My school’s annual ski day is a favorite with both students and teachers, and I was determined to participate. Other teachers and older students spent the day flying down the slopes while I spent most of the day alone, learning the sport. By afternoon I felt capable of trying a more difficult ski run. To my delight, I found myself going faster and faster, taking turns fairly gracefully and feeling exhilarated. I know what I’m doing, I exulted as I laughed aloud, swooping down the slope. I’m flying solo!

It was an unfamiliar yet welcome experience. Five years earlier, one of my husband’s old friends from business school had called and offered him a job in California. I was not surprised when my husband told me he had decided to accept the offer, for although he had a secure job, he had not been able to find the kind of position he was qualified for in our medium-sized community. But I was dumbfounded when he told me as gently as he could that he would be moving to San Jose without me or our four children, who ranged in age at that time from two to seven.

I knew that it had been a difficult time for him. For the previous two years he had struggled with his testimony of the gospel and with his commitment to the demands of our young family. But I had assumed that given enough time, love, and patience, he would begin an honest search that would lead him back to God—and to us. I was mistaken.

**A Time for Growth**

In a blessing given a few weeks afterward, my father promised me that this great upset in my life would be a time for growth.

This isn’t the way I want to grow, I remember thinking many times after that. I thought it when I tried to get my sobbing toddler who hadn’t seen me all day to go to bed so that I could begin the dishes before I folded the laundry and graded the essays I should have returned a week before. I thought it as I awkwardly shoveled snow in the pre-dawn twilight before herding my sleepy children into the car for the 45-minute drive to baby-sitters and school. I thought it as I watched the father in the row in front of ours at church tease his teenage son and then put his arm around his wife. During that gray, desolate winter I truly felt that no physical pain could come close to the emotional wound I had sustained, a wound so severe that my bewildered spirit seemed unable to make contact with the world outside.

Although the emotional pain and accompanying numbness eased with time, other difficulties re-
mained. But, as my father promised, I am gradually understanding the ways in which I have grown, releasing unnecessary burdens that I have carried in the past, and recognizing gifts the Lord has given me to enrich the present.

“The Fulness of the Earth”

As I pondered my life, I remembered a long walk I took a few days before my oldest son was born. During this walk, I thought of all the wonderful things I would be privileged to introduce my child to: walking through autumn woods, swimming in lakes, reading favorite books, attending family gatherings, touring museums, and on and on.

Years later, I felt a little spark of recognition when I read this passage in Doctrine and Covenants 59:15–16, 18–19 [D&C 59:15–16, 18–19]: “Inasmuch as ye do these things with thanksgiving, with cheerful hearts and countenances, not with much laughter, for this is sin, but with a glad heart and a cheerful countenance—

“Verily I say, that inasmuch as ye do this, the fulness of the earth is yours. …

“Yea, all things which come of the earth, in the season thereof, are made for the benefit and the use of man, both to please the eye and to gladden the heart;

“Yea, for food and for raiment, for taste and for smell, to strengthen the body and to enliven the soul."

This scripture encapsulated the desires I had as a new mother. I frequently think of that walk, and I realize that one of the most important things I can give my children is my sense of wonder and appreciation for the generous abundance with which the Lord has garnished the world around us. As a family, we try to take time to appreciate natural and man-made beauty, to take a full measure of pleasure in the resources that are our good fortune to enjoy. And when chores have to be done, we turn up the stereo and dance around together while we work, because “a merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones” (Prov. 17:22).

Sometimes it is easy to be grateful for the abundance surrounding us; other times it takes some digging to recognize that abundance. Just a few weeks after my divorce, an older woman offered a comment in Sunday School. Divorced when her children were young, she had raised them alone. “During those years, I knew that angels were watching over us and that we were receiving special protection,” she recalled. “Then I found my husband, and I didn’t need that blessing anymore. Other ones came to take its place.”

I have thought about her comment often and have made an effort to identify and take pleasure from the blessings and opportunities available to me at this time of my life. I occasionally ask myself, “What will I miss when this is over? What will I wish I had done?” Like my friend, I am grateful for the sense of protection my children and I enjoy. I am also grateful that, as a direct result of my need, I was in a position to hear and learn from the counsel she offered.

There are many people whose wisdom and friendship were not visible to me until I sought them
out in my need. Their thoughtful service was humbly offered—the birthday card left on my doorstep late at night by a divorced mother of eight children, the Christmas wreath from my son’s Sunbeam teacher, the offers of rides and help from Scouting leaders, the swamp cooler that was covered for winter and the furnace pilot light lit by attentive home teachers. I treasure these gifts that I might not have known, along with the friendships they represent.

Doing My Best

There are other blessings of this time in my life. I am on an academic schedule, and my children and I have found my months off an ideal time to be together. We drive to a family cabin in Vermont every other summer and swim in the lake, play hide-and-seek in the woods at night, and do the cooking we don’t do during the school year. Each trip we choose a different route so we can visit points of interest, such as Church history sites.

One of the keys to a sense of abundance is sufficient time and energy to devote to activities that bring joy and appreciation. This is perhaps my greatest challenge. There is simply not enough of me to go around. I prayerfully consider which needs are important to my family’s well-being on a daily basis and then concentrate on those. I have discovered that there is great peace to be found in choosing the good part (see Luke 10:42). Daily scripture study and family prayer, time together at dinner, homework, church attendance, family home evening, and weekly family activities are our family’s minimum requirements. I try not to get too flustered when other things get away from me. Sometimes the house isn’t as orderly and clean as I’d like or the grass gets a little long or the garden goes untended. But I know I’m doing the best I can, and my children understand the value of an ordered house full of appreciation and joy.

Habits of a Lifetime

It is tempting for me as a mother to make things as easy as possible for my children. I remind myself from time to time that they are acquiring the habits of a lifetime and that they need (as I do) the challenges and satisfaction of continued personal growth. Although I try to shield them from difficulties they should not have to face, I try to make sure they are being appropriately challenged intellectually, physically, and spiritually. In our family, primary areas of emphasis are gospel growth, schoolwork, domestic responsibilities, and maintaining a healthy body. It is important that my children prepare themselves for the future and acquire the habit of disciplined effort, and I also believe that children are happier, more secure, and more interesting to be around when they feel competent in various areas.

A New Perspective

Even when a priority is being thankful for all that we have, we will experience times of sadness or discontent. During those times, new ideas for growth and change can be discovered, ideas that help in our quest to celebrate life’s abundance.

Some years after the divorce, I was concerned, even unhappy, that I could not serve others in the way I wanted to without the supports of a traditional family structure. But in analyzing my feelings, I realized that much of what I thought I would gain from the support of a husband and a traditional family structure was already available to me. It was simply a matter of priorities, not of having a
husband. There were many things my family could do to serve others.

As a family, we agreed to sacrifice some Christmas money for anonymous service to a family in need. I also resolved to rededicate myself to visiting teaching. Choices like these bring a change of perspective and have made a significant difference in my life, for as I’ve served others my outlook has brightened. My challenges seem more manageable as my confidence and spirituality have been strengthened through service. Being single may sometimes change the way I serve but not the habit of service. As some kinds of service become impractical for me, other opportunities for service emerge naturally to take their place.

**Appropriate Help**

Despite our best efforts, we cannot provide all that our children need at all times. Recognizing this fact is not inadequacy; it is humility. Whether the need is emotional, financial, or physical, there are times when it is appropriate to reach out, seeking help from others. The first year my husband and I were separated, I made it six months before collapsing. When my mother realized the state I was in, she arranged for my youngest sister to clean the house, cook some dinners, and care for my youngest child once a week. That act of service increased the love each one of us had for the others and has permanently enriched our relationships.

When I went back to school for a year, I hired a friend to clean my house. Although she was paid, she did far more than I expected, and her services blessed us both. It’s important to remember that asking appropriately for help from those who have the resources to provide it is not the same as burdening those who do not.

I have found that if I approach my Heavenly Father in prayer when I am in need, he will direct me. When every door seems shut and there seems no way out, he opens another door. One night during our first Christmas season alone, I was utterly exhausted and very discouraged. Then the doorbell rang. By the time I answered the door, there was no one in sight, but there was a beautiful, homemade gingerbread house and a typed note: “On the first day of Christmas, a gingerbread house to set the mood.”

Words cannot express the warm feelings that flooded my heart. It had never occurred to me that someone would think to give us a gift. Although we were not struggling financially, we were poor both in time and in the Christmas spirit. In the days that followed, homemade zucchini bread, homemade stockings, homemade ornaments, and finally a homemade nativity set graced our front porch. The memory of those anonymous gifts has imprinted itself on all of our hearts.

**“Strong Faith and a Firm Mind”**

Sometimes, however, we are allowed to feel what seems to be the full weight of our burdens. This was difficult for me to understand at first. If I asked in faith, I thought, surely comfort should come. It did come, but only after I learned humility as I confronted weaknesses I had to overcome, only after I learned charity as I came to understand the depths of pain that others face, only after I learned hope because I had despaired before and the morning had always come. Only after experiencing and in some partial way conquering the bitter can we become those of “strong faith and a firm mind
in every form of godliness” (Moro. 7:30).

I am still lonely, and it is difficult to watch my children growing up without some of the experiences I would wish for them. But I take great comfort from a photograph I keep on my desk of the five of us on the last evening of our vacation the summer after my divorce. That first summer alone was particularly trying, but when I look at the picture all I can remember is the joy and peace I found with my children in the green hills of Vermont. That small picture reminds me to look at the experiences I am going through with an eternal perspective. I am learning that the only real source of peace, wisdom, and joy is my Heavenly Father, and that if I center my life on Christ my inadequacies will recede, leaving me only with a sweet memory of the days I flew solo.