



A Draft of the Keynote Address – A Day of Rejoicing
Enrichment Workshop
Elona Shelley January 20, 2007

What a pleasure it is for us to be here with you to share in this day of rejoicing! As a Stake Relief Society Presidency we have been looking forward to this day for months – and now it is finally here! Thank you for coming on this cold winter morning to rejoice with us.

We chose as our theme for this conference the scripture found in Psalms 118:24 which says, **“This is the day which the Lord has made; we will be glad and rejoice in it!”**

In preparation for this talk I did a search for the word “rejoice” and for other related words. I knew I would find a lot, but I was truly amazed at how many there are! Listen to just a few.

“Let all those that seek thee rejoice and be glad in thee; . . .” Psalms 40:116

“Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, ye righteous: and shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart.” Psalms 32:11 says,

“Rejoice in the Lord, ye righteous; and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness.
Psalms 97:12

“Let the righteous be glad; let them rejoice before God: yea, let them exceedingly rejoice.
Psalms 68:3

Adam fell that [men] women might be, and [men] women are that they might have joy. 2
Nephi 2:25

What do you get from those scriptures? It sounds to me like the Lord wants us to be happy – yes, even joyful! Did you notice that these scriptures didn’t say, “Rejoice only when things are going exactly as you would like them to be – when your husband is being an angel, when your children are all doing exactly what you think is best, when the cutest guy in the school asks us out, when your body is slim and gorgeous, or when your homework or housework is all done.” It’s a good thing he didn’t say that or none of us could be rejoicing today! The Lord wants us to rejoice and be glad because rejoicing lifts us above our mortal challenges. Rejoicing is hopeful and full of faith in a Redeemer who sees and knows all things. Rejoicing is an expression of gratitude as well as faith — gratitude for his power to lift and bless us, for his power to heal our hearts and set all things right, for the abundant gifts he has given us

However, the tendency among many faithful women in the church is to feel guilt, worry or fear that they are not measuring up. This was reflected in a study done some years ago of active LDS women throughout the United States. (Latter-day Saint Social Life - Volume 12 in the Religious Studies Center pg. 315-321) Although the vast majority of these women said they attended church regularly, received answers to their prayers, and had a strong belief in Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of the world, only 29% felt they would be worthy to enter the Celestial Kingdom if they died right then. You know, for as hard as we work, many of us still feel our efforts are futile. We are among these righteous people that the Lord is telling to rejoice — we are trying to do our best and the Lord knows the desires of our hearts. We want to serve him! No wonder so many of us don’t rejoice! We work so hard to be faithful and yet we feel we are making a futile attempt to be acceptable to the Lord.

We quickly identify with Nephi (2 Nephi 4:16-19) when he says,

“O wretched man – I’ll say woman since we always liken the scriptures to ourselves - that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities.

18 I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me.

19 And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins, . . .

We stop mid-verse — that is right in the middle of the verse! And we feel guilt, and we hang around in that state of “groaning”, because of our sins and our weaknesses and our human imperfections. No wonder we’re not rejoicing!

We must finish the verse as Nephi did, and continue on to the next verse.

“nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted.

20. My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions. . . .”

We can reflect on our lives, or on our day, and notice, “I do have a reason to rejoice! Even though I keep having these nagging thoughts that try to tell me I’m not good enough, I can see the Lord’s hand in my life, and I will rejoice in his blessings.”

Christ knows we are here having a mortal experience. He knows we are going to have trials. He says, “I am here for you. Let me help you. Let me walk this path with you so you don’t have to do this alone.” He has the power and the desire to rescue us from the pain of a soul “racked with torment”, to put it in Alma’s words. Do we believe Christ’s promise that he loves us and that we can trust in him and in his amazing power, or do we get stuck in our fearful, natural [man] woman thoughts that rob us of our rejoicing? Almost every LDS woman I talk to says, “I have so much to be grateful for.” But not every woman is rejoicing.

As I have immersed myself in the scriptures throughout the past several years, I’ve learned to rely more and more on the Savior and to really believe him when he says that I can trust and rejoice in his love, but it certainly hasn’t always been that way in my life. Let me take you clear back to my young teen years. All throughout my teenage years I struggled with the thought that I would be happy if I could just be popular, and I thought that I would be popular if I could just be skinny. I came to believe that thought so passionately and completely that I began hating myself whenever I ate very much because I knew I was never going to get skinny and become popular. I believed the thought that I was weak and worthless because I couldn’t seem to control my eating as well as I wanted to.

During my senior year, I was introduced to the idea that I could just throw up when I ate something that made me hate myself. This was long before I had ever heard the words “eating disorder”, “bulimia”, or “anorexia”. Throwing up sounded pretty disgusting, but I thought the worst thing in the world was being fat, so I determined to try it. I found it was easy for me to make myself throw up, and though I didn’t like the feeling that I needed to be careful to hide it from everyone, I also thought it was great not to have to worry about getting fat from the food I had just eaten. However, the next time I ate too much I found I was thinking about throwing up again. I didn’t always throw up at first, but the thought started coming to me every time I ate anything.

For a while the price was only an occasional session of throwing up, followed by a period of self loathing, followed by intensely emotional promises to God that I would have better control in the future. And of course I did lose weight. I was praised on every hand by my leaders and friends for being so cute and skinny, and lots of guys asked me out, though I wasn't really popular – yet! In my heart I hated myself because I knew it was all a big lie, but I loved the attention. However, the price quickly raged to a daily battle of binging and purging, constant self loathing, and vicious self condemnation.

My desperate soul often cried, “I need help!”, but it was swiftly followed by the thought, “But you can't tell anyone. Everyone would hate you. They would know you have been deceiving them. They would know you are a pathetic failure. No one would understand and no would like you anymore.” I believed those painful thoughts, and although I continued to go to church during those years, you can imagine I did very little rejoicing in the Lord!

My prayers went something like this: Please, Heavenly Father, I need your help. I know you hate me because I am so pathetically weak. I am repulsive and worthless. I think I love the Savior but I must not love him enough because I can't get out of this mess. I keep asking you to forgive me and I keep telling you that I will be better, but I always blow it so you know I am just a big liar, and I don't blame you for not helping me.” I thought I was being humble!

I couldn't imagine any possible way out of all the pain and deceit. My life was all about guarding my secret so I wouldn't be rejected by everyone. I hated myself and I hated my body and I wished I could just die, but when I thought about suicide I knew I was too chicken to kill myself, and I also knew I would break my Dad's heart if I did.

So how did I get so entangled – so bound down by the chains of hell? What happened that took this once happy little farm girl down such a miserable path. How does a problem like this, or any number of other problems that come into our lives, gain the power to rob women of our joy? I've pondered that question a lot!

Well, since this is a workshop, let's work on this question together. This experience showed me one of the weaknesses that my particular spirit came to earth with. It has given me the opportunity to recognize my weakness and allow it to become a blessing and a strength in my life. This discussion will not provide all the answers, but it can be a beginning for us to ponder and to continue to work on after today. Let me share a quote that was recently shared with me that I believe holds a very significant key to this question.

“We are not disturbed by what happens to us, but by our thoughts about what happens to us.”

So let's talk about our thoughts. What are they? Our thoughts are little messengers that come to this fertile ground of our minds seeking our attention. Sometimes they come randomly because of conversations or advertisements, sometimes they are sent from God, and other times they are sent from our fallen angel brother, Satan, who wants us all to be “miserable like unto himself” (2 Nephi 2:27). We have the ability to choose whether we will invite them in and entertain them or whether we will send them on their way.

Well, what did I do with those thoughts? I did what Alma said to do - I planted those thoughts in the garden of my mind and I nourished them very well, just like he said to. Only I wasn't

planting and nourishing the seeds of faith in Christ. I was planting and nourishing seeds of fear and self-hatred and self-rejection. I was planting Satan's lies and he loved it, because he knew what would happen. I nourished them so well that they grew into a huge tree that bore very bitter fruit, but once it was a huge tree, I couldn't uproot it and cast it out. For years I kept partaking of that bitter, bitter fruit and hating myself because I couldn't see another option.

Whether our thoughts are good or evil, they stick around if we invite them to stay. They stay when we focus on them and dwell on them and begin to believe them. They stay if they aren't cast out by our unbelief.

But the Lord has given us a lot of counsel on how to discern between good and evil. He tells us in Moroni 7 that if something invites and entices us to do good, it is of God. He will help us discern if a thought is going to bear good fruit. So what really was my problem? Was it my weight, or was it believing my thoughts about my weight? Was it that I wasn't popular, or was it believing my thoughts about the importance of being popular?

We can challenge any thought and apply Moroni's challenge offered in chapter 7 – "ask God in the name of Christ if these things are not true" so the Holy Ghost can manifest the truth of it to us. What were my thoughts? I'm fat, I'm ugly, no one likes a fat person, I need everyone to like me, I need to be popular, I would be popular if I could just get skinny.

Did I ask God about the truth of those thoughts as Moroni exhorts me to at the end of the Book of Mormon? Did I ask the Holy Ghost to stand at the door of my mind with me to greet those thoughts so he could reveal the truth, since by the power of the Holy Ghost I may know the truth of all things? No, I believed the lie that it was my job to get myself out of the mess since I got myself into it. I forget, or cast out by my unbelief, the truth that Christ understands my mortal situation better than I do, and that he loves me beyond measure and has fulfilled his mission, thereby preparing the way for me to be free.

How many times does the Lord plead with us to ask so we can receive, to seek so we can find, to knock so it can be opened unto us? He says if we continue in his work we are his disciples and we will know the truth and the truth will make us free. Once I understood the truth – that I was believing Satan's lies instead of receiving Christ's love, my feet were set on the path to freedom. How grateful I am to be free of those lies that bound me in such misery!

Christ loves us and wants us to rejoice in the blessings of this mortal experience. He knows we are going to be tempted and he knew we aren't always going to resist the temptations, but he promises to help us either way if we will just turn to him. That's what repentance is, you know. Turning our eyes and our hearts back to him over and over and over again, each time we get distracted by the world.

He knows we aren't going to succeed in this life without him, but every week during the sacrament he reminds us that if we are willing to remember him, he will remember us. He will give us his spirit as our constant companion, which will not only guide us, but will give us strength and insight, and power to overcome.

D&C 62:1 BEHOLD, and hearken, O ye [elders] sisters of my church, saith the Lord your God, even Jesus Christ, your advocate (the one who pleads our cause before the Father), who knoweth the weakness of [man] women and how to succor them who are tempted.

So who is tempted? This is mortal existence, and we are all tempted! Since life is a growing and learning process, we are always going to be vulnerable to the temptations of our thoughts. It is a part of our mortal experience that we shouted for joy about. Since we have this veil over our minds, one of our biggest challenges is to wait on the Lord. It is hard to be patient. I want to be fixed and I want my loved ones fixed, and I want it now! But that is not his plan. I wouldn't learn what I came here to learn if he did whatever I wanted at the moment that I want it. Life is a journey and Christ wants it to be a joyful journey for us. However, the choice is ours.

Many years ago when my children were all still small, a beautiful divorced mom with five older children was a guest speaker for our Ward Relief Society. I sat in stunned horror as she began telling of her vengeful and destructive ex-husband, and the promiscuity, drug abuse and jail time of her children. She said she had grandchildren she had never met, and yet she seemed like a normal, happy, even joyful person. I thought she had to be delusional or something! I thought, "She can't really be happy. I could never survive something like that in my life." She concluded with her testimony of the Savior's love for her and for each of her children, and even for her ex-husband, like that made everything all better. However, I have since realized that she was not disturbed by thoughts that robbed her of her faith. She knew she was a child of God, that he loved her, and that all things are in his hands. She knew that she could rejoice in him.

As I have nurtured my love affair with the scriptures by spending time studying and pondering Christ's words, I have planted and nourished the thoughts I find there. My tree of faith and trust in Christ has grown as the spirit regularly bears witness of his hand in my life as well as of the truthfulness of the words I study.

D&C 101:16 Therefore, let your hearts be comforted concerning Zion; for all flesh is in mine hands; be still and know that I am God.

When we take the time to be still and ponder the words of God in our hearts we can feel his love and receive our own personal witness that we can trust him.

I join with Nephi when he says, 2 Nephi 33:6

"I glory in plainness; I glory in truth; I glory in my Jesus, for he hath redeemed my soul from hell."

After I had done a lot of scripture searches on the words rejoice and joy, I had the thought to search for the phrase "be joyful". This search brought me to one of my most cherished scriptures found in Isaiah: 49:13-16.

*¶ Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the LORD hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted. (Notice he claims those who are afflicted!)
But Zion (that's us, sisters!) said, The LORD hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me.*

Have you ever heard someone say something like that? I have heard similar words many times, from wonderful, faithful LDS women, who for whatever reason are not feeling the love of the Lord in their lives. "I just don't get answers to my prayers. I can't feel the Lord telling me

anything. I pray but I'm not getting anything." He hears and understands. He wants to replace their pain with his love. What is his response in the next verse? He asks a question,

15 "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?"

Let me ask that question of you who have had children. Can you forget your nursing babe? There is absolutely no way! Even if your baby is asleep and you are thinking about something else, in a few hours your milk starts coming in again, and you are unavoidably reminded that you have a nursing baby! Even with all that, Christ says,

"yea, they may forget, (it is possible that somehow some mother could forget) yet will I not forget thee."

He says no matter what, he will not forget you, he will not forget me! And here is why,

16 Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.

Have you ever seen someone put a string around their finger or write a note on their hand so they don't forget something? These things are good reminders for us, and they get us by for a day or two but they can get lost or be washed off. And why do we put these reminders on our hands instead of in our hair or on our faces or some other place? Because our hands are the part of our bodies that we see the most. They are always before us. The marks in Christ's hands are always before him, and they are always before us as we remember him. I am confident he is trying to tell us that we can be joyful because we can rest assured that he will never forget us, even if it feels like he has. He has us graven on his hands. He will always keep us in his hands.

Sisters, let us cast our burdens at his feet and rejoice in his amazing mercy and love. We all desire to serve him. He knows and lovingly understands all of our thoughts and desires. Let us invite the Holy Ghost to stand with us at the door of our minds to greet our thoughts so we can more easily discern the truth. May we quickly recognize the fruits of the seeds we plant, and nourish those that "invite and entice us" as Moroni 7 says, "to do good, and to love God and to serve him." May we, with the help of the spirit, cast out those that bear evil fruit, that our lives may be filled with joy and rejoicing.

This day of rejoicing was organized so that together we can do as others in the early days of the church were counseled to do in D&C 62. The Lord said, "assemble yourselves upon the land of Zion; and hold a meeting, and rejoice together."

If you go home today in any way feeling guilty or like you don't measure up, we will not have accomplished our purpose. Today we are all about pointing a finger, but not an accusing finger of shame pointed at ourselves or at each other. Rather let us point a loving finger to God, directing our focus to our Beloved Savior and to the God who loves us all and rejoices over us as we express our gratitude and rejoice in him.

On the back of your program is a song. It is one of my favorite songs of praise. It is simple and I've asked Betty to help us go through it. (Sing Song, Bless Us With Your Love.)

I recently clipped an article from the BYU newspaper that described a movie that was made about teen prescription drug abuse. Let me quote the last few paragraphs of the article. “If there’s an issue I really learned while doing this movie, “Williams said, “it’s the denial [of drug problems] that we have here in our state. Teen drug abuse remains a relatively under-addressed issue in Utah, in spite of several startling statistics. In 2005, Utah doctors issued twice the national average of anti-depressant prescriptions, at least one teen died each week from an overdose and 249 of those deaths were due to prescription – not illicit – drugs. One discovery we made is that if you place too many people of any one religion into a cul-de-sac, realism is quickly replaced by idealism. And hence, you have doubled the national average of anti-depressants.”

I just wanted to scream when I read those last sentences. My heart shouted, “No, I won’t accept that! We, as Latter-day Saints, can do better. The whole purpose of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is about us being a light to the world so that the whole world can rejoice. We must gather our sisters in a bond of love, rejoicing together. We must go hand in hand to the tree of life, partaking of that beautiful fruit together –not judging or criticizing each other, or in any way adding to each other’s burdens, but rather lifting them and making them light, welcoming all who desire to partake with us.

As we bask in the spirit this day, we do indeed rejoice. As we go to our classes we will be nourished by the good word of God, and we will continue to rejoice together. But when we leave here, things are going to happen that won’t be so joyful! They will! That is what happens to mortals, and we are all mortal! Messengers will come to our minds seeking to be planted. Some will invite us to increase our faith, but others will tempt us to choose a different path. Stand with the spirit of Christ’s love and question those messengers. If you plant and nourish them diligently as I did, will they grow to bless your life or will they enslave you?

Christ doesn’t expect us to be perfect. He doesn’t expect us to save ourselves. He has done that by fulfilling his matchless mission. Let us rejoice in him! In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.