

Mental illness can strike the faithful as easily as anyone else. But often religious doctrine and practice exacerbate rather than alleviate these problems. From schizophrenia to obsessive-compulsive disorder, from persecution complex to sexual dysfunction, Mormons must cope with their mental as well as their spiritual health on a daily basis.

Mormon Madness

by Johnny Townsend

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Johnny Townsend

Mormon Madness



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.

“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 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

Johnny Townsend

“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

Johnny Townsend

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

Johnny Townsend

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

Johnny Townsend

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

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

“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

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Mormon Origami

When I was fourteen, I began my freshman year at the local high school. There, my first day in P.E. class, the coach told us that we weren't little kids anymore. After a heavy workout in the gym, if he thought we needed to shower, he'd send us to the showers, and no one was allowed to opt out. Just to get us used to our new life in the world of mature teenagers, the next day we would all be required to shower after class. I dutifully arrived on campus the next morning with both a towel and a washcloth. The coach had said "shower" and I was going to shower. I even brought my shampoo.

It apparently turned out to be some kind of bluff. I never had to shower even once at school over the next four years. I probably should have, of course, especially those years when P.E. was the second class of the school day. But as a young man somewhere along the autism spectrum, I consistently had trouble navigating social norms. When my mother lay dying in the hospital with breast cancer a week before my graduation, she smiled weakly at me and said, "I know you're going to have a great life, Tim." She may have squeezed my hand. I really don't recall.

But I replied, in all sincerity, "I'll try to think about you once in a while, Mom. If I remember." I'd honestly believed

that would comfort her. I didn't fully understand comfort, obviously, as my dad explained to me out in the hallway later, but I knew intellectually that comforting was what you were supposed to do with people who were dying, and I usually made an honest effort to behave "appropriately."

Mom laughed, though, and said, "You're going to be all right, Tim."

I expect her repeating my name meant something, too, but I've never figured out what might be.

Still, I guess I did turn out all right. I mean, when I heard about the Church's new campaign "Light the World" shortly before I sent off my mission papers, my first thought was that the Church was calling for nuclear war which might hasten the Second Coming. And I was fine with that. So I'm not sure there was really any scenario for which I wouldn't have found some way to cope.

People with autism often obsess about certain things that appeal to them personally. Maybe they know the names of every car Ford ever produced. Perhaps they remember the names and batting averages of the players on their favorite baseball team. My obsession turned out to be memorizing scripture verses. I'll try not to quote many here, as I've been told more than once that people who don't share this particular obsession find my own obsession "BORING!"

Their assessment always sounded capitalized. And I sensed there might be an exclamation mark attached a lot of the time, though I couldn't swear to it. Nuance wasn't my forte.

So because of my apparent spiritual devotion, I ended up a zone leader on my mission to Boston. Rising so high in the mission hierarchy led me to believe I was successful at mimicking normal social behavior, but to be honest, I didn't really know. Mormons had a habit of saying nice things even when they didn't mean them, and I had never been very good at detecting sarcasm or even simple passive-aggressiveness. I had a vague suspicion that being called to a leadership position meant that those above the new leader liked him more, while those below him liked him less.

It wasn't until I was nearing the end of my mission, with just four months left, that I started to finally grasp exactly where I stood in relation to others. Most of the time, I didn't even bother trying to understand the foreign world of emotional interaction. It wasn't that I never felt emotion at all. It was the interactive part that gave me issues. I suspect this account will give the impression that an unnatural number of awkward incidents occurred over a brief period, but really, this was pretty much how my life unfolded every day. I often felt shrouded by a fog, unable to see more than a few feet in any direction, trying to navigate my way forward without bumping into anything. It's just that this time, I bumped, and bumping made all the difference.

"President McKay," I said, sitting in front of his desk in the mission office. I'd requested a special interview with the mission president during a late night call the previous evening. "I think I'm supposed to confess."

"You *think*?" he replied. "Are you unclear if you've sinned or not, Elder Gerard? Surely, you read the rule book every week." He chuckled. "Or is that the sin you're confessing?"

I think it probably goes without saying that I rarely understood humor, either. But perhaps the way autistic people see the world is no more obvious to normal folks than the way normal folks see the world is obvious to those of us with autism.

“I believe masturbation is a sin, President.”

“You *believe*?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Well, that’s just it, President. I’m not all that sure about any of it. I mean, I hear the other missionaries bearing their testimonies all the time, heard members of my home ward doing the same thing every Fast and Testimony meeting while I was growing up, but I’ve never felt anything myself when I’ve prayed and asked Heavenly Father if the Church was true.”

“Have you been masturbating since you were a child?”

“I didn’t discover it until I went to the Missionary Training Center.”

President McKay leaned away from me and frowned. I’d read two books in high school about body language, but it might as well have been instructions in ancient Greek on how to translate Sanskrit into Sumerian.

“Elder Gerard...”

“It occurred to me the other day that maybe not feeling the Holy Ghost all those years was a result of my autism, that maybe I was like Geordi La Forge, who needed a visor even in an advanced society where all other forms of blindness were easily treatable.”

“Uh...”

“But then I figured that being ordained a missionary must be like being prescribed a visor, so there had to be some other reason I couldn’t feel the Holy Ghost now.”

“Elder Gerard...”

“I wondered if masturbation was fouling up my visor. I’m pretty methodical. I like to address one thing at a time. So I wanted to scratch this possibility off the list before examining the next one. You don’t want more than one variable in an experiment.”

Of course, the list of possible sins was pretty long. I wasn’t sure I could ever limit my inquiries to one potential problem at a time.

President McKay rubbed his forehead and sighed. “Elder Gerard,” he said slowly, “you’ve been training yourself to be appeased by instant gratification. A testimony takes time and patience.”

“I’ve been praying for ten years. Don’t we expect our investigators to get an answer in a few days?”

“You will never gain a testimony of the Church if you continue to masturbate.”

“Well, I stopped last night, right before I called. Will I get an answer today?”

The president closed his eyes. “Young man, let me tell you something. You may manage to finish your mission. You may go home and find a pretty girl and take her to the temple. You

may even be faithful to her. But she is still going to leave you because you will never be able to satisfy her sexually.”

“Excuse me?” Had we stopped talking about testimonies? I seemed to have missed the cue. That was the whole reason for the interview, so why was it we weren’t talking about it? I looked at the president’s furrowed forehead and tried to catch up.

“You’ve trained yourself to orgasm too quickly,” President McKay continued. “No woman likes a man who comes too fast. You two may have sex for a few months, maybe a few years, but she will eventually want better sex than you’ll ever be able to provide, and she will divorce you.” He breathed out heavily. “You’ve ruined your chances for a successful marriage. And without that, you’ll never reach the Celestial Kingdom.”

I nodded slowly, considering how to respond. I’ve learned since then that this conversation didn’t completely adhere to societal norms, that there may have been something wrong with the mission president as well, but I didn’t feel particularly offended at the time. Merely uninterested in his tangential discussion. Marriage didn’t concern me at the moment. I wasn’t even sure I ever wanted to be married. The concept reeked of constant emotional interaction, and what good could possibly come of that? Becoming a ministering angel sounded much better, even if I ended up a “smoothie” as some of the other elders called it, a resurrected being without genitalia.

So I hoped it was acceptable to steer the conversation back where it had started. “You’re saying I’ll be able to feel the Holy Ghost more powerfully if I learn to take longer in the shower?” I looked into the mission president’s face, trying to

make sense of his expression. “That’s how I’ll get a testimony?”

President McKay stared at me for a long moment. Then he closed his eyes and nodded. “You can get back to work now, Elder. Say hello to your companion for me.”

He didn’t offer his hand, but I still figured out that he expected me to leave. I was getting much better at deciphering cues. At least on occasion. Just that morning, for instance, when my companion, Elder Romney, poured himself a bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch and then stared at it for two solid minutes before taking a bite, I said, “Something on your mind?”

He looked up at me with a thin smile and said, “Nothing gets past you.” But then he spent the next ten minutes complaining that his girlfriend Cathy back in Idaho was getting married, and I found myself confused all over again.

“And that’s a problem?” I asked. “You can’t be with her for at least another ten months, anyway, so what do you care? I mean, the Church says you can make a relationship with any girl work, as long as you’re both committed to the gospel.” These things couldn’t be that hard for normal people.

Elder Romney pushed his bowl of cereal to the middle of the table and walked off.

Perhaps if I could learn to feel the Holy Ghost, I reflected, it would help me interpret these kinds of situations better.

I ate Elder Romney’s cereal before it could get too soggy. Then we headed out to the mission home.

I said goodbye to President McKay now and joined my companion in the president's living room. I could hear Sister McKay clinking around at something in the kitchen and wondered briefly what Elder Romney and I might eat for dinner. When I stopped next to the sofa, he looked up at me with a frown. People sure frowned a lot. The biggest problem with that was that frowns seemed to mean so many different things. "You good, Elder Gerard?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied. That was the answer you were supposed to give, whatever the truth might actually be.

We returned to our area, tracted for an hour, and then stopped to visit Kyle, a young Black man in his early twenties studying at UMass Boston. The elders who'd served here previously had baptized him, and we were ordered to make sure he didn't fall away too quickly. If we could keep him active until he graduated and became a solid tithepayer, he might become a successful leader in the ward. Someone those above him liked and that those below him might not. Elder Romney knocked on the door, and Kyle frowned a moment later when he opened it.

Another frown, I noted. Did it mean he was falling away already? Had he sinned? Perhaps masturbated?

Did he have gas?

"Hi, Elders," Kyle said with a sigh. "You know, it's okay for you to call before you pop over."

"Oh, we were just in the neighborhood," Elder Romney replied, smiling in his usual manner. For the first time, though, I questioned the sincerity of his smile. He'd expressed being upset just a couple of hours earlier. Was he actually faking

most of the time like I was? Were other people faking, too? It seemed almost impossible even for normal people to figure out all this stuff. What chance did I have? “Are you free right now?”

Kyle glanced behind him back into the apartment and then turned toward us again. “Sure,” he said, “come on in.” He ushered us into a tiny living room, where Elder Romney and I sat on an abbreviated sofa, a love seat, if I remembered the term. What love might have to do with furniture, I didn’t know. Kyle pulled a chair over from a kitchen table resting in a small nook. “What’s up?”

“We know from experience that lots of new converts have questions while they’re adjusting to their new life,” I said. “Have you come across anything the elders who taught you before didn’t explain?” What I really wanted was to ask his advice. How had he managed to feel the Holy Ghost when following Moroni’s challenge? But I sensed such an inquiry might not be appropriate.

Kyle looked at the floor for a moment. “Well,” he said after a bit, “I’ve started doing my Home Teaching. They assigned me to work with one of the men in Elders Quorum. He makes all the appointments, and I just try to go along if I’m not busy.”

“Yes?” I said. I wondered if I’d missed what the problem was.

“Brother Ketchum said it was important to visit our families at the beginning of the month.”

“Okay.”

Kyle smiled. “Apparently, two of our families bake cookies for the Home Teachers the first day of each month. They just sit on a shelf until we show up. Brother Ketchum said that whether we eat fresh cookies or stale ones is up to us.”

Elder Romney giggled.

“Okay,” I said, still not understanding Kyle’s concern. Maybe he preferred cupcakes.

“So is it customary to use bribery to mold behavior in the Church?”

Elder Romney giggled again.

I rubbed my chin and said, “I think it’s probably more common to threaten punishment.”

Now Elder Romney spluttered. He and Kyle continued to talk for the next few minutes, but I tuned out to have my own internal conversation. I usually did what I was told to do simply because I was told to do it, but I vaguely recognized that other people attempted obedience in reaction to some kind of pressure. I often wondered if that pressure came from the Holy Ghost and the reason I didn’t feel such pressure was because I didn’t have Holy Ghost receptors in my brain. Literally. My neurons were physically different from those of normal people.

But what if the pressure and punishment and bribery was all part of some social construct I simply didn’t get that had nothing to do with God?

I remembered watching a series of car commercials on TV before my mission, all advertising the same brand. The

concluding statement each time was, “Love. It’s what makes a Subaru a Subaru.” Both my two sisters and my dad seemed to develop tiny smiles when they heard the words, even if they’d seen the commercial a dozen times before, and they definitely didn’t smile while watching advertisements for other products. Their response must have something to do with love, I thought, but surely the manufacturers at Subaru weren’t suggesting that people who bought Chevrolets and Hondas and Mazdas and Volkswagens and Audis and Toyotas and Fords and Volvos didn’t love their families, that people who felt love only and always purchased Subaru. It seemed statistically unlikely.

Did other people spend the bulk of their lives being buffeted about by these emotional manipulations? All day long every day? When I bought a pair of socks, it was because that brand had performed better than other brands I’d tried in the past.

Maybe autism was a blessing.

Elder Romney tapped me on the shoulder, and I realized he was standing beside me. “Kyle said he has to get back to his books.”

“Oh.” I stood as well. “Thank you for your time,” I said, holding out my hand. “We’ll see you on Sunday.” I stopped suddenly in the middle of our handshake.

“You okay?” Kyle frowned.

I’d been taught to mention a rendezvous at church every time we parted from a member or investigator. But I wondered now if that was some form of manipulation, too. This must be

what it felt like to be color blind, I thought. To not be able to see what other people see.

I resumed my handshake and smiled the way my companion had earlier.

Elder Romney and I returned to our apartment just after 4:00, a bit early, but I'd discovered that zone leaders didn't need to follow the rules in as exacting a manner as regular missionaries. I was too tired today to worry why that was. I picked up a copy of the *Ensign* while my companion went to check the mail. He returned a moment later with a big smile, waving an envelope in the air. "It's from Cathy's sister!" he said. I couldn't detect any perceivable difference from this smile and the one he'd offered earlier to Kyle.

"And that's good?" I asked.

"She's almost as pretty as Cathy," he explained.

I didn't get it.

"It's a physical letter," Elder Romney pointed out. "That means she doesn't want her father to be able to check her emails."

This wasn't getting any clearer.

He opened the envelope quickly and pulled out a letter along with a piece of crumpled paper. "Look," he said. "It's origami." He shoved the creased paper in front of me, and I recognized that it had been shaped to resemble a white, short-sleeved shirt with a colorful tie in front down the middle. "Wow! That's so cool!" he said. "Isn't that cool, Elder Gerard?"

It was just a piece of paper.

“I’m going to take a shower before dinner.”

“Okay, Elder Romney.”

I returned to my *Ensign*. One of the articles seemed to be about rising up to do whatever the Lord asked of us, no matter how unqualified we personally felt. Naturally, the author quoted 1 Nephi 3:7, but I won’t repeat it here. BORING!

Maybe this whole subject was boring. Perhaps that was why Heavenly Father never answered my prayers. He’d fallen asleep.

But if the Lord had asked me to gain a testimony, I reasoned, it must somehow be possible, with or without his help. I concentrated on the words in front of me and made a real effort to understand the advice the writer was offering. Then near the end of the article, he included a quote from Neal A. Maxwell. I guess I can include that. The words of modern-day prophets and apostles are technically scripture, but I hope I can get a pass on this point. “God does not begin by asking us about our ability,” Maxwell said, “but only our availability, and if we then prove our dependability, he will increase our capability.”

Something clicked inside my brain, and I set the magazine down. Neal A. Maxwell had just lied. The author quoting him had lied.

It wasn’t that I didn’t understand the words. They simply weren’t true. I was never not going to be autistic, no matter how many coping mechanisms I came up with. I was never

going to be moved by a Subaru commercial. Or by a favorite hymn. Or by the beauty of the temple.

The temple was just a building.

Members were always talking about how much they loved the Mormon community. It was one of the first things investigators noticed. It was even one of the things some of the ex-Mormons we ran across reminisced about.

I was never going to feel close to other people.

I looked down the hallway, where I could hear the water running behind the bathroom door. Elder Romney was probably feeling the Spirit right this minute. I would never feel it, no matter how long I took in the shower.

I almost decided to pack up and head for the airport right then. But after a moment, I realized the same things would be true no matter where I was or what I did with my life. And if being a missionary helped others even a little, there was nothing wrong with that. Peter Milton couldn't distinguish red and green but created critically acclaimed black and white etchings. Beethoven had been deaf when he produced some of his most beautiful music.

At least I'd heard that it was beautiful. I'd have to take my teacher's word for it.

I looked back down the hall. The shower was still running strong. That letter from Elder Romney's hometown appeared to have affected him profoundly in some way. I expected the experience might help him feel better, and if he felt better, we could possibly be more successful in our work.

Johnny Townsend

I remembered that he really liked Idaho potatoes. I went to the kitchen and started chopping a few into bite-sized pieces. I pulled out the roasting pan and turned on the oven.

And I thought about my mother.

Kugel Exercises for Men

I love my husband, but good grief, he can be exasperating. He doesn't mean it most of the time, of course. It's just that some neurons in his brain always seem to get rerouted in the middle of a sentence. During the last presidential election, Arnie was always complaining about the electrical college, about how the use of superdenigrates wasn't fair, how none of it mattered anyway. Every politician was corrupt, after all. Tracy, he asked me one time, did you hear about that outrageous ornaments deal in the Middle East?

For the first three years of our marriage, I made the foolish mistake of correcting Arnie when he made these kinds of mistakes. But it was like correcting a cat for meowing. Arnie was going to meow, whether I liked it or not. As long as he wasn't giving a talk at church in front of the whole congregation, I tried not to be embarrassed anymore.

And then the shooting happened at Jessica's school. Thank heavens, she wasn't one of the fourteen students and two teachers killed, but it did mean we had to start speaking in public on a regular basis. I prayed Arnie could hold it together for the length of a sound bite. But at our very first rally in support of a ban on assault weapons, the inevitable happened. A reporter stuck a microphone in front of Arnie and asked,

“What is it you want politicians to know?” Simple enough, right?

I held my breath as I waited to hear what would come out of my husband’s mouth. “It’s all fine and good for senators to say kids should be learning CTR,” he said, “but CTR isn’t enough. We need to stop the bleeding before it starts.”

I suppose it was a blessing the reporter never used that footage, that he didn’t know the Church slogan “Choose the Right” or the CTR rings Mormon youth wore.

At another rally a week later, Arnie was approached again. He had a natural, earnest look about him that made him excessively approachable. It was why I’d first asked him out, after all, all those years ago. “What do you hope to accomplish with these protests?” the reporter asked.

“Arming teachers isn’t enough,” he replied. “There’s an elephant of surprise involved. And it’s in those first few seconds when half the deaths occur. We have to get rid of the deadliest weapons themselves so no one can surprise us with them.”

I can’t tell you how awful it is to watch a seasoned reporter laughing at you during such a serious rally. A shattered ego is better than a shattered liver, but it’s no laughing matter, either.

“Arnie,” I said that night after we returned home, “you need to get a priesthood blessing.”

“For what?” he asked.

“To see if the Lord can cure you of all those malapropisms.”

“Oh, Tracy, that again?”

“You saw that that miserable reporter actually used the footage he had of you? He’s making people who want sensible gun regulations look like idiots. And you’re helping him.”

“Aw, honey, it was a slip of the tongue. Nobody takes that seriously.”

“Exactly my point.”

“Dad,” Jessica chimed in, “I’ve already gotten two dozen comments on Facebook about what you said.”

“At least people are hearing me. Maybe it’s a blessing I talk funny.”

“It’s not a blessing, dear.”

Arnie sighed. “You want me to stop coming to the rallies with you guys?”

To my shame, part of me did. I didn’t know what else I could reasonably expect, after all. I’d already determined there was no way to keep him from meowing. “Maybe we can practice,” I said. “If you memorize two or three different statements and just stick to those if you get asked anything, it’ll be okay.”

Arnie shrugged. “I’ll do whatever you want,” he said.

We did exactly that, but at the next three events we attended, no one asked him anything. I saw that same mean-spirited reporter at a different rally and hoped he’d try to embarrass us again, but even he left us alone. Part of me felt miffed, but mostly, I was grateful to hear fourteen-year-old

students who spoke more eloquently than any of us could hope to. We kept the pressure up, though, or at least the students did, and we tried to support them as best we could in their efforts. So both Jessica and I quizzed Arnie relentlessly on his canned responses.

Meanwhile, I kept thinking about those cats. Felines were nowhere near as easy to train as dogs, but spray bottles did work, and cats did adapt quickly to litter boxes. So I stayed on Arnie's case whenever I caught him making a mistake. "Is it ever appropriate to use a split infinity?" he asked one day.

"Split infinitive," I corrected. Though Arnie's version might make a good title for a science fiction novel.

"Do you think it's safe to let Jessica stay at a hospice when she goes to those rallies so far away without us?"

"They're called hostels, dear." Though, considering the reason for these rallies, perhaps Arnie's nomenclature was more accurate.

"Politicians really ought to pay attention to us," he said another time. "It's in their best interest. When people get disinfected, they're liable to do anything."

"That's disaffected," I corrected him. Maybe this really was hopeless.

Then came the news of another shooting. "You heard what happened at the Veterinarians' Home?" Arnie asked me.

"They have a home for veterinarians?" I asked, genuinely confused.

"Veterans," he corrected himself.

If he knew the word, why didn't he just use it?

"There was a shooting," he said, explaining what he'd heard on the radio on his way home from work.

"I want you to get a priesthood blessing," I told him again.

"Aw, Tracy, it's embarrassing. I feel like a grown man asking for a blessing to stop me from bedwadding."

"Bedwetting?" I suggested.

He nodded.

"Bishop Barnes has never been anything but nice to us," I said. "Doesn't call you to teach any classes. He's a good man."

"Okay, okay. I guess it can't hurt to ask."

After services on Sunday, Arnie had the bishop and first counselor give him a blessing in the bishop's office. They let me attend. I'd hoped for a "you will be cured!" type of blessing, but instead it was the typical, "according to your faith." It wasn't that Arnie and I didn't have faith. It was just that those types of blessings so rarely seemed to work. Admitting such a thing felt like we were demonstrating a lack of faith, though, so I thanked the bishop, squeezed Arnie's hand excitedly, and we headed home for lunch.

"I just love Italian paisley," Arnie said when I put the meal on the table.

"Parsley," I said automatically before biting my lip. I should have given the blessing more of a chance to work. Now I'd jinxed everything.

Arnie gently put his hand on mine. “It’ll be okay, honey. It’ll be okay.”

I knew blind people stayed blind. I knew amputees never regrew a limb. I knew even the faithful died of cancer. But I just didn’t understand Heavenly Father. This was such a *stupid* affliction. And it was hurting Jessica. It wasn’t fair.

We weren’t so faithful, however, that we didn’t watch movies on Sunday. That evening, I slipped in a DVD of *The Faculty*, and we watched as a family. Clearly, we weren’t so faithful we didn’t watch R-rated films, either. It was a cute movie, as kids were always thinking their teachers were aliens. We needed a diversion after the tension of the past several weeks.

“I just love Penelope Cruz,” Arnie said as the movie was ending. “She was so good in this, even if it was a small part.”

“That was Salma Hayek,” I said.

“No, it was Penelope Cruz,” Arnie insisted. “You know, the woman who was in *Frida*.”

Maybe we watched too many R-rated movies. Arnie’s lack of a cure almost certainly *was* our fault. “Salma Hayek was the actress in *Frida*,” I said.

“Really?”

“Really.”

A similar discussion occurred a few days later over dinner. Jessica was talking about something difficult in her Physics class, and Arnie offered, “I think Stephen Dawkins is great.”

It was our daughter who caught him this time. “Do you mean Richard Dawkins,” she asked, “or Stephen Hawking?”

“The Black guy who demoted Plato.”

“Gotcha.”

Jessica stayed with me in the kitchen while I was putting things away. Arnie was on the sofa flipping through channels. “I don’t know if I want Dad to come to the rally at the capital this weekend,” she said. “I mean, I was used to the weird way he speaks after growing up with him, but seeing him in public now is...well, it’s embarrassing.” She closed her eyes. “Does that make me a bad person?”

“Honey, you wouldn’t be normal if your parents didn’t embarrass you.”

“Will you ask Dad?”

I stood with a plate poised over the bottom dishwasher rack.

“What is it, Mom? You’re not having a brain fart, too, are you?”

I set the plate gently in the rack and turned to Jessica. “What if we asked him to tape his mouth shut?” I suggested. “Maybe we could tell him it was part of the protest. We could have him hold a sign that says—oh, I don’t know—something like, ‘The dead have no voices but ours.’”

Jessica smiled, but her smile faded almost instantly. “Since that’s actually true, we *need* to have Dad be able to speak.”

I tapped the top rack of the dishwasher. “I see your point.” Jessica looked so unhappy that I pulled her close and gave her a hug. “We’ll figure this out,” I whispered.

It felt like the bishop’s blessing had backfired. Arnie seemed to be using malapropisms in every other sentence these days. Was I just hypersensitive to it again after years of ignoring it? Sometimes, I wanted to bean him with a frying pan. Like when he talked about “repairian” therapy for gays. Or when he called his sister “ex-mammon.” Surely, he knew the word “Mormon,” didn’t he? Or the time he talked about the “apocalyptic” books of the Bible that Catholics read which we didn’t.

“Apocryphal,” I corrected automatically.

Then, the day before the rally, when we were doing a bit of last minute shopping together to get snacks for the trip, we ended up with a Russian sales clerk at the grocery. I wanted to sink into the floor when Arnie decided to impress her with his language skills. “Placebo,” he said with a smile. The woman just stared at him. I couldn’t get him out of the store fast enough.

This just wasn’t going to do. It wasn’t going to do at all. With hundreds or even thousands of people at the rally, the chances that a reporter would even see Arnie, much less approach him, were pretty slim, but these students really seemed on the verge of achieving a meaningful change, and I couldn’t bear to have my husband make that more difficult.

Arnie wanted to have sex that night, just in case one of us got hurt by counterprotesters carrying assault weapons, or even by the police. Really, though, he never missed a chance to explain why we needed to have more sex, so I wasn’t fooled

by his reasoning. I gave in because, frankly, since he rarely talked during intercourse, our lovemaking made up some of our best quality time.

“I’ve been doing more of those kugel exercises for men,” he said.

There was a time and a place *not* to correct someone.

The next morning as we were getting ready to head for the state capital, Jessica pulled me aside. “I’m afraid,” she said. “I had a dream that Dad made the whole movement look stupid.”

“He doesn’t have that much power, honey,” I assured her.

“I so want this to be a positive experience.”

“We’re all on the same team,” I said. “That already makes it positive.”

I could see Jessica was still unconvinced, and suddenly, I felt a direct flash of inspiration entering my brain. “Honey,” I said, “why don’t *you* give him a blessing before we go?”

“Huh?”

“And I’ll assist.”

“But we don’t hold the priesthood.”

“We have...we have...goodness,” I said. “That’s power enough.”

Arnie didn’t even hesitate when I suggested our daughter give him a blessing before we headed to the rally. She lay her hands on his head and made a decent stab at the blessing. When you thought you’d never have to give one, you didn’t

really pay attention to all the particulars of how it was done. But she concluded with, “if you are approached by a reporter, you’ll speak more eloquently than you ever have before.” I was a little worried by her wording, though, since she wasn’t setting the bar exceptionally high, but both she and Arnie seemed satisfied, and we headed off with smiles on our faces.

Jessica carried a sign that read, “When I said I’d rather die than go to Physics class, that was hyperbole, ass-ault-holes.”

There were other signs that caught my attention as well, like one carried by a woman wearing black that read, “It’s too late for my family, but can’t we save any others?” Another sign read, “I don’t want you to run into my school without a weapon to save me. I want you to run up to the NRA and do it.”

The sign that really affected me, though, was one held by a delicate twelve-year-old Black girl with short braids. “I don’t want to have to text my mom I love her from underneath my desk.”

After the march but before the speakers began talking, reporters mingled with the crowd, and I was both excited and nervous when a young woman put a microphone in front of Arnie.

No one ever asked me anything.

“What do you think about the politicians who say kids just need to learn to be nicer to each other so the outcasts don’t feel they need to shoot anyone?”

“If only those six-year-olds at Sandy Hook hadn’t been such bitches,” Arnie said, “maybe they wouldn’t have all been

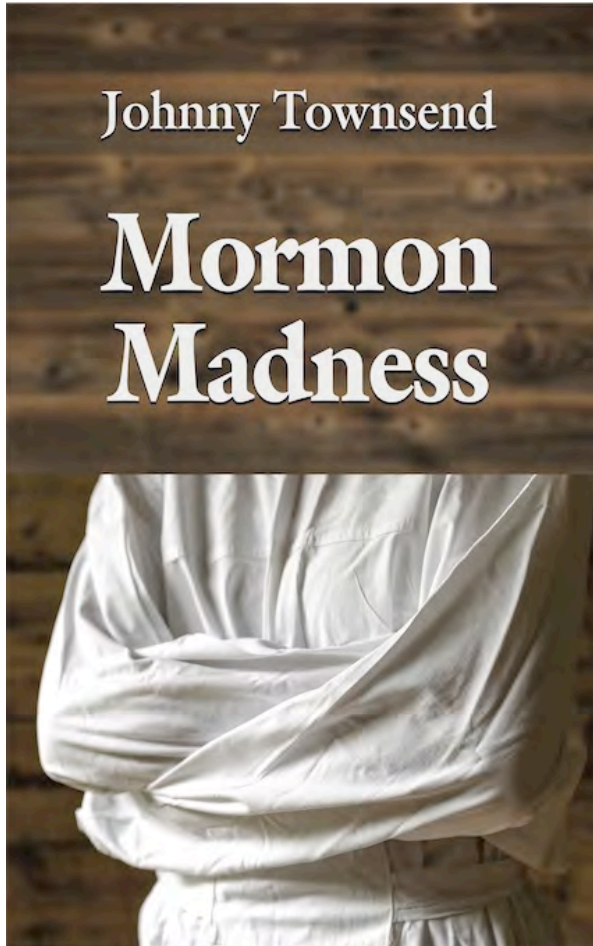
shot in the head.” He paused half a second and added, “Is that what politicians are saying? I think a better approach would be not to let people who are so deeply offended by country music fans and moviegoers and little kids have the opportunity to buy weapons of mass destruction in the first place.”

I almost shouted I was so happy for Arnie.

Jessica, Arnie, and I all did shout that night when we saw the clip on CNN. I didn’t know if Jessica really did have the power to heal, or if we had just lucked out, but it was a good day for our family. Arnie had bought a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken for dinner, and we washed it down with ice cold Cokes. It did feel a little odd to be having a good time when the occasion was so somber, but it felt important to be happy, too. What was the point of being alive if we couldn’t enjoy life a little? “Man is, that he might have joy” and all that. I turned to the Weather channel to take our eyes off the news, asking what everyone wanted to see next to relax.

“Oh, let’s watch *Mom*,” Arnie suggested. “It’s both serious and light-hearted, and I love their self-defecating humor.”

Jessica and I started laughing, unable to stop, the first real laugh we’d had since the tragedy all those weeks ago. Arnie soon joined in, though he clearly didn’t have the slightest clue what was so funny.



Mental illness can strike the faithful as easily as anyone else. But often religious doctrine and practice exacerbate rather than alleviate these problems. From schizophrenia to obsessive-compulsive disorder, from persecution complex to sexual dysfunction, Mormons must cope with their mental as well as their spiritual health on a daily basis.

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