

We need universal healthcare, tuition-free college, taxpayer-funded childcare and pre-k education, fare-free public transportation, automatic voter registration, nationwide vote-by-mail, and immediate action on climate. We must reduce spending on the military and police, and demand that the ultra-wealthy and corporations pay their fair share.

***This Is All Just Too Hard:
Relinquishing Our Need for Validation***

By Johnny Townsend

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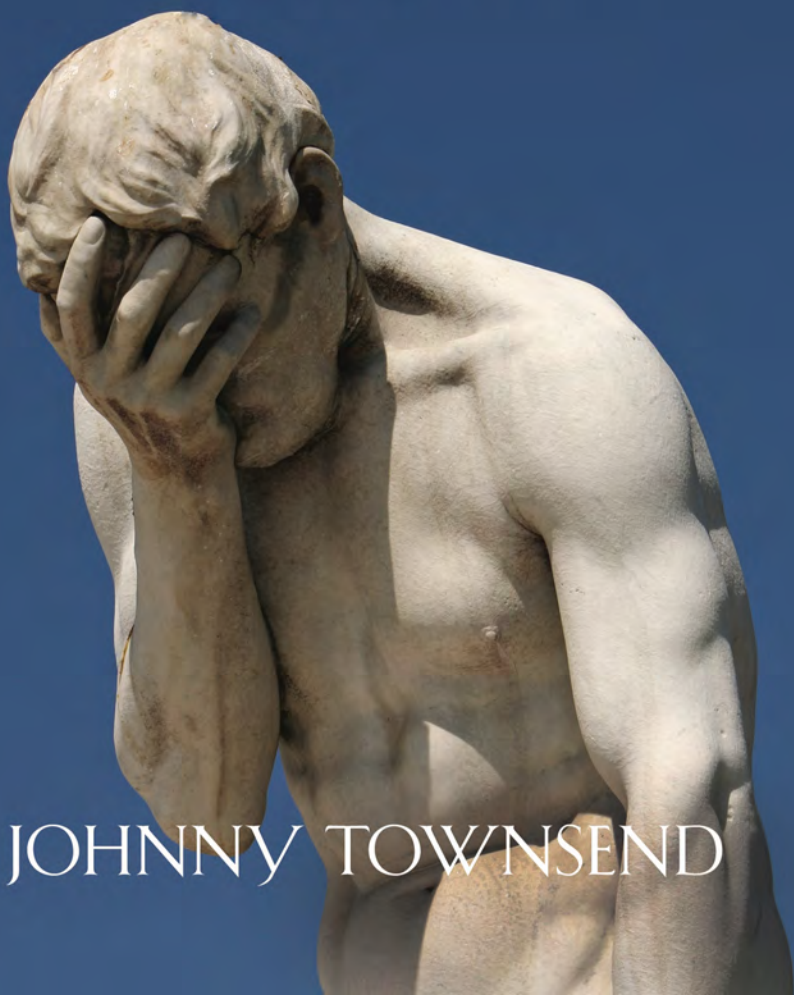
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THIS IS ALL JUST TOO HARD



Relinquishing Our Need
for Validation



JOHNNY TOWNSEND

Praise for Johnny Townsend

In *Zombies for Jesus*, “Townsend isn’t writing satire, but deeply emotional and revealing portraits of people who are, with a few exceptions, quite lovable.”

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

Townsend’s stories are “a gay *Portnoy’s Complaint* of Mormonism. Salacious, sweet, sad, insightful, insulting, religiously ethnic, quirky-faithful, and funny.”

D. Michael Quinn, author of *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*

Johnny Townsend is “an important voice in the Mormon community.”

Stephen Carter, editor of *Sunstone* magazine

The Circumcision of God “asks questions that are not often asked out loud in Mormonism, and certainly not answered.”

Jeff Laver, author of *Elder Petersen’s Mission Memories*

Johnny Townsend

“Told from a believably conversational first-person perspective, [*The Abominable Gayman*’s] novelistic focus on Anderson’s journey to thoughtful self-acceptance allows for greater character development than often seen in short stories, which makes this well-paced work rich and satisfying, and one of Townsend’s strongest. An extremely important contribution to the field of Mormon fiction.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2011.

Kirkus Reviews

“The thirteen stories in *Mormon Underwear* capture this struggle [between Mormonism and homosexuality] with humor, sadness, insight, and sometimes shocking details....*Mormon Underwear* provides compelling stories, literally from the inside-out.”

Niki D’Andrea, *Phoenix New Times*

In *Sex among the Saints*, “Townsend writes with a deadpan wit and a supple, realistic prose that’s full of psychological empathy....he takes his protagonists’ moral struggles seriously and invests them with real emotional resonance.”

Kirkus Reviews

“The Buzzard Tree,” from *The Circumcision of God*, was a finalist for the 2007 Whitney Award for Best Short LDS Fiction.

This Is All Just Too Hard

“Townsend’s lively writing style and engaging characters [in *Zombies for Jesus*] make for stories which force us to wake up, smell the (prohibited) coffee, and review our attitudes with regard to reading dogma so doggedly. These are tales which revel in the individual tics and quirks which make us human, Mormon or not, gay or not...”

A.J. Kirby, The Short Review

“The Rift,” from *The Abominable Gayman*, is a “fascinating tale of an untenable situation...a *tour de force*.”

David Lenson, editor, *The Massachusetts Review*

“Pronouncing the Apostrophe,” from *The Golem of Rabbi Loew*, is “quiet and revealing, an intriguing tale...”

Sima Rabinowitz, Literary Magazine Review, NewPages.com

The Circumcision of God is “a collection of short stories that consider the imperfect, silenced majority of Mormons, who may in fact be [the Church’s] best hope...[The book leaves] readers regretting the church’s willingness to marginalize those who best exemplify its ideals: those who love fiercely despite all obstacles, who brave challenges at great personal risk and who always choose the hard, higher road.”

Kirkus Reviews

Johnny Townsend

“Johnny Townsend’s...keen observations on the human condition come in many shapes and sizes...reflecting on both his Jewish and Mormon backgrounds as well as life in the vast and varied American gay community...His perspective is sometimes startling, sometimes hilarious, sometimes poignant, but always compassionate.”

Gerald S. Argetsinger, Artistic Director
of the Hill Cumorah Pageant (1990-96)

In *Mormon Fairy Tales*, Johnny Townsend displays “both a wicked sense of irony and a deep well of compassion.”

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

“*Selling the City of Enoch* exists at that awkward intersection where the LDS ideal meets the real world, and Townsend navigates his terrain with humor, insight, and pathos.”

Donna Banta, author of *False Prophet*

The Golem of Rabbi Loew will prompt “gasps of outrage from conservative readers...a strong collection.”

Kirkus Reviews

“That’s one of the reasons why I found Johnny Townsend’s new book *Mormon Fairy Tales* SO MUCH FUN!! Without fretting about what the theology is supposed to be if it were

pinned down, Townsend takes you on a voyage to explore the rich-but-undertapped imagination of Mormonism. I loved his portrait of spirit prison! He really nailed it—not in an official doctrine sort of way, but in a sort of ‘if you know Mormonism, you know this is what it must be like’ way—and what a prison it is!”

C. L. Hanson, *Main Street Plaza*

Zombies for Jesus is “eerie, erotic, and magical.”

Publishers Weekly

“While [Townsend’s] many touching vignettes draw deeply from Mormon mythology, history, spirituality and culture, [*Mormon Fairy Tales*] is neither a gaudy act of proselytism nor angry protest literature from an ex-believer. Like all good fiction, his stories are simply about the joys, the hopes and the sorrows of people.”

Kirkus Reviews

“In *Let the Faggots Burn* author Johnny Townsend restores this tragic event [the UpStairs Lounge fire] to its proper place in LGBT history and reminds us that the victims of the blaze were not just ‘statistics,’ but real people with real lives, families, and friends.”

Jesse Monteagudo, The Bilerico Project

Johnny Townsend

Let the Faggots Burn: The Upstairs Lounge Fire is “a gripping account of all the horrors that transpired that night, as well as a respectful remembrance of the victims.”

Terry Firma, Patheos

In *Let the Faggots Burn*, “Townsend’s heart-rending descriptions of the victims...seem to [make them] come alive once more.”

Kit Van Cleave, *OutSmart Magazine*

Marginal Mormons is “an irreverent, honest look at life outside the mainstream Mormon Church....Throughout his musings on sin and forgiveness, Townsend beautifully demonstrates his characters’ internal, perhaps irreconcilable struggles....Rather than anger and disdain, he offers an honest portrayal of people searching for meaning and community in their lives, regardless of their life choices or secrets.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2012.

Kirkus Reviews

“The Sneakover Prince” from *God’s Gargoyles* is “one of the most sweet and romantic stor[ies] I have ever read.”

Elisa Rolle, Reviews and Ramblings, founder
of The Rainbow Awards

“*Let the Faggots Burn* is a one-of-a-kind piece of history. Without Townsend’s diligence and devotion, many details would’ve been lost forever. With his tremendous foresight and tenacious research, Townsend put a face on this tragedy at a time when few people would talk about it....Through Townsend’s vivid writing, you will sense what it must’ve been like in those final moments as the fire ripped through the UpStairs Lounge. *Let the Faggots Burn* is a chilling and insightful glimpse into a largely forgotten and ignored chapter of LGBT history.”

Robert Camina, writer and producer of the documentary *Raid of the Rainbow Lounge*

“Johnny Townsend’s ‘Partying with St. Roch’ [in the anthology *Latter-Gay Saints*] tells a beautiful, haunting tale.”

Kent Brintnall, *Out in Print: Queer Book Reviews*

Gayrabian Nights is “an allegorical tour de force...a hard-core emotional punch.”

Gay. Guy. Reading and Friends

The stories in *The Mormon Victorian Society* “register the new openness and confidence of gay life in the age of same-sex marriage....What hasn’t changed is Townsend’s wry, conversational prose, his subtle evocations of character and social dynamics, and his deadpan humor. His warm empathy still glows in this intimate yet clear-eyed engagement with

Johnny Townsend

Mormon theology and folkways. Funny, shrewd and finely wrought dissections of the awkward contradictions—and surprising harmonies—between conscience and desire.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2013.

Kirkus Reviews

“This collection of short stories [*The Mormon Victorian Society*] featuring gay Mormon characters slammed [me] in the face from the first page, wrestled my heart and mind to the floor, and left me panting and wanting more by the end. Johnny Townsend has created so many memorable characters in such few pages. I went weeks thinking about this book. It truly touched me.”

Tom Webb, judge for The Rainbow Awards (A Bear on Books)

“The struggles and solutions of the individuals [in *Latter-Gay Saints*] will resonate across faith traditions and help readers better understand the cost of excluding gay members from full religious participation.”

Publishers Weekly

Dragons of the Book of Mormon is an “entertaining collection....Townsend’s prose is sharp, clear, and easy to read, and his characters are well rendered...”

Publishers Weekly

This Is All Just Too Hard

“The pre-eminent documenter of alternative Mormon lifestyles...Townsend has a deep understanding of his characters, and his limpid prose, dry humor and well-grounded (occasionally magical) realism make their spiritual conundrums both compelling and entertaining. [*Dragons of the Book of Mormon* is] [a]nother of Townsend’s critical but affectionate and absorbing tours of Mormon discontent.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2014.

Kirkus Reviews

“Mormon Movie Marathon,” from *Selling the City of Enoch*, “is funny, constructively critical, but also sad because the desire...for belonging is so palpable.”

Levi S. Peterson, author of *The Backslider*
and *The Canyons of Grace*

In *Gayrabian Nights*, “Townsend’s prose is always limpid and evocative, and...he finds real drama and emotional depth in the most ordinary of lives.”

Kirkus Reviews

Selling the City of Enoch is “sharply intelligent...pleasingly complex...The stories are full of...doubters, but there’s no vindictiveness in these pages; the characters continuously poke holes in Mormonism’s more extravagant absurdities, but they take very little pleasure in doing so....Many of Townsend’s stories...have a provocative edge to them, but this [book]

Johnny Townsend

displays a great deal of insight as well...a playful, biting and surprisingly warm collection.”

Kirkus Reviews

“Among the most captivating of the prose [in *Off the Rocks*, in a piece reprinted from the collection *A Day at the Temple*] was a story by Johnny Townsend illustrating two Mormon missionaries who break the rules of their teachings to spend more time with one another.”

Lauren Childers, *Windy City Times*

Gayrabian Nights is a “complex revelation of how seriously soul damaging the denial of the true self can be.”

Ryan Rhodes, author of *Free Electricity*

Gayrabian Nights “was easily the most original book I’ve read all year. Funny, touching, topical, and thoroughly enjoyable.”

Rainbow Awards

Lying for the Lord is “one of the most gripping books that I’ve picked up for quite a while. I love the author’s writing style, alternately cynical, humorous, biting, scathing, poignant, and touching.... This is the third book of his that I’ve read, and all

are equally engaging. These are stories that need to be told, and the author does it in just the right way.”

Heidi Alsop, Ex-Mormon Foundation Board Member

“If you like short stories and you’re interested in the lives of Mormons, you should be following the work of Johnny Townsend. Since he writes from an ex-Mormon perspective, believers often dismiss Townsend’s work as biased—or as *a priori* ‘an attack on the church’—but I think that’s a mistake. Johnny Townsend writes his characters with a great deal of compassion and empathy, whether they’re in the church or not...or somewhere in between.”

C. L. Hanson, *Main Street Plaza*

“Townsend is a wonderful writer with a wry but sympathetic eye for humans’ frailties, and the ways in which religious belief both exacerbate and console them. [*Despots of Deseret* contains] more vibrant parables about doubts and blasphemies that hide beneath a veneer of piety.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2015.

Kirkus Reviews

In *Lying for the Lord*, Townsend “gets under the skin of his characters to reveal their complexity and conflicts....shrewd, evocative [and] wryly humorous.”

Kirkus Reviews

Johnny Townsend

In *Missionaries Make the Best Companions*, “the author treats the clash between religious dogma and liberal humanism with vivid realism, sly humor, and subtle feeling as his characters try to figure out their true missions in life. Another of Townsend’s rich dissections of Mormon failures and uncertainties...” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2015.

Kirkus Reviews

In *Invasion of the Spirit Snatchers*, “Townsend, a confident and practiced storyteller, skewers the hypocrisies and eccentricities of his characters with precision and affection. The outlandish framing narrative is the most consistent source of shock and humor, but the stories do much to ground the reader in the world—or former world—of the characters....A funny, charming tale about a group of Mormons facing the end of the world.”

Kirkus Reviews

Townsend’s “works are on a cutting edge of history.”

Walter Jones, Assistant Head of Special
Collections, Marriott Library

The Washing of Brains has “A lovely writing style, and each story was full of unique, engaging characters....immensely entertaining.”

Rainbow Awards

This Is All Just Too Hard

“Townsend’s collection [*The Washing of Brains*] once again displays his limpid, naturalistic prose, skillful narrative chops, and his subtle insights into psychology...Well-crafted dispatches on the clash between religion and self-fulfillment...”

Kirkus Reviews

The Last Days Linger was awarded Second Place for Best Gay Contemporary General Fiction in the 2017 Rainbow Awards

“While the author is generally at his best when working as a satirist, there are some fine, understated touches in these tales [*The Last Days Linger*] that will likely affect readers in subtle ways....readers should come away impressed by the deep empathy he shows for all his characters—even the homophobic ones.”

Kirkus Reviews

In *Dead Mankind Walking*, “Townsend writes in an energetic prose that balances crankiness and humor....A rambunctious volume of short, well-crafted essays...”

Kirkus Reviews

Johnny Townsend

“‘Mormon Communists with Temple Recommends’ [in *This Is All Just Too Hard*] is nominally about politics, but it’s so much bigger than that.”

Evan Derkacz, *Religion Dispatches*

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Train Up a Child in the Bias He Should Know

(published in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on 7 August 2020)

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). That’s as true for the biases we learn as well as for our religious worldview.

Bias is a learned, automatic reaction, either positive or negative. When I was a Mormon missionary in Italy, my companion and I rented *Fiddler on the Roof* to show local members. We wanted to help those still struggling with Catholic backgrounds understand it was possible to break free of “Tradition!” The flip side was working with members whose children were no longer interested in the LDS Church.

I recently joined a Facebook group for missionaries who served under my mission president and was shocked to see that several formerly rebellious colleagues were now stalwart members. One elder had earned money for his mission by selling drugs. Another had worked as a loan shark. Serving was to fulfill family expectations. If they believed, it was only nominally. I was surprised they’d even completed their missions, much less remained in the Church for decades.

I left the Church only a few years after returning home and have also remained close to Mormonism. My former companions will say it’s because “the Spirit” is trying to call me to repentance, that I can never really deny “the truth” I’d

once testified of every day. But the facts are that ex-Jehovah's Witnesses feel the same ties to their past. So do ex-Catholics and ex-Sunnis and ex-Lubavitchers.

I'm 59 and have never drunk an alcoholic beverage. I've never smoked a cigarette, never taken any illicit drugs. And while I no longer believe drinking coffee is a sin, some mornings when I prepare a pot for my husband, I experience a brief, "Oh my heck, what am I doing?"

An atheist now, I still find myself wanting to pray, "in the name of Jesus Christ."

Most Mormons reading this just gasped at the word "atheist." Or frowned. Or felt pity. And your upbringing led you to experience it. Automatically.

I watch *Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist* or *Snowpiercer* or *Space Force* and realize I'm interpreting a certain line or situation through Mormon eyes. I can't hear a news report about Navajos with COVID or missing Native women or contested pipelines on Native land without thinking, at least for a moment, about their "Lamanite" ancestors.

So when my Mormon friends and family tell me they resent being accused of bias against Blacks or others, I realize it's simply because they don't understand how implicit bias works. It's unconscious, part of the culture we grow up in, not something we choose. In the case of Mormons, we were taught (not very long ago) that Black people were cursed because they weren't vigilant in the Pre-Existence. Lamanites were cursed because of their wickedness.

An LDS leader can't snap his fingers, say the Church doesn't teach racism anymore, and expect that to erase years of direct and subliminal messages. American Mormons are part of

the national culture as well, which has also engrained biases into our subconscious. Learning what we've been taught doesn't make us bad people. The bias is inevitable. But refusing to acknowledge it exists, when we have so much evidence it does, *is* morally unacceptable.

If I'm still influenced decades later by my short time in the Church, do we expect that just because we mean well, we're somehow immune to learning, to influence, to culture we've experienced our entire lives?

I only lived in Italy two years, and yet forty years after I first stepped off the plane in Rome, I can't help but turn up my nose at inauthentic Italian food. I listen to the news about growing fascism in Italy differently than those who didn't visit the ruins of Mussolini's house personally. One of the local missionaries was anti-Reagan, a believer in socialist principles, a woman who remained committed to the Church the rest of her life.

Did you just experience another knee-jerk reaction?

It's not a sin to be biased. It's inescapable. The pressing choice before us today is what to *do* about injustice caused by racial bias.

My Mormon background still tells me that we must make amends for the harm we've caused and from here on out "Do what is right and let the consequence follow."

Suppression of Information is a Human Rights Abuse

(published in *LA Progressive* on 5 July 2020)

“You are *not* having sex on that stage!”

“Uh, I didn’t know that was an option.”

One of the many funny scenes from *Miss Congeniality*, a comedy about a beauty pageant—oh, excuse me—scholarship program. Despite its humor, or perhaps because of it, the dialogue makes an important statement on the human condition—lack of information, especially *withholding* or denying that information, is an act of oppression.

You’d think the Kafkaesque disbelief in the value of wearing face masks during a respiratory pandemic would be impossible to impose on huge swaths of the population. But science-deniers deny the science on masks and vaccines and climate because of the information they’ve been given...and the information withheld from them.

In late 1982, my mother began experiencing a heavier than usual period. In January of the following year, she was informed that to stop the bleeding, she’d need a hysterectomy. After a few days recuperating at home, her fever spiked, and she was readmitted to the hospital. The first nurse to visit after

she settled in looked at her chart and said cheerily, “Oh, you’re the leukemia patient.”

My mother turned to my father. “I have leukemia?”

She’d suspected it already. At home, we had a book that provided a list of possible diagnoses for various symptoms. Mom had looked up her bleeding and bruising and whispered to me, “I think I have leukemia.”

Even at the age of twenty-one, I understood how hard it was for a lay person to accurately diagnose disease with only two paragraphs of study. But when I went to see my mom in the hospital that January afternoon, she recounted what the nurse had told her, adding, “I finally got the doctor to tell me what kind of leukemia I have, but now he won’t give me a prognosis. I need you to go to the library and tell me what you find.”

I did and returned the following day with the news. “Well?”

I realized why the doctor hadn’t wanted to tell her. “Most people with this form of the disease only live three months.”

My mother deflated like a balloon. I didn’t have the heart to let her know only a fraction of patients went into remission, and even those who did usually experienced a relapse within a year and never went into remission again.

“They started the chemotherapy without asking me,” she said, motioning to the IV in her arm. “If I’d known all this, I would have stayed at home and blown my brains out.” She looked angrily toward the door. “But now I’m trapped and can’t get out.”

When I asked my father why he and the doctor had kept this information from her, he told me they decided she wasn’t

strong enough emotionally to handle the news, so they had to decide what was best for her. But it was her life, I thought, her misery, her death. She had a right to the most basic information about her own body.

Over the next few weeks, I watched my mother suffer horrifically, covered with bruises from all the needles, lying on a bedpan non-stop, confused, even delirious. Two nurses struggled for half an hour one day digging into her arm to insert a rubber tube to make it easier to access her collapsing veins. For *thirty minutes*, my mother cried as the staff tortured her for her own good.

But they finally gave up, unable to get the tube in.

All that suffering for nothing.

When the nurses returned later to inflict more useless pain, Mom looked about the room in confusion, not recognizing me or my grandmother. She threw her arms up to the ceiling and cried out, “I want my mama!”

My grandmother started sobbing.

A few days and a few seizures later, a nurse came in to check on my mom, who was thankfully sleeping. The nurse examined the IV and adjusted it to speed up the flow. But the medicine burned, waking my mother. She reached for the IV, realized she wasn’t allowed to touch it, and cried. Her kidneys were now failing. The stress and medication were giving her diabetes.

My father and my mother’s doctor, with their privileged information, had decided what was best, three weeks of excruciating misery before Mom’s inevitable death. With patriarchy like that, who needs misogyny?

I soon realized this wasn't an isolated case. People are denied vital information every day of their lives. It's not only unethical. It's a violation of human rights.

As a Mormon, I heard my leaders say that homosexuality was an evil choice and that the only way for a gay man to reach heaven was to marry a woman. Coming out under such circumstances was devastating. Many LGBTQ folks in similar situations ended up committing suicide, submitting to electroshock torture, or entering into doomed marriages that damaged even more lives.

After I came out, I studied homosexuality and the history of religious attitudes, finally understanding what my leaders clearly didn't. I talked to them, wrote letters, gave them reading lists. I'd always been taught—and believed—these were men of good will. But I discovered that their oppression wasn't imposed out of ignorance. They didn't preach hurtful doctrine because they didn't know any better. They *knew* the truth and taught misinformation *on purpose*.

The possibility had never occurred to me.

Suppressing accurate information is a crime against humanity, whether it's legal or not.

Mormon leaders also kept the documented history of Joseph Smith's polygamy from its members until just a few years ago. Even now, they insist that most of the polygamous marriages were non-sexual. I was taught at church that Mormons were kicked out of Missouri in the 1830s because Missouri was a slaveholding state and Mormons were against slavery. Church leaders kept hidden inconvenient details such as Brigham Young's pro-slavery stance, that he even pushed to enslave Native Americans as well. An African American slave was even paid to the Church as part of a member's tithe.

Religious people are free to believe what they want. They're free to end personal relationships with those they deem unacceptable. But they're making those choices based on inaccurate information. And the decisions they make don't just "hurt someone's feelings." In Utah, they shape the laws and policies that affect everyone in the state. Their senators and representatives in DC help shape the laws and policies that affect everyone in the nation.

We all know some things. We also know there are things we don't know. The biggest problem, however, is in *not* knowing there are things we don't know because we've never heard of them.

Who knew to expect a sonic boom before we were able to fly fast enough to create one?

Does it matter that Bertolucci's lavish production of *The Last Emperor* leaves out the detail that the last emperor of China was gay? Does it matter that not a single actor in the original *Star Wars* movie was black, not even among the extras? Does it matter when films on historic subjects erase the participation of blacks, Asians, or other non-whites from the story? Both distortion and omission of information cause widespread damage by shaping our cultural attitudes which then affect policy and law.

I was in my thirties before I learned that Christopher Columbus cut off the hands of native slaves and created a culture of such cruelty that before long, *half a million* Arawaks were dead. I was taught in school that Columbus was a hero, taught in church that Columbus followed God's direction to "discover" America.

I was never taught relevant information about the African slave trade in the States or the treatment of Native Americans.

The denial of information about these human rights abuses is a separate human rights abuse itself, not only against African Americans and Native Americans but against everyone else as well, shaping our worldview and mindset so that many of us perpetuate systemic racism without even being aware of it. U.S. mistreatment of the Japanese and other Asians is glossed over if taught at all. U.S. involvement in the assassination of leaders or in support of military coups—in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1961, in Chile in 1973, in Iran in 1953, and elsewhere—impact the lives of millions, affect international relations, affect virtually every person on the planet. When we are kept ignorant of even the most basic knowledge of these interventions, we are unable to comprehend what is happening around the world today. Our ignorance has non-trivial consequences both here and abroad.

Both the misinformation and misdirection we receive every day affects what we eat, how we shop, the way we bury our dead. We grow up believing the way we fund and operate our police departments is how it's always been done, the way it *has* to be, while neither is true. Lack of information keeps us blind to other possibilities. *That's one of its main functions.*

Tens of millions of Americans suffer from little or no health insurance. Our political leaders and our corporate media make deliberate choices to keep us ignorant of the various universal healthcare programs in every other developed country in the world. That lack of information not only affects how Republicans vote, it affects how Democrats vote, too. We are all told that single-payer or other universal healthcare programs are unrealistic and impractical. Every person in this country suffers, since even those of us with good healthcare are heavily impacted by those without it.

The same goes for tuition-free college and vocational training. People are kept ignorant even of the information they *could* learn. Poverty, crime, cultural literacy, and everything else in our society is shaped by this suppression. *Millions* of people suffer entire lifetimes as a result. The collective lack of information affects the way people vote, the way some abstain because voting seems futile. What kind of impact do thirty or forty million adults without degrees or vocational training have on the rest of the country, on our place in a global economy?

We call out female genital mutilation as a human rights abuse—and it’s an appalling one—but we need to understand that a denial of post-secondary education is an abuse that also carries devastating consequences.

We are told that only having two major political parties is the norm, that anything else is for fringe radicals. That’s not the way many functioning democracies around the world operate. It’s impossible to keep Americans completely ignorant of what goes on in other countries, of course, but we can be taught that having other parties could never be viable here. We can limit the scope (and amount) of our international news coverage. Keeping American voters ignorant of other possibilities denies us many of our basic human rights.

Why work for guaranteed childcare or a universal basic income if you’ve only heard a vague mention of them once or twice in your life? Why work to include dental and vision care with healthcare if you’ve always been taught separating them was simply the way things were done? When I lived in Italy, I was shocked to discover that “high school” was a five-year program, that one could attend an academic high school or a technical high school or a vocational high school. Each type even had sub-categories, and high school lasted five years, students typically graduating at 19. Who knew that we could

adapt secondary education to meet the needs of the students, that accepting the one-size-fits-all status quo was a choice? It doesn't *feel* like a choice if we aren't aware there are options. But it is.

It's just that the choice is made by those controlling the information.

Not *everything* our political and religious leaders do is wrong, not *everything* reported by the media or taught in class is a lie crafted to deceive us. It's that we aren't given the information we need to know the difference and to act accordingly.

That's by design. And this suppression of information, the deliberate spread of misinformation, and outright lying leave us without the time, energy, or funds to take care of ourselves, much less help anyone else. That, of course, allows those at the top to keep power and resources for themselves. It's one of the main motives for opposition to Net Neutrality.

When I left for the Missionary Training Center as a happy, dedicated nineteen-year-old, I soon discovered that I'd been lied to. I struggled almost every day for the next two years, virtually all of the suffering related to the lies and accompanying sense of betrayal I felt, not the experience itself. "Why didn't they tell me the truth?" I kept asking. "I would still have come. I would just have been better prepared."

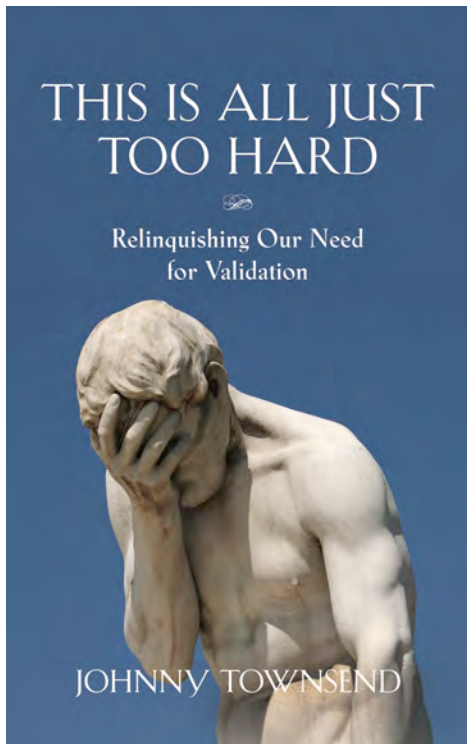
We never know the full truth, even in the sciences. We learn and modify and progress. That's not the same thing as denying the information we *do* know.

It will always be an uphill battle to teach the truth in schools or religious institutions, to elect leaders who have the interests of their voters at heart, to demand that journalists

report the facts people need to know rather than the spin corporate executives want people to hear. We must do what we can to bring transparency and accuracy to each of those arenas, but in the meantime, we must learn to think critically, ask the right questions, verify what we can, and actively seek out the information we need.

In *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, Leo Tolstoy wrote, “The most difficult subjects can be explained to the most slow-witted man if he has not formed any idea of them already; but the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of a doubt, what is laid before him.”

The one truth that is glaringly obvious? Knowledge is power and its possession creates an automatic conflict of interest. To share knowledge is to share power. And power is rarely granted freely. We must demand and take that knowledge, whether it’s granted freely or not. Or we will find ourselves trapped, not in a hospital bed, but in an economic and intellectual prison, with no way out, suffering every day until we die.



We need universal healthcare, tuition-free college, taxpayer-funded childcare and pre-k education, fare-free public transportation, automatic voter registration, nationwide vote-by-mail, and immediate action on climate. We must reduce spending on the military and police, and demand that the ultra-wealthy and corporations pay their fair share.

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