

"One Thing Needful": Becoming Women of Greater Faith in Christ



BY PATRICIA T. HOLLAND



Just after my release from the Young Women general presidency in April 1986, I had the opportunity to spend a week in Israel. It had been a very difficult and demanding two years for me. Being a good mother with ample time to succeed at that task has always been my first priority, so I had tried to be a full-time mother to a grade-schooler, a high-schooler, and a son preparing for his mission. I had also tried to be a full-time wife to a staggeringly busy university president. And I had to be as much of a full-time counselor in that general presidency as one living fifty miles from the office could be. But in an important period of forming principles and starting programs, I worried that I wasn't doing enough—and I tried to run a little faster.

2- Toward the end of my two-year term, my health was going downhill. I was losing weight steadily, and I wasn't sleeping well. My husband and children were trying to bandage me together even as I was trying to do the same for them. We were exhausted. And yet, I kept wondering what I might have done to manage it all better. The Brethren, always compassionate, were watching, and extended a loving release. As grateful as my family was for the conclusion of my term of service, I nevertheless felt a loss of association—and, I confess, some loss of identity—with those women that I had come to love so much. Who was I, and where was I in this welter of demands? Should life be as hard as all this? How successful had I been in my several and competing assignments? Or had I muffed them all? The days after my release were about as difficult as the weeks before it. I didn't have any reserve to call on. My tank was on empty, and I wasn't sure there was a filling station anywhere in sight.

3- It was just a few weeks later that my husband had the assignment in Jerusalem to which I have referred, and the Brethren traveling on the assignment requested that I accompany him. "Come on," he said. "You can recuperate in the Savior's land of living water and bread of life." As weary as I was, I packed my bags, believing—or, at the very least, hoping—that the time there would be a healing respite.

4- On a pristinely clear and beautifully bright day, I sat overlooking the Sea of Galilee and reread the tenth chapter of Luke. But instead of the words on the page, I thought I saw with my mind and heard with my heart these words: "[Pat, Pat, Pat], thou art careful and troubled about many things."

Then the power of pure and personal revelation seized me as I read, "But one thing [only one thing] is [truly] needful." ([Luke 10:40–41](#).)

5- The May sun in Israel is so bright you feel as if you are sitting on top of the world. I had just visited the spot in Bethoron where the sun stood still for Joshua (see [Josh. 10:12](#)), and indeed, on that day, it seemed so for me as well. As I sat pondering my problems I felt that same sun's healing rays like warm liquid pouring into my heart—relaxing, calming, and comforting my troubled soul.

6- Our loving Father in Heaven seemed to be whispering to me, "You don't have to worry over so many things. The one thing that is needful—the *only* thing that is truly needful—is to keep your eyes toward the sun—my Son." Suddenly I had true peace. I knew that my life had always been in his hands—from the very beginning! The sea lying peacefully before my eyes had been tempest-tossed and dangerous—many, many times. All I needed to do was to renew my faith, and get a firm grasp on his hand—and *together* we could walk on the water.

7- I would like to pose a question for each of us to ponder. How do we as women make that quantum leap from being troubled and worried to being women of even greater faith? One frame of mind surely seems to negate the other. Faith and fear cannot long coexist. Consider some of the things that trouble us.

8- I have served as a Relief Society president in four different wards. Two of these wards were for single women, and two were wards with many young mothers. As I sat in counsel with my single sisters, my heart often ached as they described to me their feelings of loneliness and disappointment. They felt that their lives had no meaning or purpose in a church that rightly puts so much emphasis on marriage and family life. Most painful of all was the occasional suggestion that their singleness was their own fault—or worse yet, a selfish desire. They were anxiously seeking for peace and purpose—something of real value to which they could dedicate their lives.

9- Yet it seemed to me that the young mothers had easily as many concerns. They described to me the struggles of trying to raise children in an increasingly difficult world, of never

having enough time or means or freedom to feel like a person of value because they were always stretched to the ragged edge of survival. And there were so few tangible evidences that what they were doing was really going to be successful. There was no one to give them a raise in pay; and beyond their husbands (who may or may not remember to do it), no one to compliment them on a job well done. And they were always tired! The one thing I remember so vividly with these young mothers was that they were *always* so tired.

10- Then there were those women who, through no fault of their own, found themselves the sole provider for their homes financially, spiritually, emotionally, and in every other way. I could not even comprehend the challenges they faced. Obviously, in some ways, theirs was the most demanding circumstance of all. The perspective I have gained over these many years of listening to the worries of women is that no one woman or group of women—single, married, divorced, widowed, homemakers, or professionals—have cornered the market on concerns. There seem to be plenty of challenges to go around. But, I hasten to add, there are marvelous blessings as well.

11- Every one of us has privileges and blessings, and every one of us has fears and trials. It seems bold to say, but common sense suggests that never before in the history of the world have women, including LDS women, been faced with greater complexity in their concerns.

12- I am very appreciative of the added awareness that the women's movement has given to a gospel principle we have had since Mother Eve and before—that of agency, the right to choose.

13- But one of the most unfortunate side effects we have faced in this matter of agency is that, because of the increasing diversity of life-styles for women of today, we seem even more uncertain and less secure with each other. We are not getting closer, but further away from that sense of community and sisterhood that has sustained us and given us strength for generations. There seems to be an increase in our competitiveness and a decrease in our generosity with one another.

14- Those who have the time and energy to can their fruit and vegetables develop a skill that will serve them well in time of need—and in our uncertain economy, that could be almost any time. But they shouldn't look down their noses at those who buy their peaches or who don't like zucchini in any of the thirty-five ways there are to disguise it, or who have simply made a conscious choice to use their time and energy in some other purposeful way.

15- And where am I in all of this? For three-fourths of my life I felt threatened to the core because I hated to sew. Now, I *can* sew; if it is absolutely necessary, I *will* sew—but I hate it. Can you imagine my burden over the last twenty-five or thirty years, “faking it” in Relief Society sessions and trying to smile when six little girls walk into church all pinafores and laced and ribboned and petticoated—in identical, hand-sewn dresses, all trooping ahead of their mother, who has a similar outfit? I don't necessarily consider my attitude virtuous, lovely, of good report or praiseworthy, but I'm honest in my antipathy toward sewing.

16- I have grown up a little since those days in at least two ways: I now genuinely admire a mother who can do that for her children, and I have ceased feeling guilty that sewing is not particularly rewarding to me. The point is, we simply cannot call ourselves Christian and continue to judge one another—or ourselves—so harshly. No mason jar of Bing cherries is worth a confrontation that robs us of our compassion and our sisterhood.

17- Obviously the Lord has created us with different personalities, as well as differing degrees of energy, interest, health, talent, and opportunity. So long as we are committed to righteousness and living a life of faithful devotion, we should celebrate these divine differences, knowing they are a gift from God. We must not feel so frightened, so threatened and insecure; we must not need to find exact replicas of ourselves in order to feel validated as women of worth. There are many things over which we can be divided, but *one* thing is needful for our unity—the empathy and compassion of the living Son of God.

18- I was married in 1963, the very year Betty Friedan published her society-shaking book, *The Feminine Mystique*, so as an adult woman I can only look back with childhood memories of the gentler 1940s and 50s. But it must have been much more comfortable to have a life-style already prepared for you, and neighbors on either side whose lives gave you role models for your own. However, it must have been even that much more painful for those who, through no fault of their own, were single then, or had to work, or struggled with a broken family. Now, in our increasingly complex world, that earlier model is fragmented, and we seem to be even less sure of who we are and where we are going.

19- Surely there has not been another time in history when women have questioned their self-worth as harshly and critically as in the second half of the twentieth century. Many women are searching, almost frantically, as never before, for a sense of personal purpose and meaning; and many LDS

women are searching, too, for eternal insight and meaning in their femaleness.

20- If I were Satan and wanted to destroy a society, I think I would stage a full-blown blitz on women. I would keep them so distraught and distracted that they would never find the calming strength and serenity for which their sex has always been known.

21- Satan has effectively done that, catching us in the crunch of trying to be superhuman instead of striving to reach our unique, God-given potential within such diversity. He tauntingly teases us that if we don't have it all—fame, fortune, families, and fun, and have it all the time—we have been short-changed and are second-class citizens in the race of life. As a sex we are struggling, our families are struggling, and our society is struggling. Drugs, teenage pregnancies, divorce, family violence, and suicide are some of the ever-increasing side effects of our collective life in the express lane.

22- Too many of us are struggling and suffering, too many are running faster than they have strength, expecting *too* much of themselves. As a result, we are experiencing new and undiagnosed stress-related illnesses. The Epstein-Barr virus, for one, has come into our popular medical jargon as the malady of the 1980s. “[The victims] are plagued by low-grade fevers, aching joints, and sometimes a sore throat—but they don't have the flu. They're overwhelmingly exhausted, weak, and debilitated—but they don't have AIDS. They're often confused and forgetful—but it isn't Alzheimer's. Many patients feel suicidal, but it isn't clinical depression. ... Female victims outnumber males about 3 to 1, and a great many are intelligent high achievers with stressful lives.” (*Newsweek*, Oct. 27, 1986, p. 105.)

23- We *must* have the courage to be imperfect while striving for perfection. We *must* not allow our own guilt, the feminist books, the talk-show hosts, or the whole media culture to sell us a bill of goods—or rather a bill of *no* goods. We can become so sidetracked in our compulsive search for identity and self-esteem that we really believe it *can* be found in having perfect figures or academic degrees or professional status or even absolute motherly success. Yet, in so searching externally, we can be torn from our true internal, eternal selves. We often worry so much about pleasing and performing for others that we lose our uniqueness—that full and relaxed acceptance of one's self as a person of worth and individuality. We become so frightened and insecure that we cannot be generous toward the diversity and individuality, and yes, problems, of our neighbors. Too many women with these anxieties watch helplessly as their lives unravel from the very core that centers and sustains them. Too many are like a ship at sea without sail

or rudder, “tossed to and fro,” as the Apostle Paul said (see [Eph. 4:14](#)), until more and more of us are genuinely, rail-grabbingly seasick.

24- Where is the sureness that allows us to sail our ship, whatever winds may blow, with the master seaman's triumphant cry, “Steady as she goes”? Where is the inner stillness we so cherish and for which our sex traditionally has been known?

25- I believe we can find our steady footing and stilling of the soul by turning away from physical preoccupations, superwoman accomplishments, and endless popularity contests, and returning instead to the wholeness of our soul, that unity in our very being that balances the demanding and inevitable diversity of life.

26- One woman, not of our faith, whose writings I love, is Anne Morrow Lindbergh. She comments on the female despair and general torment of our times:

27- “The Feminists did not look ... far [enough] ahead; they laid down no rules of conduct. For them it was enough to demand the privileges. ... And [so] woman today is still searching. We are aware of our hunger and needs, but still ignorant of what will satisfy them. With our garnered free time, we are more apt to drain our creative springs than to refill them. With our pitchers [in hand] we attempt ... to water a field, [instead of] a garden. We throw ourselves indiscriminately into the committees and causes. Not knowing how to feed the spirit, we try to muffle its demands in distractions. Instead of stilling the center, the axis of the wheel, we add more centrifugal activities to our lives—which tend to throw us [yet more] off balance.

28- “Mechanically we have gained, in the last generation, but spiritually we have ... lost.”

29- Regardless of the time period, she adds, “[for women] the problem is [still] how to feed the soul.” (*Gift from the Sea*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1975, pp. 51–52.)

30- I have pondered long and hard about the feeding of our inner self amidst too many troublesome things. It is no coincidence that we speak of feeding the spirit, just as we would speak of feeding the body. We need constant nourishment for both. The root word *hale* (as in “hale and hearty”) is the common root to words like *whole*, *health*, *heal*, and *holy*. President Benson recently said, “There is no question that the health of the body affects the spirit, or the Lord would never have revealed the Word of Wisdom. God has never given any *temporal* commandments—and that which

affects our stature affects our soul.” We need so much for body, mind, and spirit to unite in one healthy, stable soul.

31- Surely God is well balanced, so perhaps we are just that much closer to Him when we are. In any case, I like the link between *hale*, *whole*, *health*, *heal*, and *holy*. Our unity of soul within diversity of circumstance—our “stilling of the center”—is worth any effort.

32- Often we fail to consider the glorious possibility within our own souls. We need to remember that divine promise, “The Kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:21.) Perhaps we forget that the kingdom of God is within us because too much attention is given to this outer shell, this human body of ours, and the frail, too-flimsy world in which it moves.

33- Permit me to share with you an analogy that I created from something I read years ago. It helped me then—and helps me still—in my examination of inner strength and spiritual growth.

34- The analogy is of a soul—a human soul, with all of its splendor—being placed in a beautifully carved but very tightly locked box. Reigning in majesty and illuminating our soul in this innermost box is our Lord and our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, the living Son of the living God. This box is then placed—and locked—inside another, larger one, and so on until five beautifully carved but very securely locked boxes await the woman who is skillful and wise enough to open them. In order for her to have free communication with the Lord, she must find the key to and unlock the contents of these boxes. Success will then reveal to her the beauty and divinity of her own soul and her gifts and her grace as a daughter of God.

35- For me, *prayer* is the key to the first box. We kneel to ask help for our tasks and then arise to find that the first lock is now open. But this ought not to seem just a convenient and contrived miracle, for if we are to search for real light and eternal certainties, we have to pray as the ancients prayed. We are women now, not children, and we are expected to pray with maturity. The words most often used to describe urgent, prayerful labor are *wrestle*, *plead*, *cry*, and *hunger*. In some sense, prayer may be the hardest work we ever will engage in, and perhaps it should be. It is pivotal protection against becoming so involved with worldly possessions and honors and status that we no longer desire to undertake the search for our soul.

36- For those who, like Enos, pray in faith and gain entrance to a new dimension of their potential divinity, they are led to box number two. Here our prayers alone do not seem to be

sufficient. We must turn to the scriptures for God’s long-recorded teachings about our souls. We must learn. Surely every woman in this church is under divine obligation to learn and grow and develop. We are God’s diverse array of unburnished talents, and we must not bury these gifts or hide our light. If the glory of God is intelligence, then learning, especially learning from the scriptures, stretches us toward him.

37- He uses many metaphors for divine influence, such as “living water” and “the bread of life.” I have discovered that if my own progress stalls, it stalls from malnutrition born of not eating and drinking daily from his holy writ. There have been challenges in my life that would have completely destroyed me had I not had the scriptures both on my bedstand and in my purse so that I could partake of them day and night at a moment’s notice. Meeting God in scripture has been like a divine intravenous feeding for me—a celestial IV that my son once described as an *angelical* cord. So box two is opened through *learning from the scriptures*. I have discovered that by studying them I can have, again and again, an exhilarating encounter with God.

38- However, at the beginning of such success in emancipating the soul, Lucifer becomes more anxious, especially as we approach box number three. He knows that we are about to learn one very important and fundamental principle—that to truly find ourselves we must lose ourselves—so he begins to block our increased efforts to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves. Through the last decade, Satan has enticed all humanity to engage almost all of their energies in the pursuit of romantic love or thing-love or excessive self-love. In so doing, we forget that appropriate self-love and self-esteem are the promised reward for putting others first. “Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.” (Luke 17:33.) Box three opens only to the key of *charity*.

39- With charity, real growth and genuine insight begin. But the lid to box four seems nearly impossible to penetrate. Unfortunately, the faint-hearted and fearful often turn back here. The going seems too difficult, the lock too secure. This is a time for self-evaluation. To see ourselves as we really are often brings pain, but it is only through true humility, repentance, and renewal that we will come to know God. “Learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart,” he said. (Matt. 11:29.) We must be patient with ourselves as we overcome weaknesses, and we must remember to rejoice over all that is good in us. This will strengthen our inner selves and leave us less dependent on outward acclaim. When our souls pay less attention to public praise, they then also care very little about public disapproval. Competition and jealousy and envy now begin to have no meaning. Just imagine the

powerful spirit that would exist in our female society if we finally arrived at the point where, like our Savior, our real desire was to be counted as the *least* among our sisters. The rewards here are of such profound strength and quiet triumph of faith that we are carried into an even brighter sphere. So the fourth box, unlike the others, is broken open, just as a contrite heart is broken. *We are reborn*—like a flower growing and blooming out of the broken crust of the earth.

40- To share with you my feelings of opening the fifth box, I must compare the beauty of our souls with the holiness of our temples. There, in a setting not of this world, where fashions and position and professions go unrecognized, we have our chance to find peace and serenity and stillness that will anchor our soul forever, for there we may find God. For those of us who, like the brother of Jared, have the courage and faith to break through the veil into that sacred center of existence (see [Ether 3:6–19](#)), we will find the brightness of the final box brighter than the noonday sun. There we find wholeness—holiness. That is what it says over the entrance to the fifth box: *Holiness to the Lord*. “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God?” ([1 Cor. 3:16](#).) I testify that you are holy—that divinity is abiding within you waiting to be uncovered—to be unleashed and magnified and demonstrated.

41- I have heard it said by some that the reason women in the Church struggle to know themselves is because they don't have a divine female role model. But we do. We believe we have a mother in heaven. May I quote from President Spencer W. Kimball in a general conference address:

42- “When we sing that doctrinal hymn ... ‘O My Father,’ we get a sense of the ultimate in maternal modesty, of the restrained, queenly elegance of our Heavenly Mother, and knowing how profoundly our mortal mothers have shaped us here, do we suppose her influence on us as individuals to be less?” (*Ensign*, May 1978, p. 6.)

43- I have never questioned why our mother in heaven seems veiled to us, for I believe the Lord has his reasons for revealing as little as he has on that subject. Furthermore, I believe we know much more about our eternal nature than we think we do; and it is our sacred obligation to express our knowledge, to teach it to our young sisters and daughters, and in so doing to strengthen their faith and help them through the counterfeit confusions of these difficult latter days. Let me point out some examples.

44- The Lord has not placed us in this lone and dreary world without a blueprint for living. In Doctrine and Covenants 52, we read the Lord's words: “I will give unto you a pattern in *all things, that ye may not be deceived.*” ([D&C 52:14](#); italics added.) He

certainly includes us women in that promise. He has given us patterns in the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price; and he has given us patterns in the temple ceremony. As we study these patterns, we must continually ask, “Why does the Lord choose to say these particular words and present it in just this way?” We know he uses metaphors and symbols and parables and allegories to teach us of his eternal ways. We have all recognized the relationship between Abraham and Isaac that so parallels God's anguish over the sacrifice of his son, Jesus Christ. But, as women, do we stretch ourselves and also ask about Sarah's travail in this experience as well? We need to search in this manner, and we need always to look for deeper meaning. We should look for parallels and symbols. We should look for themes and motifs such as those we would find in a Bach or a Mozart composition, and we should look for repeated patterns.

45- One obvious pattern is that both the Bible and the Book of Mormon begin with a family theme, including family conflict. I have always believed this symbolized something eternal about *family* far more than just the story of those particular parents or those particular children. Surely all of us—married or single, with children and without—see something of Adam and Eve and something of Cain and Abel every day of our lives. With or without marriage, or with or without children, we all have some of the feelings of Lehi, Sariah, Laman, Nephi, Ruth, Naomi, Esther, the sons of Helaman, and the daughters of Ishmael.

46- Those are types and shadows for us, prefigurations of our own mortal joys and sorrows, just as Joseph and Mary are, in a sense, types and shadows of parental devotion as they nurtured the Son of God. These all seem to me to be symbols of higher principles and truths, symbols carefully chosen to show us the way, whether we are married or single, young or old, with family or without.

47- And, obviously, the temple is highly symbolic. May I share an experience I had there a few months ago concerning the careful choice of words and symbols? I have chosen my words carefully so that nothing will be improperly shared outside the temple. My quotations are taken from published scripture.

48- Maybe it was coincidence (someone has said, “Coincidence is a small miracle in which God chooses to remain anonymous”), but in any case, as I waited in the temple chapel, I sat next to an elderly man who unexpectedly but sweetly turned to me and said, “If you want a clear picture of the Creation, read Abraham 4.” [[Abr. 4](#)] As I started to turn to Abraham, I just happened to brush past [Moses 3:5](#): “For I, the Lord God, created all things, of which I have spoken,

spiritually, before they were naturally upon the face of the earth.” Another message of prefiguration—a spiritual pattern giving meaning to mortal creations. I then read Abraham 4 carefully and took the opportunity of going to an initiatory session. I left there with greater revelatory light on something I had always known in my heart to be so—that men *and* women are joint heirs of the blessings of the priesthood, and even though men bear the greater burden of administering it, women are not without their priesthood-related responsibilities.

49- Then, as I attended the endowment session, I asked myself if I were the Lord and could give my children on earth only a simplified but powerfully symbolic example of their roles and missions, how much would I give and where would I start? I listened to every word. I watched for patterns and prototypes.

50- I quote to you from Abraham 4:27 [Abr. 4:27]: “So the Gods went down to organize man in their own image, in the image of the Gods to form they him, male *and* female, to form they *them*.” (Italics added.) They formed male and they formed female—in the *image of the Gods, in their own image*.

51- Then, in a poignant exchange with God, Adam states that he will call the woman Eve. And why does he call her Eve? “Because she [is] the mother of all living.” (Gen. 3:20; Moses 4:26.)

52- As I tenderly acknowledge the very real pain that many single women, or married women who have not borne children, feel about any discussion of motherhood, could 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 ever bore 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 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.

53- I have only three children and have wept that I could not have more. And I know that some of you without any have wept, too. And sometimes too many have simply been angry over the very subject itself. For the sake of our eternal motherhood, I plead that this not be so. Some women give birth and raise children but never “mother” them. Others, whom I love with all my heart, “mother” all their lives but have never given birth. And all of us are Eve’s daughters,

whether we are married or single, maternal or barren. We are created in the image of the Gods to become gods and goddesses. And we can provide something of that divine pattern, that maternal prototype, for each other and for those who come after us. Whatever our circumstance, we can reach out, touch, hold, lift, and nurture—but we cannot do it in isolation. We need a community of sisters stilling the soul and binding the wounds of fragmentation.

54- I know that God loves us individually and collectively *as women*, and that he has a mission for every one of us. As I learned on my Galilean hillside, I testify that if our desires are righteous, God overrules for our good and that heavenly parents will tenderly attend to our needs. In our diversity and individuality, my prayer is that we will be united—united in seeking *our* specific, foreordained mission, united in asking *not*, “What can the kingdom do for me?” but “What can I do for the kingdom? How can I fulfill the measure of *my* creation? In my circumstances and with my challenges and my faith, where is my *full* realization of the godly image in which I was created?”

55- With faith in God, his prophets, his church, and ourselves—with faith in our own divine creation—may we be peaceful and let go of our cares and troubles over so many things. May we believe—nothing doubting—in the light that shines, even in a dark place.