

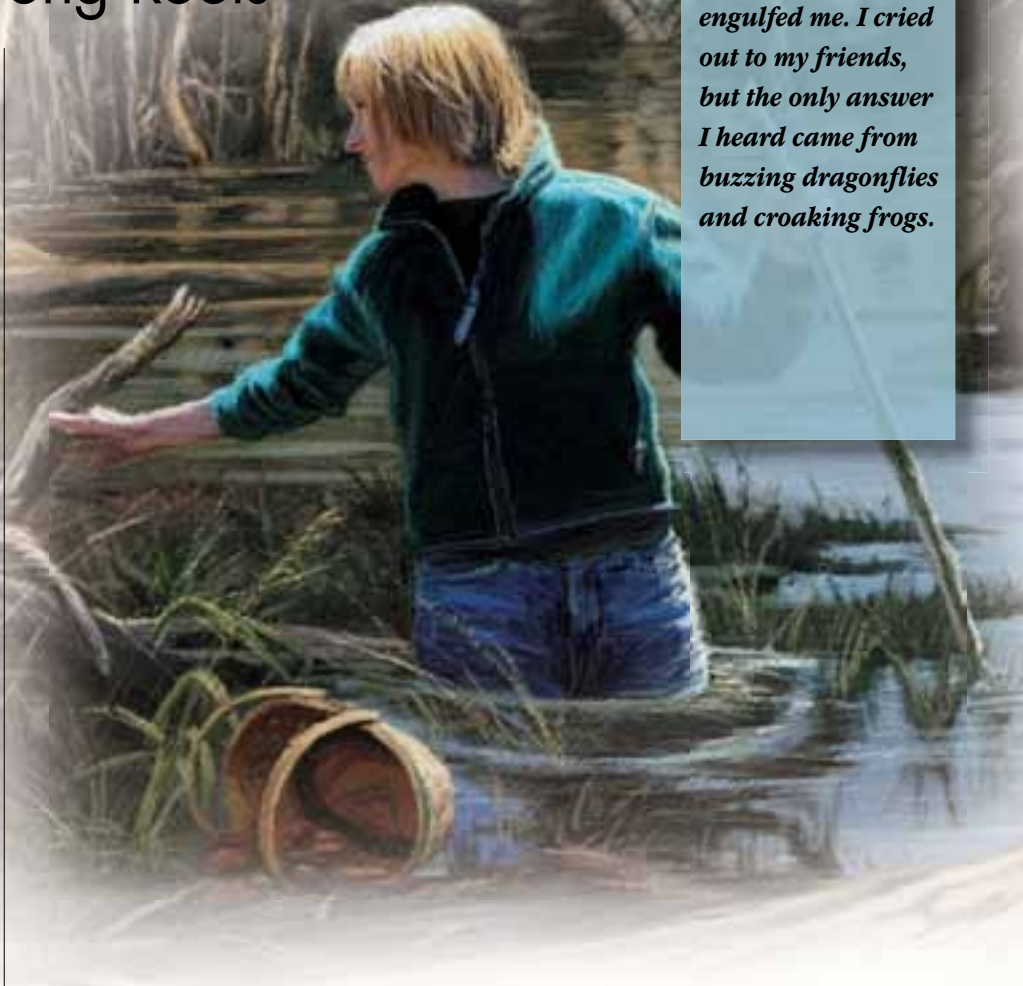
Grabbing the Strong Roots

When I was a schoolgirl in Russia, I read a scary story about two boys who encountered a bear in a forest. Years later, after I had become a teacher, some friends asked me to join them on a trip to collect mushrooms. The forest still scared me, but I agreed to go with them.

Entering the forest, I grabbed a wooden stick so I could defend myself in case I ran into a bear. My friends soon found the brown mushrooms they were looking for. I, on the other hand, was looking for mushrooms with bright red tops, so I started off in a different direction. Before I knew it, I was alone.

While I was searching, I slipped and fell. My mushroom basket flew into the air, but I held tight to my stick. When I tried to get up, I noticed that the ground was muddy and sticky. To my horror, I realized that I had wandered into a swamp! My rubber boots quickly filled with water, and I began to sink. I tried to move my legs, but instead of freeing myself, I was pulled deeper. When the mud reached my waist, deep fear engulfed me.

I cried out to my friends, but the only answer I heard came from buzzing dragonflies and croaking frogs. As I began to weep, I suddenly remembered my mother. Whenever she was in a bad situation, she prayed. She often invited me to pray, but I always refused,



When the mud reached my waist, deep fear engulfed me. I cried out to my friends, but the only answer I heard came from buzzing dragonflies and croaking frogs.

answering, "There is no God."

But in my watery soon-to-be grave, there was nothing else I could do but pray and call upon God for help. "If You live, please help me!" I cried.

Almost immediately I heard a kind voice tell me, "Believe and be not afraid. Grab the strong tree root."

As I looked around, I saw a big tree root behind me. Using my stick, I was able to latch onto it. Something then gave me the power to pull myself out of the swamp.

Covered with mud, I fell to the ground and thanked God for answering my prayer. I now believed that He lived. I had felt His presence and heard His voice, and He had given me power to pull myself free.

A short time later, when the full-time missionaries taught me that the Prophet Joseph Smith had received an answer to his prayer in the Sacred Grove, I believed them. After all, God had answered my prayer in a forest. I latched onto the strong roots of

the gospel, was baptized soon thereafter, and serve today in the Gyumri Branch in Armenia.

I know Heavenly Father loves all of His children, and I'm grateful to be a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I'm also grateful for the many other blessings I have received from Heavenly Father, especially for His answer to an atheist's prayer in the forest many years ago. ■

Melsida Hakobyan, Armenia

We're Here to See the Temple

One autumn day during my shift as a worker in the Salt Lake Temple, a young man and his friends, clearly not dressed for temple worship, arrived.

"We're here to see the temple," the young man said.

"Do you have a recommend?" I asked.

The young man thought for a moment. Then he said, "Yes. My mother has a Mormon friend in Minnesota. She recommended that we come see the temple."

I felt impressed to pull the young people aside and talk to them. The young man's name was Lars. I explained to him that not only *could* he come to the temple but also that Heavenly Father *wanted* him to come. I told Lars that he first had to prepare, and I explained how.

At the time, I had been active

in the Church only a short while. I had served a mission but later left the Church after getting caught up in the entertainment industry and using drugs and alcohol. I thought my family would be impressed with my career and wealth, but my mother didn't care about any of that. Instead, she always put my name on the temple prayer roll, which angered me.

The woman I married had also left the Church. By the time our eight-year-old daughter, Tori, began asking questions about Jesus Christ, we had bottomed out spiritually. Despite my missionary service, I couldn't remember anything about the Savior.

"There are people who are qualified to teach you about Jesus," I told Tori. "Why don't you talk to them?"

A few days later, two sister missionaries knocked on our door. Tori invited them in and began taking the discussions. Eavesdropping from another room, I heard the sisters teaching doctrines that I recognized to be true.

"Would you like to be baptized?" one of the sisters asked Tori after the third discussion.

"Yes," she replied.

"Will your dad baptize you?"

I had not been to church for 20 years, but I knew my life was about to change. I sat in on the last few discussions, we started attending church, and my wife and I met with the bishop. As I repented, I decided that I must do everything possible to compensate for the years I had



lost. I changed careers, magnified my Church callings, was sealed to my wife and daughter, and became a temple worker. That's how I knew that a curious group of young people could become temple worthy.

The following spring, Lars wrote me a letter, thanking me for explaining the real meaning of a temple recommend. "I *did* learn more about a temple recommend," he wrote. "Actually, I was baptized and received a recommend of my own last January!" My eyes filled with tears as I looked at the photograph he had enclosed of himself in his white baptismal clothes and of the missionaries who had taught him.

My journey back to the temple was remarkable, and learning of Lars's journey was a wonderful blessing that reminded me how we can all touch lives for good. ■

Rees Bandley, Utah, USA

Grandma's Baptism

On June 30, 2001, I was making a birthday cake for my daughter when the phone rang. It was my sister in Brazil, informing me that our grandmother had passed away.

The news was sad, but I was not sad. After all, my dear grandmother had lived to be nearly 102. I was happy that she was

free of her aged, mortal body and had gone to the spirit world.

Then I started thinking about the coincidence of her death occurring on my daughter's birthday, and I wondered if there was some significance in the timing. As the days passed, I discovered what it was: it would be easy for me to remember to be baptized for my grandmother a year after her passing. I assumed this responsibility, knowing that I had to wait just until my daughter's next birthday.

The year passed quickly. I did not have the opportunity to go to the temple on the exact anniversary

of my grandmother's death, however, because I lived in Portugal and attended the Madrid Spain Temple. But hardly a day went by that I did not think about my responsibility to be baptized for Grandma Josefina.

It was not until October 2002 that we were able to go to the temple. My husband and I went along with our son, Mathew, who was going to receive his endowment in preparation for his mission. I was happy to be going to the temple, and I thought I might feel something special when I was baptized in behalf of my grandmother.

My husband performed the baptism, but I didn't feel anything. My son performed the confirmation, but again, nothing. My anxiety over not feeling anything passed, and I was just glad that the ordinances had been performed for my grandmother.

After the endowment, we went to the sealing room to have Grandma sealed to her parents. When we knelt across the altar to perform the ordinance and the sealer began to speak,

I felt as if a shock had started at my head and passed through my body. It is difficult to describe, but at that burning moment, I was certain that Grandma Josefina rejoiced in being sealed to her parents. ■

Marilena Kretly Pretel Busto, São Paulo, Brazil





decided that helping at a mission would be better than sitting at home feeling lonely and bitter. A few days later I found myself placing hot mashed potatoes on the plates of hungry people.

Lifting Others and Myself

It was Thanksgiving of 1990. I had just gone through a difficult divorce, and I was a first-year law student in an unfamiliar city. My children were going to be at their father's house for the holiday, and for the first time in my life, I would be alone on Thanksgiving.

At first I wanted to feel sorry for myself and have a good cry. But then I began to count my blessings. I had two beautiful children, a nice house, an opportunity to gain knowledge, and the gospel of Jesus Christ to guide my life. I truly had been blessed with many things.

As Thanksgiving approached, I discovered that a group of law students had planned to go to a local mission to help serve an early Thanksgiving dinner to the homeless. I decided that helping at the

mission would be better than sitting at home feeling lonely and bitter, so I joined my fellow students.

A few days later I found myself placing hot mashed potatoes on the plates of hungry, grateful, life-tossed people. The tears that welled up in my eyes were not for the sadness I felt for myself; rather, they were tears of love for all of God's children, no matter their circumstances.

Thanksgiving wouldn't have been Thanksgiving without a turkey in the oven. But a 14-pound (6-kg) turkey would be too much for me, so I invited several students who were from other countries and faraway states to join me. I wanted to share a traditional American Thanksgiving dinner, but I invited them to contribute. I asked each to bring a favorite dish from home.

Our Thanksgiving dinner turned out to be a delightful and memorable meal—egg rolls and all.

King Benjamin declared, "Behold, I tell you these things that ye may learn wisdom; that ye may learn that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God" (Mosiah 2:17).

I learned wisdom that Thanksgiving Day. By offering service when it was easier to sit around and mope, I found joy. Service is the key to happiness not only during the holidays, when it is easy to get caught up in what is missing from our lives, but also during any season. No matter what our situation, we can always find someone to help. By lifting our brothers and sisters, we also lift ourselves. ■

Cathy Whitaker Marshall, Washington, USA