

Curation and Creation:

A Reflection on Faith through Motherhood and Academia

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I am, what some might call, a convert to motherhood.

Raised in Orem, Utah, I grew up surrounded by hundreds of Latter-day Saint mothers. There was no shortage of examples of women who served tirelessly, behaved faithfully, and lived stalwartly. My neighborhood and ward were filled with mothers who watched over their children diligently and could reliably be found just inside the front door when a child sought reassurance or loving aid. My own mother was among these beautiful women. Certainly, there were outlying examples of LDS women who had to work outside the home to make ends meet, but I never considered them.

My mother, Annette, battled nearly a decade of infertility, and when motherhood finally graced her life, she was fulfilled every whit. She poured her whole self into my care with never a hint of resentment. Her rose-colored memories are full of pure joy. Every late night a pleasure, a child's constant chatter music to her ears. It never occurred to me that I could or would possibly feel differently when my time for motherhood arrived.

I excelled in school and was fortunate to earn a Bachelor's and then Master's Degree in French Studies from BYU. My years in these programs were filled with inspiring professors who not only taught French grammar, but shared testimony while drawing a Christian allegory to Baudelaire's poem *The Albatross* or analyzing the role of spirituality in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë*. After my scholastic successes, I unquestioningly began my own path toward motherhood. In a matter of months, I went from feeling invigorated with ideas and energized by learning, to spending day after solitary day alone, at home, fully overwhelmed by the simultaneously stressful yet often mundane life with a newborn. I failed to understand how I could feel such deep love when looking into my son's beautiful face, yet still feel pangs of emptiness as I pumped milk, bounced him through his cries, and counted the hours until my husband came home. The guilt swept through me daily as I struggled between the sharp juxtaposition of my newfound adoration for my perfect son and the sense of loss I felt as I wandered through my silent apartment.

Sarah Bachelard in her meditative book *Experiencing God in a time of Crisis* explains that the difference between a painful or difficult experience and a crisis is that with the latter comes a dislocation and a need to find a new self to deal with the new problems. A crisis engenders a discernment and a turning point. Thus, for me, becoming a mother forced me to turn my fragile self to face the winds of a meaningful future. As I persisted, I experienced what Bachelard describes when she writes, "Events of crisis open the possibility of being led into a deeper wholeness..."¹

As the years passed by and two more sons graced my life, my conversion to motherhood grew exponentially as I found joy in my strengths and grew more comfortable accepting my weaknesses. I learned how to cultivate small adventures, packing my children up for museum trips or ventures into the big cities in which we lived. I developed radical acceptance for my inability to make funny voices or invent a make-believe game on the floor. I exposed my sons to

¹ Sarah Bachelard, *Experiencing God in a Time of Crisis*, Miami: Convivium Press, 2012.

classic and contemporary art in Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and more. Our small car carried us on explorations of tiny towns and new forests, sandy beaches and unique lighthouses. After years of taping photos of famous paintings and sculptures around our kitchen, I had finally saved enough tutoring money to take our family to France for the summer. We spent a dreamy five weeks elbowing our way to the front of museum crowds, soaking in architectural marvels, and playing *flâneur* in dozens of Parisian streets and parks. Through big moments and small, I had finally curated a mode through which motherhood felt less oppressive and rather more restorative and *generative*. Moreover, as I, with God's help, exercised my agency within my own version of motherhood, I cultivated a sense of empowerment.

After ten years as *maman au foyer* and homemaker, with my youngest entering preschool, I considered the possibility of taking up my studies again in Boston University's French PhD program. I felt excited at the prospects and comforted that my kids would be safe in school during much of my study time. My husband was the key supporter in this dream and enthusiastically encouraged me to apply. After months of waiting crawled by, I finally had my response: I was waitlisted, in the first position. I began to question myself: Did God disapprove of my choice to do a PhD? Had my decade at home with my children ruled me out of the academic world? Even if I were accepted, how would I compete with those who hadn't taken a hiatus? Fortunately, my fears were soon calmed, and I received word of my full acceptance and an encouraging feeling confirming my choice to move forward. However, questions of doubt still plagued my mind.

That September my husband gave me a comforting priesthood blessing, letting me know that God would help me to "know what is most important," and would bless me to be able to both accomplish and enjoy my coursework while managing to balance my life at home. As I began my coursework, the challenging pursuit through these moving literary texts aligned with what I as a Latter-Day Saint strive for—to hope, to believe, to endure and hope to endure all things, and to seek after "anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy."² The French and Francophone novels I studied absolutely fit these criteria. Despite the 5 am alarms, long commutes, and weekends studying, I returned home infused with energy from my professors' inspiring lectures and our literature discussions. I came back a woman renewed, grateful and eager to spend time with my sweet boys. They have shared in my joy, again confirming the divine validity of my decision.

As the semester progressed, God indeed manifested his support to me in my work. As I read, I was inspired with ideas. I saw connections between the Francophone women whose stories I studied and my own life. These connections with women and mothers in literature led me to approach them less critically and rather more contemplatively.

One semester passed, then another...my love for the inspiring literature I studied grew with each course. Extraordinary professors opened my mind to new ideas and new perspectives. However, the workload became almost unbearably heavy, and in a moment when I couldn't possibly understand where the extra study and writing hours I so desperately needed were going to come from, my husband lost his job. This certainly wasn't the solution we had in mind, but we quickly came to understand the divine timing of the loss. Those three months became a testament to me that God understood what I needed to complete my qualifying papers by the end of the semester. The mental pull of motherhood slackened knowing that while I spent grueling 16-hour days writing, my kids were being lovingly watched over by my attentive husband. There could not have been a more inspired solution.

² Article of Faith 13.

The defense of my qualifying papers was a day I'll never forget. I could undeniably feel divine help as I was able to enthusiastically recall characters, details, and moments in literature to support my arguments for the questions my professors asked. When I passed, they complimented me on the way I had woven maternal threads of agency and subversion throughout both papers. I was encouraged to integrate both into my dissertation research.

As I now approach this research, I begin with 19th-century French mothers who dreamt of widening the hearth enough to both care for their children and find personal fulfillment in writing, the visual arts, and more. Their attempts were met with rancor by those who clawed at tradition. This feels relatable in a culture that often expresses discomfort when women step outside solely their nurturing roles. Then, as I began more contemporary research, I discovered the heart-wrenching writings of Francophone writers like Léonora Miano and Maryse Condé, whose depictions of motherhood amidst postcolonial suffering moved my soul. Their stories deserve to be shared, discussed, and dispersed. Thus, my research on motherhood feels meaningful on multiple levels.

Co-creation with God, whether it be in the form of childbearing and rearing or in academic writing, is at the heart of what it means to me to be a woman and scholar of faith. I do not pretend that the integration of motherhood and scholarly work is one of comfort. In one of my African literature courses, we discussed the notion of an *espace cicatricial* or a scarred space. With physical scars, there is often discomfort, numbness, and rigidity. However, I have found that in moving beyond the place of physical and emotional scars resulting from the births of my children and the ensuing experiences of extreme isolation, I have been able to move into a place where Christ's scars, i.e. the enabling power of the atonement, can bring me more hope. For me, my years of conversion to motherhood and the subsequent start of my doctoral program were formative steps I took to move beyond this scarred space into a regenerative, new life.

My journey through motherhood can be compared to a long verse of chiasmus. My intellectual aspirations, both before and after my initiation into motherhood, comprise the tensions and resolutions found both in poetry and life itself. My integration of further learning with motherhood is one possible moment for its chiastic center. Yet, the complete pattern has yet to reveal itself to me, and perhaps I must wait for the latter half to be written in order to better understand what the difficult first half meant. As in chiastic poetry, rather than a victorious ending, one is more often offered a return to the origin. A cyclical yet transcendentalized return to one's initial situation. Lori Branch, describing chiastic structures, related this path of return to T.S. Elliot's quote, "We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring. Will be to arrive where we started. And know the place for the first time." While I certainly cannot return to my initial launch into motherhood, I can certainly bring a godly approach to both my roles of faith and scholarship.

I am deeply inspired by what George Handley and other scholars call a "hermeneutics of love" or of recovery, a way of interpreting that uses criticism to complete or fulfill or restore."³ This strikes me as a godly approach. I recently heard education described as a covenant with God. While I don't intend to speak blasphemously, that comparison resonates with me. Heavenly Father has made it possible for me to pursue my studies, and now it is my job to bring my whole self to them. In doing so, it is an expression of my faith to incorporate a hermeneutics of love to the literature with which I engage.

³ George Handley, "On Criticism, Compassion, and Charity," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2016): 117–33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43957294>.

This brings to mind one well-known chiasmic verse from the New Testament. Allow me to alter the gendered pronouns for my own purpose:

She that *findeth* her life shall *lose* it:
And she that *loseth* her life for my sake shall *find* it.

Matthew 10:39

With loss at its chiasmic center, this verse speaks to the quality that is most inextricably linked with motherhood—and that is sacrifice. While my sacrifices as a mother and scholar are far from over, I can confidently testify that they have thus far acted as a refiner's fire and produced strength within me I couldn't otherwise have gained. It is not only LDS women who speak of "losing themselves" without purpose after having children. Thus, the "finding" in the aforementioned verse speaks to the divine possibilities available to mothers as we *partner* with God through the challenges of childrearing.

I am not the first to draw the comparison between motherhood and chiasmus: Michelle Wright, a writer who examined the trope of the Black mother in Black diasporic women's writing said that like chiasmus, "motherhood figures a mode of being-in-relation that unbuilds separateness without overcoming the Other – its essence is difference-in-relation."⁴ I appreciate that this description evokes both an essential bond as well as a need for separateness and freedom. Wright goes on to describe this discourse as one that "does not depend on the 'mastery' of difference"⁵ and is not a discourse focused on control. I prefer to think of it, rather, as a discourse that guides with wisdom, word by word, to its most pivotal moments. Then, at crucial turning points, it spirals its reader back toward a more transcendentalized version of home. This metaphor testifies to the role of a Godly mother who also, word by word, guides her children to and through their most pivotal moments, praying that each turning point will lead them heavenward, a return toward eternal life.

In conclusion, navigating the traditions, expectations, choices, doctrines and roles of womanhood and motherhood has been especially instrumental in my journey of becoming a woman and scholar of faith. Part of my dissertation topic focuses on how 19th-century French women writers reimagined new possibilities for mothers in modernity. To transpose that into a gospel context, I aim to reimagine new possibilities for my own motherhood, outside the lines of what traditional LDS culture has prescribed yet wholly fulfilling the divinely appointed role with which I have been entrusted.

In the case of life and chiasmus, interpretations are vast, and often meaning lies buried beneath the surface. Dr. Matthew Wickman uses an eloquent phrase in his book *Life to the Whole Being*⁶ when he writes, "The meaning is waiting." In the crucibles of both motherhood and academia, I will strive to patiently await moments of clarity and meaning when I cannot see a path forward.

While much remains of my maternal journey, I have come to better understand my own personal identity within such a creative and godly space. Although challenging and painful at times, the home has been a nourishing ground for my growth. My curated quest for meaning both

⁴ Sarah Colvin, review of *Mothers and Others in Fiction* by Sharon Dodua Otoo and Olivia Wenzel, *German Life and Letters*, 77: 68-85. <https://doi.org/10.1111/glal.12404>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Matthew Wickman, *Life to the Whole Being: The Spiritual Memoir of a Literature Professor*, Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2022.

within and out of my walls has surprised me with its rewards. While I continue to transform, improve, falter, and realign, I gratefully and proudly proclaim: **I am a convert to motherhood.**