LIFE LESSONS FROM

Mothers *of* Faith

INSPIRING TRUE STORIES ABOUT LATTER-DAY MOMS

COMPILED BY

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My Mother, the Contradiction

by John Bennion

The east and the west meet in my mother, making her a woman of contrasts. She grew up in Silver Spring, Maryland, but spent most of her married life in Vernon, Utah. She attended the Chevy Chase ward as a teenager, met many people of influence when her father was a tariff expert for Congress, and was a sorority girl in college, but she managed without electricity, telephone, or central heating during the first years of her marriage to my father. Cosetta Castagno, our neighbor when I was growing up, called her the most beautiful woman ever to live in Vernon, but she has none of the self-consciousness or vanity of many lovely or handsome people. She listens to opera solos while playing electronic Scrabble and eating cheap, past-date candy. She is frugal and a bargain hunter but lavishes money on her children and grandchildren on birthdays and at Christmas. She is a contradiction—sophisticated and earthy, soft and hard-edged, selfish and generous, independent and needy.

Growing up, I spent a lot of time with my dad, but my mother was the one who held us all together, made our lives work. She bought our clothing, planned for us at Christmas and birthdays, walked up the road with us to church, took us up to the cemetery on Memorial Day, prepared our picnic for the Fourth of July, came up with ideas for the floats we entered in the parade. She kept the chickens, fed them scraps, reminded me to milk the cow and get something from the garden. I learned to love reading from her because when I was young, we both buried our heads in books all the time. She took me to the bookmobile, which seemed like heaven—walls lined top to bottom with stories.

Many of my best childhood memories are of wonderful Christmases, with quite a few gifts around the tree. Recently, I asked mom how she managed at Christmas without much money, and she said: "I just did the best I could. I had a lot of fun doing it. I tried to make sure everyone had something. I tried to make things, but I wasn't any good at that. I remember one year I made you a stick horse with a Naugahyde head, and you couldn't ride it because the head was so heavy that it just flopped over." She wanted to give us everything.

It's clear that not having enough money worried her, but she also had to adjust to my father, who expected her to live without "amenities" and who was never much of a handyman. Recently, she said, "It was hard learning how to do things without electricity, and I didn't blame Colin for that, but I did blame him for not fixing things. I had this idea that men were supposed to fix things. He didn't have time or know how, so often I had to figure out a way to fix whatever broke." After years of not having enough, she must have been worn down. She described a time when my father hired a man to drill a well on their farm but didn't have money to pay him. Mother said, "They took us to court, and we just settled it outside the door. We had to start paying every month for the well. . . . It was hard because there wasn't enough money to go around. It was a funny way of thinking that the family wasn't where your money went. The family was somewhere farther down the list, and it was hard for me to accept that the farm needed money too. . . . I don't know how we managed all those years. So many expenses, so much work, but we just struggled along."

I'd been to Utah, and it was pretty barren, but it was sort of like an *adventure*, you know. I had a romantic idea of "home on the range," I guess.

Her battle to give us as much as possible came from her own youth when she felt she didn't have enough. Born in 1932, she grew up during the Depression. Although her family's house in Maryland was quite large, she still thought they were poor. "I know we wore a lot of hand-me-downs, and mother really practiced economy. We had more children than anybody around. . . ." She had the feeling of not having enough money even then. "I didn't get a bicycle until I was nearly too old for one. I longed for one so much, and then they got me an old, beat-up one. It was red and kind of rusty, but it was a bicycle. I loved it."

As a teenager she felt hungry all the time. She often sneaked downstairs to the refrigerator and carefully shaved ice cream off the top of the container. She would take more and more until a noticeable amount was gone, and then she'd get in trouble. During her childhood, she was hungry for confirmation from her father and mother, and for whatever reason, she felt that she didn't get enough of their praise.

When I was a child, I assumed that the sense and direction of my parents' lives was steady and well planned. But I hadn't yet realized that for them, as it was for me, life was composed of hundreds of small decisions. During our interview, I asked her why she wanted to go west with my father. She said, "I'd

EDUCATION

SERGENE ELIZABETH BENSON BENNION
is the mother of

JOHN BENNION

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been to Utah, and it was pretty barren, but it was sort of like an adventure, you know. I had a romantic idea of 'home on the range,' I guess." She tried to tell me what it was like to live away from the lush, urban East. "I do remember feeling for a long time that there was something not right because there weren't trees and things growing. But I was happy about my new adventure. It was dusty, dusty, dusty, but on the other hand, the lack of humidity was a great blessing. It was different, but I wasn't unhappy."

She also went because my father was an easy man to love, although I believe he was not an easy man to live with. She met him at Utah State, her father's former school. Initially, she liked him because he was a lot of fun. "He was fourteen years older than me. I didn't know that. I mean, he just seemed like a kid." She didn't know at first that she loved him; it was a gradual discovery. At a sorority meeting once, the women's president announced that Colin Bennion was engaged. "But it wasn't to me. It was to someone else. And I had a really funny sinking feeling. It was strange. Then something said to me, *It will be all right.*" In time, his engagement to the other woman ended, and that February, Colin asked my mother to marry him. "I just suddenly said yes, I'd marry him. . . . He'd been on a little trip, and I'd missed him." I have learned from my mother to follow my heart and my impulses, and to make the best of my fortunate and unfortunate decisions.

When they were first married, they lived with my father's mother, Lucile, on the family ranch in Vernon, and in Delta and Sandy, where he taught school. Early during those first years, she and Dad bought

twenty-five heifers. Mom said, "He did just what his father did: he put them out in the [alfalfa] field and five of them died. . . . It was a hard thing." Talking to her, I had the feeling that she wished my father would not have followed some of his father's traditions. Then their neighbor across the street in Vernon died, and my parents were able to move out of Grandma Lucile's house and buy the neighbor's house. My mom said, "We couldn't borrow the money. They would only lend us part of it. I don't know where we got the rest. We thought we were the richest people around to have a house of our own." While they lived in that house, their last two children were born, Susan and Janet. Red poppies grew in front of the house, and it had a nice lawn and a white picket fence.

I'm not telling the story the way she would. She has been nobody's victim, and my father was a kind and loving man, if flawed. But, then, who is not flawed? My mother has adapted and succeeded. She occasionally substituted for Dad at the elementary school when he was sick or had something he had to do with the cows. There are rules

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now for substituting that would prevent someone from just stepping in for a family member. But she finally got her undergraduate degree, started teaching in Vernon, and kept taking classes for her master of education degree. When she began teaching, she was terrified that she wouldn't do well. But she gradually came to enjoy it. "I liked working with the children. I liked having a check. I liked setting up my own program. Beth [the senior teacher] didn't tell me what to do."

So one of the ways she survived life in the desert was by gradually becoming independent and getting her own money that she could spend on the children, money that wouldn't go to the ranch. With two incomes, my parents made more money than they ever had. "For a while there, we were

fantastic, and we were able to send money to Mary Ann and Dell in California." From her, I learned the values of becoming independent and providing for my own.

I think she is a resilient, creative woman. When she was first married, she lived in circumstances like those people dealt with in the nineteenth century. But she figured out how to cook cakes and other food with a wood stove where the temperature is difficult to regulate. She read with the light of a kerosene lamp and got by with cars that broke down often. For many years, she cleaned clothing with a wringer washer and hung them on a line. She bottled fruit and tomatoes, bought food on sale, and managed while the farm sucked money from the family. She wasn't good at chopping wood, but she brought in extra wood whenever there was a storm. While my dad was away at school, she learned how to milk the cow. "It was one of the bravest things I've ever done," she said. "Those animals are huge." She didn't have central heating until she and Dad added to their Vernon house in 1970. She worked hard to give us ambition and the skills to pursue those ambitions. Her children are well educated and financially stable. She sacrificed much for us.

I tease her that she's only happy when she's sitting in a draft, eating the toughest piece of meat. In many situations, it's difficult to find out what she wants; she says herself that this is usually because she doesn't know what she wants beyond "a book and a dish of ice cream." She downplays her many successes and the wonderful way she adapted to a difficult man who loved a difficult environment. She seems to think of her other talents the same way she thinks about her beauty, as if these qualities are just not that significant. My claim is that few women could have adapted with equal facility and grace to the desert and to her new desert family. I will be proud if I can live up to her example of responsibility, independence, flexibility, and devotion to her children.

I tease her that she's only **HAPPY** when she's sitting in a draft, eating the toughest piece of meat.