

CHAPTER 1

VOCABULARY

I saw that the best thing I could do was get hold of a dictionary—to study, to learn some words. –Malcolm X

A Sunday school teacher, a third grade teacher, a music teacher, and a well-intentioned sixth grade teacher all made lasting impressions on me. But the overwhelming amount of the material, uninspiring and incompetent instructors, and, more importantly, my lack of motivation slowed my intellectual growth. I didn't want to be made fun of, so I never tried. If you don't try—you don't fail. If you don't fail—nobody laughs at you. That was my reasoning, so I became a very good basketball player and a great talker. Back then, I thought that I didn't need to read or spell; I was clever enough to succeed with limited knowledge. This way of thinking came to an abrupt end when I landed in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in January of 1969.

Before arriving in Argentina for my two-year mission for the Mormon Church, I studied Spanish for three months at the Language Training Center in Provo, Utah. With that

background and my two years of high school Spanish, I was not cocky, but I was confident I could manage. But studying a foreign language in a sterile classroom in America and being immersed in it in a foreign country are two entirely different experiences. I learned this right away. Upon landing at Ezeiza Airport in Buenos Aires I was starving, so I approached a food counter and tried to buy something to eat. I found out that I didn't have the words in Spanish for what I wanted so what I ended up eating was something I pointed to. To make matters worse, I wasn't sure what it cost. Not only did I not have a working Spanish *vocabulary*, but also I had zero knowledge of Argentine currency!

Everybody in Argentina spoke so fast—700 words a minute with gusts up to 975, or so I thought. It would be months before I understood enough even to realize that the Porteños of Buenos Aires have an accent that is peculiar to the capital and not used anywhere else in the country. I found out in Córdoba, my next destination, that its citizens also had their own distinct lilt that is charming if you are familiar with it and downright unintelligible and annoying if you weren't.

Shortly after arriving in Argentina, I was on a bus traveling across the country from Córdoba to Mendoza when it dawned on me that I was hopelessly unprepared to speak to anybody in this vast and beautiful country of 24 million people. I listened to those around me and understood absolutely nothing. Argentines not only spoke rapidly, but also used words I never knew existed. What they said was just noise—at least to me. The only good thing to come from the twenty-hour bus ride was a simple but revelatory truth—after all my Spanish studying I had only the vocabulary of an Argentine pre-schooler. So guess whom I talked to for the first several months in the land of the *gauchos*? Children!

Talking to these children was not as bad as it sounds. They were actually quite patient with me and helped all they could. But I also learned to help myself. I decided as soon as I got off the bus in Mendoza that I was going to write down every word I heard that I didn't know, look it up in my pocket dictionary, and then write the word and its definition on a three-by-five-inch card. I carried this card with me all day and I would frequently pull it out and quiz myself. If we took a break during the day, I was mentally going over the list of that day's new words in my head. I listened to conversations and made an effort to use new words. At night, before going to sleep, I went through the entire list to make sure I had mastered all the vocabulary words.

Interestingly, I was not afraid to make a mistake or be corrected by a child or anyone else who knew what I didn't. This was new for me. My goal had become to learn—not to impress or avoid making a fool of myself. This certainly had not been my educational paradigm thus far! The significance of this tectonic shift in my thinking was not clear to me at the time, but it did become clear later.

Soon I found myself able to speak and understand conversational Spanish. The time actually arrived when I was able to go several days without having to write down a single word. My appetite had been whetted; I longed to learn more. So I started reading the New Testament in Spanish in the early morning. Same drill—find words I didn't know, look up their meaning, write them on my card and try to use them during the day. I studied these new words at every opportunity and continued to test myself at the end of each day.⁹ After I finished the New Testament, I started reading the daily newspapers, and then it was on to high school textbooks on history and language all in Spanish. My vocabulary expanded expo-