

*Legacy of Relief Society*  
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It's such a privilege for me to be here with you today. I have felt of the grand spirits of each of you women, and brothers who are with us as well.

Recently, you may have noticed that there's been a lot of emphasis on the history of Relief Society. Why do you think there has been such an interest in this? What are we supposed to be learning as we study our history? Over the past months, I have been given the opportunity to study and write about our great Relief Society legacy. It's been a wonderful, challenging, and miraculous journey. I am so grateful for all I've learned about the divinity of the Relief Society organization and also for the ordinary yet extraordinary women I have met from our past. These are noble examples of faith, testimony, sacrifice, and charity. I've come to love and admire them. For a few moments I will share some of what I have learned about Relief Society's inspiring legacy.

As I immersed myself in this history, I felt again powerfully of Heavenly Father's great love for His daughters and of their crucial place and important purposes in His plan. Sisters, He knows us. He needs us. There are things we need to do, people we need to bless, virtues we need to develop, and ways we need to behave.

Many of you may have a vague idea about the beginning of Relief Society in Nauvoo in 1842. You may think that it began with a few sisters who wanted to create a sewing society to make shirts for the men who were building the temple. In the mid-1800s it was popular for women to create such benevolent societies. When the Prophet Joseph Smith heard of these stirrings among the women, he invited them to meet him above the Red Brick Store on March 17, where he would share, as he said, "something better" for them.<sup>i</sup>

As the gospel and the church organization were gradually revealed to him, Joseph Smith had learned of the exalted station of women in our Father's plan. He taught the sisters that "the Church was never perfectly organized until the women were thus organized."<sup>ii</sup> In that first meeting he organized them "under the priesthood after the pattern of the priesthood,"<sup>iii</sup> and with the opportunity to receive all of the blessings of the Priesthood. He told them that this

“charitable Society. . . is according to your natures—it is natural for females to have feelings of charity—you are now plac’d in a situation where you can act according to those sympathies which God has planted in your bosoms.”<sup>iv</sup> Latter-day Saint women would now have greater scope, opportunity, and authorization to be participants in God’s work.

Joseph Smith taught the sisters on numerous occasions in their Relief Society meetings during that inaugural summer of 1842. We have minutes of those choice discourses, carefully recorded by Eliza R. Snow and safely guarded in her keeping as she journeyed across the plains to the Salt Lake Valley. He taught the sisters that the purpose of Relief Society was “not only to relieve the poor but to save souls.”<sup>v</sup> They were taught to become holy women, “to repent and get the love of God.”<sup>vi</sup> Meekness, love, purity, these are the things that should magnify us,” he said.<sup>vii</sup> One specific way he encouraged the sisters to be better is to hold their tongues. He said, “put a double watch over the tongue...the tongue is an unruly member—hold your tongues about things of no moment—a little tale will set the world on fire.”<sup>viii</sup> I think that this meaningful advice could well be taught to women in our Relief Societies today, don’t you? Our Nauvoo sisters were qualifying themselves to receive all of the priesthood blessings of the temple. Their intentions in the beginning were to help prepare a temple for the people. But under the guidance of a prophet, they also participated in preparing a people for the temple. In short, the sisters were taught to serve others, to save families, and to sanctify themselves. Not surprisingly, these foundational principles continue today as our guiding purposes in Relief Society. You have often heard Sister Beck say “the Lord has commissioned each Relief Society sister and the organization as a whole to: 1. Increase in faith and personal righteousness. 2. To strengthen families and homes. And 3. To serve the Lord and His children.”<sup>ix</sup>

So how are we doing as women today in fulfilling these purposes? Let me tell you about an experience I had as I worked on this project. I had written to a certain point, and then I wasn’t sure how to proceed. I was stumped. After one particularly frustrating day where I couldn’t figure out what to do next, I had a very vivid dream, which I am not prone to have. I was hiking and following a man up ahead of me who seemed to know where he was going. But then he turned a corner, and I lost sight of him. I couldn’t find my way. Then, suddenly, as it is in dreams, I found myself lost within the four walls of an amusement park with no way out. I could see over the walls to where I needed to be, but I couldn’t figure out how to get there. I was so frustrated, and then I woke up. It occurred to me that, as I thought about this dream, that it was an allegory of my situation. I was lost in an amusement park, and the things of the world were crowding out the spiritual influences I needed to help me in this project. And then I thought, “Maybe this is an allegory about many of the sisters of the Church around me. They might be stuck in an amusement park, too, allowing themselves to get distracted and diverted from their noble responsibilities.” Emma Smith was told to “lay aside the things of this world, and seek for the things of a better.”<sup>x</sup> We know that Section 25 was not for Emma alone, but was His “voice unto *all*.” (italics added)<sup>xi</sup>

My husband asked me how I got out of the amusement park. Well, I didn’t in the dream. But several days later President Henry B. Eyring gave a talk at the general Relief Society meeting about the history of Relief Society. I was thrilled by his words and filled with the Spirit. As I studied every word, I was inspired to know how to continue with my project. I testify that there is a spirit about this history. I was also inspired by Eliza R. Snow, the great poetess of the early

Church, who described how the Spirit guides and comforts us and protects us from worldly trials. She said:

“To be sure we have trials; but what are they? I want to ask my sisters now a serious question. When you are filled with the Spirit of God, and the Holy Ghost rests upon you—that comforter which Jesus promised and which takes of the things of God and gives them to us, and shows us things to come, and brings all things to our remembrance—when you are filled with this Spirit, do you have any trials? I do not think you do. For that [spirit] satisfies and fills up every longing of the human heart.... When I am filled with that Spirit my soul is satisfied, and I can say in good earnest, that the trifling things of the day do not seem to stand in my way at all. But just let me lose my hold of that spirit and power of the Gospel and partake of the spirit of the world, in the slightest degree, and trouble comes; there is something wrong. I am tried, and what will comfort me? You cannot impart comfort to me . . . but that which comes from the Fountain above. And is it not our privilege to so live that we can have this constantly flowing into our souls?”<sup>xii</sup>

That spirit which flows to us from the Fountain above will comfort us and help us to rise above the trials, distractions, and amusements of the world. The truth of Eliza R. Snow’s words reached my heart. President Eyring said, “The history of Relief Society is recorded in words and numbers, but the heritage is passed heart to heart.”<sup>xiii</sup> I have loved how the sisters from the past have touched my heart. They have taught me by their examples of faith, sacrifice, testimony, wisdom, charitable acts; by their ability to live by the Spirit and by personal revelation, and by their stories of everyday righteous living.

Someday I can’t wait to meet Zina Diantha Huntington Young. I feel like we are kindred spirits. She was asked to help Eliza R. Snow re-establish Relief Societies in the Salt Lake Valley. Eliza was known as the “head” because of her articulate leadership style, and Zina was known as the “heart” because of her tender nature. In her patriarchal blessing Zina was blessed with nurturing, healing gifts, which she used in her home and as a midwife.

Brigham Young called Zina to be in charge of the silk industry, which was established as part of the Church’s great efforts at becoming self-sufficient. She abhorred the silkworms, even having nightmares about them, but she did what she was asked to do.

After her mother’s death, Zina was inconsolable. Finally one night she heard her mother’s voice say to her, “Zina, any sailor can steer on a smooth sea; when rocks appear, sail around them.” In answer Zina cried, “O Father in heaven, help me to be a good sailor, that my heart shall not break on the rocks of grief.”<sup>xiv</sup> I love this story. It makes me want to be a good sailor too.

The widowed Mary Fielding Smith had nothing but her strong testimony and the guidance of the Spirit as she left Nauvoo in her extreme poverty. She walked by faith with her fellow Saints to Winter Quarters, across the Missouri River, and into the valleys of the mountains without sufficient wagons or teams. She said, “‘The Lord will open the way,’ but how He would open the way no one knew.”<sup>xv</sup> Later her son, President Joseph F. Smith, remembered how his mother’s unwavering devotion to God served as a protecting shield for him. He said, “Would not her children be unworthy of such a mother did they not hearken to and follow her example?...

Whenever...temptations became most alluring and most tempting to me, the first thought that arose in my soul was this: Remember the love of your mother. . . . Remember how willing she was to sacrifice her life for your good. . . . This feeling toward my mother became a defense, a barrier between me and temptation.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Mary Fielding Smith instills in me the desire to have my children see me live with faith in every act as she did.

Lucy Meserve Smith, a little known pioneer woman from Provo, was present in the Salt Lake Tabernacle in October 1856 when Brigham Young announced there were stranded and destitute handcart companies, caught in early snowstorms, that needed immediate help. She, along with others, stripped off her petticoat and stockings right there in the Tabernacle and began loading wagons with these personal donations. As a local Relief Society president, she said, “We did all we could . . . to comfort the needy as they came in with handcarts late in the fall.... The bishops could hardly carry the bedding and other clothing we got together.... We did not cease our exertions ‘til all were made comfortable.... I never took more satisfaction and I might say, pleasure in any labor I ever performed in my life..... We wallowed through the snow until our clothes were wet a foot high to get things together. . .” And then—my favorite line from her journal entry comes last. After her extensive labor of love, she says, “What comes next for willing hands to do?”<sup>xvii</sup> This simple statement typifies Relief Society sisters past and present, who willingly, lovingly, tirelessly reach out to those who are in need. It’s become a motto for me: “What comes next for willing hands to do?”

In my studies, I met another extraordinary ordinary woman: Louise Yates Robison. Sister Robison grew up on a farm in Scipio, Utah, where she learned all the pioneer skills of self-sufficiency—to raise animals, grow a garden, weave cloth, sew, and cook. When the 6<sup>th</sup> general Relief Society president, Clarissa Williams, was called, it was announced over the pulpit that Louise Robison would be her second counselor. Louise raised her hand in support of the new counselor, surprised that she had a name so similar to hers. When she realized that she was the one who had been called, Louise was so upset. She did not think she had the qualifications to fulfill this assignment. When she went to President Heber J. Grant’s office to be set apart, she told him that she was willing to serve, but that she felt sure he had been misinformed about her abilities. She told him that she had a limited education and very little money and social position, and she was afraid that she wouldn’t be the example that women of the Relief Society would expect in a leader. She said, “I’m just a humble woman.” President Grant responded, “Sister Louizy, 85 percent of the women of our church are humble women. We are calling you to be the leader of them.”<sup>xviii</sup> Later she was called as 7<sup>th</sup> general Relief Society president during the years of the Great Depression. She was perfectly well suited to preside in hard times. She lived by the motto, “Welcome the task that takes you beyond yourself.”<sup>xix</sup>

Sister Louise Robison initiated “Singing Mothers” choruses, for she believed that a “singing mother makes a happy home.”<sup>xx</sup> This is a personally important legacy to me, because my mother was a “Singing Mother.” One of my earliest memories of Relief Society was going with her to song practices. And yes, she did bring happiness into our home with her constant singing.

My mother was a Relief Society woman in every way—devoted to strengthening her family, reaching out to others in need, and always striving to grow in her personal righteousness. Her all-consuming service as the 11<sup>th</sup> general Relief Society president reduced her to tears one night when she returned home after a very long day. “What’s wrong?” my dad asked. She said, “I just wish I had some time to give some service.” He almost laughed. “But that is all you do, all day every day,” he said. “But my friend just had surgery, and there are new babies in the ward, and I would like to be taking food to them and helping them.”<sup>xxxi</sup> She wanted to provide the same kind of loving care for her close neighbors as she had always done.

My mom, Barbara W. Winder, left a lasting legacy of unity for the Church. She was called at a time when the auxiliaries were quite independent from each other. She was asked to unify the auxiliaries under the priesthood umbrella. She said, “I want so, and desire so, that we be unified, one together with the priesthood, serving and building the kingdom of God.”<sup>xxii</sup> This unity with the priesthood and the auxiliaries continues to be the pattern today as we work closely together in families and in councils, for we know that if we are not one, we are not His.<sup>xxiii</sup>

After learning about the lives of these women and a host of other women with great faith, I felt like the Apostle Paul, who said, “seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.”<sup>xxiv</sup> We the women of the Church are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have laid aside the problems and temptations that beset them to run the race the Lord has set before them.

Every generation has noble, charitable, faithful, holy women. Although few of these women are well known to history, they are all well known to God, which is all that ultimately matters. As Eliza R. Snow put it, “There are many of the sisters whose labors are not known beyond their own dwellings and perhaps not appreciated there, but what difference does that make? If your labors are acceptable to God, however simple the duties, if faithfully performed, you should never be discouraged.”<sup>xxv</sup>

Each of us in our own small or large spheres has the opportunity to add our stories to the pages of the history of Relief Society. It is now our turn, as Joseph Smith urged, “to live up to our privileges.”<sup>xxvi</sup> A sister from my stake told how she was blessed by the Relief Society and then gave back in return.

Lynne was in her late teens when her stepfather, who was on a military training mission, was shot in a senseless shooting. She and her mother quickly got on a military plane to go to him, but partway through the journey, they learned that he had died. Grief-stricken and confused, they returned to the base. She recalled, “As my mother and I, exhausted and heartsick, walked down the steps from the plane, [a] man and a woman standing on the airstrip walked over and put their arms around us. It was the branch president and the Relief Society president, neither of whom we had met before.”

In the week that followed, “Sisters we had never met floated in and out of the kitchen of our quarters like soft shadows, bringing food to serve the officers and families who came to call, then

cleaning up. Then staying, serving food again, and cleaning up again. Those days were confusing as we struggled to deal with the fact that Stew was dead, a victim of a senseless shooting. But there was always a sister there, waiting quietly in the background—to take messages, to answer the door, to hold our hands as we made phone calls to our families and friends. . . . Through it all, I developed such a sense of gratitude that I couldn't imagine how I could repay those dear sisters.”

Several years later, when Lynne was married with three small children, she was called to serve in a Relief Society presidency. At times she wondered if she could meet the demands of the calling. “But then the memory came back,” and she said to herself, “Now . . . it's my turn.”

“A woman in the ward had lost her fourteen-year-old daughter. The mother asked me to buy a beautiful gown and to dress her daughter's body in it in preparation for the burial. I was able to do it—and found it a very tender experience. It was my turn to serve, as those sisters in North Carolina had served me.

“An elderly woman in the ward who lived alone overdosed on her medications and was in a helpless condition for three days. The other counselor and I found her still alive in her apartment and cleaned her up before the ambulance arrived. We then stayed to scrub the apartment—walls and floors—with disinfectant. My turn again.

“A young mother in the ward, one of my best friends, suddenly lost her only child, a beautiful three-year-old daughter, to an infection that took her life before the doctors were even aware of how serious her illness was. The other counselor and I went to the house as soon as we heard of little Robin's death. As we approached the screened patio door, we heard the father (who was not a member of the Church) sobbing as he talked long distance to his mother. Looking up, he saw us and, still sobbing, spoke into the phone: ‘It will be all right, Mother. The Mormon women are here.’ My turn once more.”

Lynne says that when people ask her what she thinks of Relief Society, she tells them her story. She says, “That's how I feel about Relief Society way down deep.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

We as women resonate to Lynne's “way down deep” feelings about Relief Society. Because we too have been surrounded by “so great a cloud of witnesses,” we are ready to “run...the race that is set before us.”

President Joseph F. Smith urged Latter-day Saint women to “lead the world and to lead especially the women of the world, in everything that is praise-worthy, everything that is God-like, everything that is uplifting and that is purifying.” He said: “You are called by the voice of the Prophet of God to do it, to be uppermost, to be the greatest and the best, the purest and the most devoted to the right”<sup>xxviii</sup>

My daughters are here today. They, too, are my examples. They, like the noble women of the past, stand as witnesses of everything that is pure and right. They know that they are daughters of God with responsibilities to bless and serve His children. They know that they belong to a divinely inspired organization which prepares them to receive all the blessings the Father has for

them and gives them vision and direction to serve others and strengthen their families. Like Zina Young, they are nurturers and healers. Like Mary Fielding Smith they live with faith and testimony. Like Lucy Meserve Smith, they provide relief for those in need. Like Louise Yates Robison, no matter how humble they feel, they do whatever they are called to do. Like their grandmother Barbara Winder, they cheerfully sing in their homes and work unitedly with priesthood brethren in their families and in their callings.

I want my granddaughters, Jane, Claire, Susie, Eliza, Emma, Hannah, Abby, Annie, Gracie, and Natalie, to know of the legacy that is theirs through this great organization of Relief Society. I want them to know their mothers' stories of faith, testimony, and charity—and their mothers, and their mothers. Because then they will know who they are and what their purposes are. They will do as the Prophet Joseph urged, “to act according to those sympathies which God has planted in [their] bosoms . . . (to) live up to [their] privileges.” And they like each of us here will be worthy to receive the blessing that he promised that, “the angels cannot be restrained from being your associates.”<sup>xxix</sup> In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes:

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- <sup>i</sup> Joseph Smith, in Relief Society Minute Book, Nauvoo, Illinois, Apr. 28, 1842, 40.
- <sup>ii</sup> Joseph Smith, quoted in Sarah M. Kimball, “Auto-Biography,” *Women’s Exponent*, Sept. 1, 1883, 51.
- <sup>iii</sup> Sarah M. Kimball, “Auto-Biography,” *Women’s Exponent*, Sept. 1, 1883, 51.
- <sup>iv</sup> Joseph Smith, in Relief Society Minute Book, Nauvoo, Illinois, Apr. 28, 1842, 38.
- <sup>v</sup> Joseph Smith, in Relief Society Minute Book, Nauvoo, Illinois, June 9, 1842, 63.
- <sup>vi</sup> Joseph Smith, in Relief Society Minute book, Nauvoo, Illinois, June 9, 1842, 63.
- <sup>vii</sup> Joseph Smith, in Relief Society Minute Book, Nauvoo, Illinois, Apr. 28, 1842, 38.
- <sup>viii</sup> Joseph Smith, in Relief Society Minute Book, Nauvoo, Illinois, May 26, 1842, 52.
- <sup>ix</sup> Julie B. Beck, “Fulfilling the Purpose of Relief Society,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2008.
- <sup>x</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 25:10.
- <sup>xi</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 25:16.
- <sup>xii</sup> “An Address by Miss Eliza R. Snow,” *Millennial Star*, Jan. 13, 1874, 18.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Henry B. Eyring, “The Enduring Legacy of Relief Society,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2009, 121.
- <sup>xiv</sup> “Mother,” *The Young Woman’s Journal* 22 (Jan. 1911): 45.
- <sup>xv</sup> Joseph F. Smith, in *Deseret Weekly*, Jan. 9, 1892, 71.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith (1998), 32, 35.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Lucy Meserve Smith, “Historical Sketches of My Great Grandfathers,” 54.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Gladys Robison Winter, in *The Life and Family of Louise Yates Robison*, comp. Gladys Robison Winter, Church History Library, MS 9129, Fd. 2.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Elect Ladies*, by Janet Peterson and LaRene Gaunt, 1990, 124.
- <sup>xx</sup> *Elect Ladies*, by Janet Peterson and LaRene Gaunt, 1990, 122.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Personal memories.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Ensign*, May 1984, 59.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 38:27.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Hebrews 12:1-2.
- <sup>xxv</sup> *Elect Ladies*, by Janet Peterson and LaRene Gaunt, 1990, 37.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Joseph Smith, in Relief Society Minute Book, Nauvoo, Illinois, Apr. 28, 1842, 38.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> “Now It’s My Turn,” Lynne Christy, *Ensign*, March 1992, 25-27.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith (1998), 184.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Joseph Smith, in Relief Society Minute Book, Nauvoo, Illinois, Apr. 28, 1842, 38.