



1-1-2002

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Recommended Citation

Clarke, Rebecca W. (2002) "Learning to Float," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 41 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol41/iss1/14>

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Learning to Float

Rebecca W. Clarke

Kneeling across from my fiancé, I searched his face for some sort of sign. I looked for the answer in the people behind him. I tuned out the words of the sealer so as not to miss the answer that God must be waiting to give me after all my diligent and dutiful searching. I kept waiting and waiting and waiting for something magical to happen.

“But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea” (Matthew 14:24–25). Sounds sublime. But then, my life feels closer to Peter’s version: “And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me” (Matthew 14:29–30).

And then it was Sam’s turn and he said yes, and then it was my turn and I turned to the sealer, who was silhouetted by the light pressing in behind him—certain that he would let me know what I needed to say—but he said nothing. His eyes said nothing; he didn’t nod, didn’t smile, didn’t raise his eyebrows, didn’t lean in just a bit to encourage an answer. He just stood there, hands behind his back, looking down at me, waiting like his ride wasn’t coming anytime soon. I looked at my brother’s face, at his wife’s face. They were smiling. Everyone was smiling, apparently unaware of the sense of nothingness I was dangling over.



I’ve seen Eliza dangle there. Eliza looks like a bright orange armadillo, chubby legs jutting out from under the protective shell of the life jacket and

poking into the water. I am standing in the shadow made by the edge of the Seven Peaks swimming pool, holding my twenty-month-old in front of me. She can say *orange* now.

I lean my head back into the water while continuing to hold her up. Eliza says to me, “Hair wet?” After I realize that’s not a description of me but a request for her, I carefully lean her back and dip her head into the water. This is the move she refused to allow in parent-tot swimming lessons when she was nine months old. Now, at almost two, she’s still tentative.

I don’t blame her. Leaning back into things, into unknown waters, requires so much trust. I was frustrated when she was at the lessons, all the other kids kicking back, even eagerly. I felt the accompanying sideways glances from other mothers I imagined to be taking secret pleasure in Eliza’s noncooperation.

We went to lessons for six successive Thursdays. As much as she loved the water, there would be nothing of floating for Eliza. The slightest list backwards was immediately halted by grasping and screaming. Today at Seven Peaks I am not here to teach her anything. We are simply spending time together until Daddy comes home.



I had struggled for the answer I was seeking at the altar. During our four-month engagement I initiated many fasts; I intimated to God that I’d keep on fasting until I got a clear sign—which apparently wasn’t a big enough threat to worry him much. I prayed and I prayed and I prayed. I dedicated myself to one side of the decision, in keeping with instructions in the Doctrine and Covenants, telling myself that I truly had decided on *this*, and then searched for signs of approval from God. The next day I would dedicate myself to the opposite side of the decision with an equal amount of zeal. I read my scriptures with marriage in mind. I ate, I went to work, I attended church, I painted my toenails, all the while attempting to keep my spiritual antennae sharply focused and ready to feel the slightest, lightest urging from God. But I couldn’t get that sense of yes-ness I was desperately searching for, no breeze from heaven to point my weather vane. Nor could I get a hint of no.

The words that kept coming to my mind were from my mission exit interview with the mission president, the ones I recorded in my mission journal verbatim: “There will be times in your life when you will feel the Spirit depart from you, because we are here to learn to make decisions on our own.” I asked my father for a blessing, and in it he told me exactly

what I didn't want to hear, what I already knew he would say: "This decision is up to you."

But I couldn't make this large a decision on my own. If God would refuse to help, I would seek advice elsewhere. I read my horoscope. I turned my attention to the people around me. They were a lot more opinionated than God had been, and much more willing to share. I asked friends, co-workers, and people I barely knew their theory of how you know who you should marry. One lady in my ward told me in a most solemn voice as she pressed my hand and looked right into my eyes, "You will just know. Don't do *anything* until you truly *know*."

In the Bride's Room, my mom helped me pin the high lace collar to my lower-cut one and long sleeves onto my short ones. All the while I wondered if God were planning a surprise for me. I desperately hoped that my story would be one of the stories where I would "know" at just the right moment.



Eliza surprises me by asking again, "Hair wet?" I lower her back again, my forearm running the entire length of her spine, her legs straddling at my elbow, the back of her bony head in my hand. I leave her there a little longer this time. She looks up into the air and from side to side with her dark eyes; then, realizing I am not in her line of vision, she contracts as quickly as a potato bug, limbs clamoring desperately for me.

We repeat this, every time the leaning back lasting a little bit longer. Each time she lets go more willingly of me, and I feel more of her body trust in the water and in the life jacket, and I am exhilarated with the risk she is taking. The seventh time she leans back, I let go of her completely. Leaning back, she can't see me, her arms are outstretched, and her ears are underwater; she can see only sky, and all sounds are muted. Eliza floats.

As Eliza relaxes on this perfect-weathered day with the crowds around us, I consider the moment when I leaned back, listing into the unknown, and decided to see what it would be like if I trusted in the air around me, and in the goodness of the person across from me, and in the words my mission president said to me, and in the blessing that my father gave me, and in my own willingness to make things work, and in the molecules of goodness and magic and strength that are constantly surrounding us and that will buoy us up if we surrender.

I have not yet, in the fourth watch of the night, walked on the sea. I have not so much as walked on the water momentarily, as Peter managed. But I have leaned back into the water. I've let go of the safety of the edge and

drifted from the side without the assurance of hands to hold me, without even an orange life jacket to buoy me up. I'm learning to relax, to lean back and float. I like floating.

Rebecca W. Clarke (rwc24@email.byu.edu) received her B.A. in psychology in 1993 and her M.S. in marriage and family therapy in 2000, both at Brigham Young University. She currently teaches an honors writing course at Brigham Young University. This essay tied for second place in the *BYU Studies* 2000 personal essay contest.