



Mormon mission president and his missionaries defect from the Church.

Interview with a Mission President

by Johnny Townsend

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INTERVIEW
WITH A
MISSION
PRESIDENT

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*

“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.

“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’s short stories cannot be pigeon-holed. His 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. He dares to think and write about people and incidents that frighten away more timid artists. 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!

Johnny Townsend has written at least ten books of Mormon stories. So far, I’ve read only two (*Mormon Fairy Tales* and *The Circumcision of God*), but I’m planning to read the rest—and you should too, if you’d like a fun and interesting new perspective on Mormons in life and imagination!”

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

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 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

“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] 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

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

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

Rainbow Awards

“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

Interview with a
Mission President

Johnny Townsend

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Dedicated to those who serve
rather than obey

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Secret Combinations

“My brother Jacob was fucked in the chapel by his stake president and then excommunicated by him,” I said to Billy, the guy who’d opened his door to us and then cursed us out for being homophobes. Seattle was known for its liberal views. Our conversation hadn’t lasted sixty seconds before he demanded to know the Church’s position on gay rights.

Billy’s brows furrowed in anger. “And you’re still trying to get people to join your fucking church?” he asked. “You’re a motherfucker, too. And a fatherfucker and brotherfucker.”

“But not a sisterfucker?” I asked. Billy glared back at me.

“Elder Benson,” said Elder Miller, my companion, “we’d better leave.”

“You’re damn right,” said Billy, “and don’t come back.” He started to close the door. I put my foot in the way, and his eyes grew wide. “You gotta be fucking kidding me, dude.”

“I’ve got an idea,” I said. I wished I could tell Jacob about it, but confiding in this guy would have to suffice.

“Bully for you.”

“Hear me out.” I raised a hand. “I’ve been out on my mission a year and a half, and I haven’t baptized anyone.”

“Boo hoo.”

“No, what I mean is I haven’t even *tried* to baptize anyone. I’m here putting in my time because my parents insisted. I don’t actually believe any of this stuff anymore.”

“Elder Benson!”

Billy looked mildly interested now. “So what’s your plan? Go home and tell your parents to fuck off? What’s that to me?”

I reached forward and put my hand on Billy’s arm. He tensed but didn’t brush it away. “I want to baptize you and as many of your friends as possible. Gay or straight.”

“Not a fucking chance in hell.”

“Wait,” I said. “Wait.” I took a deep breath, knowing Elder Miller could report me straight away to the district leader or the mission president himself. “I want to baptize as many people as possible. Get the missionaries excited. And the local members. Heck, if we get enough people in on this, maybe even someone in Salt Lake will notice.” I paused. “And then...”

“Elder Benson,” said Elder Miller with an edge to his voice. Now he had his hand on my arm. This must be what a gay three-way felt like, I thought. I wondered if Jacob had ever tried one of those. He hadn’t written to me even once since I’d left on my mission, but I wrote him faithfully every week. My mother told me he deleted every single email unopened. At least that proved he still kept in contact with her.

“I want to get thirty or forty people to join,” I continued, “and then have them all go up at one time in Fast and Testimony meeting and say they’ve decided they can’t stay members because of the Church’s position on gays. I want them

all to demand excommunication at the same time.” I couldn’t wait to see the bishop’s face, or that of the Relief Society president. Or the faces of the other missionaries who’d be coming to each and every baptism.

“And that’ll change your church’s policy toward LGBT folk?” asked Billy with a slight sneer.

I shrugged. I couldn’t blame him for not being interested. I’d had no interest myself for the past eighteen months, and I had something real at stake. I wished I knew if Jacob was trying anything like this, or if he was past caring.

Or was that “past feeling”?

“If you’re not a member, no one at church cares one iota what you think. You being mad at them as a non-Mormon doesn’t make the slightest difference to them. If you’re baptized, though, they’ll at least hear you for a minute before they cast you out.”

“Whoopee. A whole minute of power. I’m trembling.”

One single, solitary minute, I thought. That was really a pretty accurate estimate. But in one minute, the *Titanic* could hit an iceberg. A plane could hit the Twin Towers. Apollo 11 could touch down on the moon. “The thing is, even if those members never allow themselves to talk about what happened, they’ll *remember*. They’ll see how the policy is holding the Church back. They’ll understand just a tiny bit more the pain they’re causing. They’ll *think*.” I wasn’t at all sure that was true, but for the first time since I’d started my mission, I felt like I actually had a mission.

Billy finally pushed my hand away and crossed his arms. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

I smiled. “It doesn’t matter. No one can make you stay a Mormon. You can quit any time you like. I just want a mass resignation, or a mass excommunication, to make more of an impact.” I snapped my fingers. “Maybe you know a reporter who can cover you guys making the announcement in Fast and Testimony meeting?”

Billy pulled at his goatee. “Actually, I do know someone.”

“Excellent!”

“Elder Benson, what in the world are you doing?”

“Elder Miller,” I said, turning to my companion for a moment. “You’ve been out on your mission for almost ten months. How many baptisms have you had?”

“Two,” he said defensively, his chin jutting out a little.

“Both nine-year-old kids of inactive members, am I right?”

Elder Miller didn’t say anything.

“Billy, how soon can you get a group of your friends together?” I asked. “There are questions they’ll have to be able to answer in the baptismal interview.” I smiled, thinking of marking ten or twenty lessons on our weekly stat sheet. The best part would be getting all the praise for something I knew was a sham.

Was that how the apostles felt every six months during General Conference?

“I can get six or seven people here on Friday night,” he said slowly. He pulled at his goatee again. “But I don’t know...”

“Look,” I said, “get your friends together. We’ll come over Friday night. You’ll outnumber us. At the very least, you can make us strip down to our Mormon underwear and laugh at us. It’ll still be a fun evening for you guys.”

“I’ve heard about your underwear,” Billy admitted, his eyes dropping momentarily to my crotch.

“7:00?” I asked.

My companion looked as if he’d just witnessed his mother giving his father a blow job.

Billy stared at me a long moment, tugging on his goatee. He turned to Elder Miller and then looked at me again. “7:00,” he confirmed.

Elder Miller and I walked away from the door and headed up the sidewalk. My companion was practically hyperventilating. “Elder Benson,” he managed, “what’s gotten into you? We’ll be ex’ed ourselves if we do this. And it won’t change anything. I don’t like the gay policies, either, but the Church isn’t led by people like us. It’s led by God, and God does what God wants to do. Our job is to accept it and obey. That’s what will get us to heaven.”

I directed our steps back toward the car. There was no need to keep tracting any longer. We could go home and relax. Our stats were going to be out of this world.

“Elder Benson, I can’t let you do this. I’m going to have to call Elder Morrison.”

“Okay, Elder, okay. But let’s baptize some converts first. It’s an experience you’re never going to get any other way. It’s a memory you can take with you to your grave.”

Elder Miller frowned. We climbed back in the car and headed to our apartment in Skyway. I listened to my CD of La Oreja de Van Gogh while my companion studied his scriptures. Jacob had gotten me hooked on Spanish music during his mission to Argentina. He’d given me CDs of Laura Pausini, too, back before I accepted my own mission call and he’d cut off all contact.

The next day was Thursday, and I treated Elder Miller to a movie. I wanted to see *Snowden* but my companion refused. He wanted to see *Pete’s Dragon* but I refused. We finally settled on *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*, mostly because neither one of us had any clue what it was about.

Friday night, we headed over to Billy’s house for 7:00. I was afraid he might have changed his mind, or gotten bikers or leathermen to “teach us a lesson.” But when we walked into his living room, we saw seven men and women, all perfectly normal looking. I wondered if they were all straight. Perhaps none of his gay friends could stomach even a brief pretense.

“This is Carole,” said Billy. “She’s a reporter for the *Seattle Gay News*, but sometimes she blogs for *Huffington Post*. I thought she should be in on this from the beginning.”

Carole shook my hand. Billy introduced us to the others as well, and just as I was about to start, Carole stood up and faced me. “Billy told me the basic plan,” she said, “but I have some questions first.” I turned to Elder Miller and then nodded at Carole. “I’ve done a little research, and it turns out your church doesn’t release clear membership numbers. Billy and the others

are worried that the baptisms will raise their numbers, but the excommunications won't lower them."

I hadn't thought of that. That could be a problem, though. I'd read a couple of articles already about mass resignations, and there were never any precise numbers. It had always been easy to dismiss those leaving as a handful of nuts.

Carole motioned to the other men and women sitting on the sofa and various chairs behind her. "These folks are also worried that your church will start implementing a waiting period before allowing resignations, something to put off the event, something to keep this kind of protest from becoming a real movement."

"A movement?" I asked.

"If this works, we can try to get some of the various LGBT organizations to organize something nationwide," she said. "Maybe worldwide." She crossed her arms. "But if your church implements a waiting period or something..."

"Maybe we should try to get fifty or seventy-five people before leaving the first time," I said. "That way, even if it only happens once, and you cover it, it will still be news."

My companion leaned over and whispered in my ear. "Elder Benson, I'm afraid." I squeezed his arm. "We're going to be struck by lightning." He looked worriedly toward the window. The sky was clear.

When it was finally my turn to speak, I explained that the more friends and colleagues they could encourage to participate, the more impact the plan would have. But there were certain things they would have to agree to on a temporary basis, or at

least pretend to. “If you’re living together but not married, you have to say you’re married. You can’t have coffee or alcohol on your breath or cigarette smoke on your clothing. If you’re gay, say you’re straight guys rooming together until you find the right girl, and that you’ll start looking for the right girl in the Church so you can go to the temple to be married. Take down those paintings of nude men in your bedroom.”

“Put them in *the closet*?” asked one guy pointedly.

I explained the basic culture they’d have to be part of for at least a month or two, and the doctrine they would have to swear to believe. I assured them that as new converts they wouldn’t have to change their underwear. There were some gasps and a few giggles, but we finished the meeting with a quiz I’d prepared, and everyone got most of the answers right. “There’s a copy of *Mormonism for Dummies* in the library,” I said. “You guys should check it out and browse through the book until you get a feel for things. Going to church won’t be like fooling the Nazis that you’re Aryan, but the fewer mistakes you make, the better.”

After a brief, freeform Q&A, I shook everyone’s hands and stood up. “Billy, when do you guys think you can get another batch of friends ready?”

“Better make it next Saturday,” he said. “A week from tomorrow.”

I nodded. “Now I’m going to call on Peggy to offer the closing prayer.” She made a face, but I said, “You have to get used to this stuff.” She took a deep breath, everyone bowed their heads and folded their arms as I’d instructed, and she gave it her best shot. No one laughed.

Within two months, we'd baptized thirty-two people, but when I met with Billy again after services one Sunday to ask when he could get another group ready for indoctrination, he shook his head. "Thirty-two isn't enough," I insisted. "We still need more. Surely, you know a few other people."

"It isn't that," he said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"Yes?"

"We all talk on Facebook all the time," Billy said, "and..."

"And?"

He shrugged. "Well, we've decided we believe it. All of it. Except for the part about gays, of course. But we think we can change that from within. We don't want to quit."

My mouth fell open, and Elder Miller raised a fist in victory. "Yes!" he said.

I realized Jacob was never going to talk to me again for the rest of my life, even after I came home from my mission. I'd stop talking to myself if I could manage it. I offered my hand to Billy sadly, and we shook. Then I turned to my companion. "Well, we'd better get back to our tracting zone," I said.

"But this referral system is working so much better!" he protested.

I shook my head. "It's time to start knocking on doors again."

Elder Miller sighed. "Okay, Elder. Okay. But I'm saying a prayer for you." We went home, dusted off our old tracting

Interview with a Mission President

book, and headed back out the door to waste as much time as we could in the time we had left.

Food for Lack of Thought

I took the metal scoop and filled it with a cup's worth of dried popcorn kernels. My companion, Sister Ross, was holding a plastic bag open, and I poured the kernels into it. Sister Ross then tied the bag like a balloon while I scooped another cup of dried kernels.

"Isn't this fun, Sister Clayton?" My companion grinned at me like a little child playing dress up in her mother's clothes.

"Sure."

I poured another scoop of kernels into the next bag, and Sister Ross nudged me. "Come on," she said with a smile. "What does this make you think of?" She waited a second while I looked at her blankly. "Come on. Come on, you know."

I scooped up another cup of dried kernels, and my companion began singing. "I looked out the window and what did I see?" She paused, grinning like a hyena. "Come on, Sister Clayton, come on? What did you see?"

"Popcorn," I said. I poured my scoop into Sister Ross's waiting bag.

"That's right!" she gushed. "Isn't this fun?" She tied the plastic bag.

We were working in Georgetown at Lifelong AIDS Alliance, preparing food to be delivered to various patients. The organization had started out focusing on people with AIDS, but those folks were living so long these days that the group had expanded their focus to any other patients who also suffered from debilitating diseases. Sister Ross and I volunteered in the warehouse four hours a week for our community service. Some weeks, if I was really tired of missionary work, we volunteered a second day for another four hours, in the kitchen cooking for the Chicken Soup Brigade. We usually did that on Sunday, the absolute last day of the week I wanted to be proselytizing. I'd just announced to my companion we'd be coming back this Sunday as well. But Sister Ross stomped her foot and shook her bag of popcorn kernels at me. "It's wrong to work on the Sabbath," she said.

"We're not working," I told her again. "We're volunteering."

"Still," she said. "My mother always cooked the simplest meal of the week on Sunday, to avoid working hard. If we can't do it for ourselves, we shouldn't do it for others, either."

"My mother always made the biggest meal of the week on Sunday," I countered. "It was like a holiday every week." I looked at her. "You do know that's where the word comes from. Holy Day. You're supposed to have big meals on holidays."

"Like Yom Kippur?" asked my companion. Her lip curled in a slight sneer. How she could go from chipper to bitter in thirty seconds always amazed me. My mood was always pretty constant.

I shrugged. "We sometimes bought fried chicken on the way home from church."

“And made other poor girls work on the Sabbath,” Sister Ross concluded.

I shrugged again. “They weren’t Mormon,” I said. “They didn’t have the same commandments we did.”

“*Everyone* is supposed to obey *all* the commandments *all* the time.”

“Okay, okay,” I conceded. “We can either work here four hours on Sunday or six hours on Monday. Which do you prefer?” I was honestly perfectly okay with either option. I could spend half a day here every day and be fine with it.

“I choose Monday,” she said.

“Monday it is. Thanks for keeping me on the strait and narrow.”

Sister Ross frowned, apparently unsure if she’d won the argument or not. It was a technique I used with her often. We continued filling bags with popcorn kernels until we emptied the bin in front of us. Our next task was to set up paper grocery bags along both sides of an aisle, two bags deep, and put one plastic bag of popcorn kernels in each one. Then we were to put one can of yams in each bag. And then make yet another round putting one box of tea in each bag. The items were different each time we volunteered, just whatever Lifelong had on hand at the time.

“I don’t feel comfortable giving people tea,” said Sister Ross.

“Let’s sing ‘Popcorn Popping on the Apricot Tree’ again,” I suggested. My companion’s eyes lit up, and she started belting out the Primary children’s song. I knew she was hoping we

could use it as a missionary tool, that one of the other workers would ask us about it, leading to an appointment, a lesson, and then a baptism.

Like that ever happened.

After three rounds of stooping down over the paper bags, my back started to hurt. We'd been asked to add several more items to the bags, but I thought we should try a different task first to give us a break. "Ready for more scooping?" I asked. "We're supposed to divide this bin of rice into plastic bags, like we did for the popcorn."

"Sure!" said Sister Ross. "Scooping is fun!" She grabbed a plastic bag and held it out in front of me, waiting. Soon we were in the middle of another monotonous routine. That was perhaps what I liked best about volunteering here—I could forget about everything and empty my mind.

Only I could never really empty my mind. That was part of the problem. I thought about Sister Turnley who we were trying to reactivate. She was a lesbian, between girlfriends, and debating whether or not celibacy was worse than heartbreak. I held her while she cried each time we left her apartment. Then there was Sister Piper, an elderly widow who had difficulty coming to church, so she was officially deemed "inactive," even though her testimony was as strong as anyone's. But the elders couldn't come over to give her the sacrament because she was a single woman. And we couldn't give her the sacrament because we didn't hold the priesthood. And no one ever seemed able to arrange for both men and women to visit her at the same time, so that it would be safe for everyone.

"Are you happy?" I asked, pouring a scoop of dry rice into a plastic bag.

“Of course,” Sister Ross replied. “Aren’t you?”

I dug my metal scoop deep into the rice bin. “My brother has left the Church.”

“Oh, no! How terrible!” She reached over and touched my elbow.

My brother had just finished his film degree at Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles and found his first menial job in the profession. If he worked his way up very far, it would be difficult for him not to be influenced by all those liberals out in Hollywood. Unless, of course, he became a Scientologist instead. I knew I should feel bad for him, but Cary having a new cultural norm wasn’t much different from me starting to root for the Seahawks now that I was living in Seattle.

Or for me to start identifying with all the atheists here in the Pacific Northwest. If there were atheists in St. George, they were pretty closeted.

“How would you feel if one of your kids didn’t make it to the Celestial Kingdom with you?” I asked.

“It would be just awful.” She paused. “Just awful.” Sister Ross stared at her full bag of rice, unmoving, until I nudged her to tie it off.

“Could you be happy in the Celestial Kingdom without one of your kids?” I went on. “Be a happy goddess for eternity, knowing one of your children didn’t make it?”

“Well, we still get to visit them down in the lower kingdoms, don’t we?”

“Like that time we visited Sister Marks in jail after she beat her husband?” The Beehive instructor had discovered her husband was cheating on her and hit him over the head with a ceramic vase.

“I suppose.”

I scooped up another cup of rice. And then another. And yet another. Before too much longer, we’d emptied the bin. I wasn’t ready to go back to the paper bags on the floor yet. My back was still a little sore from earlier. So I pointed to the bin of dried kidney beans next to the empty rice bin and waved my scoop at Sister Ross. She rubbed her upper arm and nodded.

I thought of Sister Turnley. The last time we’d visited, she’d asked for a blessing. “I know you don’t really hold the priesthood,” she said, “but I need to feel the touch of another woman, and this seemed the safest way to do that.” Sister Ross refused to participate, so I put my hands on Sister Turnley’s head by myself.

What did the afterlife hold in store for someone like that?

Or for someone like Sister Ross, who couldn’t bring herself to comfort a suffering woman?

Or for me, who wasn’t any more effective than my companion?

“My mom says she won’t mind Cary not making it to the Celestial Kingdom,” I said.

“Why not?” asked Sister Ross. “Doesn’t she love him?”

I shrugged. “She says we’re supposed to be happy in heaven, and she won’t be happy if she knows he’s in the

Celestial Kingdom. And for that matter, *he* won't be happy if he can't come visit Mom in the Celestial Kingdom."

"So...?"

"So she thinks Heavenly Father will make them forget each other. It's the only way either of them can be happy."

Sister Ross paused while tying a plastic bag. I gave her a moment and then nudged her.

"So...so...?" My companion struggled with the concept.

I couldn't blame her. I had trouble with it as well. I'd asked my mother point blank, "God gives us Celestial Rufies to make us forget?"

"Yes," she insisted, "just like the one he gave Mary when he impregnated her with Jesus."

I wasn't sure I could accept that. I desperately wanted to be happy at some point, so I was doing everything I could to make it to the Celestial Kingdom. I accepted that there was no happiness in this life, and if I was going to be unhappy anyway, why not do all the miserable things one needed to do to earn the Celestial Kingdom? At least once there I could finally be happy.

I scooped another cup of beans and poured it into Sister Ross's waiting bag.

"How can Heavenly Father be happy?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" My companion tied another bag.

"Heavenly Father has to be aware that one third of his children are in Outer Darkness. No one made him forget. How

can he ever be happy knowing that so many of his children are in hell forever?”

Sister Ross stared at the plastic bag in her hand.

“For that matter, how can he be happy aside from that, knowing that his *good* children who aren’t in hell are suffering through war and famine and terrorism? How can God be happy knowing that bosses are making their employees miserable? That people are being mugged and raped? That they’re suffering from cancer and MS and dementia?” I held up my scoop like a sword. “How can God be happy at all?”

“Because...because it’s all for our own good,” Sister Ross managed.

I stared at the bin full of beans and then closed my eyes for a long moment. I opened them again and dug my scoop down into them, pouring them into another plastic bag. “What if...?” I began. “What if we’re *never* going to be happy?” I felt my lip quivering.

Sister Ross made a little sound like a mouse being stepped on. Then she took a deep breath, cleared her throat, and began singing. “I looked out the window and what did I see?” She continued to sing, one Primary song after another, while we finished emptying the bin of beans. She was silent as we put the beans and rice in all the plastic bags, and she was quick to point out that we’d been at Lifelong for three hours and fifty minutes now, and that was close enough to four hours.

“I’m hungry and I want to go home for lunch.” She stomped her foot, and I nodded in agreement.

Interview with a Mission President

After we ate, Sister Ross took a nap, but I was too antsy to rest. I looked through our kitchen cabinets, which were all but bare, and found a box of Devil's food cake mix. Sister Ross and I had been saving it to celebrate our first baptism. Then we'd amended that to celebrate our first real investigator.

Then we'd forgotten about it.

I took down the cake mix and pulled out our one mixing bowl, and I started preparing a special treat to bring over to Sister Turnley this evening.



Mormon mission president and his missionaries defect from the Church.

Interview with a Mission President

by Johnny Townsend

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