

A Fire Burning WITHIN ME

The day he learned to read is also the day Eduardo gained a testimony of the Book of Mormon and its power.

By Michael R. Morris

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My grandfather used to say, ‘If we want to become somebody, we have to learn to read,’ says Eduardo Contreras. ‘My grandfather was right.’

For Eduardo, however, the road to reading was a long one. As one of five children reared by his widowed mother in the city of Córdoba, Argentina, he quit school when he was eight years old and went to work to help support his family.

‘We were very poor,’ he recalls. To help make ends meet, Eduardo shined shoes, made bricks, picked potatoes, sold newspapers, and took on other odd jobs until, as a young man, he found full-time employment with the city government.

As the years passed, Eduardo married and started a family of his own. By the time most of his five children began to leave home, he still could not read and had little prospect of ever learning how. That changed one day when he chased off several local boys who were heckling two Latter-day Saint missionaries in front of his home. He invited the missionaries in, and before long



For Eduardo Contreras, pictured above with his wife, María, the Book of Mormon was the door to literacy. ‘I feel the Spirit every time I open it to read,’ he says.

he and his wife, María, were taking the discussions.

‘I had a hard time understanding anything they said because they spoke little Spanish,’ Eduardo recalls, ‘but they showed me a pamphlet that had pictures of the Savior and of the Prophet Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove. I thought the pictures they showed us and the things they taught us were beautiful.’

Soon those missionaries were replaced by others, including a native Spanish speaker. Eduardo and María, who had lost an infant daughter to death a few years earlier, were touched by the Church film *Families Are Forever*. They, along with their youngest son, Osvaldo, were soon baptized.

With Eduardo’s baptism in 1987 came a desire to strengthen his testimony by reading the Book of Mormon. ‘How do I learn to read?’ he asked his wife. María told him to look at the letters, put them together in his mind, try to sound out words, and then attempt to read aloud. With practice, she assured him, he would eventually learn to read.



A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION AND POWER

Eduardo, then 45, knew the sounds of many letters, but he had not attempted to read since leaving school nearly four decades before.

I Felt a Fire

With a prayer in his heart, Eduardo sat down one hot summer day in a shady spot in the backyard of his home. “There,” he says, “I determined to make the attempt.”

María says she never would have imagined what happened next. As she worked in the kitchen, she listened off and on as Eduardo attempted to sound out letters and words. “Suddenly I heard him speaking rapidly,” she says. “I listened and realized that he was reading—fluently. Less than half an hour had passed, and he was reading!”

Eduardo was so immersed in his attempt that he hadn’t realized he was reading. But as he read, he recalls, “I felt a fire burning within me.” Frightened and surprised, Eduardo called to his wife, “Mami, what is happening to me?”

“It’s the Spirit of the Lord,” María replied. “You are reading fluently!”

As she recalls the experience, María says, “It was something we can never deny.”

Eduardo adds, “The day I learned to read is also the day I gained my testimony of the Book of Mormon and its power.”

From then on, Eduardo began arising at 4:00 a.m. to read the Book of Mormon before going to work. He then read the Doctrine and Covenants, followed by the Bible. A library now graces the Contreras home, where few books were found before 1987.

As Eduardo’s and María’s gospel knowledge grew, so did their testimonies. When their son Osvaldo died following a traffic accident in 2001, their testimonies—coupled with powerful spiritual experiences during prayer and in the Buenos Aires Argentina Temple, where they and Osvaldo had been sealed—helped them deal with their loss.

“Perhaps some parents would have gone crazy,” Eduardo says, “but we felt a calmness that said, ‘Your son

“What does the Book of Mormon mean to you? Has it been a source of inspiration and power in your life? Will it continue to be?”

“If you have not yet drunk deeply from this fountain of pure truth, with all of my soul I encourage you to do so now. Don’t let the consistent study of the Book of Mormon be one of the things that you intend to do but never quite accomplish. Begin today.”

Elder Richard G. Scott of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “The Power of the Book of Mormon in My Life,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1984, 11.

is well.’ Of course we wept. He was a good son, and we miss him. But we have been sealed in the temple, and we know where he is.”

The Light of Literacy

Thanks to tutoring from a member of his ward, Eduardo also learned to write. “Before,” he says, “I couldn’t even sign my name.”

With the light of literacy, Eduardo came to understand the truthfulness of his grandfather’s words.

“We are here on earth so we can progress a little more each day,” he says. By learning to read and write, he adds, he is showing his children and grandchildren that it is never too late to learn, improve, and become what God wants us to become. “Because I can read, I learn something new every day,” he says.

Today Brother Contreras can read anything he wants to read, including the newspapers he once sold as an illiterate child. The scriptures remain his favorite books, especially the Book of Mormon. He has read it cover to cover eight times.

“For me the Book of Mormon was the door,” he says, still grateful for how literacy and the gospel have changed his life. “The Book of Mormon was everything to me. It is everything to me. I feel the Spirit every time I open it to read.” ■