

BYU Women's Conference 2004

Talk: Barta M. Stevenson

Conference Theme: "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation. Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation" (Isaiah 12:2-3).

Session Theme: "Strengthened with all might...unto all patience and long suffering with joyfulness" (Colossians 1:11).

Session Topic: *Infertility can be the cause of a hundred hurts. How can we feel fulfillment and joy in this difficult circumstance? How do we respond to those who question us about our personal situations? How do we offer support to loved ones unable to have children? What are our options?*

Session: Thursday, April 29, 2004; 12:30-1:30 pm
3228 Wilkinson Student Center; #69

What are our options?

Several years ago I remember a Teaching Improvement lesson entitled "Begin with the End in Mind," and that is where I would like to begin my comments today. What are our options?

When I received the invitation to participate in this conference I thought I had put this issue behind me over ten years ago, when at age 39, I had a hysterectomy and moved on to other health issues and concerns. I believed then and still do that since I had done everything within my power to bear children in mortality that the answer to my prayers was, "Not yet, be patient." But I firmly believe that at some point in my eternal progression I will be a "mother in Zion" and bear children. I am promised it in my Patriarchal Blessing and President Ezra Taft Benson has said: "We realize that some women, through no fault of their own, are not able to bear children. To these lovely sisters, every prophet of God has promised that they will be blessed with children in the eternities and that posterity will not be denied them."¹

In 1992 to commemorate the sesquicentennial of Relief Society, the Relief Societies in the two wards in Manhattan, Kansas produced a publication entitled: "A Society of Sisters." At that time I wrote.

¹ Ezra Taft Benson, *To the Mothers in Zion*, (pamphlet) February 22, 1987, 5.

“‘When life hands you lemons, make lemonade.’ This thought is not original with me, but I like to continue the saying and add, “Then you have two choices; focus on the bitterness of the lemons or the sweetness of the lemonade.”²

Now, how did I get to that point and how do I, even today, live with the constant reminders, especially in a Church that believes in families? Let me share with you some things I have learned about how to focus on the “sweetness of the lemonade.”

1. **Change your perspective.** Barrenness, or infertility as we call it today, has been part of the human experience for women since the beginning of time. In fact, many of the references to bareness are found in the Old Testament. Although everyone’s story is unique, the condition of infertility is not unique; women have been dealing with it for thousands of years. Infertility affects approximately 10%-15% of the population.³ I want to suggest two ways to change your perspective.
 - a. The first. Study the “Plan of Salvation,” or as it is often called, the “Great Plan of Happiness” and realize the many, many, many, choices and blessings you have. Remember that we all agreed to come to this earth to have **less than perfect lives**.

One story that has helped me change my perspective comes from Richard Eyre in his book “*Life Before Life*.” “If you walked into a stadium in the middle of a race, you wouldn’t declare the race unfair because some runners were ahead of others. You wouldn’t call the race organizer unfeeling or arbitrary and refuse to support or believe in him. You would assume that the runners who were ahead got there by their earlier efforts and, if you were a knowledgeable race fan, you would also assume that some of the runners now behind would end up ahead. And you would understand that each runner runs his own race in his own way for his own reasons.”⁴

Sister Patricia T. Holland taught a very important truth in her Women’s Conference address in 1987. She said: “...[C]ould we consider this one possibility about our eternal female identity—our unity in our diversity: Eve was given the identity of the mother of all living years, decades, perhaps centuries before she had ever brought forth a child. It would appear that her motherhood preceded her maternity just as surely as the perfection of the Garden preceded the struggles of mortality. I believe “mother” is one of those very carefully chosen words, one of those rich words—with meaning, after meaning, after meaning. We

² *A Society of Sisters, Manhattan I & II Wards Relief Society Sesquicentennial History Project*, August, 1992, 21; manuscript in possession of author.

³ Resolve: The National Infertility Association, information available at www.resolve.org. See also “Infertility 101” at www.ivf.com.

⁴ Richard M. Eyre, *Life Before Life*, (Shadow Mountain, 2000) 129-130.

must not at all costs, let that word divide us. I believe with all my heart that it is first and foremost a statement about our nature, not a head count of our children.”⁵

It took some time but I began to realize I was more than the sum parts of the reproductive process. I had value and worth as a woman, a mother in Zion even if I couldn’t bear children.

- b. The second key to changing your perspective is understanding the purposes of adversity in our lives. Adversity is something we knew would be part of our mortal experience. In fact, a war in heaven was fought so we could come to this imperfect world.

Not every unpleasant or bad thing that happens to us is adversity. Some things are consequences of the choices we make, but generally, adversity is affliction that happens through no fault of our own. For most of us, infertility happened to us as part of our mortal experience, through no fault of our own. We didn’t get in the infertility line in the pre-existence, but we did get in the adversity line.

Now, does knowing that this specific adversity (infertility) was part of the plan make it any easier to deal with? Elder Dallin H. Oaks has said, “Adversity will be a constant or occasional companion for each of us through our lives. We cannot avoid it. The only question is how we will react to it. Will our adversities be stumbling blocks or stepping-stones?”⁶

The answer, again from Elder Oaks: “The gift of moral agency empowers each of us to choose how we will act when we suffer adversity...Our responses will inevitably shape our souls and ultimately determine our status in eternity. Because opposition is divinely decreed for the purpose of helping us to grow, we have the assurance of God that in the long view of eternity it will not be allowed to overcome us if we persevere in faith. We will prevail. Like the mortal life of which they are a part, adversities are temporary. What is permanent is what we become by the way we react to them...Our adversities can be the means of obtaining blessings unobtainable without them.”⁷

Speaking in area conferences more than 25 years ago, President Ezra Taft Benson explained: “It is not on the pinnacle of success and ease where men and women grow most. It is often down in the valley of heartache and disappointment and

⁵ Patricia T. Holland, “With Your Face to the Son,” Keynote address at the BYU Women’s Conference on March 12, 1987, *BYU Today*, June 1987, 54.

⁶ Dallin H. Oaks, “Adversity,” *Ensign*, July 1998, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*

reverses where men and women grow into strong characters.”⁸ “Every reversal can be turned to our benefit and blessing and can make us strong, more courageous, more godlike.”⁹

Brother Carlfred Broderick at another Women’s Conference put it this way: “... [T]he uses of adversity are whatever use we put them to. May they hone us and purify us and teach us and not destroy us... The gospel of Jesus Christ is not insurance against pain. It is a resource in the event of pain, and when that pain comes (and it will come because we came here on earth to have pain among other things), when it comes, rejoice that you have a resource to deal with your pain.”¹⁰

- 2. Make a conscious choice NOT to be offended by the awkward comments and questions of others.** Which one of us, at some point, has not asked a personal awkward question of someone else? Assume the questions are really concern and love on the part of others. Most have your best interest at heart and don’t know how to express it. Use your moral agency to “act for [yourself] and not be acted upon” (to paraphrase 2 Nephi 2:26). What do I mean, “act for yourself?” By choosing your response, you can turn a potentially negative experience for both of you into a positive one and possibly a teaching moment.

One of the hardest things for me was to figure out what to say when asked about my children because most people, upon learning you are childless, assume it is by choice. So, when asked how many children I have (or whatever the question) I respond with, “I was never able to have children.” Most accept that and a few ask why we never adopted, which is like asking a single person why they never got married. For many reasons it didn’t happen. Or, as one friend with a large family pointed out, being asked why you have so many children. For many reasons it did happen to them.

Elder Marvin J. Ashton has said: “Perhaps the greatest charity comes when we are kind to each other, when we don’t judge or categorize someone else, when we simply give each other the benefit of the doubt or remain quiet. Charity is accepting someone’s differences, weaknesses, and shortcomings; having patience with someone who has let us down; or resisting the impulse to become offended when someone doesn’t handle something the way we might have hoped. Charity is refusing to take advantage of another’s weakness and being willing to forgive someone who has hurt us. Charity is expecting the best of each other.”¹¹

⁸ Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, Stockholm Sweden Area Conference, 1974, 70.

⁹ Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, Philippine Islands Area Conference, 1975, 11.

¹⁰ Carlfred Broderick, “The Uses of Adversity,” *As Women of Faith*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989) 172-173.

¹¹ Marvin J. Ashton, “The Tongue Can Be a Sharp Sword,” *Ensign*, May 1992, 19.

Consider this story from the February 1981 *Ensign* that is reprinted in the *Family Home Evening Resource Book*. Steve Dunn Hanson tells the story:

“When my great-great grandparents joined the Church in Sweden, they were faced with a long ocean voyage to America, a train trip from New York to Omaha, and then a trek by wagon to SLC. But when they boarded the train in New York, they discovered that they were to ride in stock cars that had been used to haul hogs to market and the cars were filthy and filled with hog lice.

“Grandmother accepted the inconvenience, but the humiliation was almost more than grandfather could bear. To think we are no better than hogs, he grumbled. Reluctantly he made the trip anyway. Grandmother was expecting another child. Somewhere on the plains of Nebraska, a healthy baby was born. But a few days later, the three-year-old son contacted cholera and died one night.

“The next morning the wagon master said they would hold a short funeral service and bury the boy in a shallow grave, apologetically explaining that they were in Indian country and didn’t have time to do anything more. But grandfather couldn’t accept this, and insisted on staying behind and digging a grave deep enough so the animals wouldn’t get the body. Through out the day and into the night he worked, building a strong wooden coffin and digging a grave five feet deep in the hard soil. Finally, exhausted and sobbing, he buried his son and then walked all night to catch up with the wagon train. He was heartbroken and mad, mad at the wagon master for not waiting to give his son a proper burial, and mad at God for allowing his son to die.

“That wasn’t the end of their difficulties; they continued to suffer serious hardships and adversities through their lives. **But although they both went through identical experiences, each was affected differently by them.** Grandfather became withdrawn, cantankerous, and bitter. He stopped going to church and found fault with Church leaders. He became caught up in his own miseries, and the light of Christ grew dimmer and dimmer in his life. [Emphasis added.]

“On the other hand, grandmother’s faith increased. Each new problem seemed to make her stronger. She became an angel of mercy, filled with empathy, compassion, and charity. She was a light to those around her. Her family gravitated toward her and looked to her as their leader.”¹²

This story reminds me, we cannot always pick our situations in mortality, but we can pick our reactions to them. Those who yield to the negative become weaker, but to the valiant,

¹² “Lesson 5: Avoiding Bitterness from Adversity,” *Family Home Evening Resource Book* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1983), 174.

adversities in mortality become merely stepping stones to increased faith and power. I decided a long time ago that I didn't want to become "withdrawn, cantankerous, and bitter."

We are promised in 1 Corinthians 10:13: (change one word, temptation to adversity.) "There hath no [adversity] taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to [have adversity] above that ye are able; but will with the [adversity] also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."

And in Ether 12:27: "And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them."

Now, I don't want to suggest that we should "rejoice" in being barren, but I think we should view it differently and realize that it is through this and the other challenges we have in mortality that we become strong. And, there are a lot worse things to suffer than not having children.

Elder John H. Groberg said: "No matter what our trials, we should never say, 'It is enough.' Only God is entitled to say that. Our responsibility is to ask, 'What more can I do?' Then listen for the answer and do it!"¹³

3. **Find joy in loving and "mothering" other children.** In my ward there are many young married students attending Kansas State University. Over the years I have made lots of friends, and many of them are very young. Sometimes they become my "adopted" children. When I was in the middle of my infertility treatments, one young mother allowed her daughter to sit on my lap every Sunday. Soon, those that didn't know the situation thought she was my daughter because she looked more like me than her mother. Her mother, who was a close friend, would just laugh when someone would tell me how "good" my child was. Somehow that experience helped ease the pain and I will forever be grateful to my friend and her daughter.

Another mother asked if I could help with her three small children when her husband had rotations at the Veterinary Hospital on Sunday. I gladly accepted and made friends with her shy little boys. They were well behaved and just needed a lap to sit on.

One six-year old that recently moved because her father graduated became another fast friend. Her younger sister generally had her mother's attention and her father wasn't always available. One Sunday she came and sat on my lap and looked up at me and

¹³ John H. Groberg, *In the Eye of the Storm*, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993) 201.

asked where my little girls were. It didn't occur to her that I was the age of her grandmother. I told her I didn't have any and she put her arm around my neck and said that was OK, I could still be her friend and that she loved me. My lack of little girls wasn't a problem for her. My heart was touched that Sunday as I was accepted by a six-year old.

I now have a bag of "quiet" church toys I take every Sunday and generally find some little one that needs something to help them be reverent and a very grateful mother.

4. **Serve.** All of my adult life I have lived more than 1,000 miles from my family. I have friends that also live thousands of miles from their families. They decided I needed some mothering experiences and their children needed to have an "other" mother. I was told I needed to "sufficiently suffer" through the teenage years, the hormones in tennis shoes years, with them. There was enough suffering to go around. I don't know if this is really what Alma meant when he told us to "bear one another's burdens, that they might be light" (Mosiah 18:8), but over the years I have made prom dresses, costumes for high school plays, altered Choir dresses, hemmed pants, and even been frightened to death by teen age drivers. In fact, I had one high school girl serve as a Visiting Teaching companion to the widows in the ward I was responsible for visiting. The ploy was, she would go with me if she could drive my car. And she even suggested that we could pick the sisters up and put them in the back seat. That way, we could visit as she drove us around so she could get more driving time. (Don't worry, that didn't happen.)

I need to add a disclaimer here. Don't think that I am some saint because I'm not. Most of these experiences and opportunities came because my friends asked me to help, I didn't volunteer. But in helping I was able to nurture and mother someone else's children.

5. **Don't isolate yourself.** Realize that you bridge the gap. You have something in common with every sister. Those married, those not married, those with children, those without children.

One Sunday I sat down in Relief Society next to an older young single adult that was struggling with who she was and her testimony. She had been raised in a very active LDS family. As we visited she said to me, "Sister Stevenson, I think it is neat that you don't have any children." (Now, that is not normally the word one would use to describe infertility.) The comment surprised me until I realized what she was really saying. She was telling me that she was glad there was one sister in the gospel she could relate to. Why, because my life didn't fit the mold she believed she had to live up to.

Sister Marjorie P. Hinckley put it this way, "Sisters, we are all in this together. We need each other. Oh, how we need each other. Those of us who are old need you who are young. And, hopefully, you who are young need some of us who are old. We need deep

and satisfying and loyal friendships with each other. These friendships are a necessary source of sustenance. We need to lock arms and help build the kingdom so that it will roll forth and fill the whole earth.”¹⁴

6. **Make Relief Society and the Church your cause.** I have served for over 20 years in this great organization in a variety of callings. Early on I realized I had a choice. We all need friends, associates, “peers, and mentors.” I could make my Relief Society sisters my peers so that when I needed advice and help from friends, women with my same values would be my mentors. I learned you find and make friends where you look for them and I decided to look to Relief Society. In fact, some of my most rewarding friendships developed because of Visiting Teaching assignments and other Relief Society callings.

Let me read to you the rest of my entry from 1992: “Oh, the dreams I had, the places I would go, and the things I would do filled my mind as I was growing up. My options were limitless. I could never really decide how many children I would have, more than one, but not nine like my mother. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would have none. But the purpose of this paragraph is not to focus on what I don’t have, but to tell you about the wonderful sisterhood that I have experienced. How I love the Relief Society sisters of my ward. I grew up in a large family ... Families are important to me. Although [we] visit each other and talk on the phone, it is not the same as being involved in their everyday lives, sharing their experiences as they raise their families. [This is because they live in the West and I live in Kansas.] My Relief Society sisters here and elsewhere have filled that void in my life. They have shared their experiences, children, hopes, and dreams with me, and they have accepted me as their sister. I have the best mothering experiences of all (it’s almost like being a grandmother). I enjoy the good and ignore the bad, and let someone else pay the college tuition and stay up at night worrying.”¹⁵

What are our options? The message I want to send to you is that your infertility and lack of the ability to have children is only a temporary challenge for you during mortality. Your spirit is perfect. Most people have a very deep concern and empathy for your plight. No one thinks you are less than whole except yourself. Accept yourself with your imperfections and remember: “For with God nothing shall be impossible” (Luke 1:37).

As you change your perspective remember, that this adversity (infertility) will be as valuable or as worthless as YOU choose to make it. What you do with it will determine its true value. And

¹⁴ Marjorie P. Hinckley, “Building the Kingdom from a Firm Foundation,” *As Women of Faith*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989) 11.

¹⁵ *A Society of Sisters, Manhattan I & II Wards Relief Society Sesquicentennial History Project*, August, 1992, 21; manuscript in possession of author.

we value most that which is the hardest to obtain. At some point you will be blessed with "...the peace of God, which passes all understanding..." as we are promised in Philippians 4:7.

I bear testimony that your Heavenly Father knows you, knows your name and knows your strengths and weaknesses. May he give us the strength and courage to face this and other adversities throughout our lives.