

SINK OR SWIM

BY MARY ELLEN HEINER

*Though the waters may be deep,
I learned we have help every stroke of the way.*

My brother honestly thought I'd be able to swim, but when he led me into deep water, I sunk! After that, I was terrified of water.

At the age of two I was in a farming accident that left me paralyzed from the waist down. However, I was fortunate enough to be raised in a family who overlooked the disability and treated me just like everyone else.

We always enjoyed swimming at the local pool. One evening at the pool, when I was about 9 or 10, as I “walked” up and down the edge of the pool (my weightlessness in the water allowed me for a short time to be like everybody else), I watched my family laughing, splashing, and diving from the sides. My brother Robert, who is two years older than I am, thought I was not having as much fun as the rest, so he decided to help me. He told me to hold on to his shoulders, and he would swim me over to the far side of the pool. He said it would be fun. He was right; it was fun. I played on the other side, and as long as my feet could touch the bot-

tom, I felt safe and secure.

Then Robert came to take me back. This time he veered from the shallow end, and I was soon in deep water. Suddenly he stopped and with a quick movement he turned and pulled my arms off of his shoulders and said, “OK, now swim.” Then he let go, and it was a matter of sink or swim. I sunk! Robert thought for sure I would swim. Luckily my dad had been keeping an eye on us, and he was at my side instantly. I grabbed onto his strong shoulders, and he led me back to the shallow end of the pool. As a result of that experience, I developed a fear of the water. I would still go with my family on these outings, but I would usually watch from the safety of the poolside deck chairs.

Years later, while I was attending BYU–Idaho, this fear confronted me again. I was in an adaptive physical education class



taught by Brother Gary Griffeth, who was also a physical therapist. The first two classes were great fun. I established a friendship with the other three class members and my instructor. Then Brother Griffeth dropped the bomb. He casually announced that he had made arrangements for us to use the swimming pool for the rest of the semester. Everybody was excited—except me.

Brother Griffeth let us have the first couple of class periods to just play in the pool. Then one day he got in the pool with us. I knew this was trouble. He told me he was going to teach me how to swim. He started by attaching blue flotation boards to my legs with towels. What a scary feeling I experienced as my legs began to float and my head and upper body sank. Brother Griffeth gently held me up while he taught me how to move my arms in a rather awkward stroke, how to breathe, and how to rotate my head from side to side. Before I realized what was happening, I was swimming! What an exhilarating feeling! What freedom!

Once Brother Griffeth thought I had developed my

upper body strength and technique sufficiently, he decided it was time to take off the flotation devices. My legs sunk; I sunk; and my fear of the water returned. With great patience, Brother Griffeth began the process of teaching me how to swim all over again. But with the strength and technique I had already developed in my upper body, I was soon able to get up enough speed that my legs actually began to float. As long as I kept within arm's length of the side, I felt safe. When I felt myself sinking, I would reach out and grasp the side.

The semester was coming to an end, and finals were approaching. I did not even think about my final for the swimming class. On the last day of class, Brother Griffeth



Just like Peter as he took those first steps to meet Jesus on the water, if we fear, we will flounder. But if we let Him, He will carry us to safety.

calmly announced that for my final I would have to swim a mile. This did not bother me too much because I had come close to swimming a mile each class period anyway.

But swimming a mile was only the first part. When I got into the water, Brother Griffeth calmly told me that if I wanted to get an A in the class, I had to swim in the middle of the pool, totally out of reach of my lifeline. My heart began pounding; the water suddenly wasn't my friend anymore. It became a giant monster with mouth gaping open, ready to swallow me into its murky depths. Brother Griffeth put his hands on my shoulders and looked me in the eyes and said, "You can do it. I have faith in you. I will be right there beside you every stroke of the way." And he was—right to the very last stroke. My eyes beamed with excitement and my heart swelled with happiness as I looked at that A on my transcript.

This is similar to how we develop a testimony. We begin as children and converts

by leaning on the testimonies of others. We eventually grow comfortable with our own testimony, but we don't know how strong it is until that first wave hits us, and we either "sink or swim"—just like Peter as he took those first steps to meet Jesus on the water. He became frightened, took his eyes off of the Savior, and floundered (see Matthew 14:25–31).

Sometimes our testimony is strong, and we swim. Other times we take our eyes off of the Savior, and we sink. But every time, our Father in Heaven is there to pick us up and to carry us to safety—if we let Him.

Throughout our lives we learn new principles and meet people who lift us up and inspire us. And then when we experience waves of trials, we suddenly realize that our testimonies are stronger. We can deal with each little wave that hits us because we know Father in Heaven will be there with us every stroke of the way. All we have to do is reach out in faith and take His hand. **NE**