Unfolding the Hidden Nuances of Agency, Tradition, and Power: A Case Study of Domestic Work

Jillian Bleazard

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UNFOLDING THE HIDDEN NUANCES OF AGENCY, TRADITION, AND POWER:
A CASE STUDY OF DOMESTIC WORK

by

Jillian Bleazard

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

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in

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Approved:

Lisa Gabbert
Committee Chair

Jeannie Thomas
Committee Member

Victoria Grieves
Committee Member

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

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ABSTRACT

Unfolding the Hidden Nuances of Agency, Tradition, and Power: A Case Study of Domestic Work

by

Jillian Bleazard, Master of Arts
Utah State University, 2015

Committee Chair: Dr. Lisa Gabbert
Department: English

A close examination of daily work can tell the detailed story of a person’s values and beliefs. While folklorists routinely study labor in factories, fields, and offices, domestic work remains largely unexamined, perhaps due to its historic invisibility or characterization as unimportant. This study uses folklore and feminist literature to uncover what one woman (Alana Stowe, a white, heterosexual, Mormon wife and mother in North Logan, Utah) has made of housework, in an effort to add to the research on domestic work. Stowe’s aesthetically-driven laundry folding routine communicates the values that are most important in her life, namely order, rejuvenation, familial connections and religiosity. By looking at the minute level of one woman’s daily activities we can see the individual interacting with the larger institutions that influence her life. This study seeks to bring attention to and complicate the ways in which women interact with the power structures in their lives; Stowe does not follow her traditions blindly but instead uses her agency to act innovatively within the social bounds and traditions set by her church and family.

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It is a quiet Thursday night. The children are in bed, the dishes are clean, and the floor has been vacuumed. Alana emerges from the cavernous basement with her basket of recently-washed laundry. The scent of Bounce follows her to the living room. She sets the basket down, sits cross-legged, and rhythmically begins her routine. Slowly but steadily the heap of towels grows smaller and smaller as Alana picks up, shakes out, and folds each towel. Her inherited method prescribes that a dish towel be tri-folded—like a letter—then doubled over and placed in its stack. The wave-like sound of the rustling fabric washes away her stresses of the day. As the evening wears on the neatly-spaced, folded stacks gradually replace the jumbled piles, leaving a bright, white, satisfyingly empty basket.

This private performance of aesthetically-driven domestic work recharges my friend, Alana Stowe, preparing her for another day of arduous care work. As Gerald Pocius notes, “The skillful, aesthetic, group-enforced and appreciated activities of all humans can be considered as potential art” (2003). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson contend that people’s daily actions create their stories, their identities.

We are habitual authenticators of our own lives. Every day we are confessing and constructing personal narratives in every possible format: on the body, on the air, in music, in print, on video, at meetings. On a daily basis, then, personal narrators assume the role of the bricoleur who takes up bits and pieces of the identities and narrative forms available and, by disjoining and joining them in excessive ways, creates a history of the subject at a precise point in time and space (1996: 2, 14).

Diane Tye applies this concept to domestic work, stating,

Every day, people communicate meaning through ordinary acts and everyday forms, from clothes hung on a line to a casual verbal expression or personal
experience story to a hand-fashioned quilt or rug. Sometimes meaning is intentionally placed; at other times its creation is unselfconscious. (2010: 15)

The daily acts of women provide insight into their thoughts and values. Tye notes, “One richness of folklore is that it allows those with few other vehicles for expression a valuable opportunity to find a voice” (2010: 16). By looking at non-verbal, implicit, everyday communication folklorists learn what is left unsaid by their study participants. This is particularly true of women’s daily work or crafting practices that often communicate coded meaning only with those who have the specialized knowledge to interpret the codes (Radner and Lanser 1993).

This is certainly true in the case of Alana Stowe, a wife, mother, and student living in North Logan, Utah. Stowe folds laundry in her home in North Logan, Utah where she lives with her husband, Matt, her ten-year-old son, Isaac, her five-year-old daughter, Karalyn, and her two-year-old son, Emmett (fig. 1). The aesthetically-pleasing act of folding laundry provides Stowe a satisfying creative outlet, a period of rejuvenation in which she can accomplish a measurable, achievable task, while acting appropriately as a responsible, nurturing mother. The raising of children cannot be completed in such a tidy, concise fashion. This study demonstrates that Stowe’s aesthetically-driven laundry folding routine communicates the values that are most important in her life, namely order, rejuvenation, familial connections and religiosity. My hope is to bring attention to and complicate the ways in which women interact with the power structures in their lives, highlighting Stowe’s use of agency within and around the boundaries set by her social, familial, and religious traditions.
Aesthetics in Daily Life

Folklore scholarship has long recognized the value of folk art and its products, but many scholars indicate that much is to be learned from aesthetic processes. Michael Owen Jones argues:

For a concept of art to work, then, it must recognize not only objects as works of art, designated artists as creators, and certain forms as art; it must also see the process of aesthetic expression in everyday life, manifested in a wide range of activities. What is proposed here is a broader conception of art, one which includes development of skill, mastery of technique, and the striving to perfect form in a multitude of activities by all of us in our everyday lives (1984: 176).

Tom Mould also observes, “Folklore is a democratic enterprise…It recognizes art in daily acts. It pries the artistic impulse loose from the stranglehold of marbled museums” (2011: 129). Artistic behaviors can be found in the daily lives and repetitive tasks of many people. Franz Boas states that any activity when done with intent to perfect form can take on aesthetic value (1955). Expanding the definition of art to encompass aesthetically significant behaviors and processes can allow folklore researchers to explore new areas of interest.

Although folklore acknowledges value in daily acts of creativity, many people are unaware of their own aesthetic tendencies. According to Jones, “An aesthetic response (reaction, experience) is a unique configuration of intellectual state and physiological condition that occurs usually without a philosophy of ‘the aesthetic’ and is accompanied by rudimentary expression rather than articulated principles” (1987: 170). People manipulate their daily habits according to preferences created by these aesthetic responses, changing behavior to avoid the negative and increase exposure to the desirable. This creates
a feeling for form that begins to shape daily activities. Michael Owen Jones argues, “the
aesthetic impulse—a feeling for form and a desire to perfect form—is apparent in dozens
of subtle ways in the things we make and do during the course of daily interaction, problem
solving, and the accomplishing of tasks” (1987: 81). He cites the specific example of the
trash can arrangement in his Los Angeles neighborhood, stating, “even (or perhaps
especially) in regard to the chaotic and displeasing aspects of our daily functioning the
desire to perfect form might be evident” (1987: 83). Stowe’s regular laundry folding
performance creates positive aesthetic responses that reinforce her desire to perfect her
technique, counter the inevitable chaos of a home with young children, and provide an
escape from the mundane routine that many find in the chore of laundry.

Occupational folklore scholars have found a valuable area of analysis in the
aesthetics of everyday tasks. Robert McCarl states, “Within each occupation, people
develop recurrent methods of coping with the repetitive tasks of work which, over a
period of time, become so habitual as to be almost totally unconsciousness” (1986: 83).
Jones also recognizes this phenomenon, noting, “Folk expression in the factory assumes
aesthetic form when the industrial processes become monotonous, boring, or demeaning
to the workers” (Jones 1984: 173). Folklorists have noted instances of daily creativity in
many occupations, but Tye argues that this focus should be extended to women’s work.

Folklorists still have not devoted much attention to women and domestic labour,
but what they study in other occupations applies: how workers see and organize
their world, what is important to them, how their world is classified, and how new
workers are incorporated. (2010: 22)
One reason women’s work may have been historically under researched is noted by Danille Christensen:

Because womanhood and domesticity have long been treated synonymously, aesthetic evaluations often conflate the two and present “women’s” expressive culture as comparatively childish...Pursuits closely associated with women, whether work or play, are often either seen as “forgettable”—difficult to put a finger on, and therefore unrecognized—or else dismissed as distasteful or harmless, but in any case unimportant. (2009: 75, 111)

Detailed observation and analysis of creativity in daily domestic work can deter stereotypes and encourage a clearer, more complex understanding of those who perform the work.

The specific study of housework was called for by Judith Levin in 1993. She understands the reasons that housework has been neglected as a vigorous area of study in folklore, noting that the term housework is definitionally vague. Since housework is usually unpaid its status as “work” is disputed so occupational folklorists have not taken up its study. Feminist folklorists typically do not want to argue for the creativity involved in housework since their interests lie in freeing women from oppression and housework is considered part of that oppression. Levin finds that many female folklorists are compelled by the topic but feel guilty discussing it because “professional women are not ‘supposed’ to be interested in housework” (1993: 288). Housework is often characterized as trivial, mindless, repetitive, invisible, productless, and isolated (de Beauvoir 1961, Freidan 1964), while folklore is “defined as the study of expressive, creative, traditional, skilled cultural performances, usually ones that create a product...Considered in these terms, it is not surprising that quilting and cooking are studied, but that sweeping and
dishwashing are not” (Levin 1993: 289). Verbal traditions produced by women doing housework, such as songs and rhymes, have been studied, but Levin advocates for a focus on the actual work as McCarl has pressed for in occupational folklore.

Levin believes analysis of the daily housework routines of women will provide valuable insight into their lives, but she does not wish to romanticize the oppression that often accompanies women’s housework.

A rich and diverse folklore of housework exists and should be studied. Its existence does not prove that people like doing housework, though certainly some do, but rather that cultural differences and human creativity permeate our lives in unexpected ways…The focus of feminist studies of housework has often been on the way housework oppresses women, on what housework has done to women, as it were. Without at all wanting to detract from feminist efforts to make housework something other than “women’s work,” I want to suggest that we must look more carefully at what people—men and women—have made of housework. (295, emphasis added)

Observing what people have made of housework can best be done by looking at the individual and her interaction with the larger institutions and traditions that usually dictate housework’s boundaries. The goal of this study is to observe and analyze what Stowe makes of laundry, how she utilizes her feeling for form to invite enjoyable aesthetic responses and sensory experiences that help her cope with the daily stress of housework, just as workers in other occupations find pleasurable methods for completing repetitive, mundane tasks. In doing this we can observe how she innovates within the traditional boundaries given her by familial, societal, and religious institutions.
The Importance of the Individual in Folklore Studies

Although the study of folklore often focuses on group interaction and communication, the individual plays an important role in the understanding of folklore. Ray Cashman, Tom Mould, and Pravina Shukla note, “our tradition [folklore scholarship] necessarily begins with close attention to the words, actions, and creations of specific individuals…there is no such thing as tradition without the individuals who enact it” (2011:1-2). The study of individuals yields rich humanistic and psychological insights that are often not accessible in large ethnographic studies. Mould argues,

By constructing interpretive frames through personal biographies and local cultural worlds, scholars might hope to approximate a native hermeneutic that a performer’s local audiences might use…Henry Glassie regularly provides deep biographies in addition to thick ethnographic description in order to understand and appreciate the individual both from a critical perspective as well as an ethic humanistic one. (2011: 137)

Folklore scholars who follow Glassie’s tradition gain a broader perspective of the creative process in an individual’s life. Jones also shares biographical information of artists in many studies (1975, 1989, 1995). He notes that only by examining an individual’s life can ethnographers begin to understand the motives behind aesthetic processes.

With increasing frequency in recent years folklorists are not only documenting examples of artistry but also recording some of the artists’ experiences, relationships with others, aspirations, aesthetics, and creative processes. Because they dwell on ordinary people in everyday circumstances, their research has great potential to answer questions about what is both fundamental to and universal in the behavior of human beings. (Jones 1995: 272)
Case studies lead to new ways of understanding longstanding questions of folklore studies, highlighting the way individuals exercise agency within the bounds of tradition rather than following blindly. Tye notes that issues pertaining to women’s folklore, in particular, can benefit from individual studies. “Women’s studies has been criticized as being theoretically ‘top down,’ and folklore, with its close lens on the everyday, brings with it a useful empirical focus” (Tye 2010: 42). Issues of identity, aesthetics, behavior, tradition, and values can be treated personally and theoretically in a case study. This paper explores the personal and traditional values expressed in the laundry practice of one woman.

Methods

Alana Stowe’s aesthetically-driven laundry folding routine was observed, photographed, and recorded during several fieldwork sessions over an eighteen month period from April 2013 to October 2014. Several extensive interviews were conducted with Stowe during this time. A theoretical base in folklore studies, as outlined above, guides the analysis of this study. Stowe and her matriarchal line are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon or LDS church). This study examines Stowe’s laundry folding performances through the lens of societal and religious expectations of mothers that she views as relevant to her life. Official periodicals and writings of the LDS church as well as life and family history from Stowe and her matriarchal ancestors are used to highlight these societal and religious expectations.
It is important to note that housework “can refer to any number of activities performed by any person, paid or unpaid, working in a home. The term can be attached to gender or gender-neutral depending on who defines it” (Levin 1993: 288). Housework is no longer the sole responsibility of women in America and this study does not attempt to represent all women or all those who fold laundry. Great diversity exists among people who fold laundry. This study seeks only to uncover the details of one particular case study of a 33-year-old white, American, heterosexual, female mother who folds laundry 2-3 times per week. For this reason general expectations of female, American mothers in heterosexual committed relationships will be utilized to apply to this case study. It is noted that this is only one in a growingly diverse number of ways of interpreting domestic work and any accompanying expectations.

**Process**

Stowe’s laundry process parallels the process of other creative acts such as pottery. Although many people think of potters as spending their days turning pots on wheels, the bulk of their time is spent gathering and preparing materials beforehand and firing and glazing after the pot is taken off the wheel. The artistic rendering of the clay is only a small portion of the entire process (Glassie 1999). Similarly, Stowe views the folding portion of laundry as her creative act but recognizes that the process begins with the gathering of materials.

Stowe knows it is laundry day when the piles in the hampers begin to bother her, which usually occurs twice per week (fig. 2). She informs her children in the morning
that it is laundry day and they gather their clothes. She then gathers laundry from the rest of the house and takes it to the laundry room in the basement. At this point, if she has time, she sorts items by color. If she is in a hurry she grabs items of similar color from different baskets and begins a load washing. Throughout the day she takes a few minutes here and there to “chase the laundry through” with the goal of having it all washed, dried, and in baskets in the laundry room by the time the kids go to bed (fig. 3). Sometime during the day she vacuums the living room where she folds the laundry after bedtime. She also tries to get the rest of the house in order, including washing dishes and tidying the house. After dinner she puts the kids to bed. As any parent knows, this can be a long process and is a work of art in its own right. When the house is in order and children are asleep she brings the laundry upstairs into the living room. It is absolutely essential that all other chores be completed before she brings the laundry up to be folded. Stowe notes:

If something else is taking precedence over it then the laundry waits, even if I have to throw it in and refluff it the next day or whatever. I try really hard to let it be the last thing that I do in a day so that I don’t have to rush through it and there’s lots of nights when I don’t even start folding until 11:00 at night because everything else has to get done first so that I can enjoy folding the laundry. Cuz I feel like if you’re trying to get through it then it’s not fun; it’s a chore. And why do that? So I try to do it when everything’s done and I can relax and go fold my laundry. (2013a)

Once all other chores are complete and Stowe has brought the clean laundry upstairs, her favorite part of laundry day begins. She folds the laundry and neatly stacks it back into the baskets where it awaits a trip to the drawers after the family awakes in the morning (fig. 4). If all goes as planned the entire laundry process takes one day and about thirty minutes the next morning. Folding sessions last approximately one to two hours.
Once the laundry has been put away the laundry process is put on hold until it begins again a few days later.

**Values**

**Order**

The success of laundry day is determined by the timeliness of the completion of the preparatory chores that precede the folding of the laundry. If Stowe’s house is tidied and the laundry is clean when the children go to bed, the rules of the laundry day process have been followed properly. Michael Owen Jones states that a desire for order motivates people in the creative process. “Orderliness that enhances instrumentality satisfies aesthetically” (1995: 256). Order in the home is condoned by LDS documents, as seen in the Relief Society Bulletin, a periodical for LDS women, in 1914.

Order is heaven’s first law…Let us visit a home where work is done with order and system. All perform their several duties properly; there you will find peace, happiness and comfort. All are contented, cheerful and thrifty. Then go into an adjacent home. Here neglect, indifference, extravagance, disorder and indolence reign. Mark the contrast. In the latter home selfishness, discourtesy, wretchedness, sorrow and misery follow this unregulated course. (9)

This example combined with a verse of LDS scripture, “Behold, mine house is a house of order, saith the Lord God, and not a house of confusion” (Doctrine and Covenants 132:8), demonstrate the LDS ideal of order in the home. A *Relief Society Magazine* article from 1926 focuses the responsibility for creating order on women. “The women who count are the women who are at the great business of founding and filling those natural, those
social centers which we call homes. Humanity will rise or fall as that center is strong or weak” (155). Order is clearly advocated by these early church writings.

More recent publications of the LDS church also document a focus on order in the home. “The Latter-day Saint Woman: Basic Manual for Women, Part B,” which was published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 2000, states, “Order is essential in the heavens; if it were otherwise, chaos would rule. Order is just as necessary in our homes” (231). In the accompanying manual (part A of the series) a similar topic is addressed: “Part of a homemaker’s job is to be an efficient housekeeper. When we keep our homes tidy, we feel a sense of pride. We enjoy a peaceful atmosphere at home when it is clean. We can find anything we want whenever we want it. A well-organized home is easier to keep clean than a disorganized home” (2000: 146). The religious admonition to establish order in the home and the example of Stowe’s mother, grandmother, and great grandmother likely influence the strength of Stowe’s desire for order, for completing all the household chores before retreating to her laundry folding sanctuary. Lisa Gilman, in her study of Malawian political dancers argues, “The discourse of traditionality cloaking political dancing draws people into participation, makes it enjoyable and meaningful, and at times disguises aspects of its exploitative dimensions. It also ensures its perpetuation” (2009: 205). When housework is labeled as tradition by family and religion it becomes difficult to also call it oppressive. Stowe has an interest in upholding the tradition of using housework to establish order in her home; she is seen as competent and receives rewards from the systems of power in her life, such as love, approval, validation, and the blessings of heaven.
Last year Stowe’s washing machine broke. This was a time of crisis in her home. The lack of availability of laundry made it very evident that her consistent laundry efforts provide stability and order for her family. In the eighteen days they were without a working washer she spent hours washing clothes by hand and taking laundry to neighbors who washed for her. She also spent $25 in her eight trips to the laundromat. She always had at least two children in her care as she waited for clothing to wash and dry. Although this time at the laundromat was extremely trying, she enjoyed seeing her laundry process sped up by the extra washers and dryers available. The lack of order in her home that followed the washer’s breakdown provided evidence that her consistent laundry efforts comfort and stabilize her home.

The order that folding laundry brings lends Stowe a feeling of accomplishment and control as large piles of dirty clothes transform easily into neatly stacked baskets of folded laundry. She can clean lots of clothes with minimal effort by taking a few minutes at a time to move clothes from the basket to the washer to the dryer and again to the basket. Stowe notes, “There’s a purpose for why I’m doing this. It was a mess and now it’s folded and neat and it’s going to stay folded and neat. It’s like a validation, I guess” (Stowe 2014a). Laundry, she says, is one of the ways she contributes to the household by providing order and comfort for her family. She feels that she has overcome the rebellious teenager within herself to become a responsible adult when she provides for her family in this way. “An empty laundry basket is a beautiful thing” (fig. 5). This sight induces within her a feeling of accomplishment.
A successful laundry session begins and ends as planned and everything gets folded, stacked, organized, and put away in the correct spot. “Laundry is something that I can control,” says Stowe, “and everything that I try to do turns out how I want it to. I could have a totally crazy, hectic, stupid day, and then I sit down and do the laundry and it feels like the one thing I know how to do right” (2013a). It is important that laundry be folded appropriately for her family. It is not important that it be folded with perfectly angled corners or that the laundry smell a particular way; it just needs to be done properly. To her this means that laundry is folded at night, after all other chores have been completed, and that each item of clothing is folded in a way that will allow it to be stored in a drawer in a tidy and organized fashion.

Although Stowe appreciates any help offered she prefers to fold the laundry herself so that it is done the way she likes it. She notes,

> It’s definitely an outlet to have that one thing where I don’t have to explain, I don’t have to let somebody help, I don’t have to be patient about it. It’s just, “This is my deal and I’m alone and I’m gonna take care of it.” It’s just so relaxing to not have to try so hard to do it with somebody else. (Stowe 2014a)

This can be seen in the process of folding kitchen towels. Each type and size of towel is folded distinctly so that it fits in its drawer neatly and can be hung up quickly and properly, if that is its fate (fig. 6). Towels that will be hung have a tri-fold design while those that will not be hung are folded in a rectangular format. When one towel is not folded in its proper shape the order of the entire drawer is thrown off. Performance of proper folding technique for each laundry item is satisfying and allows her a sense of control.
Stowe folds pants in different ways depending on how long they are. Adult pants are folded in thirds while child-sized pants are folded in half. This allows for efficient folding and for the pants to fit into their drawers easily. By employing a tri-fold design for adult pants Stowe can cradle the pants on her lap as she folds. Child-sized pants can be folded in half on one’s lap, but adult pants are too large to be folded in half on her lap. This strategy allows for quick, easy folding and putting away of the pants. Michael Owen Jones notes that workers often alter process to “generate the pleasure or satisfaction afforded by greater efficiency, economy, and effectiveness of motion” (1984: 174). Stowe chooses folding techniques that allow for fluid movement in the folding process and orderly placement in the drawer or closet.

Although most of the aesthetic responses discussed in our interviews were positive, one negative response surfaced as well. Silky fabrics bother Stowe. She cringes at their slickness. The first time we discussed this response she simply said, “I don’t like silky fabrics. Bleh!” (Stowe 2013a). Her disgusted face and gesture of throwing something away from her said far more than her words. Upon further probing and analysis we came to realize that the fabric’s slipperiness makes an article of clothing unmanageable and more difficult to fold. She notes,

Well, like Isaac’s gym pants that are all silky, they mess up the pile. If you put them in the middle of the pile the top slides off and they just mess everything up, but if it’s cotton or flannel or something that stays folded then you can make your neat little OCD piles and stuff doesn’t topple over and it looks pretty. (Stowe 2013a)

Her inability to control the movement of slippery fabric unnerves her. Lisa Gabbert notes that quilters gain aesthetically satisfying experiences as they enjoy the sensory qualities
of fabric. “The relationship and response of the artist to his/her chosen material constitutes a basic dynamic without which creativity cannot emerge and art cannot be produced” (2000: 150). Stowe enjoys the aesthetically pleasing encounter with cotton and flannel fabrics as she manipulates them and sees and feels them stay in place in their particular pile.

The control afforded her during laundry sessions helps Stowe feel accomplished and empowered. When asked about the difference between these two feelings she noted:

I think accomplished is something that I can enjoy all by myself. You know, Matt can be at work and the kids can be asleep and I can finish the laundry and just sit there and be happy all by myself and feel good about it no one else even needs to see it, ya know? But feeling empowered, for me I think, has to be an outward thing. To somebody else, look I’m good at something and look I accomplished something. When Matt comes home and says, “Wow! The kitchen is clean and the laundry is done and the kids are all bathed and you are amazing!” That’s empowering to me when I’m like, “Yeah, I totally worked hard today!” (Stowe 2014a)

As she receives positive feedback from Matt, Stowe is compelled to practice her technique, continually seeking empowerment through her laundry folding. She feels empowered as she masterfully folds laundry, following all the “rules” as she understands them. Folding laundry appropriately “makes me feel like maybe I’m good at something, too. So, I guess it does make me feel empowered because I don’t always feel like I have a lot of talent that shows to other people. You know, I feel like a lot of my talents are private ones” (A. Stowe 2014a). She notes that she works harder and faster on nights when her husband is watching.

It’s almost like preening, you know? When you show off for your mate and think, “See how awesome I am?” And I know that sounds super dumb, but I think I’ve
done that before, you know when he’s been grading papers and I’ve been folding laundry and I notice that my piles are more organized than they might usually be or something. It’s just kind of like, “You do what you’re good at and I’ll do what I’m good at and we’re both happy…” I’ll finish folding the clothes and get ‘em all in their baskets and shove ‘em off to the side and then curl up next to him and it’s like, “My job here is done!” (Stowe 2014a)

Stowe finds laundry folding sessions to be successful when laundry is organized, folded properly, and executed quickly, gracefully, and rhythmically. She also takes particular pleasure in folding laundry alone, at night. “I control laundry; it doesn’t control me. I have given myself permission to let go of laundry being one of the things that’s nagging at me all day long.” These aspects of the chore lend to a feeling of control and accomplishment that can be difficult to find in a home with three young children.

Rejuvenation

A successful laundry folding session rejuvenates and relaxes Stowe, preparing her for the pressures that surely await her the following day. She usually watches TV or talks with her husband while she folds, multitasking during her relaxation time. The rejuvenation of laundry comes, however, in the meditative, fluid movement she uses as she folds. She enjoys the practicality this particular form of relaxation offers.

Just as order is emphasized in many LDS documents, rejuvenation is encouraged by the leaders and doctrine of the LDS church. This is seen in a manual for those preparing for marriage. Boyd K. Packer, an apostle in the LDS church, wrote in this manual, “Jesus, our exemplar, often ‘withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed’ (Luke 5:16). We need to do the same thing occasionally to rejuvenate ourselves
spiritually as the Savior did” (2003: 281). Regular rejuvenation through a meditative activity is praised as godly work.

Another LDS manual, one that is used to teach young women how to become admirable women in the sight of God, contains a lesson on physical health. The objective of the lesson states, “Each young woman will recognize her responsibility to maintain her physical health so that she can fulfill her earthly mission” (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1993: 146). This lesson clearly emphasizes that maintaining physical health is crucial to a female’s life purpose.¹ A young woman can contribute to her physical health by finding regular means of rejuvenation: “The body needs to be relaxed and rejuvenated after work, stress, and exercise. This can take the form of sleep, rest, or participation in a relaxing activity. Everyone should have a period of rest or relaxation each day when possible” (147). These manuals clearly demonstrate that regular sources of rejuvenation are valuable to the devoted LDS woman.

A 2012 article in the Ensign, the LDS church’s current magazine, notes that rejuvenation is crucial to maintaining balance in one’s life, but is best when combined with other strategies as follows. First, the article advocates simplifying one’s life by combining activities. Stowe does this when she relaxes, watches TV, and folds laundry at the same time. The article also suggests focusing on the most important things in life, noting, “We have been counseled [by prophets] that our families should take priority over other commitments” (Hill 2012). Stowe does this by spending time with her children during the day and caring for them in an enjoyable way by folding laundry while they
sleep. The article also suggests increasing one’s energy by “participating in activities that renew us” (Hill 2012). Folding laundry in an aesthetically pleasing manner renews and rejuvenates Stowe, preparing her for continued care work.

Older LDS publications also advocate regular time for women to relax. A 1916 article from the Relief Society Magazine states,

It seems fruitless to advise women to take an hour just for themselves every day—even though the “hour” be only fifteen minutes. But it is advice that every wise woman will follow—at any sacrifice. It is true that in this busy life there seems never to be time for it, but that is one thing a mother must just “take.” (299)

The article notes many logical, scientific reasons that women need to take time each day to rejuvenate themselves, arguing that true productivity—the order that all housewives surely desire—can be achieved more efficiently if women relax on a regular basis.

Another article in a 1937 issue of the Relief Society Magazine notes that although many think of raising children and the accompanying housework as monotonous, managing the problems that come with raising a family can be as enjoyable and fascinating as reading great literature (155). Many advertisements in this magazine refer to reading good books as the ultimate way to relax. In this way, the 1937 article suggests that thinking critically about how to raise a family well, as Stowe does each time she folds laundry in her chosen way, can relax and rejuvenate a mother.

Stowe says she enjoys folding laundry because it is an activity that “allows me to regroup and do something that I know how to do and don’t have to stress over…Folding
laundry is just relaxing and [I] don’t have to think about it and it just gets done.” Jones notes that this is a common motivation in aesthetic work.

One may turn to making things, finding the rhythmic motions soothing, the texture and colors and smells of materials a pleasant distraction, the preoccupation with ideas about form a needed diversion from personal problems, the association of the activity with other people and another time a source of strength, the successful completion of the object [or process] a concrete testimony to one’s ability to restore order and to accomplish something of value, and the public’s reception of the object a reinforcement of one’s sense of self-esteem…The outcome of art’s therapy is not just the creation of an object, but the rebuilding of a person. (1995: 271)

The meditative state that results from Stowe’s fluid, cadenced folding sessions provides a therapeutic sanctuary in which she relaxes, rejuvenates, and prepares for the next few days of work, while restoring order and balance to her home and her self image.

As her husband, Matt brought to her attention, there is a rhythm and flowing movement in her folding technique. The sound that results from the rhythmic movement of the fabric, she says, is soothing. “It’s a dull sound; there’s nothing sharp about it. It’s not loud or abrasive” (Stowe, 2013a). She was not consciously aware of this sound prior to our interviews because it is usually covered by the sound of the TV. As her awareness of the sound grew she said that it would be odd if the sound did not accompany her folding time. She compares it to the background noises of a cartoon; their absence is much more noticeable than is their presence. The dull, soothing sound of the laundry being folded relaxes Stowe.

Henry Glassie, in his book, The Potter’s Art, speaks of a woman who was a potter’s apprentice but left the trade. He says of this woman, “she will remain free of the
debilitating anxieties that bedevil people who have never known creation in their own hands. That is one purpose of art. It brings confidence to its creators” (1999). As Glassie eloquently states, the process of art can instill confidence and give reprieve. The rhythmic movement of laundry folding and the sound it produces relax Stowe. Her hands flow easily between the articles of clothing, gracefully reminding her of her past and establishing her future.

A feeling for form is most notable in the rhythmic, flowing movement that accompanies Stowe’s laundry folding sessions. She sits on the floor while folding to allow for better range of motion when moving clothing from the basket, to her lap for folding, and then to its appropriate pile. Her position on the floor facilitates a fluid, dance-like motion, perfectly accompanied by the musical sound of the shaken-out towels and swiftly-folded pants. The morning after a folding session Stowe takes the clothes that she wants hung, places them in the center of her closet, and hangs them rapidly and rhythmically in their proper place. The sound and movement allow for a sort of meditation session, a time to reflect on her relationships in a zen-like way.

The sound of the washer and dryer also relaxes Stowe. One story that demonstrates this occurred in November 2012 when Matt’s brother, Jason, was suddenly killed in an accident. Alana, Matt, and their then six-month-old son, Emmett, flew promptly to Colorado to be with Jason’s family. It was an extremely stressful time and many people were packed into Jason’s family’s home. Emotions ran high with everyone in such close proximity. It was one of Emmett’s first times away from home and keeping him on a schedule while on the road was tricky. The difficulty of getting Emmett to sleep
in a crowded, foreign environment led Alana away from the crowd and into the laundry room. She stood between the washer and dryer as they ran through a cycle. Emmett slept in her arms as she held and bounced him for an hour or more. The laundry room became her sanctuary in a high-stress time and place. Listening to the washer and dryer calmed and comforted her and Emmett simultaneously.

Positive aesthetic responses urge Stowe to continue to perfect form in her laundry folding sessions. Laundry serves to order her life in a personally edifying and meaningful way. She can rejuvenate herself while simultaneously upholding religious and family traditions. In her study of scrapbooking, Danille Christensen observed that mothers justified time spent away from their families at scrapbooking retreats by claiming that their efforts benefitted their families. Scrapbooks were made to solidify family memories, thus unifying and strengthening the families. The women Christensen studied did not want to appear selfish in pursuing scrapbooking since that would violate societal expectations of motherhood selflessness (2009: 63). Laundry has been studied as a form of work that reproduces order in a social and political context (Shove 2003). Stowe’s laundry folding dance relaxes her and satisfies a need for aesthetically-satisfying creativity in her life. She enjoys rejuvenating aesthetic responses while following society’s admonition “to be everything to everyone—confidant, healer, provisioner, ‘lifebrarian’” (Christensen 2009: 110).
Familial Connections

Successful laundry folding sessions result in Stowe connecting with her family traditions and demonstrating her devotion to her husband and children through loving care work. Folding each family member’s clothing in her or his preferred style, following some of her family traditions in an adapted manner appropriate for her family, and thinking lovingly about her family while folding, all contribute to the appeal of this task. Familial connections are important to Stowe and laundry folding provides her an enjoyable, relaxing, and productive way to strengthen these connections.

Family is emphasized perhaps more than any other topic besides following Jesus Christ in the LDS church. This emphasis began early in the church’s history and can still be seen in its contemporary publications. A 1916 article from the Relief Society Magazine quotes Proverbs 31: 10-31, which states, “She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children arise up and call her blessed, her husband also, and he praiseth her.” Using this authority, the article continues, speaking directly to the women of the church, saying,

Sisters, why do you work? For what purpose do you spend so lavishly the only thing you really own on earth—your time and your energy?...The general purpose of housework may be expressed thus: To give joy and health and happiness to your loved ones and thus to attain it yourself to make through your efforts an ideal home in every sense of the term. (292)

This article argues authoritatively that the purpose of housework is to bring happiness to one’s family.
In 1995 the church released a statement called “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” This document was created by the leaders of the church to reaffirm the church’s stance on issues related to the family and was read by the president of the church (who is also considered by members to be a modern prophet) at a general conference of the church. The statement reads:

…the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children… Husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other and for their children. “Children are an heritage of the Lord” (Psalm 127:3). Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs... Husbands and wives—mothers and fathers—will be held accountable before God for the discharge of these obligations. The family is ordained of God...Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children… We warn that individuals who violate covenants of chastity, who abuse spouse or offspring, or who fail to fulfill family responsibilities will one day stand accountable before God. Further, we warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets. (Hinckley 1995)

This statement from the leaders of the church lets church members and others know, in no uncertain terms, that familial responsibilities are central to the church’s beliefs. It notes that mothers have a major responsibility for caring for their children.

The importance of families in LDS cosmology is also reflected in the number of manuals the church has published for parents. A Parent’s Guide, Family Guidebook, Family Home Evening Resource Guidebook, and Handbook 2: Families and the Church in God’s Plan have all been published to help parents raise families in a manner that is appropriate for church standards (“Home and Family Lesson Manuals”). Scriptures, church magazine articles, and regular speeches at conferences are also seen as divine
guidance on raising families. The magazine articles and conference speeches add to this body of literature on a regular basis. These messages add to the proclamation’s assertion that “The family is ordained of God” and dire consequences await those who do not fulfill familial responsibilities (Hinckley 1995). Daily family connections are an essential part of any LDS person’s life, but are even more important for LDS mothers because of their special responsibility as outlined in the proclamation. Laundry folding allows Stowe an opportunity to connect with her family and fulfill these church-sanctioned responsibilities on many levels.

Stowe’s inclination to work to provide care and love for her family may not only be influenced by her religious views, but also by general societal expectations of mothers. In *The Encyclopedia of Women’s Folklore and Folklife*, Kristin Harris Walsh noted, “As a means of social reproduction, housework is seen as providing emotional ties to family and community in addition to basic household maintenance” (2009: 309). The work that women do in the home is done for the family, not for the woman to earn money. Simone de Beauvoir hypothesized that the patriarchal view that women embody “being-for-others” created a separate sphere for women’s work (1961). Betty Friedan argued that the expected standard of unpaid labor in the home reinforces “ideals of ‘feminine fulfillment’ [that] can leave some women feeling invisible, void of self-direction and individual purpose” (1964). Danille Christensen similarly argued, “Altruism has long been seen as a particularly feminine trait, as well as an appropriate and encompassing pursuit for women” (2009: 82). Stowe personally enjoys the process of folding laundry, but sees its main value as the service it provides her family and the connections it builds with them.
Folding laundry connects Alana to her childhood and her family traditions. This is not uncommon. Henry Glassie states, “Artists who merge preservation and experimentation in performance guide folklorists into understanding tradition as a dimension within every creative act” (1995: 409). Stowe says she comes from a long line of strong, empowered women who all enjoyed being excellent caretakers and homemaker. Stowe’s grandmother and great grandmother, for example, were raised on farms in Southeast Idaho and were responsible for all of the cooking, cleaning, and laundering for the hired men on the farm (fig. 7). This was certainly not an easy task in the early 1900s but Stowe notes it was learned and passed down as an enjoyable way of life.

Stowe’s laundry tradition began with her great grandmother who used to heat the iron on the stove to iron her husband’s shirts before he wore them out into the field to work. Stowe’s grandma and mom both carried on the tradition of ironing but utilized available technology to accomplish their task. Her mom still irons most of her laundry. “She irons her pillowcases,” says Stowe. “It’s insane!” (2013a). Although Stowe embraces the strong housekeeping traditions of her matriarchal line, she chooses to do so in her own way. She very rarely irons and says her dirty little secret is that she never dusts (except when she dusts her new washer and dryer) (fig. 8).

Stowe recalls her mother making dinner and asking her to get the laundry out of the dryer after the timer buzzed when she was about nine years old. Stowe would run downstairs and fold the laundry to surprise her mother who was already busy making dinner. After dinner Stowe’s mother, Alair, would refold the laundry in the “correct”
way. After watching closely for a while Stowe learned her mother’s folding rules and began surprising her again. Next she tried to master ironing but never learned the mom-approved way. Although Alair expected perfection she always recognized Stowe’s effort and never made her feel bad (fig. 9).

Stowe has ironed only three times since she got married ten years ago. Most recently she ironed her husband’s tuxedo shirt for a choir concert. She ironed it five times in an attempt to get it right even though her husband did not care. Ironing is anxiety inducing for her now because when she was younger she always felt like she was failing and was nervous she would get something wrong. “You can refold a towel ten times,” she says, “but you can’t uncrease a shirt!” (2013a).

Stowe has adopted some of her mom’s folding techniques into her own repertoire but adapts them to her taste and her family’s needs. She and Alair joke about the differences in their housekeeping strategies, especially Stowe’s refusal to iron and Alair’s emphasis on a spotless home. Alair recently bought Stowe a sign that now hangs in her laundry room. It says, “Laundry Schedule: Sort today, wash later, fold eventually, iron never” (fig. 10).

Alair began having health problems when Stowe was five years old. This resulted in numerous surgeries and going weeks or months at a time unable to keep up the house the way she wanted to. Consequently Stowe and her sisters had more responsibilities around the house than did their friends. She learned to cook when she was ten and began making dinner for the family when she was twelve. Perhaps due to the strong tradition of housekeepers in the family, Alair made a clean house a high priority. The family
vacuumed twice per day, scrubbed the bathrooms daily, dusted twice per week and cleaned the mopboards with a toothbrush monthly.

Stowe appreciates the life lessons she was taught and the housekeeping skills she gained from her mother. “We all use elements of the past to meet our needs in the present and our hopes for the future. In the process we make tradition our own, leaving our marks” (Cashman, Mould, and Shukla 2011: 1). While Stowe incorporates some family traditions in her laundry practices, in an effort to have a different kind of connection with her children Stowe chooses to fold laundry at night so that she can spend more time playing with them during the day. A focus on the well-being of children over one’s housework is emphasized in a 1937 Relief Society Magazine article: “Human destiny is largely shaped by the nurture or neglect of childhood” (154). A 1916 article also notes that the greatest goal of a homemaker is to inspire her family to higher moral and cultural ideals as she attends to their physical needs (293). Stowe defines herself not only by the cleanliness of her home but also by the relationships she is building with her children. Stowe explains the complexity of her decision to prioritize family unity over cleanliness:

the way my house looks and how prepared my family is with clean clothes and good food to eat, the whole encompassment of housework is a reflection of who I am and how I can do things and how good of a mom I am. It’s all just wrapped up in there: if my house is clean, my kids are fed, and the clothes are clean, then I’m okay. I’m doing well. Ya know, I think it’s kinda the same as men feel about making money sometimes. I have this level of housework so it means I’m this good of a wife, ya know? Does that make sense. Which sounds so primitive and silly, but I think that’s in me somehow. To feel like it’s a reflection of me and when people come over… And I actually enjoy that my playroom is a mess when people come over because I feel that reflects that I’m a good mom. I let my kids play they have a space that’s theirs. They don’t have to live in a museum where they can only touch the one toy that’s out at a time. I think that’s one of the
dumbest rules ever, for my house. I think it works great in other people’s houses. I feel that my kids have freedom to get out whatever toys they want and we’ll clean up at the end of the day and it’s not a big deal. (Stowe, 2014a)

Despite her conscious decision to alter her family traditions to prioritize her children’s happiness, she still respects and appreciates her family and their practices.

Perhaps we all connect with or rebel against family tradition as we fold laundry or complete other household chores. Stowe’s connections to her family traditions are renewed each time she does laundry despite her choice to alter the way in which she carries out these traditions. Smells often evoke strong aesthetic responses, especially in relation to laundry (Pink 2007, Shove 2003). Stowe associates the smell of Tide with her family because this was the detergent used in her childhood home. Whenever Stowe smells Tide her thoughts immediately and involuntarily turn to her mother’s laundry practices. She does not associate a negative or positive response with Tide; simply a return of thoughts to her childhood home. Now Stowe uses Free and Clear detergent. Many members of her family have eczema which necessitates the use of an unscented detergent for skin comfort. She and Matt both prefer Bounce original scent fabric softener because it was used in their childhood homes. They have attempted to switch scents but quickly returned to the original after each switch. Stowe’s laundry consistently smells of Bounce but she is somewhat indifferent to its smell. She claims no particularly strong associations with the smell.

The smell of air-dried sheets also reminds Stowe of her childhood. Speaking of the month in July 2014 when her dryer was broken and she dried her own laundry on a line for the first time (fig. 11), she said,
Sheets dried outside are splendid! I love the smell! As I gather sheets of the line I have to bury my face in them for a minute and soak up the wonderful outside smell. I also was delighted to discover that sheets hold in that wonderful outside smell when you fold them. I dried some sheets outside and didn’t need them right away so I folded them and put them in the closet. When I got them out weeks later and opened them up, that wonderful outside smell came pouring out of them!! It was amazing. (Stowe, 2014b)

She notes that her affinity for the smell of sheets dried outside originates from childhood memories at her matriarchal grandmother’s (Grammy’s) home.

I used to spend a lot of time at Grammy’s house in the summer and one of our favorite activities was Grammy would give us a pile of sheets and light blankets and a basket of clothes pins. We would go out and make a fort out of lawn chairs and the longer we sat out in our fort the more the blankets would start to have that sun baked smell. I think that’s what it takes me back to. (Stowe, 2014b)

The smell of air-dried sheets and Tide laundry detergent demonstrate some of the positive aesthetic responses that draw Stowe to laundry. She values connections to her past and can regularly experience strong sensual connections through her laundry practice.

Stowe feels connected to her family’s future as she ponders on the best way to teach her children about laundry and housekeeping. She wants them to be independent and self-sufficient but she also values youth and playfulness. She has found a balance between these values by folding laundry at night and playfully including children in laundry day activities such as putting clothes away. One day she was gathering laundry when she paused to help her one-year-old son Emmett. She returned to her closet and began gathering the remaining laundry. She heard a startling noise and pulled back a blanket to find a giggling, four-year-old Karalyn hiding in a hamper. This story demonstrates the playfulness that is associated with laundry day. Karalyn does not feel nervous about helping with laundry but enjoys it and will learn more as she grows older.
Stowe connects with her children by providing a safe place for her children to learn laundry habits (fig. 12). In this task she accomplishes what the *Relief Society Magazine* calls “a great thing…It is no small task to teach children to work, but it is time well invested both for mother and child, and should be begun by small chores as early in the child’s life as is feasible” (1916: 298).

Stowe cares for each of her family members when folding laundry. She and her husband, Matt, went on dates to the laundromat before they were married. “He was particular about laundry and a spot cleaner” (Stowe 2013a). Now she feels that carefully folding his laundry shows her appreciation for his work outside of the home. She folds his socks in a particularly careful manner. When they first got married she folded them the way her mother used to fold socks, folding the top of one down over the other. After much debate, however, she began following the pattern prescribed by Matt’s mother, simply putting two socks together and folding the pair in half. Stowe now folds his socks in half in a pair the way he likes, showing that she cares about him and his opinion (see fig. 13).

Stowe has other methods of doing laundry that show Matt she cares about him. She explains:

It’s a way for me to show affection, well not affection, but like when I take his white shirts and put them in the steam cycle and hang them up so they won’t wrinkle. It’s a way that I can take care of him and show him that, “Look, I’m doing something nice for you, ya know?” Or when he gets out of the shower and goes to his drawer and opens it and it’s full of clean underwear and socks and it’s like, “Yeah, you’re welcome. I did that for you. Mmmhmm. I’m awesome!” It’s like this little way of showing that I love him. It’s like, “I took the time to make sure that you had clean underwear.” Cuz I don’t get a lot of opportunities to subtly
say, “Hey, I care about you.” It’s just one of those ways I can show it besides just saying, “I love you.” (Stowe, 2014a)

She also tries to complete all the chores before he comes home on nights he works late. “I guess I try to help him avoid the second shift of having to come home and have all these other responsibilities, too, you know? Cuz I figure when you work 18 hours a day you shouldn’t have to do that.” Arlie Hochschild first wrote about “the second shift,” using it to explain the double burden women carry when they work outside the home. He clearly noted that in his study women held the emotional and physical burden of the housework despite working outside the home while their husbands also thought their wives maintained the double burden (1989: 260). Stowe’s application of “the second shift” to her husband raises interesting questions about gender relations. The disconnect between the different uses of this term indicate Stowe’s desire or feeling of responsibility to carry the load of the housework is strong. She is a working student and takes on a second shift daily. At the beginning of this study she did not work outside the home. At the time of her above quote, however, she had begun working and taking classes outside the home. She notes that her husband sometimes helps with laundry while she completes work after her children go to bed. She still takes responsibility for most of the chores around the house but tries to save the laundry for times when she can enjoy it. Unlike the mothers in Hochchild’s study who “devote proportionately more of their time at home to housework and proportionately less of it to childcare” (1989: 261), Stowe chooses to remain focused on fun and helping her children learn and grow while she is at home with them. She tries to do housework while the children are sleeping, focusing her down time on playing with the children and showing her love to them. However, like the women in the study she still
carries most of the burden of the housework. An analysis of LDS women’s oral histories notes, “As society changes, generations accumulate, opportunities widen, and personal necessities vary, the message of the importance of motherhood remains as strong as ever” (Keeney and Woster 2003: 86). This is certainly true as evidenced by the church doctrine of families outlined throughout this essay. Stowe follows this doctrine by spending her time in the home focused on mothering her children in a nurturing and loving manner. Despite this interesting use of the gendered term “second shift,” Stowe clearly works hard to care for her husband and communicates her appreciation and affection through the proper execution of laundry folding and other household chores.

Stowe uses laundry to show her children that she cares about them. She told me a story that demonstrates the importance of folding each family member’s clothing “correctly.” One day when Isaac, her son, was six years old he got quite angry because his shirts hung too high for him in the closet in their new home. He began breaking hangers so Stowe decided to fold his shirts and put them in the dresser. After he got dressed each morning there would be four or five unfolded, clean shirts on the floor in his room. She realized that he was having trouble trying to find a shirt he liked so she began folding his shirts in a way that allowed him to see the front without unfolding them. This ended the shirt issue.

If someone besides Stowe folds Isaac’s shirts now, however, the same problem arises. She fulfills his needs by folding his shirts so he can easily pick the one he wants. Others don’t need their shirts folded like this so she folds theirs in a quicker, easier fashion. Isaac’s socks do not need to be folded like Matt’s since Isaac refuses to wear his
in pairs. Isaac’s socks are simply placed together with his underwear because this works for him. Stowe folds laundry in the way that her children like, despite her own preferences, to show that she cares for them, that she is a self-sacrificing, responsible mother (fig. 14).

Although Christian theology has traditionally viewed pride as a great and abominable sin, feminist Valerie Saiving notes that women often sin to a greater degree by acting overly humble or sacrificing more than is healthy. “A woman can give too much of herself, so that nothing remains of her own uniqueness she can become merely an emptiness, almost a zero, without value to herself, to her fellow men” (1992: 35). Sarah Hoagland and other feminist ethicists take issue with Saiving’s analysis, arguing that the selfish/selfless dichotomy is fallacious. It is natural, she asserts, that the interests of two people will vary from one another; because my choice differs from yours does not mean that I choose selfishly. She contends,

We will have reasons for any choice we make…We can regard our choosing to interact as part of how we engage in this living. Such choices are matters of focus, not sacrifice. That I attend certain things and not others, that I focus here and not there, is part of how I create value. Far from sacrificing myself, or part of myself, I am creating. (1989: 88)

She claims that emphasizing creation and focus allows women agency that can build meaning in their lives rather than viewing the world through an oppositional metaphor. While it is undeniable that many women find themselves in disenfranchised positions and may sacrifice to a dangerous degree as Saiving hypothesizes, perhaps considering Stowe’s actions through Hoagland’s philosophy can reveal sophistication in her choices. She creates meaning in her family’s daily life by focusing her time and attention on a task
that enriches her personally, adds to her family’s comforts, and builds upon her understanding of each family member. Although folding laundry in a particular manner for each family member can be seen as oppressive, she uses this chore to build her relationships with her family members, reflecting on each person’s uniqueness as she folds her or his clothing.

At one point in our interview Stowe told me a story that occurred while she was pregnant with her second child, Lilly. She knew that Lilly had trisomy 18 which is a fatal chromosome defect. She had been preparing for Lilly’s birth and was now at the point in her pregnancy when she would normally wash the baby’s clothes. She recalls spending a lot of time in the last weeks of her pregnancy at the Walmart near her home, standing in front of the Dreft (a laundry soap for newborns) debating whether or not to purchase it.

On the day Lilly was stillborn Alana had a doctor’s appointment scheduled for 1:00 pm. She walked to Walmart that morning, with Isaac in the stroller, to pass the time because she was nervous about the appointment. She says,

I went back to the Dreft and stood there and had this whole moment about the Dreft. And then I thought, “I don’t want to push a big bottle of Dreft home in the stroller, so I’ll buy it next time I’m in the car.” And then on the way home [Lilly] kicked which only happened a handful of times because she didn’t have very much strength. Anyway, she kicked and I patted my belly and said, “Not yet, sweetheart.” And then I went to the doctor and she was gone. It’s just interesting how often I went to that aisle and stood there debating during those 13 weeks. I was just so conflicted because I wanted to do the laundry! That’s what you do when you have a baby. You wash their clothes, you get ready, you fold things, and put ‘em in the dresser. It’s how you be a mom! (Stowe 2013a)
Stowe says she was enriched and satisfied as she used her laundry routine to prepare for the two healthy pregnancies that followed. The proper execution of laundry demonstrates that she values caring for her children and enjoys the resulting familial connections.

The value Stowe places on family aligns with the LDS church’s rhetorical definition of womanliness. “While Mormon men enact Mormon manliness through priesthood advancement and service, Mormon womanliness was defined as the active application of service to others, appropriate care of children, personal independence, and financial prudence” (Gavin 2013: 121). LDS women are not only expected to be nurturing, but especially to be nurturing in familial relationships. Sherrie L. M. Gavin cites Barbara Thompson, a member of the General Relief Society Board (the highest ranking female leadership in the LDS church), asserting,

Thus Mormon womanliness is defined in official LDS rhetoric by the act of nurturing. This nurturing within a Mormon context positions women only in familial relationships; included with the title of mother is also a woman who is a “daughter, a sister, and aunt, a cousin, a niece, and a granddaughter.” (2013: 114)

Although Stowe feels strongly about nurturing her family members and chooses to do so in a way that simultaneously uplifts her physically, mentally, and emotionally, her church clearly urges her toward this type of action. LDS women who take specific actions to nurture their families are judged as more womanly, as acting more appropriately in the sight of God than those who behave in a less nurturing manner.

Here the term agency must be taken into account. Lisa Gilman argues that often studies of those in potentially oppressed situations suggest that people use their agency
inappropriately if they choose not to revolt or protest those in power. She notes, however, that this is a simplistic view of agency and contends, as do Sherry Ortner and Michael Foucault, that

any given person operates with a unique web constituted by such things as her personality, needs, abilities, desires, and multiple social relationships, all of which can inform each decision that she makes. Each agent is therefore going to have a different and fluid perception of her social world, and her agency is exhibited through the way she makes choices either to act or not to act at any given moment. Any individual...does not exist in a binary relationship of power—ruler and ruled—but rather is embedded in webs of power tied to her or his economic, social, familial, political, and religious life, all of which impact her or his decisions at any given moment. (2009: 170)

Agency is far more complex than just noting whether or not a disenfranchised person rebels against the dominant powers in her life. Rather, each person negotiates with many power structures and his personal needs on a daily basis. After examining the specific example of LDS women through an analysis of oral histories, Amy Hoyt noted,

American Latter-day Saint women offer feminist theoreticians an instructive way of reconceptualizing agency in order to be relevant to the practices of traditional religious women. The LDS women I worked with employed agency in diverse and complex ways, but it was most often a simultaneous engagement between individual, communal, and kinship loyalties that operated within a system that allows for self-interpreted spiritual authorization. (2013: 214)

As did the women in Hoyt’s study, Stowe takes into account her own needs as well as the physical and emotional needs of her family, the demands of her religion, the expectations of her family and community, and her family traditions as she folds laundry. Although she has not told me this outright, I believe she understands that changing her laundry routine could create negative consequences for her within her family relationships, so she
balances her loyalties by deliberately choosing to execute her household chores in an overtly nurturing and painstaking manner. At the same time, she shows devotion to her family and her faith in a meditative, relaxing way which benefits her personally.

Religiosity

The aesthetic responses that compel Stowe to continue to hone her laundry folding technique encourage her toward a fulfillment of religious devotion. She receives a significant emotional boost as she achieves order, rejuvenation, and close familial connections by folding laundry in a masterful, consistent manner. This emotional boost nurtures a connection to some of the major tenets of her religion, invoking spiritual edification, as outlined in the preceding sections. Although Stowe may not analyze her behavior in this way, I believe she allows herself to act in the traditional motherly role advocated by her religion as she folds laundry because of the emotional, social, and aesthetic benefits that this work affords her.

Motherhood is extremely important in the LDS religion. This quote from the 1942 is still referenced often in official and unofficial church documents. “Motherhood is near to Divinity. It is the highest, holiest service to be assumed by mankind. It places her who honors its holy calling and service next to the angels” (“Message of the First Presidency” 1942: 5). By fulfilling the motherly role approved by the church, Stowe can claim a place near the angels. This is one of the few ways women in the church can gain visibility. Those who choose to protest or rebel may be ignored as they communicate in a style defined by the church as unwomanly.
Lisa Gilman’s analysis of traditional women’s dance in Malawi notes a similar occurrence in the political arena there. In this case women choose to dance for political parties despite the oppressiveness of the practice, due to the ideological and economic power that the tradition holds in the local culture.

In the case of dancing, politicians have been able to appropriate some women's bodies successfully because many participants in this practice (dancers, politicians, and members of the general public) feel strongly about the importance of dancing—as entertainment, as a symbolic link with the past, a central cultural practice, a distinction from European/American imperialist practices. Additionally, the institution provides some women with economic and political opportunities. Because many people in the country do feel strongly about this practice, many ignore its exploitative dimension. These strong emotional associations of women's dancing with tradition create a situation in which many practitioners are complicit in their own domination. (2004: 56)

We can feel strong emotional attachment to traditions that are not good for us. Tradition, emotions, and economic or political advantage may compel some to dismiss or ignore the possibility of exploitation. Perhaps the benefits of approval from the religious forces in her life (God, church leaders, family leaders—husband and parents) outweigh any exploitative dimensions of housework, compelling Stowe to focus on the positive aesthetic responses and close relationships that careful laundry folding provide.

Stowe’s laundry folding practice may be seen as a form of religious devotion, perhaps work as a sort of prayer. The Bible Dictionary, which accompanies the LDS King James Version of the Bible, notes that prayer has been historically associated with work, such as sacrifice in Moses’ tabernacle. “Blessings require some work or effort on our part before we can obtain them. Prayer is a form of work and is an appointed means for obtaining the highest of all blessings” (“Prayer” 2014). The Bible Dictionary also notes that the purpose of prayer is to bring one’s will into alignment with God’s and
allow that person to receive blessings that God is already willing to give, provided the person demonstrates a willingness to work to ask for the blessing. Stowe’s laundry folding practice provides physical evidence—devoted work—that she is willing to follow God’s desires for her life’s purpose. She shows she wants to maintain order, rejuvenate regularly to remain an efficient homemaker, and build family connections by doing her family’s laundry in an appropriate and masterful way. She offers a prayer, a sacrifice of her time to demonstrate her devotion.

Laundry folding also allows Stowe a time to reflect on the meaning of her family relationships, her relationship with God as one of his daughters and a mother to his children, and the growth and development of her children. As she folds the children’s clothes, particularly when the children reach milestones, she thoughtfully observes the size of the clothes, contemplating the physical and spiritual growth of each child. When a child outgrows a piece of clothing she moves it from the regular laundry circulation to a box in the basement, noting the ways in which the child has developed since beginning to wear that piece of clothing, the ways she has learned to teach and love as a mother, and how her relationship with God has grown as she has cared for one of his children. Perhaps this reflective time acts as a momentary period of prayer in which she reasserts her place as a mother, a caretaker of her children, and a daughter of God. As she folds laundry Stowe reinforces her religious values while simultaneously enjoying positive emotional and aesthetic benefits. She also gains social power and visibility in her family and her church community by acting out the traditional motherly role prescribed by her church.
Conclusion

As the magnet on her fridge notes, “Moms make it all better” (fig. 15). Folding laundry provides Alana Stowe a satisfying creative outlet in which she can accomplish a measurable, achievable task, while properly caring for her husband and children. Her aesthetically-driven technique communicates those values she finds most important to her life: order, rejuvenation, familial connections, and religiosity. Her enjoyment of the task grows as she practices and continues to master the folding process. All the while she stays neatly within the societal bounds given her as an LDS wife and mother and takes pride in maintaining an efficient, orderly home. This is not meant to be an apologist statement. Frequently women’s housework is oppressive and this study is not intended to depoliticize or romanticize that fact. Rather the purpose of this case study is to demonstrate that by looking at the minute level of one woman’s daily activities we can see the individual interacting with the larger institutions that influence her life. She does not follow her traditions blindly but instead uses her agency to act innovatively within the social bounds and traditions set by her church and family. I argue that Stowe chooses to act as a mother in the only way that gives her power and visibility in the patriarchal and highly religious culture in which she lives. By choosing to use the communication style advocated by the church for women (nurturing and accommodating) she gains visibility and power with the religious and familial authorities in her life. She says that washing and folding laundry appropriately proves to herself, on a biweekly basis, that she can successfully maintain peace and control in her home and in her emotional and spiritual life. While I agree with her perspective, I argue that by choosing to act as the nurturing,
loving mother who upholds traditional, family values in the home, she also maintains control over her place and image in the church and her family. The cost of upholding this role is far less than the cost of the alternative—potential devaluation and rejection by the religion and family that she holds dear. She chooses to sustain tradition in a way that supports her family but also invites personally satisfying aesthetic responses and social benefits.
References


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The gathering process begins in the children’s rooms.
Clean laundry waiting to be folded.
Figure 4

(Above) The folding process is the main artistic event of the laundry process. Alana sits on the floor for optimal range of motion during the folding process.

(Below) Strategic placement of folded clothing in baskets to await the following day’s trip to the dresser or closet.
Figure 5

“An empty laundry basket is a beautiful thing!”

–Alana Stowe
Figure 6

(Clockwise from upper left) Different types of towels folded in their own particular style, Towel placement in drawer, Tri-fold design, Rectangular format
Figure 7

Alana’s great grandmother Maydia Celina Sharp Anderson and husband
Figure 8

(Right) Alana’s new washer and dryer

(Below) The top of Alana’s new, dusted washer
Alana, her daughter Karalyn, grandmother Marilyn (Grammy), and mother Alair

Sign hanging in Alana’s laundry room which Alair recently gave her.
Figure 11

Alana, her daughter Karalyn, grandmother Marilyn (Grammy), and mother Alair
Figure 12

Emmett and Karalyn “helping” with the laundry process
(Clockwise from top left) Matt’s socks awaiting folding, Old way of folding socks (Alair’s method), New way of folding socks (Matt’s mom’s method), Matt’s socks put away in their drawer
(Clockwise from upper left) Isaac’s shirts, Karalyn’s shirts, Isaac’s socks and underwear.
Figure 15

Magnet on Alana’s refrigerator
Notes:

1 According to Sherrie L. M. Gavin’s survey of oral histories, an LDS woman’s purpose is found in active nurturing. “Within a contemporary Mormon context, to be womanly is to seek progression and development by the use of physical and spiritual nurturing habits and characteristics; the opposite of Mormon womanhood is not Mormon manhood (or priesthood) but anything that would corrode or impede the act of nurturing” (2013: 114).

2 Sara Hoagland is situated within the Lesbian community, but her ideas remain relevant for relationships of all types.