

Short Stories

by

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THE GIFT

By Lillie Ammann

Father in Heaven, I know I should be thankful for what I have, and I am. I praise You and thank You for the many blessings of my life. But I pray for a gift from You—a gift that will let me leave my mark on Your world. I want to know that when I've joined You in Heaven, Your world is a little better because I was here. Amen.

Mary thought of all the gifts she saw in people around her. Judy was a wonderful mother. Her legacy would be her family, with Christian values and faith. Roger had built a business that provided jobs for twenty people. His employees, their families, and his customers were all blessed by Roger's gift. Susan had just signed a publishing contract for her inspirational book. No one could guess how many thousands of people would grow in their faith when they read it. Sam volunteered several hours a week at a homeless shelter. He touched the hearts and lives of so many people when they needed it most.

The list could go on forever, thought Mary. Everyone seemed to have something to offer, everyone but her.

"My child, I have given you the greatest gift of all." The voice echoed in Mary's mind and in her soul. You'll understand tonight."

#

That evening, Mary entered the fellowship hall of the church for the potluck supper.

"Mary, come join us." The welcome came from a table filled with her friends.

"Hi," Mary said. "How is everyone?"

"Better since you're here," answered Sam. "I always get a lift when I see your smiling face."

"Thanks, Sam, but I'm sure you get more of a lift from volunteering at the homeless shelter."

Sam arched his brow in a question. "Why would you think that? I love working at the shelter, but sometimes it's very depressing. There's so much more that needs to be done sometimes I wonder if we're accomplishing anything. I probably would have given up long ago if I didn't have you to inspire me."

"Me inspire you?" Mary leaned forward. "I don't understand."

"You're the one who told me about the shelter in the first place. You were so disappointed that you couldn't find transportation to volunteer that I said maybe I'd volunteer." He grinned. "You were so excited that I had to carry through to keep you from being disappointed in me."

"I didn't mean—"

Sam interrupted Mary's protest. "I'm not complaining. In fact, I'm very grateful to you for encouraging me to volunteer in the first place and for encouraging me to continue. Even if I do get discouraged from time to time, working with the homeless is the best thing I've ever done. And when I am discouraged, all I have to do is think about your smile, and it lifts my spirits."

"Mary lifts everyone's spirits," Judy said. "When I had my first baby, I was practically a baby myself. Sometimes I think I cried as much as the baby did. Seeing Mary at church every week was a big help." She turned to Sam. "Like you said, that beaming smile always made me feel better. The baby too. She'd stop crying as soon as she saw Mary. And Mary always acted like she thought I was the greatest mom in the world."

"I do think that," Mary said.

"I'm not, but your faith in me certainly made me a better one. When there was nobody there but the baby and me, I'd get so stressed out, I didn't know what to do. She'd just keep screaming and nothing seemed to help. But I'd think about Mary and I'd sit in the rocker and talk softly to the baby. I'd tell her I was trying to be as good a mother as Mary thought I was." Judy chuckled. "I don't know whether Melody had cried herself out by then, or whether it was the rocking and the talking, or whether she recognized Mary's name, but she'd finally go to sleep. She's eight years old now, and she runs over to Mary as soon as we get to church. Mary makes her believe she's the smartest, best little girl in the world."

"I know what you mean. I remember when I had some serious business problems." Roger looked around the table. "I thought I could solve my problems by bending my values just a little. When I saw Mary at church, she told me how she admired me for basing my business on my Christian values. Her faith in me made it much easier to resist the temptation to compromise my beliefs."

Mary opened her mouth in a surprised O.

"What happened with your business problems?" someone asked.

"We all know the Lord works in mysterious ways. I had some tough times for a few weeks, then I got the biggest contract of my career. The businessman who signed the contract told me he had been watching me to see if I would compromise my values in order to save my business. He did business with me because I didn't take the easy way out. I might not be as successful as I am today if Mary didn't have so much faith in me," Roger said.

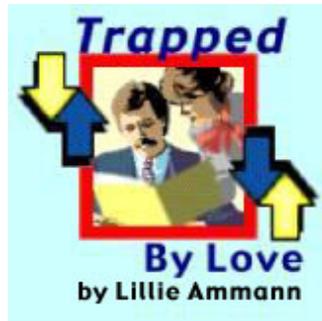
"I would never even have finished my book, much less sold it, if it hadn't been for Mary," Susan said. "I've worked on the manuscript on-and-off for years. After Mary found out I was writing, she started asking me every week how my book was coming." Susan turned to Mary. "You were so excited, you inspired me to keep writing even when I doubted I'd ever finish. I wasn't going to tell you till the book came out, but this seems a suitable time to let you know." Her voice quivered as she said, "Mary, the book is dedicated to you."

Mary tried to wipe the tears from her eyes. "I don't know what to say. I can't believe . . ."

She didn't realize Pastor Davis had stepped up behind her until she felt his hands on her shoulders. "Attendance at this church has improved since you've been a member. Several people have told me that seeing you here every Sunday in your wheelchair inspires them to be more faithful in their own attendance." The minister patted her shoulders. "Mary, you have a very special gift. God put you here to inspire and encourage your fellow man. Your smile is a beacon light of faith and love that will shine in the hearts of the many people you inspire long after that smile is lighting heaven instead of earth."

###

*Father in Heaven, thank You for answering my prayer. Thank you for the gift I didn't know I had. And thank you that now I know. Please help me continue to use the gift You have given me to Your glory.
Amen.*



Clunk! Thud! The sound of grinding gears, then silence. Even after the elevator stopped, the doors refused to open. Lori Hammond looked at the numbers on the panel. Both "11" and "12" were lit. She punched the button for the first floor several times. When nothing happened, she turned to Derek Anderson, her boss and the only other passenger in the car.

"Are we stuck?"

"Sure looks like it. I thought they fixed this thing." Derek grabbed the emergency phone and jiggled the receiver. "What's wrong with this phone? The darn thing won't work."

Lori took several deep breaths, thankful that her boss directed his attention to the elevator panel and not to her. Maybe the car would move before he noticed her reaction. If he did notice, he'd probably attribute her behavior to claustrophobia. Her reaction didn't come just from being closed up in a small space, although heaven knew that was scary enough. No, her reaction came being closed up in a small space with Derek Anderson. She managed to focus on her job and hide her attraction to him in the office. However, she didn't know if she could maintain her professional attitude stuck in an elevator alone with the only man who inspired her passion.

After jiggling the switch hook on the phone several times, Derek slammed down the receiver and pushed door of the phone cabinet shut. "Lori, **do something**. We've got to get out of here."

She looked at the ceiling and struggled for calm. What did he expect her to do—perform a miracle?

"Mr. Anderson, we're probably the last people in the building. It's after eight." They had worked late—again.

He looked surprised when he checked his watch to confirm the time. "There's bound to be a security guard or the cleaning crew around."

"The security guard is on duty, but he'll be at his desk on the first floor now. He probably won't make rounds for another half hour or more." She hoped her companion didn't notice the quiver in her voice. "I don't think he can see the elevator from where he sits."

"What about the cleaning crew?" Derek asked.

Lori turned away and pretended to look at the phone. She took a deep breath and clenched her fists to hide the shaking of her hands. "They don't start till nine o'clock."

"Well, I don't intend to stay stuck in here for an hour." Derek banged on the walls and yelled, "Anybody out there? We're stuck! Get us out of here."

His voice echoed in the small space, but they couldn't hear any sound from outside.

He took off his coat and tossed it in the corner of the elevator on top of his briefcase. He loosened his tie before he hit the wall and called out again.

Lori tuned out her boss's voice. She was used to his loud and impatient ways now, but she still remembered how terrified she'd been when she started working at Consolidated Electronics eight months ago. She'd been hired as a clerk in the sales department. Although she didn't work directly with him, she quickly learned to recognize Mr. Anderson's voice. Everyone in the department took notice when he bellowed. He didn't like to use the intercom or the phone. If he wanted to see a salesman or one of the office staff, he simply called out from his office. And when Mr. Anderson called, whoever he called came running.

In the first five months she'd worked in the department, Lori had seen four secretaries come and go. Before they left or transferred to other departments, they all gossiped with the other office workers about their boss. "He's a perfectionist," they complained. "No one can live up to his standards."

Lori never took part in office gossip. Thrilled and proud to have such a good job, she'd never risk it by complaining. Besides, she had no reason to complain. She liked her job.

She filed and copied and ran errands and tried to make herself useful, but inconspicuous. She'd been surprised when Mr. Anderson called her into his office after the fourth secretary left. Surprised that he'd asked her to come into his office, she was even more surprised that he'd walked over to her desk to speak to her.

"Boy, you must really be in trouble," one of her coworkers whispered. "I've been here five years, and I've never seen him walk up to an employee and speak normally. If he didn't yell, something must be really wrong."

Lori took a deep breath and steeled herself to face the boss. She refused to consider the possibility that she would be fired. Whatever was wrong, she hoped he'd give her a chance to correct it.

She quietly followed the manager into his office. He took his seat at the desk and motioned her into a chair across from him.

"Lori, I've been watching you work. You're doing an excellent job. You never need any help to keep up with your own work, and you volunteer to help others in the department. You're both efficient and a team player." He leaned back in his chair and rolled a pencil in his fingers. "How would you like to make more money?"

"You mean I'm getting a raise?" She tried to sound normal, even businesslike, but inside she was shouting with excitement. As a high-school dropout, she'd resigned herself to a life of unskilled labor. Now, she had proven her worth in an office job. Mama would have been so proud. She'd been so unhappy when Lori dropped out of school.

"You deserve a raise, and I'll see that you get one, whether or not you accept the challenge I'm offering you." He dropped the pen on the desk and leaned forward. "I'm sure you've heard what a tough boss I am."

Lori looked down at her hands folded in her lap. What could she say that was both honest and tactful?

Derek Anderson, the terror of the sales department, suddenly smiled and Lori's whole world lit up. She'd admired her handsome boss from afar. Now she sat in front of him, the center of his attention.

When she didn't answer, Derek continued. "I'm glad you didn't deny hearing the complaints. If you'd said you hadn't heard anything, I'd know you were lying. And I have to be able to trust my secretary. As I'm sure you know, I need a new one, and you're the perfect candidate."

He held up his hand to stop Lori's protest. "I don't really expect you to be perfect, you know. You're competent and don't engage in office politics." He frowned and paused for several seconds. "I think you'll keep your mind on business, and I'm looking for a professional, not a personal, relationship. The last couple of secretaries I've had were more interested in flirting than filing."

Lori's eyes widened and she felt the heat as her face turned red. She'd heard the other women giggling and sighing over the handsome Mr. Anderson. She admitted to herself he was an attractive man. Okay, more than attractive—gorgeous. But there was no danger of her even considering a personal relationship with him. She came to work to work, not to play. She'd put too much time and effort into preparing for a career to risk an affair with her boss.

"Look," he continued. "I realize it doesn't have anything to do with me personally. They're attracted to the Vice President of Sales and Marketing, not to Derek Anderson."

Lori's confusion must have shown on her face, because he continued, "I prefer the title sales manager, but my official title is Vice President of Sales and Marketing." He shrugged.

Lori knew what his title was. She was confused that he would think any female would be more attracted to the position than to the man. His longish blond hair invited a woman to run her fingers through it, and the long lashes on his green eyes were the envy of many women. In contrast to the boyish good looks of his face, his tall, broad-shouldered body seemed to emanate power. He didn't need a title or even his authoritative voice to draw attention. Lori heard enough gossip to know her heartbeat wasn't the only one that sped up when he came near.

His voice interrupted her daydream. "Can you move to your new desk this afternoon so we can get started in the morning?"

He didn't seem to realize that she hadn't answered. He obviously took her acceptance for granted. Although she wondered how she would keep him from seeing her attraction to him, she knew she couldn't pass up this career move. "Of course."

On that day three months ago, she hadn't let her new boss see how much her hands were trembling. Today she wouldn't let him see her fear, and she certainly wouldn't let him see her fascination with him.

She suddenly realized she didn't hear his voice. He'd quit calling for help. She couldn't hear any sound at all. When she looked toward him, she gasped at the look in his eyes. He stared at her as if he'd never seen her before.

"You're scared." She'd never heard his voice so soft.

She shook her head in denial. "No. No, I'm not scared."

He stepped forward and took her hands in his. "Lori, your hands are shaking. Are you going to panic on me?"

"No, I am not scared, and I am not going to panic." She pronounced each word carefully and distinctly. "I am the always-efficient secretary." She didn't feel like the always-efficient secretary now, but she couldn't let him know that.

Although she stood directly in front of him, she raised her voice to her boss for the first time since she'd known him. "I don't panic when you give me one hour to finish a three-hour job."

Derek held up his hands as if to protect himself. Lori took a step back. "I don't panic when you forget to tell me to set up the conference room until five minutes before twenty people arrive. I don't panic when no one can find the file you have to have right this minute."

She stepped back until she leaned against the wall. "So why should I panic just because we're trapped in an elevator between the eleventh and twelfth floors at eight o'clock at night?"

Derek just stood there with a look of surprise on his face. Lori went limp and slid down the wall to sit on the floor. He sat beside her, with his back resting against the wall.

He turned to face her. "Lori, I know you don't panic in a work situation. You're a highly skilled secretary. You have enough experience to handle just about anything that comes along."

Lori looked straight ahead rather than at Derek.

She could pretend she was having this weird conversation with a stranger as long as she didn't look at her boss. "I don't have nearly enough experience to handle the job I have now."

He turned to look at her then. "Of course, you do. You're the most qualified secretary I've ever had. How long have you been a secretary anyway?"

"Three months," she answered in a whisper.

"That's how long you've been working for me. I meant how much total experience you have."

"Mr. Anderson, you should know. My experience is listed on my employment application." She wouldn't look at him, although she could feel his eyes on her.

"I've never looked at your application." When she raised her head, he smiled. His smile had lit up her world the day he asked her to be his secretary, and it continued to light her world every time she saw it. "I knew everything I needed to know by watching you on the job. It was obvious that you were working way below your skills as a clerk. I checked with Personnel, and they said you were a qualified secretary."

"Mr. Anderson, I've never worked as a secretary before. I took a secretarial course, but I don't have any experience."

He slid across the floor to sit in front of her. "Are you serious? Of course, you are. You're always serious. Like that Mr. Anderson business. I told you to call me Derek when you first started working for me."

"I just don't feel right calling my boss by his first name."

"Well, I'm the boss, and I'm ordering you to call me Derek." He stood and paced the tiny elevator. "We're trapped in this six by six box for who knows long. I think Mr. Anderson is just a little too formal for the situation."

"Okay, Mr. . . . Derek."

"I'd have never guessed you didn't have secretarial experience. It must come naturally to you."

She had slid to the floor because she lacked the strength to stand. But she didn't know if she could sit there with Mr. Anderson—Derek—towering over her. She'd called him Mr. Anderson to keep some distance between them, but she always thought of him as Derek. Thought of him, dreamed of him, daydreamed of him . . .

Her mind was straying into dangerous territory. She was so self-disciplined that she could usually force her thoughts to something else, usually work. But this unmoving elevator blocked out the rest of the world. Her mind seemed to be filled with only two topics, equally dangerous. She could either think about being trapped in the elevator or think about Derek.

If she thought about being trapped, she would panic. If she thought about Derek, she'd probably throw herself at him and beg him to love her as she loved him.

He'd warned her from the start that he didn't want a personal relationship with his secretary. She couldn't remember when she fell in love with him. Maybe the first day she'd worked for him, when he'd taken the time to explain exactly what he expected her to do. Maybe it was when she watched him deal with an unhappy customer or help a new salesperson practice her first presentation. He seemed impatient and demanding, but he cared so much he wanted the best for and from everyone. Maybe she'd fallen in love with him the day he'd forgotten to tell her about a meeting in the conference room. He'd charmed her with his sheepish grin when he admitted he'd made a mistake, but he trusted her to fix it for him. His complete confidence in her made her feel like she could do anything.

In one way, her love made her job easy, because making his job and life smoother brought her great joy. In another way, though, her love made her job almost impossible. Each day it became more difficult for her to keep their relationship professional. Derek, though, didn't even recognize her as human, much less female. To him, she was just an efficient machine, a robot secretary.

"How did you get to be such a good secretary if you don't have any experience?" He stopped pacing and sat on the floor with his back against the adjacent wall.

"I guess I've been taking care of people all my life. That's all I do—take care of you."

"And you do a wonderful job of it too." He slid closer. "But what about the typing and dictation?"

Time to change the subject. "How long have you been a vice-president?"

"Oh, no, you aren't getting by with changing the subject. I just realized that you never talk about yourself." He shrugged. "We might as well get some good out of being stuck in an elevator. You're going to tell me about Lori Hammond."

He'd never asked her about herself before. Why now, when she couldn't escape or hide her emotions? "There's nothing to tell."

He raised his arms over his head and grasped his right hand with his left hand. Then he stretched, and stretched, and stretched. The muscles rippling under his dress shirt gave Lori a tingling feeling in her belly.

"Of course, there's something to tell," he said. "You're a mystery. How can the most beautiful woman in the company also be the most efficient?"

Lori inched away from him. The tiny elevator seemed to be shrinking. The air seemed to be getting thinner. She had to concentrate on her breathing.

"That would be an interesting combination if it existed." Lori reached for her purse to have something to do with her hands. "No one's ever accused Tina Lawrence of being efficient." Tina was the beautiful, but thoroughly disorganized, receptionist.

Derek slid closer and took the purse from her hands. He pushed it along the floor to the corner with his briefcase. "I can't positively say no one has, but I've certainly never accused Tina Lawrence of being either the most beautiful or the most efficient. The most beautiful woman in the company has silky brown hair that's probably long when it's down. She usually has a serious expression on her face, but it's worth waiting for one of her smiles. Her hazel eyes show there's more going on besides the steel control she shows to the world. She's the perfect size, and she sits just outside my office."

Lori stood in one swift motion. "Don't be ridiculous." She couldn't stop the quiver in her voice.

He rose from the floor. "Okay, we'll stick to business. Tell me how you came to be a secretary." He stood, put his hands on her shoulders, and guided her

to a sitting position. Then he sat beside her. "You really are the best, you know."

Lori had never told anyone outside her family about herself. She'd been too busy to make close friends or have a serious romance. She didn't want Derek, or anyone else, to know her secrets, but sharing secrets was better than thinking about being trapped or taking the risk of saying something that would cause Derek to realize how much she fantasized about him.

"I dropped out of school in the tenth grade." She saw Derek raise his eyebrows, but he didn't say anything. "My mother had cancer and needed someone to take care of her."

Derek slid closer and took her hands in his. "And, of course, my loyal Lori volunteered."

She pulled her hands back and looked away from him. "My mother needed me. What did you expect me to do—tell her to die alone?" She hadn't meant to sound so angry.

"I would expect you to do exactly what you did—sacrifice some of your own dreams to meet your mother's needs. You should be very proud of yourself."

"Proud of being a dropout?" She couldn't keep the resentment out of her voice. She'd always been ashamed that she hadn't finished school.

"Proud of doing what was right for your family. And proud of getting an education, some way, some time." He took her chin in his right hand and turned her face so she was looking at him. "Tell me how you did it."

She wasn't sure what she saw in his eyes, but whatever she saw seemed to loosen her tongue. "I stayed with my mom during the day while my dad worked. She wasn't a complete invalid until the last few weeks." Lori's voice broke, but she kept talking. How could she be so sensitive to his touch as she recalled those bleak days?

"That must have been hard."

"At first, I mainly just needed to be with Mom so she wouldn't be alone. I took care of the house and cooked for the family. I have a brother a couple of years younger than me. I'd give Mom her medicine and take her to her medical appointments."

Derek had dropped his hand from her face, but he sat so close she could feel the warmth from his body. "And then . . .," he prompted.

"And then the bills kept piling up. So I went to work as a waitress at an all-night café. I stayed with Mom during the day while Dad worked and he

stayed with her at night while I worked." She sat up straighter and lifted her chin. "As Mom got worse, I had to nurse her."

"I'll bet you were a good nurse," Derek said.

"Unfortunately, not good enough. Mom died." She couldn't choke back the tears.

He pulled her to his side and put his arm around her shoulders. "I'm sorry, Lori." He reached over and wiped a tear from her face. "I understand the pain of losing someone you love. I lost my father a few years ago."

Lori's eyes overflowed with tears. She sniffed and wiped them away. Derek pulled her head down to his shoulder. She wasn't sure if he was saying words or just making soothing sounds, but his gentle voice comforted her and his arm around her shoulder felt just right. He pulled his shirt out of his pants and wiped her eyes with his shirttail.

She didn't know how long they sat like that, but finally she had no more tears to shed.

Derek said, "I'm glad to see you're human. You're always in such control I've wondered if you have any feelings at all."

Did she have feelings? Right now, she felt a warm tingle everywhere Derek touched her. Her stomach felt fluttery. She wondered if her heart would beat right out of her body. Oh, she had feelings, all right—feelings that a secretary shouldn't feel for a boss who'd already warned her he didn't want a personal relationship.

She'd managed to hide these feelings for months on the job, but she couldn't control her emotions in this situation. The two of them seemed to be alone in the world. There were no sounds except the sound of their voices. There was no motion except their own limited movements. There were no other people and no other activities. Nothing to do but think and feel.

"Talk to me, Lori. Tell me how you went from being the caretaker for your family to being the caretaker of this disorganized sales manager." He squeezed her shoulder.

"After Mom died, there were still a lot of bills to pay." She sighed and sniffed. "So I kept my waitress job at night and got a job as a nurse's aid during the day. My dad also took a second job, and my little brother even got a job delivering pizzas. It took us over three years, but we finally paid off all the bills."

"Did you work both jobs all that time?"

He looked at her like—like she didn't know what. She did know that look made her feel all fluttery inside.

"Of course. We'd never have paid the bills otherwise."

"But you were on your feet all the time on both jobs. How could you keep doing it year after year?" Derek asked.

Lori shrugged and looked at the closed door. "I didn't have any choice."

"Of course, you had a choice. Many people would have just declared bankruptcy. You weren't responsible for your mother's bills," Derek said.

"My family was responsible for the bills, and I'm part of my family. We believe in paying our debts." She tried to pull away from Derek's light embrace, but his arm tightened on her shoulder.

He said, "You are the most remarkable woman I've ever met."

"I just did what I had to do," Lori said. His praise embarrassed her.

"Well, don't leave me in suspense. How did you finish your education and get your secretarial training?" he asked.

Lori took a deep breath and pulled away. This time Derek dropped his arm from her shoulder and leaned back against the wall.

"After we paid the bills, I gave up the hospital job and kept waitressing."

Derek interrupted. "Why did you give up the full-time job and keep the part-time job?"

"With tips, I could make more in thirty hours as a waitress than I could in forty hours as an aid. And that left me time to take GED classes," she added.

"So you got your GED and went on to secretarial school." Derek shook his head. "You're so good I thought you must have taken office classes in high school and worked in offices ever since high school."

"That's why I was so scared . . ." She didn't mean to tell Derek she had been afraid to go to work for Consolidated Electronics. She'd felt like an outsider. Everyone else had probably graduated from high school on a normal schedule and worked in an office for years.

"Why you were so scared about what?" Derek asked.

"Never mind." She shook her head.

"Oh, no. You're not stopping now. Keep talking," Derek said. "You said, 'That's why I was so scared . . .'"

She couldn't believe she'd already told him so much about herself. He probably couldn't think any worse of her than he did already. "Why I was so scared when I got my first office job, when I started as a clerk in the sales department." She reached for her purse again and twisted the strap.

Derek set the purse aside and took her hands. "That was your first office job?" He grinned. "I thought you were an old pro. I wondered why you'd been hired as a file clerk instead of a secretary right from the beginning."

"You could have checked my personnel file if you were interested."

"Oh, I was interested." That usually authoritative voice sounded very different. He shook his head. "Never mind about that. I didn't need to read your personnel file. I knew everything I needed to know just from watching you work."

"I'm surprised you even noticed me in that sea of faces in the clerical pool."

"Your face never blends into a sea. I noticed you, all right."

That almost sounded like he noticed her face, but he'd already made it clear that it was her work he noticed. She couldn't let herself even think about her romantic dreams.

Derek kept talking. "I don't care about your experience. You're the best secretary I've ever had. In fact the best secretary I could ever want." He squeezed her hands.

Lori looked down at their joined hands—his so large and strong, hers so dainty but just as strong. "I guess we make a good team. You're a great boss."

He laughed. "Don't let anyone else in the office hear you say that. You'll ruin my reputation. I've heard them call me the tyrant of sales and Derek the Devil before."

"They just don't know you. You're not a tyrant or a devil." She raised her head and looked him in the eyes. "You're very good at your job, and you expect everyone else to be as good at theirs." Her voice dropped. "I try my best to be good enough for you."

Derek's face turned serious. "You're probably better at your job than I am at mine, and I'm much better at mine because you're so good at yours." Then he smiled again. "Just don't let anybody else find that out."

He was still holding her hands. She pulled away and stood up. "Okay, turn about is fair play. You have to tell me about yourself now."

"There's nothing to tell," he said as he stood. Then he grinned. "I didn't let you get by with that, and I'm sure you won't let me get by with it either."

She hoped he didn't notice that she had a hard time breathing when he grinned. "You're right. I won't."

He stood so close to her she wondered if he could hear her heartbeat. She couldn't step away without bumping into the pile of coat, briefcase, and purse. Talking about being on her feet all the time in her former jobs reminded her how uncomfortable she was after a full day of wearing heels. She leaned against the elevator wall, took off her shoes, and added them to the pile. She curled her toes in the plush carpet to ease her aching feet.

Derek reached out to her and pulled her to him. His hand on her head guided it down to his chest. Without her heels, he could rest his chin on top of her head. Only a few seconds passed before he seemed to realize what he was doing. He dropped his arms and stepped back at the same time she pulled away.

"I'm afraid my story isn't as dramatic as yours," he said. "My life has been pretty boring. I grew up in a family with an older brother and younger sister. Dad was a salesman, and Mom stayed home with the kids."

She'd hardly been in his arms long enough to feel it, but she felt alone now that he was a few inches away. "So, you decided to become a salesman like your dad?" she asked.

"I'm sure that's part of the reason. I've always looked up to Dad. I started selling early. Every year, I sold the most tickets in our troop to the Boy Scouts' Jamboree. Later, it was the most candy for the band and the most calendars for the student council," he said.

Lori wished she could put more distance between them. If she continued to feel the warmth from his body and breathe his scent, she'd never want to leave. She said, "So you've been a smooth talker all your life."

Derek let her pull away slightly, but he gripped her arms above the elbows with his hands. "I don't think I'm a 'smooth talker.' I'm a professional. I know my products, and I believe it's my job to help a client solve a problem. If our product isn't the solution, I won't sell it to him. And as sales manager, I expect the same from the salesman I supervise."

"That's one thing everyone agrees on. Even those who call you Derek the Devil admit you put the client first," Lori said.

Derek smiled and dropped his hands from her arms. "So you admit you've heard the names I've been called."

"I never said I haven't heard things." She turned around to keep from looking at his lips and imagining what they would feel like if he kissed her. She'd also heard women's reactions to him as a man. She wasn't the only one who wanted to run her fingers through that thick mass of blond hair.

"But my loyal Lori never gossips about me, does she?" he asked.

"No," she answered. She doesn't gossip, but she dreams, and daydreams, and fantasizes. "Have you always worked at Consolidated Electronics?"

"No, I've worked for several other companies." He told her about his previous jobs, starting out after college as a sales trainee at a restaurant supply company. He had worked his way up the ladder at two other businesses before coming to Consolidated Electronics as a salesman four years ago. He'd been named sales manager only a year later.

"You've done a lot since you've been sales manager. You have the respect of the clients and the staff," Lori told him. "I'm proud to work for you."

"Thank you, Lori. I'm proud of what I've done," Derek said. "But I haven't succeeded as much as you have because I didn't have as many obstacles to overcome to get where I am. I'm so proud of you for getting your GED and learning a skill after what you went through."

She'd spent so many years feeling ashamed of her lack of education she didn't know how to response to praise for what she'd done. She would never have told Derek any of this if she hadn't been trying to keep from thinking about being alone with him, trapped in the elevator.

Now that she let herself think about it again, she started to panic. "What time is it now?" she asked.

Derek looked at his watch. "It's nine-fifteen. The cleaning crew should be here by now."

Lori found it hard to breathe again. She didn't know whether it was Derek's closeness or her rising panic. "They should have done something by now. What if they don't realize we're here?"

Derek placed his hands on her shoulders and eased her down to the floor again. He sat with his back against the adjacent wall. "I'm sure someone will discover the elevator's stuck when they're ready to go to another floor."

"But what if they don't?" She couldn't control her rising voice.

"Is this my always-efficient-Lori-who-never-panics?"

She breathed deeply. "I'm not going to panic. I just want someone to find us and get us out of here."

"What about your fiancé?" Derek asked. "Won't he figure out something's wrong when you don't get home soon?"

Her mouth opened in shock. "What fiancé?"

"How many fiancés do you have?" Derek asked with a frown.

"None. Whatever gave you the idea I had a fiancé?" Why were they having this ridiculous conversation when they should be trying to get out of a stuck elevator?

Derek arched his right eyebrow. "He told me when he came to pick you up for lunch the first day you started at the company."

Lori frowned in confusion as she tried to make sense of what he was saying. She thought back to her first day on the job. Her neighbor had asked her out several times. The only invitation she'd ever accepted was the one lunch date, and she'd come to regret that.

"Rob's my next door neighbor. He took me to lunch to celebrate my new job. But I've never even dated him, much less been engaged to him."

Derek stood and stared down at her. "If you're not engaged to him, why did he tell me you were?"

"I have no idea. He'd asked me out several times, but I'd never gone. Maybe . . . well, he apparently had ideas that had no basis in reality." Could he have fantasized about her the way she fantasized about Derek? "I didn't know he told you we were engaged. But I guarantee you it's not true."

"I even asked him why you weren't wearing a ring."

"What did he say?"

Derek rolled his shoulders as if to release tension. "He said he was having his late mother's ring redesigned for you and would give it to you at Christmas."

"Good grief. That's really carrying the lie to the limit." Lori felt at a disadvantage sitting on the floor with Derek standing over her. "I wonder what his very-much-alive mother would think of being called his 'late mother.'"

"He even told me you got engaged this past Valentine's Day and were getting married next Valentine's Day." On Derek's face, Lori saw confusion, frustration, and some other emotion she couldn't identify.

"I can't believe he said all that." She rose. "Why would he make up a story like that?"

"He told me so many details I had to believe him."

"When did you have this conversation? I don't even remember seeing you that day."

"You might not have seen me," Derek said. "But I certainly saw you. I talked to this Romeo while you went to wash your hands."

"Well, regardless of what he said, we are **not** engaged. We are **not** dating. We are **not** even friends anymore."

Derek frowned. "Did something happen?"

"He came on pretty strong over lunch. I thought we were just going for a casual, friendly meal. But he tried to pressure me into spending time with him, and he walked out on me when I told him I only wanted to be friends."

"That jerk! No wonder you looked unhappy when you got back to the office."

Unhappy was too mild a word to describe her emotions after resisting Rob's crude advances and having to spend two weeks of bus fare on a lunch that gave her indigestion. However, she thought she'd hid her anger and frustration from her co-workers. Learning that her boss had noticed shocked her.

"Well, at least Rob never asked me out again. In fact, I haven't even run into him in the hallway anymore."

"Okay, then, Rob's out of the picture. Are you involved with anyone else?" he asked.

"How could I be involved with anyone? I just spent an hour telling you my life story. When have I had time for romance—hurrying from the hospital to the restaurant? Or maybe between waiting tables and GED classes?"

"Lori, you're a beautiful woman—inside and out. You've worked for Consolidated Electronics for months, plenty of time for romance then," Derek said.

"Well, I haven't been interested in anyone but . . ." Lori caught herself before she said 'anyone but you.' "I haven't been interested in anyone."

"You mean I've wasted all this time?" Derek stepped closer and pulled her into a standing position. "All these months I've wanted to do this . . ."

Lori forgot elevators and neighbors and everything else as Derek wrapped her in his arms and drew her close. She reached up to meet his kiss. She didn't have to wonder how his lips would feel any more. They felt warm, and moist, and soft, and loving. Did they really feel loving?

She didn't have much experience with men, but she'd listened to other women and she'd read books. She knew a man could feel passion without feeling love. Derek had never noticed her before. He probably had a hot date planned tonight and getting stuck in the elevator with her ruined his plans. He'd said she was beautiful. Maybe he was attracted to her because he liked the way she looked and because they were stuck here in this tiny space. How would he feel when, *if*, they were finally released?

He deepened the kiss and pulled her closer. Her breasts were crushed against his chest and their bodies touched from head to toe. Heat seemed to be radiating from his body. Her insides melted. Could he be feeling anything like she was?

Slowly he ended the kiss, but his lips returned to her again and again for tiny nips and butterfly kisses. He put his hand on the back of her head and drew it down to his chest. He had held her in this position earlier to comfort her. This felt the same, but different—comforting but exciting, secure but dangerous.

Still holding her to him, he stepped back and leaned against the wall. He slid down to the floor and pulled her onto his lap. He kissed her neck and nibbled her earlobe.

"Wow," he said.

"Wow is right."

"Do you know I've been crazy about you since the day you first walked into the office?" he asked. "I was ready to throw that Rob guy out my window when he told me you were engaged."

Lori laughed at the image of Derek throwing Rob out the window. "I've never seen you resort to physical violence. Well, nothing more violent than slamming down the receiver on the phone."

"But you've never seen me stake my claim on the woman I love," he said.

"No, I haven't. As a matter of fact, I don't recall any broken windows or injured neighbors," she teased. "So I guess there's been no claim staked."

"The claim is being staked right now." He shifted her position on his outstretched legs and hugged her even tighter. "I controlled myself and didn't toss that idiot out the window only because I love you so much."

"You love me so much you didn't stake your claim?" Lori asked in confusion.

"That's right," he answered. "I knew you wouldn't be engaged to him unless you really loved him." His eyes seemed to blaze with the intensity of his

feelings. "And as much as I want to be with you, I want more for you to be happy."

"You'd have given me up?" she asked.

"I told myself I could, but I don't think I believed it." He moved her off his lap to the floor beside him and drew her to his side. "I've been planning the most important sales campaign of my career. Haven't you noticed how often we've been working late?"

She snuggled against him and answered, "Of course, I've noticed. I notice every minute I'm with you. But we've been working on the Lawton contract."

"That was a convenient excuse. If it hadn't been the Lawton contract, I'd have found some other reason to spend time with you." His smile warmed her heart. "I've been practicing my 'smooth talking.' How am I doing?"

"You're doing wonderful. But I don't want you to be a smooth talker. I just want you to mean what you're saying." She took a deep breath before she continued. "Maybe you're just reacting to the situation of being locked up together in this tiny elevator. You told me one of the reasons you wanted me to be your secretary was that I'd keep my mind on business."

Derek framed her face with his hands. "I expected you to tell me you were already engaged. I hoped you'd tell me you'd just ended a relationship and weren't ready for another one. That would have given me hope that I could win you over."

Lori shook her head. "I can't believe it. You won me over a long time ago. But no one would have guessed you wanted to."

"Oh, people could guess, all right, but they didn't have to. Ask Personnel. Ask my boss. Ask any man who's flirted with you at the office."

"What do any of them have to do with us?"

"I've reminded every Romeo who's tried to get your attention of the company sexual harassment policy. Then I went to Personnel and to my boss three months ago to be sure it wouldn't be a violation of the policy for me to date you and eventually marry you."

Lori's eyes widened and her mouth opened into a surprised O. "What did they say?"

"They said there was no problem as long as we were both interested in a relationship." He looked deeply into her eyes and into her soul. "Do you want a relationship with me, Lori?"

"What kind of a relationship are you talking about?"

"The only kind that matters. I want to marry you and show you how much I love you for the rest of our lives."

Lori snuggled against him and wrapped her arms around his chest. "Then, Mr. Anderson, we want the same thing. My dream is to be Mrs. Derek Anderson."

He lifted her onto his outstretched legs again and soon she was lost in his kisses. Neither felt it when the elevator jerked into motion and slowly lowered to the first floor. They drew apart only when they heard laughter and loud voices. They hadn't even realized the elevator had stopped and the door had opened.

Two men stood in front of them, one in the uniform of a security company and the other in the uniform of the elevator company.

"Well, I guess you're safe from a lawsuit," the security guard said to the other man. "Doesn't look to me like these folks went through any trauma."

Derek flashed a smile that warmed Lori from head to toe. He held her close by his side. "Getting trapped in that elevator was the best thing that ever happened to us. Thanks. Now we're trapped by love, and I can't think of anything better. We'll invite you to the wedding, which will be . . ." He turned to Lori. "Please say soon, darling. I've waited too long already."

"Soon. Very soon." Then she was in his arms again. Those lips she'd dreamed about so often were touching hers, and she was lost in the sensations of love.

Journal of a Purpose Seeker

A Short Story by Lillie Ammann



Sunday night: What have I gotten myself into? I had no intention of participating in this new study group, but it happened so fast. I was just sitting there after church drinking coffee and chatting with friends when Fr. Peter walked up and encouraged us to form one of the small groups he's been talking about. Before I knew it, the five of us had agreed to start a group, and Sam and Judy had arranged to give me a ride. A group about purpose, of all things.

I used to think there was a purpose for my life. But that was long ago—before the accident. Back in the days when I didn't have to depend on someone else for something as simple as a ride to church. Back when I was a rising star in the business world. Oh yeah, then I was going to become a huge business success, make lots of money, start a charitable foundation, and do great things. God had given me great ability, so I thought he'd also given me a great purpose.

Then came the accident that changed everything. No more ability, no more great purpose.

How can I get out of this group? What's the use of someone like me being involved in a group studying purpose in life? Maybe I'll start reading the book the group is studying. I can't use the excuse that I can't read it, and I can't even claim I can't write in the journal we're supposed to keep—Fr. Peter knows I have accessible computer equipment, and the book is available as an e-book.

But I'll probably find something quickly to prove this doesn't apply to me. Then I can call Sam and Judy before the first session and tell them not to pick me up because I'm not a suitable member of the group.

Week 1—Monday afternoon: It all starts with God—that's what I read in *The Purpose Drive Life*, the book we're supposed to study. The author, a pastor named Rick Warren, says we need to go to God's Word to learn our purpose. All those years when I thought I knew my purpose, did I ever bother to see if it aligned with Scripture? Did I ever even pray about it?

Back in those days, everything seemed so clear—my purpose was success in the business world. God gave me the ability and skills, so I always figured he meant for me to use them to be successful. Then after the accident, I decided he didn't have any purpose for me.

This book seems to be saying everyone has a purpose. Can that really be true? I'm still not sure this is for me, but maybe I'll go to the first session and see what happens.

Week 1—Wednesday night: I guess I'll stay in the group—for awhile anyway. We had quite a discussion tonight. It seems that I'm not the only person who isn't sure about their purpose. Judy's such a great mother; I thought she must know being a mother was her purpose in life. But she had doubts, not only about her purpose, but even about whether she's a good mother.

Imagine, she said she was encouraged by my belief in her! When she didn't know how to stop Melody from crying, she'd rock her and sing to her and pray. But remembering that I told her she was a great mom helped calm Judy—she said that made her a better mother! Tonight I learned that my life has made a difference to someone else. I'm glad of that ... but for a life to really have purpose, surely it has to make a huge difference to a lot of people.

People with purpose are those like Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, St. Paul, Joan of Arc, all the saints in fact ...

But somebody like me? I'm glad Judy said I encouraged her, but that's not the same thing as having a great purpose in life. I'm thankful, though, that I've been of some use since my accident.

Thank you, Lord, for making me useful to Judy – and for giving me the opportunity to learn about it. Amen.

Week 2—Thursday afternoon: This week's chapter confused me, so I'd decided I wasn't going to the study group. But somehow I ended up there anyway. Guess I was curious to see what the others thought about the book saying that none of us are accidents.

It's amazing how much discussion five people can have over one simple—or maybe not so simple—idea. Not so simple, because not only does this preacher say that no one's birth is an accident, but he also says that nothing that happens to us is an accident. No one argued with the idea that our births are ordered by God, but Roger and I questioned the other part.

How can anybody say that my accident wasn't an accident? Did God really want me to be hurt so badly? Was I supposed to suffer so much pain? Is it

really God's will for me to be dependent on other people for the rest of my life?

And Roger—he was doing very well in his business, then he hit a spell of bad luck when a dishonest employee went to work for a competitor and gave away trade secrets. Roger lost a lot of customers and almost lost his company. Was that part of God's plan? That affected a lot of people besides Roger—he had to lay off nearly a hundred employees. All those families suffered because of something that wasn't their fault.

Everything that happens in our lives is planned by God? That sounds like predestination—I thought God gave us free will. We had some real discussion about that last night. If God has planned everything, how can we have free will?

In the end, we finally all agreed on one thing: "... all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28, NKJV)

I can't quite accept that God caused that 17-year-old kid to get drunk, steal a car, and drive headlong into me. But I do believe that God can use that terrible tragedy for His good purpose.

Week 3—Thursday night: This week's chapter was about what drives our lives. Sam, who I always looked up to because he volunteers for just about every project that comes along, told us he often does things just to make himself look good. Like the recent fundraising drive for the new Sunday School building—he volunteered to head it up to get approval. He often feels overwhelmed from all the things he agrees to do, but he can't bring himself to say "no" if he thinks he'll get prestige from doing it.

Most of us thought having a purpose in life would mean being busier. But Sam said he felt relieved that the idea of having a purpose would make him focus and actually do fewer "things." He would do the projects that related to his purpose and not do a lot of "things" just because it was expected of him.

That was a different perspective for all of us. Most of the others, of course, do a lot more than I do. There's so little I can do. But what little I do is random—I don't focus on anything because I don't have a purpose.

Week 4—Tuesday morning: This week's lesson reminds us that life on earth is only preparation for eternity. What we do here has eternal consequences. When I fret about the inconveniences of not being able to walk steadily or hold a job or do many of the things "normal" people do, when I get

frustrated over having seizures—how petty those things are compared to the glories of eternity!

Week 5—Monday afternoon: Although there are many metaphors to describe life, the Biblical metaphors are a test, a trust, and a temporary assignment. This chapter talks about the trials that different people in the Bible went through. It's encouraging to remember that some of the greatest people in the Bible failed tests on occasion but came back and succeeded greatly later on.

I think of "tested by fire"—God does that to us, in big and little ways. My accident was a huge trial, and I guess I haven't done as well as I could. Maybe coming to this group was a smaller test—one I would have failed if Fr. Peter hadn't conspired with my friends to get me here!

And life is a trust—nothing we have is ours. Our materialistic, throw-away society doesn't recognize this, but everything we have is in trust from God.

In a strange way, I see that having to depend on someone else for something as basic as transportation is a good analogy for this. I don't own the power to get myself to and from church any more than I own the possessions that I have.

If I hadn't had the accident, I probably would be a top-level executive, completely independent—or at least believing myself to be—with material wealth and social standing. But I probably wouldn't be starting to get this glimpse of what God wants from us, from me in particular. I'd think I had control over my own life instead of at least be beginning to give control of it to God. Maybe there *is* a purpose in what happened to me.

Week 5—Thursday morning: Maria's got a publisher for her devotional book, and everything's smooth sailing now. But apparently that wasn't always the case. She said she's collected 47 rejections! And some of them were downright unkind—telling her not to waste her time submitting it anywhere else. But the publisher she's with now is committed to the project.

And she announced the most amazing thing! She said she'd nearly given up on the book several times, but I kept asking her about it. She said my encouragement helped motivate her to keep trying to get published. I never realized I was encouraging her—I was just so excited about what she was doing. She gives such meaningful devotions for the women's group that when she said she was writing a devotional book, I knew it could be a blessing to many other people. And now it will be.

Lord, thank you for using me to encourage Maria. Amen.

Week 6—Monday afternoon: This week's chapter flies in the face of a lot of popular televangelists who preach a prosperity gospel. Not only is life temporary and brief compared to the time we'll be in eternity, but the thing that struck me was that we're not supposed to feel complete contentment and happiness here—we're supposed to long for our eternal home. Living abundantly isn't about riches and comfort here on earth—it's about preparing to go home to God.

Week 6—Thursday morning: This chapter seemed to have as much impact on the others as it did on me. Although we'd already come to expect that life is a trial, I don't think any of us had really thought in these terms before—that we aren't supposed to be completely comfortable on earth. We all accepted that we aren't guaranteed happiness, but this was the first time we realized we aren't even supposed to be completely happy in earthly terms.

The discussion went on so long that I got overtired and ended up having a bout of seizures. It was almost an ironic perfect ending—just to prove that we aren't supposed to be completely comfortable, I demonstrated by having a bout of very uncomfortable seizures. It affected the whole group, too, because the seizures always make everyone around me uncomfortable. They don't quite know what to do or how to act—even though these friends know better than most that all they can do is wait them out.

As soon as the bout ended, Sam hustled me to the car while Judy got the kids from the nursery, and that effectively ended the discussion. But it sure didn't end my thoughts—my head's still buzzing—and I'll bet the others are thinking about this too.

Week 6—Saturday afternoon: Fr. Peter called yesterday—I almost dropped the phone when he said, "Tonya, I heard you experienced a bout of blessings the other night." He went on to explain that of the many people he's seen with head trauma, I was the only one who wasn't severely intellectually impaired. When he put it like that, the limitations I have do seem like blessings in comparison.

Judy and her kids stopped by on their way to the park this morning. Those kids are something else! Melody is nearly five and little Bart—my godson!—just turned three. I met Judy and Sam when I first started going to St. Mary's, and they welcomed me as if they didn't even notice my skin was a different color and I had multiple handicaps. We became instant friends in spite of the fact that I don't warm up to people very easily. They introduced me to Roger and Maria, who accepted me just as quickly.

Melody was born a few months later, and I fell in love with her at first sight. We aren't far enough along in this study of purpose to reach any conclusions

yet, but surely Judy's purpose—or at least part of it—is raising those two beautiful children into fine Christian adults. And if my encouragement of her is part of my purpose, I'll consider it a blessed one.

Week 7—Tuesday morning: This chapter says the purpose of everything in creation is to show God's glory. The author makes a very sobering statement: Only two of God's creatures fail to bring him glory—demons and people. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23, NKJV) Living for God's glory rather than our own is the greatest thing we can do in our lives.

Living for God's glory includes worshiping him, loving other believers, becoming Christ-like, using our gifts to serve others, and telling others about God.

Worship sounded easy—I never miss services on Sunday. In fact Fr. Peter says I'm an encouragement to others. If I can get to church every week in spite of all the obstacles I face, then other parishioners who don't deal with the same difficulties are motivated to attend. But Pastor Warren isn't just talking about showing up for church services on Sunday. He's talking about living a worshipping lifestyle. Worship on Sunday morning is one thing—but living a life of worship? I never thought of that, and I sure haven't been doing it.

Week 7—Thursday afternoon: Every week just gets better—I'm really glad that I ended up here, in spite of my initial reluctance. It's not necessarily pleasant. Last night was pretty intense—if we weren't all friends, I don't think we'd share the way we do.

The discussion of using our gifts to serve others generated some lively debate. I must have sounded pretty bitter when I said, "How can I use my gifts to help others? Aren't gifts the abilities, skills, and talents we're born with? Well, I lost all the talents I was born with in the accident. This book says nothing is an accident, so how come I don't have any skills or talents?"

They all really looked shocked. Nobody said anything for several seconds. Then Sam asked, "You don't really believe that, do you?"

What a ridiculous question! I almost said so, but I realized he was serious. And the others obviously had the same question. I didn't know what to say. All I could think of was what I used to have—who I used to be.

"I graduated at the head of my MBA class from one of the top Ivy League colleges. All my professors said I was on the fast track for success in business. I had plenty of talent and all kinds of skills—but they aren't very

useful to someone who can't sit at a desk, much less focus her eyes on the latest company memo!"

I didn't realize I was almost yelling. None of my friends had ever heard me even raise my voice before, and now I sounded like a shrew. I sure wasn't doing any of the things we'd just talked about! My actions were a long way from giving glory to God or being Christ-like or serving others. I lowered my head and tried to keep the tears from falling.

The next thing I knew they were gathered around my chair, all talking at once. Gradually I began to make sense of what they were saying. "You've got a real talent for encouraging others, Tonya. Just look at what you've done for everyone in this room."

Turns out each of them felt like I had been a positive influence on them. Not just Judy and her mothering ability and Maria and her book—the guys also had stories to share about something I'd said or done that made a difference to them!

Sam said of all the activities he was involved in, the one that meant the most to him—the one where he felt he really made a personal difference—was working at the homeless shelter. He never would have done it because he always does the things that make him seem important, like heading up the building fund. But I was so excited about the work with the shelter and so disappointed that I couldn't participate that he volunteered just so he could tell me about it every week. Then the work really touched his heart, and it's turned into the most meaningful work he's ever done.

Roger said when his business was in so much trouble, when he was laying off so many people, he had a chance to get a big job if he did something unethical. He really thought about doing it; he was sure no one would ever find out, and if he got the job, he wouldn't have to lay off several dozen more workers. I could hardly believe my ears when he recalled that I'd asked how the business was going. He told me they were having some tough times just then.

And I said, "Thank God you're a Christian businessman. When you pray for wisdom, the Holy Spirit will lead you to make the right decisions." Roger said he did pray for wisdom and eventually overcame the business problems. He also avoided those unethical actions, which he might have succumbed to if I haven't given him that little pep talk when he needed it.

I felt like a hypocrite when Roger said that, because I haven't been practicing what I preached to him. I haven't been very consistent about praying to find my own purpose. And I certainly had no idea at the time that

my words were really significant to Roger. In fact when he reminded me of what I said, the words sounded "preachy" instead of encouraging.

They were all giving me too much credit ... but there seems to be a pattern here. I can't be a mother, but I can encourage Judy. I can't write a devotional book, but I can encourage Maria. I can't work at the homeless shelter, but I can encourage Sam. I can't run a business, but I can encourage Roger.

Lord, I'm at the start of an exciting and important journey—the search for my purpose. I've come a long way just in the first few weeks—from believing that my life has no purpose to understanding that every life has purpose, from thinking that purpose has to be measured by huge numbers of lives impacted to the realization that purpose is not measured in numbers, from imagining that purpose requires great acts of extraordinary heroism to the comprehension that purpose may entail small, simple acts if they are done to your glory and in your will.

Thank you, Lord, for how far I've come. Guide me, Holy Spirit, into living my life fully in your purpose. In Jesus' name. Amen.