

Jewels

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The first time it happened, I was seven. My grandma had mailed me a tiny ring for my birthday, an aquamarine set in silver. I clapped my hands and couldn't stop jumping when I saw it. It was the first piece of jewelry I had ever owned; like wearing a piece of the sky. I took it everywhere—presenting my hand to the world, palm down, as if I were queen. It was the most beautiful ring in the history of rings.

And then I lost it.

At first I hid under the covers. Crying and heavy with guilt. Then I looked all over the house for it. Quietly. I didn't want to tell my parents, thinking they'd be mad that I had lost something so expensive. By the end of the day, I was wrung out from worry.

That night I had a dream.

I must have just seen *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, because I was in a dark cave with perfectly cut and polished diamonds, rubies, and emeralds jutting out the walls. I could just pull them off. I grabbed as many jewels as I could, filling my pockets with them and stuffing them in my shirt and pants. I was so loaded down I could barely shuffle out of the cave.

I thought, *This is great! I'm RICH! I can have anything I want. And anyone I know can have anything they want—if they're nice to me.*

And then I woke up.

Remembering the dream, I started searching in my bed, under my pillow, and under the bed for the jewels. And oddly enough (to me at least), I couldn't find any. Not one. It was the strangest thing. One minute I was holding them and the next minute they were gone. I started crying.

And I'll never forget what happened next. A peaceful thought filled my mind and heart with perfect clarity. *You can't take "things" from one world into the next.* And as soon as I heard it, I knew it was right. I somehow understood that owning the ring was just temporary. It was all right to say goodbye to it a little early. The feeling of calm that accompanied the thought was so loving and kind that it dissolved my worry, and I found it easy to go back to sleep.



It happened again when we were teaching our investigator Tanya a second discussion in her tiny apartment. She corrected my companion. I quickly shot Sister Harper what I hoped was a supportive "I'm-sure-your-verb-tenses-are-just-fine" look, but she didn't appear to be bothered at all. I was, of course, supremely pleased that no Bulgarian had ever corrected me midsentence. But, to be fair, I *was* half-Bulgarian.

And then, three months into my mission, it happened to me! I was buying train tickets, and a total stranger corrected my Bulgarian (*the nerve!*). And then the bread man. And then a member at church. And on and on. What was going on? Were my language skills getting *worse*? What was happening?

After a few days of frustration, I sank to my knees. What was wrong with me? I cried and pled with the Lord, hoping my language skills in Bulgarian wouldn't be a total disappointment to my Bulgarian mother (who I was sure was expecting me to come home speaking like a native).

It didn't take long before a quiet thought entered my mind. *No one has corrected you before because no one has understood you before. Their correction means that they can at least guess what you are trying to say.*

The thought rang so true that I resisted the temptation to wallow in frustration and humiliation. Maybe perfect pronunciation wasn't the point. Maybe there was more to communicating than language. I decided to shift my focus from trying to speak "like a Bulgarian" to connecting with those I met. I listened more, and service became my language. I realized that it really wasn't about me. And sometimes when we spoke of Joseph and his vision and the air was charged with truth that reflected in their eyes, or wet-faced and beaming they stepped out of baptismal waters and gave me that look of pure joy and radiant disbelief, we did connect—and it didn't take any words at all.



Then it happened when pregnancy with a second child eluded me. I stashed a thermometer in my pillowcase to take my “waking temperature”—waiting for a subtle increase in degrees to announce my ovulation. I bought and practically memorized the book *Taking Charge of Your Fertility*. I hid an entire shoe box of herbs, tinctures, and homeopathic remedies from my husband in the kitchen cupboard (because *somehow* he had gotten the idea that I was becoming *obsessed*). I prayed. I fasted. I went to the temple. I cried. And pled. *Why* would Heavenly Father give me this desire without fulfilling it? Give me my baby!

But something else happened. Instead of me changing Heavenly Father’s mind, he changed me.

He held off on giving me what I asked for. He calmed me down. He filled me with peace. Several strong, brilliant, single, and married women confided in me their unfulfilled desire to bear any children at all. I started playing more with the child I did have, holding him, kissing him, reading to him, watching him splash a rendition of “Once There Was a Snowman” during his bath.

And eventually I told God that if I was able to have only one child, I was so grateful for the one I had. And a quiet thought came into my mind again: *I am in charge of when a child comes to your family, not you.* That same peace enveloped me, and I knew it was okay to loosen my stranglehold on this thing I could not control. It was okay to take a step back and trust that God knew what he was doing and that I didn’t have to understand why. It was enough that he knew.



And when financial challenges swallowed us whole—it happened again.

Moving. Paying two house payments. Surgery. Doctor visits. Dramatic job changes and losses within the tanking economy of 2008. We prayed. We fasted. We made goals. We visualized. We went to the temple. We worked. And worked. And worked. Month after month. Year after year. Fighting to keep what the Lord was trying to help us let go of.

And while I knew we had to say goodbye to the house, I just couldn’t.

People walked in to look at it, and I felt so ashamed. And angry. And sad. They walked around humoring my prattle, but really planning the color they would paint the room. In their minds they had already moved in, and I was just the sad woman who had carpeted their good luck.

Little did they know of the ants that encircled the sink in the summer, or the crabgrass, or the morning glory you had to claw out of the

flowerbeds by the roots, the aspen knots you had to mow over, or the yellow jackets that built their nests in the holes of the swing set. Or the tears I'd shed over low fences with neighbors, the "Lights On" competition at Christmas, the butternut squash and brown sugar brought over at births, the garden starts shared with unsolicited parenting advice. The deep, deep bonds we had forged over frustrations and forgiveness. They didn't know.

But there were things I didn't know either.

And when we finally let go and moved—encircling, angelic generosity from others was a daily experience. People who I had thought "had it all" opened up to me and shared their own formidable troubles: cancer, divorce, depression, wayward children, infidelity. I could not believe what they were carrying. I had no idea.

I no longer cared if I or my children (yes, we were blessed with one more) were wearing the latest fashions or watching the newest movies or playing with the latest electronics—I was free not to bother with keeping up at all.

I looked differently at the homeless people I saw; they were real people with lives and stories, and the line between us was blurring. I could feel the cold metal of their grocery cart in my hands when I saw them pushing it up a sidewalk. What was their story? What had they lost? Weren't we all just trying to go home? And then the quiet thought came into my mind during a sacrament meeting: *Money is just one resource. You have a thousand others.*

It was true.

I began to open my eyes to them. My friends I had relied on: Emily—who bartered, walked, and strategized with me daily. Kathryn—who could sense when I was depressed and would immediately offer a lunch date, or free babysitting while I went to the temple, or cheerful and tearful encouragement. My husband—who would leave love notes around the house, wash a sink full of dishes, dance around the kitchen with me, or put the kids to bed at the drop of a hat. My children—who would take my hand and lead me off to admire a new creation, or curl up in my lap to a book or movie, or giggle those light, golden giggles. I was made more aware of and grateful for relentless optimism, hope, creative outlets like writing and singing, family, good humor, good food, restful sleep, peace, and unseen angels taking care of the details and fabric of life that I could no longer control.

And the loving corrections continue, and like jewels in a cave I can just pick them up before they disappear.

I honestly used to think that obedience to the gospel naturally equaled financial stability, good health, lack of conflict with family members, and so on. Didn't challenges mean that I was being punished for some undiscovered wickedness? Wasn't ease in one's life a sign of the Lord's favor?

But then I remember my dream, and that my life here on this earth is very short. And though it feels very real, someday I will wake up from it. Luckily, Heavenly Father will whisper his jewels to me and let me pick them up along the way back to him. I remember that there are some things that only Heavenly Father is in charge of, that I can't take things from this world into the next, and that there are those who love me enough to correct me, and I hope it happens again.

This essay by Michelle Forstrom won third place in the 2017 Richard H. Cracraft Personal Essay Contest.