

“Becoming Women of God”

Mary N. Cook

This address was given Thursday, April 28, 2011 at the BYU Women’s Conference

© 2011 by Brigham Young University Women’s Conference. All rights reserved.

For further information write:

BYU Women’s Conference

161 Harman Continuing Education Building

Provo, Utah 84602

801-422-7692

E-mail: womens_conference@byu.edu

Home page: <http://womensconference.byu.edu>

I would like to explore now how we can become a woman of God and specifically how can we influence our young women to become more virtuous and righteous daughters of God.

One of the great principles that I learned in this recent past general conference was that of “desire,” as taught by Elder Dallin H. Oaks. He said:

“Desires dictate our priorities, priorities shape our choices, and choices determine our actions. The desires we act on determine our changing, our achieving, and our becoming. ...

“When we have a vision of what we can become, our desire and our power to act increase enormously.”¹

During the past four months, my husband has been through his third recurrence of a serious illness. He is the only man in the audience, I might say, and I’m so happy he’s here. Thank you, sweetie.

Near the end of his treatments, we had a life-and-death scare with an adverse reaction he had to one of his drugs. Through fasting, prayer, priesthood blessing, temple attendance, and the faith of many, I might add, his health has been restored. An experience like this gives one a focused look at life and eternity. As a couple, our desires have changed, and as a result, our priorities have shifted. This has been such a life-changing experience that we have altered forever our priorities, and our choices, and thus our actions.

If you desire enough, you do have within yourself the ability to become a woman of God. I pray that you will come to know today of your own identity as I have in just these past few months—that I am a daughter of God, and that he does know me. I will pray that you will be able to recognize that your testimony can fuel the trials that you will face; and through your worthiness that you may access the power of the Holy Ghost. As women of God, guardians of virtue, we are

the examples who can create a chain reaction of righteousness, and indeed we can change the world.

“The Family: A Proclamation to the World” verifies that we come to earth with a divine nature and destiny: “All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny.”²

I would like to show you a short video clip right now of Lauren, a young child reciting the thirteenth article of faith, which is the 2011 Mutual theme this year. As you watch this, I want you to reflect on children and how each one does come to the earth with that inherent divine nature. [Video of three-year-old Lauren repeating the thirteenth article of faith from memory]

I giggle every time I see that. But at this early age, Lauren believes! She has confidence, hope, enthusiasm, and yes, maybe just a little bit of pride for this accomplishment—after all, this was the conclusion of her reciting all 13 Articles of Faith. But a concern we have for women, and especially our young women, is that the adversary, in subtle but by very real ways, is extinguishing that spark of divine nature. Of course Satan would target women; we are the greatest influencers! How can we resist this pull of the world and realize our divine potential?

I would like us to consider what we can do to not only fan the spark of our own divine nature, but also how each of us can help others to fan the flame of their own divine nature.

As you may know, the purpose of the Young Women program is to help each young woman be worthy to make and receive covenants and receive the ordinances of the temple, that she might return to her Heavenly Father. In order to accomplish this, we have several objectives that we hope each young woman will achieve. Three of these objectives will not only help a young woman prepare for temple blessings, but it will help her to be well on her way to becoming a woman of God:

- First, *identity*. She must understand her identity as a daughter of God.
- Second, *testimony*. She must strengthen her faith and testimony in Jesus Christ.
- And third, the *Spirit*. She must be worthy to receive, recognize, and rely upon the promptings of the Holy Ghost.

I would like to make a comparison of these objectives to the components of fire. Let me talk a moment about fire in very simple terms. In order to create fire, four elements are required: oxygen, fuel, and heat, which, when combined, produces a chain reaction. This is referred to as the fire tetrahedron. Fires start when a flammable material, or *fuel*, in combination with a sufficient quantity of an oxidizer such as *oxygen*, is exposed to a source of *heat* and is able to sustain a rate of rapid oxidation, producing a *chain reaction*. Now, let me draw these comparisons.

Oxygen is life giving. Our Heavenly Father is the giver of life. We *are* His spirit daughters, created in His image. In choosing to follow our Heavenly Father’s plan, we were permitted to come to earth and experience mortal life. And the gift of eternal life is made possible through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. To know where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going is key to understanding who we are—this is our *identity*.

Fuel is something that sustains. Our knowledge of the plan of salvation and of the Savior’s role in that plan sustains us through mortality. A *testimony* is the fuel that will sustain us through life’s challenges.

Heat. One definition of *heat* is “intensity of feeling.”³ We often associate the promptings of the Holy Ghost with feelings. In Galatians 5:22–23 we are taught that the fruits of the Spirit are really feelings: “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.” As women of God, we will need the guidance of the Holy Ghost. We must be worthy to receive, recognize, and rely on those feelings or promptings of the *Spirit*.

A *chain reaction* is a series of events in which each one influences the next. As members of the Church, we have been given the responsibility to build the kingdom of God and help others realize their divine nature and destiny. Example is key to helping others recognize this divine nature, particularly our children. We are the models, we are the mentors, the teachers to help them define their identity, strengthen their testimonies, and give them experiences with the Spirit.

Just as each of these components is required to ignite a fire, a fire can be extinguished by removing any one of these elements of this fire tetrahedron.

So let’s consider identity, testimony, and Spirit in light of some of the statements in the Young Women theme that is repeated worldwide each week by our young women.

First, “We are daughters of our Heavenly Father, who loves us, and we love Him.” This *is* our identity. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf said:

“Much of the confusion we experience in this life comes from simply not understanding who we are. Too many go about their lives thinking they are of little worth when, in reality, they are elegant and eternal creatures of infinite value with potential beyond imagination.

“Discovering who we really are is part of this great adventure called *life*. ...

“... God has given again in these latter-days the truths about where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going.

“... You are something divine—more beautiful and glorious than you can possibly imagine. This knowledge changes everything. It changes your present. It can change your future. And it can change the world.”⁴

Knowing our identity does change everything. It gives us perspective; it provides confidence and direction. Like oxygen, it does give us *life!*

However, “the adversary is having a heyday distorting attitudes about gender and roles and about families and individual worth.”⁵

He is doing his best to distort and suffocate our true identity.

Elder Ballard expressed this concern when he taught us that some are falling victim to—who we should be. He said: “For that reason I am concerned about what I see happening with some of our young women. Satan would have you dress, talk, and behave in unnatural and destructive ways in your relationships with young men. ... He is the author of mass confusion about the value, the role, the contribution, and the unique nature of women. Today’s popular culture, which is preached by every form of media from the silver screen to the Internet, celebrates the sexy, saucy, socially aggressive woman. These distortions are seeping into the thinking of some of our own women.”⁶

Do you really know who you are? Are your desires, priorities, choices, and actions consistent with your identity as a daughter of God, or are Satan’s distortions seeping into your life and dousing your spark of divinity? Sisters, the best way we can influence each other and especially our young women is to understand our own identity and that we are women of God and to live our beliefs with confidence.

Now let’s consider another declaration of the Young Women theme: “We will ‘stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places’” (Mosiah 18:9).

In order to witness, we must have a testimony. I’m sure all of you have a desire for your testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ to be strengthened, or you wouldn’t be here today. Our testimony will be the fuel that will sustain us through the tests and trials of life.

We teach Beehives at Young Women camp the essentials to building a successful fire. Their first assignment, as you all know, is to gather the tinder. It takes time and effort to collect enough tinder to start a fire. Testimonies are like that. Testimonies grow gradually through an accumulation of spiritual experiences—most of them quiet and small. No one receives a testimony completely all at once. And like a fire, it takes constant rekindling. As President Henry B. Eyring counseled the young women this past March at our General Young Women meeting:

“Your living testimony will expand as you study, pray, and ponder in the scriptures. ...

“Frequent and heartfelt prayers of faith are crucial and needed nutrients. Obedience to the truth you have received will keep the testimony alive and strengthen it. Obedience to the commandments is part of the nourishment you must provide for your testimony.”

He then warned: “There is danger in neglecting prayer. There is danger to our testimony in only casual study and reading of the scriptures.”⁷

To feed the fire of a young woman’s testimony, we have asked each of the young women to do four small and simple things, 100 percent, every day: Pray night and morning; read the Book of Mormon five minutes every day; obey and live the commandments and standards in *For the Strength of Youth*; and finally, *smile*—because as 2 Nephi 9:39 reminds us, “to be spiritually-minded is life eternal.”

We have asked Young Women leaders to lead out in setting the example in consistently doing what we are calling the PROS—Pray, Read, Obey, and Smile. Many have witnessed to us of the difference it is making not only in their callings but also in their relationships and in their families, and these are small and simple things to do.

If you want to help a young woman strengthen her testimony, teach her by example how to daily rekindle her testimony to keep it aglow. Help her realize that for the rest of her life, her living and growing testimony will be the fuel that will fortify her and keep her on the path to eternal life.

Vital to becoming women of God is to receive, recognize, and rely on the guidance of the Holy Ghost. A third statement from the Young Women theme that will help us qualify for that guidance is, “We [will] strive to *live* the Young Women values, which are: faith, divine nature, individual worth, knowledge, choice and accountability, good works, integrity, and virtue” (italics added). Living these values will demonstrate our desire to remain worthy for the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. Worthiness will give us the confidence we need to set priorities, make correct choices, and act upon the promptings of the Holy Ghost.

Elder Neil L. Andersen cautioned:

“We live in a time when transportation, communication, and access to information all tower in comparison to the past. But moral issues such as honesty, chastity, Sabbath observance, family responsibility, and even the sanctity of life—issues long held in unison by the world and by Latter-day Saints—now find themselves interpreted in every way and open to debate (see D&C 1:16).

“As the developments of technology and communication ever press the modern world upon us, being in the world but not of the world requires that we make constant choices and decisions (see John 17:14). Spiritual discernment is paramount. As disciples of Christ, we must make the gift of the Holy Ghost a conscious, daily, prayerful part of our lives. ...

“How can we use this heavenly gift as a vital compass for our daily actions? We must believe that even in our weaknesses, the still, small voice we feel comes from our Father. We must pray and ask and seek and then not be afraid when answers come into our heart and mind. Believe they are divine. They are.”⁸

Disobedience suffocates these divine promptings of the Holy Ghost. Nephi explains: “Ye are swift to do iniquity but slow to remember the Lord your God....yea, ye have heard his voice from time to time; and he hath spoken unto you in a still small voice, but ye were past feeling, that ye could not feel his words.”⁹

As women of God, we must constantly strive to be worthy of the Spirit. We must do everything we can to make our lives and our homes a sanctuary for the Spirit. Beware of becoming “past feeling” because of the noise of the world telling you “who you aren’t” or who you “need to be,” having the world compete for your time, and make your life so complex that you cannot “feel his words.” Make it a priority to “be still” so that you can hear the promptings of the Holy Ghost that will help you make these correct choices and give you the confidence that your actions are consistent with a woman of God.

As you and I know, values and standards are being cast adrift. Values and standards must be taught and exemplified in the home, as women *are* the greatest influencers. We *are* the guardians of virtue. We *are* the examples. We are the catalysts to start a chain reaction that *can* change the world.

Following the recent earthquake in Japan, I read this response to the question, “Why don’t the Japanese loot?”

“In Japan, people are conditioned not to bring shame to themselves or their family. ... Thomas Lifson describes how people even in large urban areas do not live in anonymity. People associate a person’s actions with the family, and everyone is taught a deep respect for property.

“... If a child finds even a small coin, a parent will take the child to the police to report the item as lost. ... The police take this seriously because they see it as a way of passing along moral instruction.”¹⁰

Our examples *do* matter! Women are the catalysts of these chain reactions in society. Elder Ballard described it this way: “Every sister who stands for truth and righteousness diminishes the influence of evil. Every sister who strengthens and protects her family is doing the work of God. Every sister who lives as a woman of God becomes a beacon for others to follow and plants seeds of righteous influence that will be harvested for decades to come. Every sister who makes and keeps sacred covenants becomes an instrument in the hands of God.”¹¹

Identity, testimony, and Spirit—three key factors to become women of God. Guard each of these components, and if one is flickering in your own life, access the enabling power of the Atonement to make necessary changes.

Think of young women you know who are really just in that embryonic stage of becoming women of God. Should you see one of these components in a young woman dimming, I hope that you would help her by sharing your love, your wisdom, and your example.

Remember Elder Oaks's promise: "When we have a vision of what we can become, our desire and our power to act increase enormously."¹²

Now, as daughters of God, I would like to invite you stand and repeat the Young Women theme with me. And as you do, consider the vision of whom you can become.

(All repeat Young Women theme)

Thank you, sisters. That was music to my ears.

In closing, may I remind you of one of my favorite quotes from President Spencer W. Kimball that I know you have heard often: "Much of the major growth that is coming to the Church in the last days will come because many of the good women of the world...will be drawn to the Church in large numbers. This will happen to the degree that the women of the Church reflect righteousness and articulateness in their lives and to the degree that the women of the Church are seen as distinct and different—in happy ways—from the women of the world. ... Thus it will be that female exemplars of the Church will be a significant force in both the numerical and the spiritual growth of the Church in the last days...."¹³

I spoke at the Relief Society meeting at the MTC just last Sunday, with those beautiful sister missionaries who are some of the "exemplars of the Church." I learned from one of these young sisters who said something like this: "We do not know and can't really comprehend what our potential is, and we should not deprive our Savior of the opportunity to help us become all that He knows we can become." Our Savior wants us to be women of God, and He will help us. He needs women of God to fulfill His purposes. And I testify that if we will desire enough, it is within us to become women of God who truly can change the world. And I bear this testimony humbly, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

¹ Dallin H. Oaks, "Desire," *Ensign*, May 2011, 42, 44.

² "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.

³ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (2003), "heat."

⁴ Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "The Reflection in the Water" (Church Educational System fireside for young adults at Brigham Young University, Nov. 1, 2009), institute.lds.org.

⁵ M. Russell Ballard, "Women of Righteousness," *Ensign*, Apr. 2002, 69.

⁶ M. Russell Ballard, "Women of Righteousness," 69.

⁷ Henry B. Eyring, "A Living Testimony," *Ensign*, May 2011, 126, 127.

⁸ Neil L. Andersen, "A Gift Worthy of Added Care," *Ensign*, Dec. 2010, 32–33.

⁹ 1 Nephi 17:45.

¹⁰ Jay Evensen, "Why Don't the Japanese Loot?" *Deseret News*, Mar. 20, 2011, G1.

¹¹ M. Russell Ballard, "Women of Righteousness," 70.

¹² Dallin H. Oaks, "Desire," 44.

¹³ *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball* (2006), 222–23.