

Gentle Persuasions

William Morris

I

I often went with my father on home teaching visits when I was ten and eleven. I don't remember why his companions were never around. I suppose they were inactive. Back then, inactivity wasn't a concept I really understood. In our small southern Utah town, everybody was Mormon except those few odd (but nice, they were always described as nice) families who were Catholic or some vague Protestant denomination. There was that one J-dub family; but for some reason, no one ever really thought about them.

The family we were visiting that Sunday evening lived only a couple of blocks away. We had never visited them before, but I knew who they were. They had a daughter my age as well as several other younger and older children. That there were older children was important, as I recall, because I remember feeling that I needed to be impressive. I needed to project a certain solemnity combined with the appearance that I understood what was being discussed—that I was a proto-priesthood holder and not just a tagalong because my mother wanted to get me out from underfoot.

As we walked along the hard-packed red dirt that edged the blacktop, I noticed that my father was quieter than usual. Normally he'd be using this walk as a teaching moment, prepping me for the visit, giving me a rundown of each member of the family and outlining the proper conduct and forms for the visit. I interpreted his silence as a certain awe and reverence about the errand we were on and followed suit.

The family welcomed us in, the father warily, the mother nervously.

My father was a lawyer with a solo practice. As one of the few

professionals in town with a graduate degree, he was respected. But he was also the son of a boy who had left and the grandson of an interloper, a northerner who had married a local girl; and as his practice was young and struggling, he didn't have the added credibility of wealth, so the respect was mingled with resentment and distrust. I suppose I understood all this in the same way that any small-town kid absorbs thousands of adult social interactions and derives from them the opinions he believes he is expected to have.

We were seated on the couch, the family fanned out in front of us on various chairs and benches, the youngest ones on the floor. I tried to pay attention to the pleasantries and small talk, but I found myself not knowing where to look. There was no angle or plane without a face. In particular, I didn't want to look at my classmate. I liked the girl, or so I believe; unlike my major crushes, she has faded to a blur in my memory. The only adjectives that come to mind are "coltish" and "skittish." And I do seem to recall a long braid of reddish brown hair. But I may have added that detail during my teenage years, an artifact born out of stereotype mixed with a supposed throwing off of my small-town roots to embrace Utah Valley cosmopolitanism.

What I do still vividly recall, though, is my boyish-verging-on-adolescent appraisal: Her family was poor and uneducated and proud. Therefore, in the cruel calculus of small-town sexual politics, she was someone not to be encouraged romantically because the proper thing for someone of my status—the smart, shy kid who had the slightest hint of big city sophistication—was to admire from afar the unapproachable rich girls who were smart but not bookish, the ones who wore jeans and skirts instead of homemade dresses, who wore their hair feathered and with bangs.

My mind wandered until, all of a sudden, all the voices dropped away except for the two adult males. And suddenly it didn't seem as if they were talking about the gospel anymore. And then it became clear that my father was trying to convince this man to pay his taxes.

My father's first appeal was to a vague sense of doing what's right, but he was countered by the logic of refusing to support a corrupt government that funded such abominations as abortion clinics, deviant artists, and welfare moms.

My father then quoted the Twelfth Article of Faith, the famil-

iar refrain of being “subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates.” As a child who had fervently embraced the celebrations of 1976, whose twin heroes were George Washington and Huckleberry Finn, I loved that particular Article of Faith, although I wasn’t sure what “magistrates” were. But it was a cool word—almost as cool as “principalities.” My family read the scriptures together regularly, and I had very much embraced the faux-King James language of the Restoration. Still do.

The response was a bit difficult to follow, but it seemed to have something to do with Captain Moroni and the Title of Liberty and the Spirit ceasing to strive with a land when its inhabitants become too wicked. More than a decade later, I’d hear the same rhetoric from the lips of Bo Gritz and wonder if this brother (I don’t remember the family’s name) had become an acolyte.

All of a sudden, my father’s voice changed. Gone was the fine net of argument he had been constructing. I recognized the new tone of voice and syntax from our bedtime negotiations. My father was deploying the blunt power of consequences.

Looking back now, I can’t figure out how this could be the case. Perhaps I misheard or misunderstood. Perhaps my father was counting on the ignorance of his combatant. But I swear he said that if they didn’t pay taxes, the kids would be kicked out of school. This seeming calamity was easily shrugged off. The government was intruding too much anyway, what with the teaching of evolution as fact and such. They would home school (although the mother didn’t look as if she relished this particular thought). This worried me. I began to appraise my classmate again, even stole an obvious glance at her.

My father moved on to the threat of losing city services, including those of the volunteer fire department. I was astounded. It wasn’t like my dad to be quite this forceful. I had never seen him try to scare people before. In every situation—at church, at work, at home, out in public—he was always the voice of calm and reason, of civility and dignity.

The father’s response got rather dramatic—something about watching the house burn to the ground. And with that rhetorical flourish, they both seemed tired out, even though they continued to talk for several minutes. Suddenly I got this sense that the real

confrontation had already taken place prior to our visit—that somehow my father already knew the likely results and was just here to go through the motions.

I'm not sure what I said in the obligatory closing prayer. I was in a state of befuddlement. This good brother's worldview seemed very foreign from mine, where education, reason, acts of kindness, family, church, scripture, history, and government were all part of one eternal round. I was an American Mormon of good lineage. This man seemed to want his family to be neither American nor Mormon, or to be some eccentric, foolish version of both.

The walk home was even more silent than the walk there had been. I wanted to ask my dad several questions, but none seemed to form themselves into a complete thought.

I wonder if my father wondered what I thought about the whole experience. I haven't brought it up since. But as I recall, I was surprised to see him fail to persuade. I felt sorry for him for lowering himself to such a coarse confrontation—for sullyng his integrity by enacting this argument in front of his son and in front of this man's family.

And I still wonder: Was he really fighting for this man's soul? Did he go in expecting to win, or was this a predetermined piece of theater that someone else had forced him to go through? Because now that I look back at it, I'm not even so sure that this family was one he had been assigned to home teach.

II

Samuel had just finished his homework when his mother called down the stairs. "Sammy. Phone."

He sighed, rolled his eyes at the sing-song syllables and childhood nickname, and trudged up to the kitchen.

"It's Brother Hamblin."

He took the phone and croaked out a greeting.

"Thanks for taking my call," Brother Hamblin said, as if Samuel had a choice in the matter. "I'm sorry it's such short notice, but I was wondering if you might be available to go with me to visit the Nielsons."

"Sure," he said. Brother Hamblin had standing times and days of the month for all their home teaching visits so Samuel knew

something was going on. He couldn't guess what it might be, especially since he was too young to help give a blessing.

"Great. Why don't you throw on a shirt and tie, and I'll be right over to pick you up."

Samuel had difficulty choosing a tie. He wasn't sure whether to tailor his wardrobe to the parents or the kids. The Nielsons had a son and daughter who rode the same bus as him. The daughter, a freshman named Katy, was about as punk as a Provo Mormon teenager gets. She was protective and maybe a little ashamed of her older brother, who was two years older but only a sophomore. He seemed like a geek but didn't hang out with the other geeks. He didn't hang out with anyone except his sister and her wild friends. Or at least that's how it appeared to Samuel since he didn't really know either of them that well.

He went with the conservative choice—eschewing his skinny ties for a muted, standard-width paisley. Brother Hamblin was waiting when Samuel went out the front door. He sat in his silver Plymouth Reliant though the Nielsons only lived a couple of blocks away.

Samuel opened the door and slid into the front seat. Brother Hamblin had his hand stuck out and delivered a firm handshake.

"Thanks for coming, Sam," he said. "I know it's late and a school night, but the Nielsons are in need of the presence of the priesthood right now." He paused for a minute, his breath streaming out into the crisp fall night. "It appears that Katy has run away. They don't know where she is."

Samuel nodded.

"I wasn't going to drag you into this," Brother Hamblin said. "But you are my companion and a good young man. And you were going to find out soon enough anyway. I know you probably don't know anything, but they specifically asked if you would be coming with me. Do you mind if I say a prayer before we make the visit?"

Samuel shook his head.

Brother Hamblin's prayer was short, sincere, and expressed with a rough, simple eloquence. He was semi-retired from Geneva Steel and made fine furniture in his garage. Samuel admired him but had found it difficult to connect with him in the six months they had been home teaching companions. Brother Hamblin

lacked that streak of lingering adolescence found in most of the priesthood holders Samuel interacted with, including his dad. The one that led to talk of (or, even better, experiments with) cars, sports, movies, guns, computers, firecrackers and other small explosives, hunting, fishing, and camping as well as all things odd, unusual, creepy, or scary.

The Nielsons lived in the upper half of an older duplex. Brother Nielson answered the door. Samuel felt a strange sense of vertigo climbing the steep stairs, as if they should be descending instead of ascending up into the living room, with its orange shag carpet, dingy, yellowed lighting, brown furniture, and tan accents.

Samuel's family was not rich. In fact, they lived a rather shabby, genteel lifestyle. Most of their furniture and furnishing were second-hand or homemade—faded Japanese prints, an ancient but nicely polished upright piano, pine bookshelves that his father had crafted and his mother had stained to mimic a dark hardwood—and the overall effect was one of comfort and understated taste. But the Nielsons' home made him uncomfortable. They were the shabby without the genteel. Yes, their decor was a decade out of date, but it wasn't just that. They had a worn-down roughness to them, as if they were still pioneers hard-scrabbling their way through a joyless existence. Katy was the only one in the family who seemed to know how to smile.

All talk was quiet and very matter-of-fact. Katy hadn't been home for two nights. She hadn't been in school since her brother had eaten lunch with her the day she had disappeared. She hadn't called. She hadn't left a note.

Mostly Brother Hamblin ran down all the possible steps of action, Brother Nielson responded to the two or three they had already taken, and the two made plans for the remaining items. It seemed to Samuel as if Brother Hamblin was going to be doing all the difficult, time-consuming ones.

Samuel answered their few questions for him. No, he hadn't seen her at school after her brother had. No, he didn't really know who her friends were or how to contact them. No, he didn't have any idea where she might be.

Even after his part was over, Sister Nielson kept staring at him. He tried to keep his eyes active and focused on the people in the room, especially his home teaching companion. He didn't want to

spend the rest of the visit staring at the carpet. This was serious stuff, and he was not going to play the part of the useless, tuned-out, young man. Eventually he had to give in because she wouldn't stop looking at him. Her weak blue eyes projected needy, unnerving greed. He knew what she wanted. She wanted him to entangle himself with her children, but he couldn't do it. Didn't even know how to do it. Besides, his social position was insecure as it was. Sure, unlike many of the other youth in the ward, he would actually interact with them. He also admitted to himself a bit of a fascination with Katy—with her short, bleached, asymmetric haircut and funky outfits. Maybe a crush, even, but only a small one. The least of many.

At some point the room broke into a mix of worry and sorrow. All that was left was a night of waiting and, if nothing had changed by the next morning, a set of unpleasant tasks. Brother Hamblin would contact the cops, then he and Brother Nielson would hit the streets. Sister Nielson would call Provo High and see if her teachers had any suggestions.

Samuel thought that the gravity of the situation would exempt him from offering a closing prayer, but Brother Nielson asked him to pray. Somehow he found the words, cautious yet generically hopeful. But the whole time he could feel Sister Nielson's eyes on his face, could almost see them through the orange-red of his closed lids.

The next day at school, Katy's absence wasn't mentioned by anyone. Brother Hamblin hadn't said that the information was confidential, but Samuel decided it wouldn't be a good idea for him to bring it up.

That evening, Brother Hamblin called to say that Katy had been found squatting with some of her friends in an abandoned home off West Center Street. "Trying to set up house" was how Brother Hamblin had put it.

Although Samuel didn't see her on the bus the next morning, Katy showed up for geography class. She smiled at him as she came in and sat a couple of desks away. He smiled back. It was strange. His slight crush and hormonal awareness of her was still there, but it was joined by an almost brotherly fondness, a deep concern for her well-being and for, well, her soul. Her salvation.

In some complex yet elemental way, she belonged to him. Not the macho, jock-like ownership of sisters, girlfriends, and cousins displayed by arrogant young men in the halls and classrooms of Provo High, but the stewardship of a shepherd, for she was a sheep of his fold. And Samuel felt joy over her return.

During class, he noticed her looking his way several times. Every time he looked up, she looked away. Finally, near the end of the period, he glanced in her direction and caught her gaze. She held it long enough for him to realize that she was looking at him with her mother's eyes.

III

His wife had been the first to notice the change in Brother Johnson's home teaching visits. Although he still showed up at their doorstep with *Ensign* in hand, he seemed to use it more as a prop than a resource. He would read two or three sentences and then go off on lengthy sermons about the importance of being open to personal revelation, the faithfulness of the early members of the Church, the vitality of Joseph Smith, or the gifts of the Spirit.

At first he had welcomed the change. He enjoyed not hearing the First Presidency message, which he had usually already read (or at least skimmed), and the fact that the visits went beyond the pro forma appealed to him. Brother Johnson came prepared.

Early on, Brother Johnson's visits had left him with a fuzzy feeling of "yeah, that's something to think about." But lately they had become strident, and this month's visit had taken things to a new level.

Brother Johnson had started off by discussing the importance of a marriage based on covenants.

"Celestial marriage is the highest form of the priesthood," he had said. "Without it, there is no eternal increase. Without it, even if one is fit for the celestial kingdom, one is only a servant of those who have entered the higher covenant and lived the higher law."

There followed a tangent about the importance of not being of the world and the principle of the harvest and the danger of spiritual plateaus, and then suddenly he was quoting D&C 132 and talking about the looming cleansing of the world and how there will be fewer people saved at the last day than most Church members realize. Some line about empty vessels and rancid oil.

And then he was asking them if they had the courage to live the higher law and take their temple covenants seriously.

Their response had been solidly noncommittal. Brother Johnson had ignored his wife and, looking him straight in the eye, told him that, if he was interested in these ideas, a group of members held a discussion group the second Friday of the month at his house.

Brother Johnson never seemed to have an active companion, so he asked his wife to say the closing prayer. Neither his wife nor Brother Johnson had seemed thrilled with the idea. The prayer had been short, the good-byes hurried.

Now as he lay in bed next to his sleeping wife, he pondered the question she had asked after they had finished their personal prayers, the one he had answered with a shrug: “Who are you going to talk to about this?”

As he weighed the various official and unofficial channels, he also began to wonder how a man such as Brother Johnson had become caught up in a splinter group. Because he was sure that that was what was going on. The Manti group stuff had become public recently. It wouldn’t have surprised him to discover similar activities up here in Idaho—to find that it had awakened some dormant tendencies in certain individuals.

Why would someone do something like that? Cause themselves and their families such social and spiritual harm? And yet, when he stopped to think past his knee-jerk prejudices, he found that he had a certain sympathy for these newer-mode splinter groups. They seemed much more interesting than the old-school, inbred polygs or the Strangites or the RLDS because the break was fresher and more dangerous. And at least this sort of thing had a Mormon form and energy to it—not like the watered-down New Age “embraced by the light” and “Jesus is my friend and brother” crap. Still, lame. And annoying. It put him in a difficult position. Brother Johnson had never come out and started naming his wives, but he had also left no doubt about what he had been hinting at.

And because he couldn’t quite decide who he *was* going to talk to about this, he found himself instead trying to figure out how you recruited additional wives. He figured the standard

BYU/Ricks dating techniques that he knew well (though never quite mastered) probably didn't apply. Hey, want to be one of my "Three Musketeers"? Together we could "Skor" a spot in the celestial kingdom. "Peppermint Patty" is already on board. He struggled for another minute trying to come up with other candy bar names, maybe something about searching for "Mrs. Goodbars." He hoped he'd remember all this enough to tell it to his wife in the morning. She'd probably see the humor of it.

His thoughts turned to her. Her loveliness. Her strength. Her sometimes fragility.

The weird energy from the visit finally started to dissipate. He felt sleep creeping in.

And then, suddenly, just as he was letting the whole thing go, he had a flash of insight. He felt the vitality and excitement that could come from encircling your family in the tight, secure grip of zealotry and paranoia. The illusion of control over a shrunken sphere. His thoughts turned to the very early days of the Church. What would it have been like to have been a Pratt, a Smith, a Knight, a Whitmer? And he discovered that part of him yearned to not have to battle so much with a world whose rewards could be sweet but which were usually small and infrequent and often left a bitter aftertaste. The fatigue of trying to balance work, family, church, service, and himself—to not let the tensions slacken—pooled within him.

He halted his mind. It's not that he was afraid of the train of thought—that he wanted to avoid reaching some insight about his weaknesses. He already knew them. He also wasn't afraid that he would chip away at his testimony. Yet he still checked. And yes, beneath the swirling clouds of doctrine, doubts, duties, history, troubling things, things put on a shelf, things amalgamated with the theories of the world, the core gently hummed, quiet with power.

He concentrated on his wife's breathing—the slow, soft, familiar rhythm—and drew it around him like a blanket.

IV

David nervously fingered the slip of paper in the right pocket of his flight jacket while President Jim Barnes exchanged the normal pleasantries and explained the details of their relationship.

"David is one of the best Scouters I've ever known," he said.

“We must have done two or three trips to Philmont with the regional council in the ’60s and ’70s, isn’t that right?”

David nodded and took his hand from his pocket. He wasn’t happy about this visit. But he had an obligation to discharge, and he had avoided it for much too long, until one of the executives he flew for needed to quickly get to Fresno from L.A., and once he had called and told his old buddy Jim Barnes about the whole thing, Jim, with that sense of mission and unfailing energy that served him so well in his calling as stake president, had sprung into action. He made David feel old and tired. Not an easy thing to do to a pilot who was past his prime but still firmly in the saddle. The truth was, it was lucky for him that all the pieces had been there to make entry into this family’s home much easier than it had any right to be. It made David feel a little guilty, in fact.

“Anyway, I just wanted to let you know a little bit about David before he tells you why he is here.” Jim paused and cleared his throat. “Why don’t you go ahead and tell Brother Leith the reason for our visit now, David?”

Brother Leith betrayed not even a hint of curiosity. David wondered if he had sensed what this was going to be about. His wife wasn’t in the room. Brother Leith had been rather vague when Jim had asked about her earlier.

“Thanks, Jim, uh, President Barnes,” he said. “And thanks for taking the time to meet with me, Brother Leith. I know that this is a bit out of the ordinary, but . . .” David trailed off, put his right hand in his jacket pocket again, cleared his throat.

“So I, uh, had to spend a couple of weeks in the hospital a while back,” he said. “There was one nurse—a male nurse named Bruce—who was very good. Very gentle and patient. And also very funny. He was definitely one of the few bright spots of my stay . . .” David stopped speaking.

Brother Leith didn’t blink.

David swallowed nervously, one part of his mind angry at the situation, another part full of sorrow.

“Well, I figure you know where this is going. Come to find out Bruce was your son, and we talked a little about the Church and the difficulties the two of you have had.”

His fingers itched. He felt as if any minute his fingers would ignite the slip of paper.

“Anyway. Before I left I promised that I’d let you know he was doing okay. I happened to be in Fresno this weekend, and called up President Barnes, and that’s why we’re here.”

David wished he had had time to change into church clothes. He was wearing the wrong kind of uniform for this situation.

Brother Leith was silent for awhile. Then he said, “Well, thanks for letting us know.”

He stood up. So did David. Jim—President Barnes—remained seated.

David felt like he ought to say something else though he didn’t know what. He sensed that President Barnes wanted him to sit back down, so he did.

“I’m not sure what else to say, Brother Leith,” David said. “I know that your boy’s decisions must have been very difficult for you. I have a son who is a bit of a black sheep himself. I don’t know what has passed between you two. All I know is that Bruce wants to reach out to you but is afraid to.”

“He has made his choice,” said Brother Leith. “He knew the consequences.”

“Now, Craig,” said President Barnes, “I don’t condone the boy’s actions by any means. But you know the Brethren have begun to soften their stance a bit on this. Not, of course, on living as an active homosexual, which I understand is one of the main problems you have with your son, but it’s a bit more complicated about how this all happens, and they’ve asked us to have sympathy for and reach out to those with same-sex attraction. I know it’s not an easy thing to do. And I’m not judging you. Heaven knows what I’d do in the same situation. But just think about giving Bruce a call. You never know. You should never lose faith. The Brethren have promised us that if we don’t give up hope, that if we continue to love our wayward children, that they will eventually return to us. I know it’s hard to believe that that could happen in this particular situation . . .”

President Barnes trailed off a bit, licked his lips, and then, as his eyes winced a bit as if he was sorry that he had to continue, he said, “And besides, I’d hate to see you repeat the same mistake your father made when you joined the Church.”

Brother Leith's face stiffened. "That was different. I was turning towards righteousness. He turned away from it."

"Absolutely," President Barnes said. "You're right. I shouldn't have made the comparison. And I'm not here to make excuses for him. Neither is David."

David nodded slowly. He imagined the paper never leaving his pocket, yellowing then disintegrating.

Brother Leith seemed to suddenly recognize that a stranger and the stake president were in his home. The intensity faded from his face.

"If he wants to be a prodigal son, fine. I'd welcome him back," he said. "He knows I would. He knows that the door is always open. But if he's going to persist in his sin, I will not be a party to it."

President Barnes moved to speak, but David motioned for him to be quiet. He stood back up. "We don't want to keep you," he said. "Thanks for letting us drop by."

The other two men stood up. David wondered if a flash of movement in the next room was the mother. Brother Leith led them out onto the front porch. David stepped forward and let President Barnes make the conciliatory good-byes.

As President Barnes turned to walk down the steps, David pulled the slip of paper from his jacket and turned back and handed it to Brother Leith. He was surprised that the father took it without hesitation. He had expected a struggle.

"Just call him," David said, his voice almost a whisper. "Can't hurt to call." He stepped quickly to President Barnes's side, and they proceeded in silence to the car.

As they drove away, David looked back. Brother Leith was still as they had left him, staring down at the crinkled piece of paper in his hand.

V

So here's the deal: For the first time in my life, I was in a presidency. After several years of post-marriage, yeoman work in the nursery, I had been called as first counselor to a very gung-ho elders' quorum president who worked as an assistant DA in Elk Grove. It was kind of fun. I liked teaching (every so often) and planning activities and even created this killer spreadsheet to organize home teaching. But there was this one other thing: Ben,

the EQ president, was a big believer in reactivation through personal, unannounced visits.

So it was that we found ourselves knocking on doors in the hot Sacramento sun. I was having flashbacks to my mission. It turns out that a few more years of maturity had not cured me of the waves of awkwardness and dread that came as we approached every address.

I was totally cool with every silent door we hit. Although, of course, Ben wasn't content to simply ring the door bell. If no one answered, and so far this evening no one had, he moved on to loud knocking, and then, finally, to peeking in a window. The dude wasn't willing to cross names off the list either, if it seemed like there was any possibility that the address wasn't a dud. These were lost souls to be reclaimed. He wanted sure knowledge. Like I mentioned, he was one intense guy.

I was smart enough to not let myself get irritated. I deployed my mission defense mechanism: Be cool and don't escalate the tension and the other guy ends up doing most of the work. No harm, no foul, and maybe you'll have some fun along the way.

In between doors, we cruised the streets of West Sacramento in Ben's beat-up, old-school Jetta (complete with intermittent air conditioning), and I regaled him with stories from my past. He seemed to enjoy the conversation; but as the evening wore on, I could tell he wasn't content to let our efforts be a wash. With every unanswered door, his energy spiraled up another level. He was winding himself pretty freakin' tight and not reacting much as I launched into yet another humorous mission-related story, this one involving a dog, a Frisbee, and a drunk guy. So I dialed things down a bit. Offered some words of encouragement.

Then, without warning, a vague wisp of faith broke through the heat and sweat and frustration, and I caught a bit of his vision. Started to actually care about reaching somebody. Started praying silently for some contact. And not just so Ben would relax, either. There was some hope involved. And the aforementioned faith.

Look. I know how this sounds. I'm at heart and in practice actually rather orthodox. It's just this one thing: I have a hard time going after the lost sheep. In my experience, there's a reason they've left the fold, and they usually don't want to be chased.

Finally someone answered. The door had been mine, but the

sound of an actual human voice startled me into silence. Ben, of course, was quick to come to the rescue. Before long, we found ourselves sitting on a couch talking to a young, hip Latino named Jorge in his air-conditioned townhouse.

In the beginning, the conversation was easy. Like Ben, Jorge worked for the government (as a graphic designer for some obscure state agency) and like me, he had graduated from UC Davis. In fact, Jorge shared that he had been baptized as a teenager down in SoCal, but had gone inactive shortly after starting college. We let that fact rest for a bit as we discovered that all three of us were passionate about technology, design, gaming, and indie rock. I dominated the conversation, a torrent of words flowing from my mouth. Once I get in the door and past the awkwardness, I'm golden. And I figured it this way: What this kid needed is to understand that there are active, believing Mormons who are just as cool, just as up on stuff as he is.

But then Ben began to steer the conversation back around to the gospel. "Well, Jorge, it's great talking to you," he said. "It seems like life is going pretty well for you right now. But do you ever feel like something is missing?"

Jorge thought for awhile. "Sometimes I do," he said. "I do still pray sometimes, and I've thought about reading the Bible again."

Something inside me rebelled at the directness of the approach. I figured Jorge knew why we were there, and I was reluctant to push into dangerous territory. The dude had answered the door. We had had a good conversation. Let's leave it at the BROT¹ stage. There was plenty of time to coax things further. Start out with some basic social networking invites: Facebook or MySpace, maybe LinkedIn, and Last.fm, for sure. Then an invite to an EQ activity. Get him to meet a few more of the quorum members and feel comfortable with them. Maybe pass him off to the Singles Ward and get him to a dance or Young Adult activity.

But Ben was going straight for the jugular. Or the brass ring. Or the big close. Or whatever the most appropriate euphemism is for reactivation efforts.

"I'm happy to hear that," he said. "I think your instincts are right on. And we're here to invite you to take things a step further. I know that it can be difficult to come back to church after you've

been gone for awhile, but I think you should come this Sunday. Just see how it feels to be there again. In fact, I could even pick you up. I live pretty close to here.”

Well, crap. I had to admire Ben’s audacity. I could only nod and smile and try to look solemn. But I knew that there was no way my face could look as bright and holy as Ben’s. My faith had scarcely been glimmering going into this; his had been burning brightly all evening.

I anticipated Jorge’s retreat, watched for him to close off parts of himself. But I read him totally wrong.

“You know,” he said, “I’m sure why I stopped going. I just got so busy, you know? I’m still pretty busy, but you guys seem cool, and I have thought about going back to church. Get back on track, you know? I may get married and have kids some day. It’d be good to already be firm in the faith. I don’t want to be a hypocrite, you know? My dad was always pretending to be holy, and then he’d turn around and cheat on my mom or go out and get high and come back angry and break stuff. I don’t want to be like that.”

“You won’t be,” said Ben. “Even if you don’t come back to church, you won’t be. But I promise you that if you return to church, if you get back on track, you will be blessed with all your righteous desires. Of course, we will help you. We will help you prepare to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood and then go to the temple. That’s what we’re here for.”

Jorge’s eyes lit up at the word “temple.” Something seemed to click there, but part of me felt a little sick. So many times on my mission I had seen the inactive who answers the door and has one moment of fire, acts like he’s going to get it all together, makes it to church once, and is never heard from again. It had happened several times, twice with people I had baptized earlier in my mission. The curse of being sent back to your greenie area.

“Yeah, I saw that they are building one up in Rancho Cordova,” he said. “It would be neat to be able go there and go inside. Have you been to the one in L.A.?” We both shook our heads. “It’s really cool. I did baptisms there once.”

I could feel the presence of the Spirit and knew that the other two were feeling it also. The warmth enveloped me—a gentle wash of warmth, a strange and welcome contrast to the blast furnace we had been out in earlier. But my initial reluctance was still wrig-

gling around inside me. What was wrong with me? I admired Ben's boldness. I really did. But perhaps I had bought too much into California *laissez faire*. The libertarian lite that was such a strong part of my school and work milieu. Thing is, it was a comfortable zone to be in. We all let our individual beliefs and practices stay inside the family and find common ground in pop culture and politics. It's what you do when you have co-workers who are hardcore into S&M or Jewish mysticism or veganism or tats or gay circuit partying. Or Mormonism.

So I sat on Jorge's Ikea couch, and we were edified and rejoiced together. And I felt the Spirit about as strong as I ever do and yet held part of myself back. I just couldn't quite let it be what it was. The echoes of all the loud knocks on all those silent doors. That squirmy sense of not wanting to bother people, of wanting to let people be, remained.

I half expected Ben to do a HOFRS.² He didn't.

Ben and Jorge continued to talk for a couple of minutes, but I think we all realized that the visit was about over. The exact arrangements for next Sunday were made. Like all good third wheels, I offered the closing prayer.

The night air was still warm as we walked to the car. Ben was exultant, radiant. I shared his joy and mourned my inability to share it fully.

Notes

1. BROT = Building Relationships of Trust.

2. HOFRS = Helping Others Feel and Recognize the Spirit. These are the first two steps of the commitment pattern (essentially a sales technique) which was taught to LDS missionaries in the 1980s and 1990s.