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Aguas Vivas

Thea Jo Buell

So, was there anything you just couldn't find there?" I asked the newly returned missionary. He had been home from Guatemala for a few months, and I would be leaving for the same country soon.

He looked puzzled at my question and thought for several seconds before answering. "Balloons," he said.

It was my turn to look puzzled. Why would a missionary need balloons? I was later to wish he had mentioned cotton swabs, which was more the sort of answer I was looking for, but as I collected supplies for my upcoming service, I trustingly purchased a half dozen bags of inexpensive, brightly colored party balloons and tucked them into a corner of my luggage.

I carried the balloons with me for seven months. Then I was sent to serve in Escuintla, a port city by the El Salvadoran border. Sister Garcia and I were assigned two areas, one a sprawling slum known as La Limonada and the other an outlying area of tightly packed houses, newly opened to missionaries, called Aguas Vivas. An auspicious name, Aguas Vivas: Living Waters.

My companion and I set out on our first morning to explore this new area. We stepped from the bus and looked around at the painted cement and unpainted wood houses. We both felt a thrill of the Spirit course through our souls. The Lord had work for us to do here. Eagerly, we approached the first house and knocked.

Several hours later we climbed wearily back onto the bus. We had tracted every house in the small area. Some doors had not been answered, of course, the occupants away or wary of visitors, but at all others we

had been politely but firmly rebuffed. We felt drained and wondered at the earlier powerful affirmation we had felt. I glanced behind me as the houses slipped from sight. I felt an invisible barrier settle between us and Aguas Vivas, like a giant hand clamping down over the area, preventing us from reaching its inhabitants.

Several days later we found ourselves with some free time and felt impressed to return to the neighborhood. But again we sensed that strange barrier and knew that our work would be fruitless. We boarded the next bus and headed for La Limonada.

This experience repeated itself several times during the coming weeks, then evolved into a habit. Each day, after lunch, when we typically had few appointments, we would ride the bus to Aguas Vivas. We would stand at the side of the unpaved road for a few moments, waiting for inspiration or at least guidance. But always we felt that same sense of emptiness, of a firm spiritual wall standing before us.

We rarely met adults on the streets here. The men were at the docks, either working or looking for work and would not be home until evening. The women were inside, cooking or cleaning. The streets were the playground of the young, ever-present, involved in the various inventive games of children who owned no toys and whose parents lacked the money for school and books.

We visited, found no change, and went on our way to La Limonada. But we never forgot the surge of certainty we had felt on our first day in Aguas Vivas, that here was a fertile field, ready for harvest.

There was no conscious thought or plan to my actions one day as I opened a package of balloons and stuffed a handful of them into my bookbag. We arrived in Aguas Vivas as usual, and without set purpose I took out a balloon and inflated it. Curious, the nearby children gathered several paces away. I knotted the balloon and held it out to them. I said nothing, so the children would understand that we wanted nothing from them, that the gift came with no strings attached. They hung back, uncertain. Then one intrepid boy of about six stepped forward and grasped the balloon. His sister made a move to stop him, but he dashed off down the street with his prize, batting the balloon up into the air repeatedly in the seemingly instinctive game always played with a first-time balloon.

I inflated a second balloon, and suddenly a dozen eager hands reached toward us. Soon the street was filled with laughing children and bright balloons. We left to catch the bus to La Limonada.

We returned the next day and the next. The children no longer hung back from us but gathered happily at our approach. And their hopes were rewarded as each day we offered them more inflated balloons. Sister Garcia, a native Guatemalan, started to visit with the children as I occupied myself with the balloons. She listened laughingly to their childish gossip and answered their shy questions about my pale complexion.

Soon the number of children waiting for balloons grew as word spread of our strange gifts. I began stuffing more balloons into my bookbag. Our visits to Aguas Vivas now lasted twenty or thirty minutes, until every child was paired with a bright balloon. There were no arguments about colors, no disagreements about who was first in line. These gifts were too rare and precious to fight about; they were simply to be accepted and embraced in their moment. After the last child had darted off, Sister Garcia and I would board the bus to La Limonada. I was always slightly dizzy but abundantly happy. The balloons, it turned out, were a bright spot in our day as well.

Balloons are transient creatures, especially in a world of sharp corners, hard gravel, and rough cement. This ensured that no child of Aguas Vivas was able to save his or her balloon. They were always used up within a short time of receiving them. The children did not mourn the loss but returned to collect a new balloon each day, happy for the moment of brightness in their lives, like a tiny taste of Christmas each afternoon. But they kept their physical distance from us, and we were careful never to tread on this sacred space. The children were rightfully wary. Their lives were not without real danger, and like the skin of a balloon, the fragile trust they placed in us was something we dared not scratch.

A week or two passed. Sister Garcia and I were handing out balloons as usual to a happy crowd of children. In time, only two girls remained. They had stood quietly at the edge of the crowd, slightly apart. I inflated a balloon and held it out to them. They made no move to reach for it. The balloon was handed to a little boy who ran up suddenly, his eyes bright and eager. I pulled out another balloon, but the older girl shook her head. "My mother wants to meet you," she said.

The girls led us to a ramshackle house and opened the gate. We walked down an open corridor to the back room their family rented. Their mother, Flor, invited us in. "I just wanted to meet the people who were giving balloons to the children," she said. "I wanted to know what kind of people would do something like that."

We told Flor we had another gift we would like to share, and she and her girls listened as we introduced them to the restored gospel. "You need to come back when my husband is home," Flor said. We made an appointment to do just that.

We emerged back into the sunlight of the street and without a word began knocking on doors. A miracle had transformed the little neighborhood: the invisible hand that had held it firmly locked away from us was pushed back by the curiosity of its own people. Now every door in Aguas Vivas opened to us. Aside from those who were not at home, every family invited us in and asked us to teach them. Every home responded in the same way: "We wanted to meet the people who would give balloons to children. We were told you were wicked, but now we cannot believe it. We want to hear what you have to say."

We learned that a local minister had coached the residents of Aguas Vivas in how to "deal with the Mormons." He had instructed them to answer their doors and politely decline our invitations. He had taught several powerful and frightening sermons on the terrible wickedness of the Mormons. It was his hand that had held this area in its grip. But bright balloons given without price or expectation had broken belief in his words and driven away the veil of falsehood.

Soon we were spending all our time teaching in Aguas Vivas. We had been having little success in La Limonada. The discussions we had taught there had mostly been to bored women looking for company or to those who longed for a listening ear to hear their complaints. In Aguas Vivas, we felt again the strength of the Spirit that had surged through us that first day.

Several weeks passed, and we were preparing three families for baptism: Flor and her family, a widower and his teenaged children, and the Mesa family. We had been led to the Mesa family by a little boy, Saúl, much as we had been led to Flor's family. Elena Mesa had let us in to her small but comfortable home, laughing. "I cannot turn you away," she said. "My son has been begging us to have you in. He heard you teach one of his friend's families. He says he likes the way your words make him feel."

We taught a message on the Atonement of Christ. Five-year-old Saúl sat transfixed, and his mother listened intently. Three other young children sat quietly, enjoying the pictures of Christ we had brought with us. Unbeknownst to us, Elena's husband, Carlos, had returned from work and sat outside on the porch, listening. He entered as we finished our

discussion. "We were told you did not believe in Christ," he said. "But I know now that is not true. Your teachings are good for my family. You are welcome in my home."

When we introduced the Book of Mormon to the Mesa family, Carlos seemed troubled. He accepted the book, but said little. For several visits, he was quiet and unresponsive. But he did not turn us away. One evening, as we sat down to begin teaching, he placed the Book of Mormon on the coffee table between us. "I have read this book," he declared. "There is nothing but truth in it."

We were stunned.

"Several years ago," he went on, "two young men gave me a copy of this book. I took it to my minister, and he told me the book was evil and must be burned, so that is what I did. But now I have read this book, and I know it is from God. There is not one word of evil in it." He looked at us expectantly.

We responded with an affirmation that the book was true. But it was not the response he anticipated.

"Now I going to hell," he explained. "I have burned a holy book."

I limped through an explanation of how the truth was in the message of the book, that the paper it was printed on was not sacred. There was no sin in his action.

My companion recovered my fumble. "Through baptism," she said. "All sins are washed away."

Now eleven people had committed to enter the waters of baptism. Joyfully we made preparations for the solemn event. But my heart was troubled. Flor had agreed to be baptized but had openly declared that it was simply a decision to follow her husband's choice. She had learned what we had taught and indicated that she understood it, but it was clear she did not yet have a testimony of her own. She was being baptized because her husband and children desired it, and she wished merely to keep unity in her marriage and family.

When we first met Manuel Melendez, Flor's husband, we had taken him for something of a simpleton. He was rumped and dirty and had difficulty expressing himself, stumbling over simple phrases. We soon learned he was the town drunk. But he had been present and attentive at our discussions. When we had challenged him to live the Word of Wisdom, he agreed. We saw the doubtful glances of his family. It was something Manuel had tried many times to do, he told us. "I have heard other preachers, but you have finally brought me a message powerful

enough to help me do it," he declared haltingly. "I feel the strength of it in my soul. God is with me stronger than he has ever been before. I shall beat the devil this time."

Over the weeks, we saw a miraculous transformation in Manuel. He now sat before us, straight-backed, steady, and clean. His eyes sparkled with intelligence, and we were taken aback at his eloquence and quick mind. Flor's eyes shone softly with renewed respect. The man she had fallen in love with had been returned to her.

But there was a hard knot of sadness in Flor that even her husband's renewed spirit and the message we taught could not dispel. I thought it was the shame of being the wife of the town drunk and the burden of having to provide for her family, but weeks passed, and the dull ache in her eyes did not improve.

So I worried and prayed.

We stopped by Flor's home to prepare the paperwork for the family's baptisms. The elders would come by in an hour for their interviews. All was moving forward. I sat with Flor, collecting names and dates while Sister Garcia did the same with Manuel. I was nearly finished as I asked the routine question, "Do you have any other children?"

"No," Flor responded.

I returned to the form but felt instantly confused. I surprised myself by asking again, "Do you have any other children? Older children? Children who do not live with you perhaps?"

"No," Flor responded, annoyed.

I chided myself for my inability to concentrate. "Don't offend the woman," I scolded myself silently. "You asked the question, and she answered it. Leave her alone." But the form now made no sense to me, and I could not write a single letter.

I turned to Flor, and the question rose unbidden to my lips. "Do you have any other children?" I was horrified at my own words.

Flor looked at me strangely, not a friendly look. She sighed heavily, as if at confession. "I had a baby," she said. "But she only lived a few weeks. She doesn't count."

My heart swelled; my confusion dispelled. I had heard this teaching before—it was commonly held among Guatemalan women. They were told when a baby died to just forget about it and have another one. Little ones that died in infancy were simply lost. Strong women did not grieve, but simply got on with their lives.

"Oh, Flor," I said. "Your baby does count." Quietly, I reviewed the plan of salvation, explaining the place in it for little children who died.

They were alive in Christ, who knew them and loved them. The day would come when Flor would meet her little one and hold her again in her arms.

Hope kindled in Flor's eyes, and her heart softened and changed. The dullness that had so long defined her drifted away. Hesitantly at first, then with rising joy, she gave the name and the birth and death dates of her baby girl, and I recorded them. Tears trickled down Flor's cheeks as she held the paper in her hands. Until now, there had been no mortal record made of her child's fleeting life, and this paper gave acknowledgement and reality to that child's existence. Finally, Flor's heart was free to believe what it had always known—that her daughter did count—and Flor at last could love her and grieve for her.

Ephemeral as a balloon, little Maria had slipped into and out of this thorny world, leaving her mother's arms aching and reaching for a remembered brightness. Now that reaching was answered as an unexpected gift flowed through her, touching her heart and granting her the gentle, healing testimony of hope. It was the gift of living water.

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