

I recently read the fantastic opinion piece by Mette Harrison via The Huffington Post entitled "If We Don't Feel Oppressed, Are We?" and it really hit home with me.

When discussing matters that bothered me in the church, in particular the inequality

of women and men in leadership, the argument I received (and echoed in Mette's article) was: "Well, I don't feel that way." In fact, a PR representative from the church in response to women asking for church leaders to pray about the role of women in the order of the priesthood said, "Women in the church, by a very large majority, do not share your advocacy for priesthood ordination for women and consider that position to be extreme."

To pass it all off as kosher we tell women how wonderful they are. And somehow by saying this the masses are placated. Women, when told how innately motherly they are, suddenly forget how much they rocked their business law class because they now feel like becoming a working professional is a role that is less important. We tell women how righteous and spiritual they are and how special it is that they have all these special divine roles that men don't. Because women have a uterus. Because babies.

I'm not arguing that women don't or shouldn't possess these qualities. Many women do.

BUT, so do many men.

And many women possess strong leadership and spiritual qualities often attributed to men.

It's frustrating to me as a woman in the church to see women reduced to their body and what it produces. That because they can give birth they are somehow equal to men and God. Because they're so special they don't need anything other than motherhood. Children are enough. Being a mother is enough.

I've written a few times about modesty in the church and the problem I feel it holds when we focus on lines. I have talked about how it teaches members to focus on the body of the person and what they are wearing or not as a signal of their righteousness. This is primarily a focus on women, teens and girls.

A woman's character, even when dressed modestly but not on par with the lines drawn by the Mormon majority, is immediately judged with every pair of shorts or sleeveless shirt she wears.

"Slutty"

"Looking for attention"

"Trying too hard"

"Easy"

"No self respect"

"Clearly only interested in one thing"

"Doesn't have her priorities straight"

"Must not love God/Jesus"

"Not a 'good girl'"

"Not marriage material"

"Lesser"

"Poor choices"

"Off The Path"

"Her covenants obviously don't mean anything to her"

or

"She's forgotten what she covenanted"

And it doesn't end with teenagers and young adults.

You see, you think you're safe once you're married and have the garment to enforce your modesty. The lines are drawn and you have a physical item to cover. Phew, right?

Not really.

The second you take off your temple clothing and change into your wedding dress you have a temple worker there to make sure you are wearing the garment and that it is covered appropriately by your dress. They tell you stories of garments thrown in the trash because they don't work with a dress. Double sided tape and altering of the garment is met with a scolding.

Once you walk out of the temple, there are already people checking your wedding dress to see if you screwed up and had to ditch the garments to be able to wear your dress. (i.e. "There's no way she could be wearing garments with that dress!")

And if you aren't being examined to see if you could actually possibly be wearing the garment with some "crazy" piece of attire, you're always told when someone can see the garment. It's always when you are dressed in a sweater or something else that is not revealing or "immodest" in the least and it is always in a hushed whisper.

It's almost like someone is telling you they can see your hot pink thong sticking out of the top of your pants. Except it's just a little sliver of unflattering lace neckline to the side of your very modest cap sleeved shirt.

This little game gets really fun when you're wearing a skirt that loves to static cling to your garments.

"Oh, ya... those are just my long white biking shorts that I love wearing under everything. Because they are AWESOME!" (as you try to walk in heels and hold your skirt down in the front AND back all at the same time.).

"Pssst.... sister... I can see your, umm..., testimony."

So the skirts get longer and flowy-er. Maxi skirts people. Mormons wear them for a reason.

Heaven forbid we ever consider getting rid of the cap sleeve on a garment top. In fact, it SHOULD actually be a full sleeve because "I've seen other women who try to get away with a sleeveless shirt" which is clearly against the rules. We can't have other women trying to bend the rules. I mean, that's what the temple workers said from day one.

And oh my gosh, I can't believe that sister so and so wore her work out clothes/swimming suit/workout top all day long! Why didn't she immediately change back into her garments?! That's what I do. That's what we're SUPPOSED to do.

Oh and ladies, by the way, we made these awesome new tops with a regular looking collar on them. You know pretty much like an undershirt. But you should make sure to keep that all *totally* covered. Men's garments that look like undershirts are totally okay to use as an actual undershirt and the collar is totally fine to be seen though. It's probably because the neckline on a woman's undershirt is too dangerously close to her breasts to allow it.

We should actually make sure that the garment showing and lack of wearing doesn't happen. In fact, let's make sure that bishops talk to women of their congregation about how they as women should wear the garment all of the freaking time. OR ELSE...

Wait! Stop! Why do we wear the garment again? What did we covenant regarding the garment exactly?

If you'd like to, you can look up what exactly those covenants were. You can also go do initiatories and experience what the covenant is. Or look it up while you are in the temple. However you do it, it's nice to remember exactly what you covenanted in regards to the wearing of the garment.

Now that we've come to it, the temple is precisely where the policing of the wearing of the garment should be left.

And yet we pick nits over if someone is or is not wearing their church mandated underwear appropriately. One of the things that makes me the most crazy is when other women tell me how much they love and appreciate garments after they hear someone else talking about what they don't like about them. They refuse to see any

flaws because, in their eyes, the church is improving them. I admit that they are making progress and trying to improve them. The church now has women who design garments, which are then approved by the men running the show. The church also ran surveys earlier this year/last year to get input on garments, though if you happen to complain about what you don't like about them in person you are generally tsk-tsked about how you should love them simply because they are holy and keep you on the path to super VIP heaven.

For many women, myself included, garments are not a love relationship. They become a form of oppression. They become an mandated item that are unflattering, uncomfortable and damaging to their body image.

Their design is ultimately decided upon by men who are spiritually guided by A Man. If we believe that the very design and manner of wear of the garment is revealed to prophets by God, neither of which has ever had a female body, I have to wonder about how wonderful they can really be. I think underwear is just one of those things you have to personally experience.

As I have examined details of my faith I have had to address a variety of large and small items with a magnifying glass and ultimately decide if it was something that was helping or hindering my spirituality.

Slowly, over time, I have broken down barriers of body image and what I could or couldn't wear.

My entire youth I was told that bikinis were bad. It was both explicitly and inexplicably implied that the girls who wore them were less righteous and not making good, modest, decisions about their clothing and that they didn't care about their dress, pleasing God, et al. We were told that modesty should encompass not just our every day clothing, but what we wore to work out in, swim in, wear to bed, etc. If we did wear bikinis and "immodest" clothing we were just putting our bodies on display for the men and boys around us. This implied that "immodest" clothing choices meant that we were interested in attention from men and boys, which sexualized the female body.

When we lived in Texas and I struggled through wearing layers of clothing while pregnant in the summer, I looked at the women all around me and saw good women wearing whatever they were comfortable in. There were no men leering at or sexualizing them.

I had a moment of clarity when I went to the community pool where bikinis on bodies of all shapes and sizes were the norm.

It hit me that no one cared what I was wearing.

I got comfortable with my post-baby body and wore a bikini anyway. Because it was cute and I liked it. My rounded belly was part of me and what I had accomplished. Five children later and with belly fat that isn't going anywhere I still wear a bikini without shame.

Three summers ago as I was boiling in my garments, I finally said to hell with it and bought a pair of shorts that, while still long, were well above my knees.

It was scary and wonderful every time I left the house.

But I felt empowered. This was my body. This is what I felt comfortable in. And no one else gets to judge how I wear my underwear except me and God.

After battling regret after regret over many things in life, I knew I didn't want to look back and regret not doing this sooner.

I think there are probably people out there who are sad about how I have chosen to live my life. Unfortunately, many of those people probably have made their own conclusions about my relationship with God and The Church without having a meaningful discussion with me.

I actually wore my garments off and on as they worked for me for the past 3 years. Every time I put them on became special and meaningful instead of a chore. It reminded me of going to the temple and getting dressed. It was so deliberate and felt almost ceremonial. It was a very poignant reminder of the temple.

Many people would balk at the idea that garments are oppressive. How could they be when they are so inspired/special/meaningful?!

Listen to yourself when you dread pulling on an extra layer during the summer. *Why* can't the garments be different? *How* were garments originally intended? *What* changed and why did it change? How do you personally feel?

On a final note, try to remember that other people, especially women, may feel differently about their garments than you do. Instead of using a person's underwear, and whether you can catch glimpses of it or not, as a marker of their faith or righteousness, stop yourself and remember that it doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter to you personally if that person is or is not wearing garments. That is something between each individual and their God.

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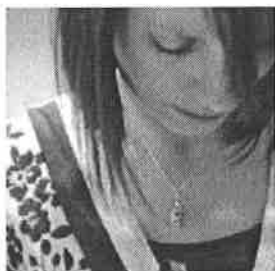
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## Carrie Marsh

Carrie is a memorial artist and mom to 3 young children, and is being watched over by twin boys. When she isn't working, you can usually find her spending time with her family. If there is, by some miracle, extra time when she doesn't want to fall into her bed and sleep, she likes to indulge her creative side, where she dabbles in a bit of everything. She has been married to her husband, Jon, for