA, MOVE US FORWARD.

To those verses I now add:

Mother Eve, with wisdom and resolution you took a bold step into the unknown. You moved past shame to fully embrace your vision. You not only gave us life, but also taught us what it means to fully live one. You continue to fill us courage and strength. MOTHER EVE, MOVE US FORWARD.



"Watercolor 1" by Brooke Williams, New Haven, Connecticut