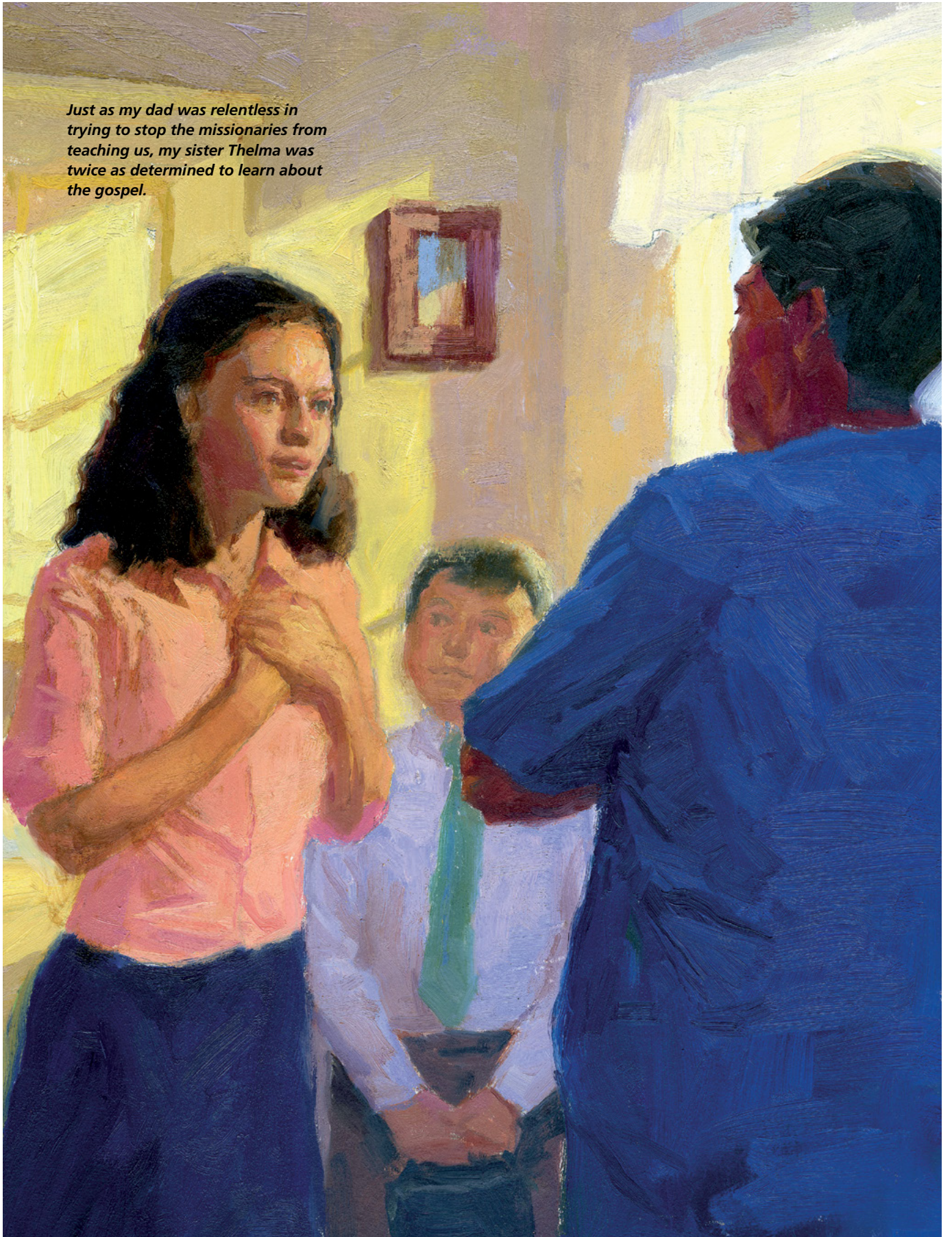


Just as my dad was relentless in trying to stop the missionaries from teaching us, my sister Thelma was twice as determined to learn about the gospel.



Blessed

BY MY FAITHFUL SISTER

I wouldn't be the man I am today without the righteous influence of my older sister.

By Rafael Antillon

I am fortunate to have had good women in my life: a nurturing and courageous mother, wise and faithful sisters, and a loving and supportive wife. I wish to honor one of these influential women, my older sister, Thelma, for her impact in my life through her continuous good example.

When I was young, my father taught me to follow Thelma's lead when he and my mom were not around, and I am eternally grateful for this counsel.

Having a Determination to Learn

Three of my eight siblings joined the Church in El Salvador the same time I did. Thelma was 14 years old and my oldest sibling when we got baptized. I was 8 years old at the time and the youngest of the family, so she was our leader.

We were introduced to the Church by our neighbor who sang songs that we later learned were hymns. Our neighbor told us about a wonderful place called Primary, where children learned to sing. The missionaries were contacted, and they started visiting our home to teach us.

However, my dad had strong feelings against the Church and about his children being taught by the missionaries. Being a small boy, I never understood what those two elders went through to bring the gospel into

our lives. Dad would kick them out if he found them at our home, and he would deliberately turn off the lights if the elders stopped by in the evening. Just as my dad was relentless in trying to stop the missionaries from teaching, Thelma was twice as determined to learn about the gospel and read the Book of Mormon. Thelma and the elders never gave up, and for this I am thankful.

Going to church was a struggle because Dad tried to stop us by using a variety of tactics, such as requiring that we do chores before we could leave for church.

One Sunday morning was particularly hard. He did not want to let us go, but we refused to be stopped. He kicked a garbage can and spilled its contents all over the floor we had just cleaned. Thelma quietly began picking up the garbage without complaining. After she had cleaned the floor again, she asked if we could go to church. We had finished all the chores and more, but he still did not want to give his permission. Finally he asked pointedly, "Why do you insist on going to this church anyway?" Thelma then bore a powerful testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel and of the message of the Restoration of the gospel. As she concluded, my dad waved his hand and gave his permission.

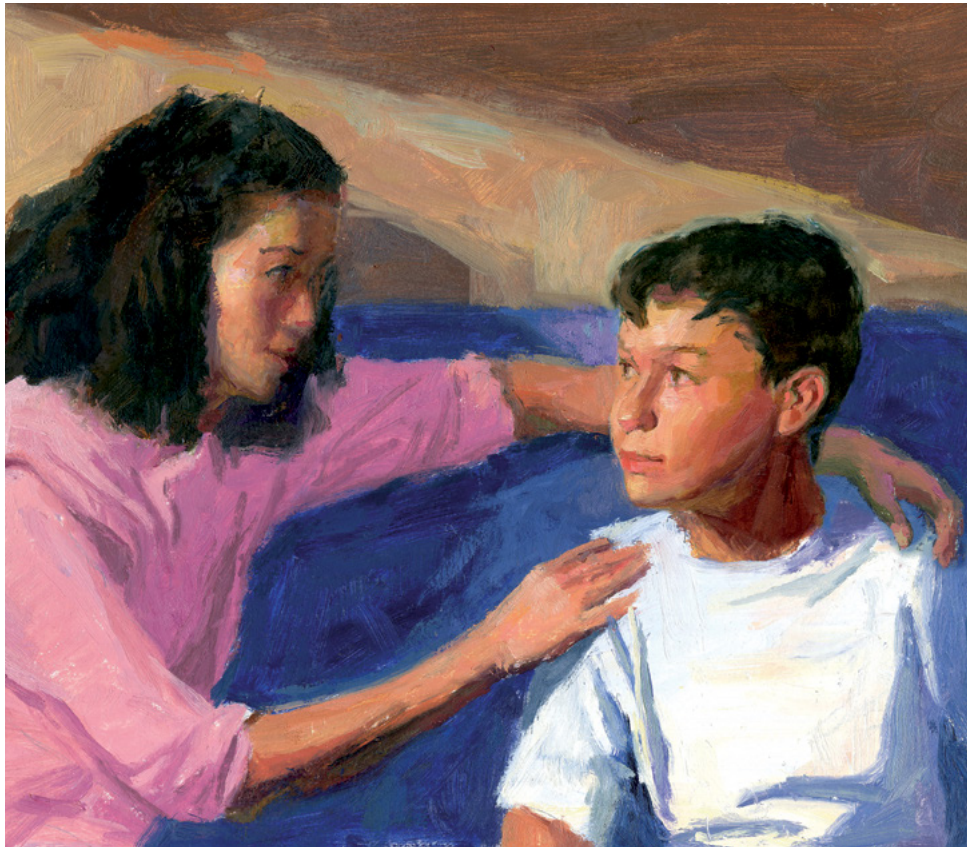
Dad never tried to stop us again after this incident and eventually, even though he did not like it, gave his consent for us to join the Church.

Serving from the Start

I had no problem attending church on Sunday, but I was not as enthusiastic about attending Primary because it was on Saturday morning at that time. When I was 10, Thelma came home one Saturday and told my other siblings about a great soccer game between the deacons and the Blazers (11-year-old Scouts). She pointed out how unfortunate it was that I had missed the game because I had not attended Primary. Needless to say, I went the following Saturday (with my soccer cleats on) and never missed it again.

When Thelma was 16, she was called to be the Primary president. Our bishop had been trying to find someone to handle the many challenges the Primary organization was facing. The ward covered a large area, and it was difficult and expensive for many families with small children to travel by bus to the church both on Saturdays for Primary and on Sundays. Many of those children were not attending Primary, and no solution had been found. The bishop had been prompted to call Thelma but could not bring himself to do it because she was so young. The prompting continued, and after receiving approval from the stake president, the bishop extended the call to my sister.

This proved to be an inspired decision, and it blessed many children—including me. Thelma magnified her calling by following inspiration, using common sense, and implementing innovative ideas to develop training programs to bring the gospel to the children. She asked her counselors and teachers to hold Primary meetings at several places closer to their homes, and she provided ongoing training for those teachers. This solution allowed members to save time and money and enabled children who were previously not attending Primary to receive the blessings of this wonderful organization.



Setting an Example of Faith

My siblings and I continued to follow Thelma's lead as time progressed. We held family home evenings and attended all of our Church meetings. Shortly after I was ordained a deacon, Thelma turned to me during one family home evening and recognized me as the priesthood holder in the family. This event taught me a valuable lesson about respect for the priesthood.

She also made sure I never lacked the proper encouragement and extra incentive to attend my priesthood meetings or to fulfill my responsibilities. For instance, Thelma used every noisy and energetic way to get me out of bed on Sunday mornings so I could attend priesthood meeting. She also taught me to look forward to my advancements in the Aaronic Priesthood.

At Mutual and seminary I didn't mind that I was always known as "Thelma's brother." Some of my friends had the support of their parents in the Church, but I had my bishop, Young Men leaders, and Thelma.

Thelma continued to be an example to me as she held a variety of callings until she left for her mission. She served honorably in the Guatemala Quetzaltenango Mission, and the fruits of her labors included the baptism

When I was young, Thelma encouraged me to attend Primary and other Church activities. As the years go by, her example and enthusiasm for the gospel continue to be a source of inspiration to me.

of our mother two days after Thelma returned home. Our joy was full as I, then a priest, performed this sacred ordinance. Following Thelma's example, I began to earnestly prepare to serve a mission.

After her mission, Thelma moved to the United States to attend Brigham Young University, despite our meager economic circumstances. She remained a strong influence on me regardless of the distance.

After I returned home from serving in the Guatemala Guatemala City Mission, I also traveled to Provo, Utah, to attend BYU. I was grateful for the kindness and support of so many people to help get me there. However, money was still going to be short.

Soon after I arrived in Provo, Thelma and I reviewed our financial situation. We both concluded that even with my working part-time, we did not have enough money to pay my rent and hers for the entire school year. Thelma never doubted that we would make it through that trial though. She trusted that the Lord would provide a way. Less than a week later, Thelma received a letter from BYU's Spanish department. As she opened it, she turned to me and exclaimed, "This! This is how we are going to pay your rent!" The letter informed her that she had been accepted as a teacher's assistant, which would increase her income.

Handling a Health Challenge

As the years go by, Thelma continues to be a source of inspiration. She handles adversity better than anybody else I know. She takes care of her wonderful son who has Down syndrome, our elderly mother, and a husband with a serious health condition. Also, if those things weren't enough, she has health issues of her own.

A few years ago, Thelma underwent brain surgery to relieve pressure from a brain cyst. Given the needs of her loved ones, the prospect of any complications was intimidating. She prayed for help and inspiration and visited the temple. Through it all, her faith did not waver, but she had reservations about putting her life in the hands of the doctor who would perform the delicate surgery.

Thelma was visiting with a dear friend during this time and confided her concerns about the surgery. Thelma's friend asked for the doctor's name and upon learning the name, Thelma's friend said that the doctor was a member of her ward. She told Thelma that he was a faithful member of the Church and a worthy priesthood holder. He often played Church hymns while he performed surgeries. Although a simple piece of information, this was a tender answer to Thelma's prayers. Thelma's life and spiritual experiences are a source of continuous strength and testimony in my own life.

I think of young boys who may be experiencing an upbringing similar to mine. I think of those who have no male role model at home, who can only find refuge at Church, and those growing up in troubled countries. To them I say: Never give up; stay close to the Lord and to His servants. I am grateful that the Lord provided the support I needed to encourage me to accomplish my goals and become the person I am today. ■

The author lives in New York, USA.



THE FAITH AND DEVOTION OF WOMEN

"I express my gratitude to you faithful Latter-day Saint women, now numbered in the millions and found across the earth. Great is your power for good. Marvelous are your

talents and devotion. Tremendous is your faith and your love for the Lord, for His work, and for His sons and daughters. Continue to live the gospel. Magnify it before all of your associates."

President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008), *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Gordon B. Hinckley* (2016), 104.