

Melinda Cummings Cameron, “Act Well Thy Part,” in *Finding God at BYU*, ed. S. Kent Brown, Kaye T. Hanson, and James R. Kearl (Provo, UT: The Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 230–41.

*If thou art merry, praise the Lord with singing, with music, with dancing, and with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving (D&C 136:28)*

### **Act Well Thy Part**

*Melinda Cummings Cameron*

*Melinda Cummings Cameron was born amid the glamour of the film industry in Los Angeles, California, in 1948. Her father, Bob Cummings, was a movie and television star from the 1940s through the 1960s, starring in the number-one rated television show during the 1950s, The Bob Cummings Show. Melinda’s parents reared her with honesty and family values in spite of the lure of glitz and glamour that surrounded her growing-up years. She came to BYU after a campus visit intrigued her with the beauty of the place. Her discovery of God at BYU is captured on film, and thousands of people have witnessed it without knowing that they were seeing the miracle of the Holy Ghost touch her life as she performed in *Pioneers in Petticoats*. After joining the Church during her third year at BYU, she married Kim Cameron. They are the parents of seven children and live in Ann Arbor, Michigan.*

I was born while my parents lived in Beverly Hills, California. My father was featured in *The Ziegfeld Follies* with Fanny Brice and subsequently became a television and motion picture star in the 1950s. My mother was also in show business and had appeared in several movies before meeting and marrying my father in 1945. She relinquished her career to become the mother of my four brothers and sisters and me.

Let me begin by telling you more about my father and mother, because who they are and what they chose to do with their lives has had a major impact on me. My father was born Charles Clarence Cummings in Joplin, Missouri, in 1910, the son of a physician father and a religious mother. She called their only child, after ten years of trying, “my miracle baby.” As a young man, my father was an outstanding student and swimmer, possessing a natural acting ability and a great love for aviation.

During the Depression, Dad left Drury College and a major in mechanical engineering after less than a year because of financial hardship. On a friend’s advice that plentiful acting jobs existed in New York City, he moved there, eventually taking courses at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. This training convinced him that he should pursue a career as an actor.

The demand for British actors in New York theater prompted Dad to go to England, acquire an English accent, and return to New York with a new identity—Blade Stanhope Conway. Dad was cast in *The Ziegfeld Follies* opposite Fanny Brice. During this time, Milton Berle took Dad under his wing and gave him a chance as Milton’s straight man. When Milton discovered that Dad was not really British, but an impostor trying to preserve his job, he agreed to keep the secret. However, when a Hollywood talent scout offered Dad and Milton screen tests for an up-coming movie, and Dad got the part while Milton was turned down, keeping the secret provided a true test of Berle’s friendship.

Once in Hollywood, Dad was cast in dramatic and romantic movie roles opposite some of the greatest stars in the Golden Years of Hollywood, such as Grace Kelly, Olivia DeHavilland, Ronald Reagan, Buster Keaton, and Ray Milland. He changed his name permanently to Robert Orville Cummings (Orville after Orville Wright, whom his own father once treated for an illness), and he became a major movie star.

My mother, Mary Elliott Daniels, was born in 1917 in Gaffney, South Carolina, the second of six children in a poor family. As a beautiful and brilliant woman and valedictorian of her high school class, she received several college scholarships but had to turn them all down because of indigent circumstances. She even wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt asking for a college loan, but she was turned down.

Mother won a number of beauty contests that resulted in her leaving home for New York City at age seventeen to pursue a career in modeling and show business. She supported her family back home in South Carolina, missing meals in order to send money to the family. Even though she was hungry, her high moral standards caused her to resist the advances of wealthy men promising a comfortable lifestyle.

Seeing her performance in a New York production, a Hollywood movie agent offered her a screen test. She was flown to Hollywood and put under contract at MGM Studios. She spent her first years in Hollywood performing in small roles in major motion pictures, receiving studio training in acting, singing, dancing, diction (to help overcome her southern accent), and makeup. She was often tutored in the early mornings when the makeup artist had time for her and

before the major stars arrived. However, when it was announced that Judy Garland or Joan Crawford was coming down the hall, Mom was whisked out of the makeup chair and into a corner of the room until there was time for her again. She spent numerous makeup sessions just listening to some of these famous women, observing the stress they experienced and pace of their lives. The demands they faced and the expectations placed on them by their careers took a heavy toll on marriage and family. Most of these relationships were conducted via telephone.

When I became a young woman, my mother shared those experiences with me. She told me, “I determined that if I could ever find someone to marry, I would not have a career so I could have a strong marriage and family.” On another occasion she said, “It really takes all one’s effort to have a happy marriage and family. I’ve known couples who put their marriages and careers before their children, and their children were a disaster; or women who put their careers before their husbands and children, and their marriages did not last; I have never known anyone who was able to do all three and stay together.”

As a young girl growing up, I experienced the glamour of the Hollywood lifestyle—the travel, parties, exciting people, fame, fortune, and the promise of an exciting career. Traveling with my parents to Europe, for example, enabled me to meet Alan J. Lerner who said he liked my name so much that he planned to write a song about it someday—which he did in *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*. I traveled to Japan on movie location with Shirley MacLaine and to London on location with Leslie Caron and Warren Beatty. Having an hour conversation with the Beatles was a highlight and a lifelong memory. I have wonderful recollections of attending girls school with Candace Bergen, Jimmy Stewart’s twins, and Lisa Halaby, now Queen Noor of Jordan. I attended summer camp with David Cassidy (*The Partridge Family*) and Patti Reagan, and acted in plays at Beverly Hills High School with Richard Dreyfus and Albert Brooks. I also observed the price one pays for a lifestyle of popularity and notoriety. We had a constant intrusion of visitors in our home, and our lives were constantly interrupted because our house was on the Movie Star Bus Tour—a nuisance to me but evidence that Daddy was popular. My mother told me as a young teenager never to write anything in a note or a letter that I didn’t want printed in the *Los Angeles Times*, and I was cautioned to be careful about what I said on the telephone.

On several occasions, my mother had to depend on nurses to look after us when she traveled with my father overseas. I remember how it felt to be cared for by a paid care-giver who had little patience with me and did not hide her favoritism or unkindness when Mother was not around to see it.

Family events were often held in front of a camera, with Mother trying to find a way to have us really do the activities we had just staged for a magazine article or TV show. These included taking trips, demonstrating lawnmowers, using play equipment, and eating and drinking various foods and beverages. After a hard day at work, Dad would come home and say to me, “Never marry an actor. It’s a rotten life.”

In the mid-1960s in Hollywood, scripts being offered to my father began to change. They became racy and even required some nudity. Many movie contracts reflected this change in the fine print by indicating that nudity or risqué outtake material could be required at the producer’s discretion. Dad became more and more discouraged with the movie business and turned to live theater. He starred in several successful theater productions in the East and became interested in investing in theaters-in-the-round. One such theater was being built just north of Salt Lake City. Dad brought our family, along with the family of a close friend to meet the board of directors and participate in the grand opening celebration for the new Valley Music Hall. We were hosted by a member of the board of directors, M. Russell Ballard, who agreed to take us on a sight-seeing tour, which included the campus of Brigham Young University.

My mother had seen the campus on a previous visit to Utah, and my older brother thought the security of Utah would be a good environment for me. Mom was thrilled to again meet Janie Thompson, director of BYU’s Program Bureau, and some of the Curtain Time USA tour members, recently returned from a world tour. I was so impressed with the group—their freshness and their happiness—but I was especially impressed with the feeling of peace I felt while touring the campus. These were feelings I had rarely felt with my friends in Beverly Hills or among the Hollywood crowd. I wondered, “Why is everyone so happy here? What is this feeling? Are they just putting on a show for visitors?”

My high school friend—I shall call her Diane—and I were offered college applications as we learned about the special standards at BYU. The code of conduct—which included honesty, integrity, modesty in dress and behavior, keeping the Word of Wisdom including no alcohol, cigarettes, or Coke—reminded me of my parents’ teachings. All these ideas seemed to resonate with me, and I began to be drawn to this wonderful place. We all went back to California, but I never forgot how I felt that day at BYU. Diane and I both began acting, and during my senior year in high school I started a professional stage career, preceded by acting classes from Agnes Moorehead and a recording contract offer from Jules Stein. I went on tour with a professional stage production of *Generation* opposite my dad. He was taking a big chance with inexperienced me. In fact, he declared on opening night in Palm Beach, Florida: “Because you are my daughter, people will expect more from you than they would from just any new actress. You’ll have to be

great on the first try. And, by the way, my career depends on it.”

With that, we performed opening night, and our positive reviews and sellout audiences in each city during our summer stock tour began to convince me that acting was probably my best career choice. After opening night in Miami Beach, competing with Frank Sinatra at the Fountainbleau, a movie producer named Huntington Hartford introduced himself and offered me an audition for a motion picture and a television miniseries. He arranged for me to meet his representative in Los Angeles at the end of our show’s run.

Back at home in Beverly Hills, I met with Mr. Hartford’s representative, and he explained the special nature of the audition. I would be “living with the producer.” I was being given a chance for a major breakthrough as a film star; I just had to compromise my standards to get the part. I felt too young to make such a choice. As a professional actress, this was such an important opportunity. But as a young woman, even though I had experienced little formal religious instruction outside my home, I knew this was morally wrong. I wanted to stay pure and build a happy marriage someday, and I knew that I could never really have a secure marriage if I knowingly gave in to this solicitation.

I tried to explain myself to this veteran Hollywood gentleman, but I was met with little tolerance on his part. Some of my parents’ mends who heard about my decision to say no to an audition for this new Mike Nichols movie, *The Graduate*, and the special television miniseries based on the novel *Jane Eyre*, reprimanded me. “Melinda, do you realize what a great opportunity this is? With your father’s connections, this chance has been handed to you. Others work their entire lives to get such a chance; you should be ashamed that you’re giving it up.”

In spite of the pressure I felt to say yes, I also felt a strong internal encouragement to maintain my values. I felt in my mind a voice simply saying my name, “Melinda,” prompting me to remember who I was and helping me recall events in my life when I had chosen to stay morally clean. The experience was so unsettling for me, however, that I decided to apply to attend college rather than to jump back into professional theater. I applied to and was accepted by BYU in the fall of 1967. After a few hours of orientation in Deseret Towers, I was introduced to my new roommate, Elaine Black, from Blanding, Utah. The differences in our backgrounds were immediately apparent. She had grown up in a large LDS family of modest means in Blanding, a town that had fewer people than my high school graduating class. She had never traveled far from home, and she delighted in rural activities and loved country and western music.

On the other hand, I had traveled all over the world and had attended command performances in the presence of royalty, and Hollywood celebrities frequented our home. As time passed, however, Elaine turned out to be the perfect roommate and one who would influence my life immeasurably. On several occasions while standing in meal lines at the Morris Center, some BYU students would come up and cattily ask when I was going to take the missionary discussions or be “dunked in the water.” Elaine would brush it off in a cute way that made me feel comfortable. Later she told me she had prayed to room with a non-Latter-day Saint, but added, “I had no idea it would be someone like you!” I’m sure it was challenging for her to share a room with someone whose life seemed so complicated and whose value system was devoid of the principles of the restored gospel and of the Holy Spirit. But Elaine’s testimony of the gospel was revealed in quiet ways by the way she lived each day—she prayed each morning and night, attended her church meetings faithfully, wrote letters of appreciation to her family for the privilege of attending BYU, and gently offered to answer any questions I had about the Church. I began to see a pattern in the way she and other BYU students lived their lives in harmony with their testimonies, which they frequently shared at dorm prayers each evening.

These quiet but powerful examples of the fruits of the gospel were supplemented by my first Book of Mormon class. I remember the first day of class, in which it became clear that I was the only non-Latter-day Saint in the room. When our instructor asked if anyone was opposed to offering a prayer, an LDS girl in the back raised her hand and indicated that she did not want to be called on to pray. I was surprised at the seeming contradiction, and my thought was, “Why not? Don’t you believe this? Then why are you here?” I thought prayer was linked inextricably to Church membership. I came to realize that not all BYU students were like my roommate, Elaine.

As the semester progressed, I tried to abide by the standards that I had promised to live upon enrolling at BYU. Whereas my friend Diane had labeled the University’s behavioral and dress standards, dormitory curfew hours, and required religion classes as “juvenile,” I had committed to conform to the standards, and I intended to keep my word. One result was that I began to feel small promptings from the Spirit, and my understanding of eternal truths began to increase. However, that brought about a certain sense of personal anxiety that I would be responsible for this knowledge as I learned more. Contemplating joining the Church was troublesome because of the great problems it would cause in my family. In Beverly Hills circles, Mormons were comparable to a strange cult, and no one expected that I would actually become a Latter-day Saint. This quandary prompted me to apply to other colleges, as an escape, so that I could leave BYU before I learned too much.

On the other hand, I did not want to be a quitter. I blanched at the thought of giving up simply because things were becoming uncomfortable. Besides, I told myself, what I was learning was not bad for me; in fact, I felt that I was

better because of this new knowledge. I didn't need to become a Latter-day Saint just because I was learning principles that were helpful to me. After all, I still needed to know what course I should pursue in my life. Was my earlier decision to pursue professional acting the right one?

During the summer after my freshman year, I entertained U.S. troops in the Orient on Janie Thompson's Program Bureau tour, "Startime BYU," and saw the priesthood of God at work when two returned missionary tour members pronounced a priesthood blessing that saved a life. I was tutored by Janie Thompson, who had herself made great sacrifices in her life for the gospel. She gave up a career as a professional singer in New York, followed the promptings of the Holy Ghost, and accepted a position at BYU to build the student entertainment groups. Along the way she refused several proposals of marriage because they did not include the temple. Through Janie's example on tour as well as in rehearsals on campus—which included morning and evening prayers, devotionals before each production, testimony bearing by tour group members, singing hymns, and seeing heaven's hand on many occasions while on tour in foreign lands—I was taught to acknowledge the Lord's hand in every aspect of my life.

I learned through Janie about my need for complete reliance on him when making life plans and difficult choices. I also became deeply involved in dramatic productions in the College of Fine Arts at BYU. Several individuals touched my life in unusual ways. For example, I was cast in a leading role of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, directed by Dr. Preston Gledhill. A week before production, I contracted the worst case of laryngitis I had ever experienced. I was unable to speak for the week prior to opening night, and the cast members specifically prayed for me to get well, some even fasting for me. As I saw the cast and crew kneel in prayer to begin and conclude each rehearsal and performance, I knew my miraculous recovery opening night was not by chance.

One of my acting classes was taught by a person who also became a mentor and tutor, Dr. Charles Metten. He challenged each of us to draw from ourselves the greatest performance of our lives as we acted our final exam scenes. I had been touched by Dr. Metten's great talent, energy, and gospel insight as he taught. Now, as I watched other students perform their final scenes, I felt a similar power exuding from several of them. It was a power that I knew I lacked, but I strongly desired to acquire it.

Dr. Lael Woodbury was another highly influential instructor. He pointed out the responsibility directors and producers have each time they select material to produce. One principle I will never forget was taught in connection with a discussion about academic freedom, performing in productions with questionable material, and attending lewd movies just to know what others are watching. His personal standard, which was not shared as a prescription but as wise counsel, was stated this way: "I never want to be responsible for putting an evil thought into someone else's mind." That simple principle was to serve as a guidepost for me throughout my life.

The following year, still as a non-Latter-day Saint, I was invited to audition for a film being produced in connection with general conference, *Pioneers in Petticoats*. Filming began that winter, and we shot scenes over several weeks in locations in Provo, Salt Lake City, and Heber Valley.

Approaching the end of the shooting, I was working on some lines for a scene near the end of the movie. I felt awkward with the dialogue, and it seemed as though I couldn't really make the words a part of my character. I just wasn't able to get comfortable with the lines. Having little experience with personal prayer, I was encouraged by my roommate, Elaine, to pray about my concern. That seemed like a reasonable alternative given my quandary. So when she left the room, I locked the door, drew the blinds, and knelt by my bed. I offered a sincere but awkward prayer, then waited. I looked up. I think I expected to receive a Joseph-Smith-in-the-Grove kind of experience, but nothing happened. I felt no different.

I spent the next few days before filming that scene praying constantly for help with the dialogue. Each time I offered my petition, however, I received no response. I became very troubled by this, because I had heard many stories about others' answers to prayers, miraculous occurrences, and heavenly interventions. I was troubled by this lack of response. I began to think, "If Heavenly Father is really there, if he really cares about me, surely he will realize how much I need some assistance." Additionally, I felt invested in the success of the movie, but I worried that my dialogue problems would alter the quality of the final product.

We began filming, and I silently prayed as I walked to my mark on the set. I began to speak the dialogue that by now had become so familiar to me. Then something very unusual happened. As I said the lines, I received an overpowering impression, a witness, that President David O. McKay, the living prophet at the time, was the Lord's prophet, and that this church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is the Lord's Church, restored to the earth. I felt a consuming, warm feeling, and my tears flowed naturally. As we finished filming the scene, I noticed that several of the young women in the cast were also crying. I asked one of them, "Why are you crying?" She replied, "Melinda, we know that you know."

It has taken several years to fully appreciate the events that I experienced on the set that day and the sacred

nature of that special witness. I realize that it was not by accident that I was reared in a home that prepared me to recognize the promptings of the Spirit. Without the example of special parents, I am certain that I would have been unprepared to feel the Holy Ghost and to recognize true principles. I am so grateful to my parents for their teachings and, especially, to Heavenly Father for knowing just the right time to answer my prayer.

As I was preparing to be baptized, I was fearful that my family would not accept my decision and, of special concern, would not allow my younger sister to attend BYU the following year. I came to understand again, however, that my responsibility was to keep the commandments and to act consistently with true principles, and that Heavenly Father would help me with my family. He did. He helped them to accept my decision. My family even permitted my sister to enjoy the blessings of BYU. A year later, after moving to Provo, she also accepted the gospel and was baptized. It was all a miracle to me.

A few weeks before my baptism, I was listening to the radio while getting ready for a ward Relief Society meeting. The broadcaster announced a news flash: my friend Diane had committed suicide. I sat numb as I listened to the grim details. My childhood chum. My classmate in school. My playmate at family gatherings and parties. My friend who had chosen professional acting as a career. Then it hit me. Both of us were offered opportunities to study at BYU, but only I chose to attend. That could have been me.