

What You Leave Behind: Six Years at the MTC

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EVEN NOW, NEARLY ELEVEN YEARS LATER, I can still see his face — shocked, fearful, and deeply pained. I'd been working for almost four months at the newly constructed, multi-million dollar Language Training Mission, as the Missionary Training Center was known back in the late fall of 1976. I was excited and confident, perhaps a little too much so, having already taught one group, or district, of missionaries during their required two months of language and gospel instruction before heading off into the mission field. When the number of French-speaking missionaries entering the LTM began to drop off shortly after I started working there, I was assigned to help supervise evening retention — a three- to four-hour period each night in the LTM's large new cafeteria — during which the missionaries were expected to practice and review the day's language lesson or memorize the discussions they would be presenting to potential converts in less than five weeks.

I noticed him during one of my first evenings at retention. He was seated at one of the smaller cafeteria tables, next to a rough brick wall. His head was bowed slightly, and as I strained I could hear him almost inaudibly, but very intently, repeating the lines from the discussion he'd taught himself that day. I learned later that he'd already had several years of French before entering the LTM and that his teachers had felt he would progress faster if he started memorizing the discussions immediately rather than remaining with the rest of his district as they struggled through the first four weeks of language instruction.

At the time, he seemed to have everything going for him — everything that I had lacked two and a half years earlier when I had entered the LTM, at that time located in Knight-Mangum Hall on the south end of the Brigham Young University campus. He seemed prepared, outgoing, friendly, and his enthusiasm was contagious. Perhaps being a recent convert gave him the drive and desire he exhibited, I reassured myself. Like everyone else, I enjoyed his company and spirit, but I must now confess I also felt a little envious.

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Slowly, however, over the next few weeks, he began to change. The discussions were not coming as easily as he'd hoped, and he started to blame himself. He tried getting up each morning before 6:00 A.M., convinced that a little more study time each day would make up for the previous day's lag. He read regularly from the small, white mission handbook of rules, fearing that his unintentional disobedience might somehow be affecting his memory. And he prayed and fasted. But the discussions didn't come any easier. At retention, he'd sit at his small table, his eyes glazed, his stare fixed to one of the bricks in front of him, tears slowly lining his cheeks.

Then, one evening, he was gone. At first, I thought that he'd gone back to his dormitory room; perhaps, like other missionaries, he wasn't feeling well. But he was not there the next evening either. Each night, I kept looking for him, expecting to find him at his familiar corner in the cafeteria, but he never returned. Soon afterwards, I asked one of his two classroom teachers what had happened to him. Shaking her head, she explained that he'd become depressed over his apparent inability to learn the discussions as quickly as he'd wanted and despondent that his prayers and fasting for help had gone unanswered. When he finally left the LTM, she said, he'd lost all faith in himself, and in God as well.

I've long since forgotten this missionary's name, but his face — the sadness, despair, and hopelessness — as well as the realization that he was someone's son, brother, and friend continue to haunt my memories of the Missionary Training Center. Although his was fortunately not a typical experience, whatever else I may remember of the six years I spent as an instructor at the MTC, from 1976 to 1982, I will never be able — nor would I want — to forget his face.

Towards the end of my mission to southern France in mid-1976, teaching at the LTM was the furthest thing from my mind. The two months I had spent at the LTM in the summer of 1974 had been unforgettable, but not ones that I thought I'd ever look forward to reliving. Once home, however, I quickly realized that I'd soon have to find a job if I expected to start school again in the fall. (Before my mission, my parents and a scholarship had helped greatly to defray tuition at BYU. Unfortunately, after my first semester, I lost the scholarship because of a low GPA. And while I believe my parents would have helped support me, I didn't think I could continue to impose on them.)

A good friend who'd just returned home from a mission to Central America serendipitously suggested the LTM as a possibility. While the idea honestly hadn't occurred to me before, the more I thought about it, the better it sounded. After all, the Church was completing construction on the new \$16 million LTM complex north of the BYU campus and would obviously be looking for additional teachers to meet the expected tidal wave of new missionaries. I didn't realize until much later that while the total number of missionaries was expected to increase, this was because all non-English-speaking missionaries would report to the Provo complex, not because of a dramatic jump in the number of missionaries in any one language.

Convinced that I had nothing to lose, I soon reported to the supervisor for all French teachers, Steve Graham. From his office in one of the upstairs rooms in Knight-Mangum Hall, he dutifully interviewed me, handed me two forms for my former mission president and my current bishop to fill out, and made an appointment for me to take a language test. I immediately sent off the two confidential referral forms to my mission president and bishop. Several years later, I was allowed to make copies of these completed references from my personnel file at the MTC. Both were unexpectedly complimentary, especially the one from my bishop, who'd known me only since my return home the previous month. I was concerned that my mission president wouldn't remember me well enough to offer an opinion. I'd been an adequate missionary, but certainly not one of those who become, even before their mission is over, something of a living legend. While President Broshinsky may not have remembered me as well as he did some missionaries, I learned that at least one shared experience stuck out in his mind. From what I understand, he still enjoys telling the story of how tired he was during our final interview before I left France and how I asked him at one point, "I'm not putting you to sleep, am I, President?"

I had no idea what to expect from the required language test. All I'd been told was that I would be evaluated on my ability to carry on a conversation completely in French with two French-speaking natives. Most people, I'm sure, would consider this a relatively easy hurdle for any returned missionary. It's important to keep in mind, though, that most missionaries returning from non-English-speaking missions are never exposed to the kind of language experience that is expected of fluent, educated native speakers. The two people evaluating me knew this, as did I. Fortunately, they were not as hard as they could have been, and while far from fluent, at least I didn't embarrass myself (or if I did, they were too kind to tell me). At the conclusion, I rated average, which was passing. Two weeks later, the supervising teacher telephoned me to say that I was hired, that I should attend a special orientation seminar for all new teachers, and that I could expect my first group of missionaries by the end of the month. Although nervous, I was elated at the prospect of steady, part-time work, of using what language skills I'd picked up in France, and of working with newly called missionaries.

Upon entering the MTC, all missionaries are assigned first to a companion and second to small districts of no more than twelve elders and sisters, all of whom are learning the same language, if not going to the same mission. Each district is then assigned two teachers, who are completely responsible for that district's language and discussion instruction. The missionary's highly regimented day is broken into three instructional periods of approximately three and one-half hours each. The two teachers are each assigned to one of these three periods, and the third period (which, depending on the schedule governing the particular language, may be in the morning, afternoon, or evening) is unstructured, though not unsupervised, retention. Missionaries called on non-English-speaking missions usually stay at the MTC eight weeks, the first three of which are devoted exclusively to language instruction, and the last five

to memorizing, or mastering, the discussions, which are the missionary's primary proselyting tool. Two days after arriving, all non-English-speaking missionaries are expected to speak in their new language, except for emergencies. At any rate, this is the ideal.

No two districts of missionaries ever resemble each other completely. Each is as separate as the individual missionaries who compose them. Yet, after a while, I began to notice similarities, both between missionaries and among districts. Some missionaries enter the MTC much better prepared than others. They have read some, if not all, of the scriptures, have paid attention in seminary and Sunday school classes, and have even begun to memorize the discussions in English. Others are hoping that a mission will force them to study the gospel, since they've never before during their nineteen years had to take the Church seriously. Some enter the MTC willingly; others, who would almost prefer to be anyplace else, are there because of pressure from parents, friends, bishops, or branch presidents. Some fit easily into the intensive and strict regimentation; others chafe constantly at the rules and daily routine. Some learn the language and discussions almost too easily; others struggle painfully with the most simple verb conjugations or with the most familiar gospel concepts. Some enjoy the security of their assigned companionships; others resent the idea of forced friendships.

I was fortunate with my first district, called Lyon after one of the large cities in the Switzerland-Geneva mission. Not only were the majority of missionaries committed to the ideals of a mission, but my companion teacher, Derek Streeter, was a veteran instructor with more than two years' experience at the LTM to draw upon. His patient example helped to head off successfully many problems resulting from my own inexperience before they became unmanageable. Those first missionaries and I owe him much.

After that first district, the number of missionaries entering the LTM began to decline. Whether by design or accident, more missionaries enter the MTC during the summer months than at any other time, especially the late fall and early winter. And with these seasonal changes, the number of teachers necessarily fluctuates. Fortunately, I did not lose my job but was assigned to evening retention until the number of missionaries started to rise again.

Retention, or Practice and Review, as it came to be known officially, was at once enjoyable and challenging. Most missionaries looked forward to these three unstructured hours as a chance to catch up on the day's instruction and as a respite from the intense classroom drilling. However, most teachers assigned to retention approached the task apprehensively. For it soon became apparent that some missionaries — always a minority — required almost constant supervision. Either these missionaries had never had to organize their own time before and didn't know how to or they viewed retention as a three-hour break from their missions. When not monitoring the activities of a handful of missionaries, quizzing them on the day's vocabulary, or listening to them present discussions, I would find myself walking up and down the aisles of the large cafeteria with virtually nothing to do, except be available for their questions.

After that, I worked both in the classroom and in retention and came to appreciate that a missionary's true reaction to his or her two months at the MTC, as well as a mission in general, is most clearly revealed away from the classroom, either in retention or in weekly one-on-one stewardship interviews between missionary and teacher. Away from the constant pressures to succeed in the classroom, from the close supervision of both teacher and other missionaries, and from the usually comforting support of companion and district, most missionaries sooner or later must confront their own personal demons and private nightmares. Like most teachers, I was sometimes able to catch a glimpse of these intimate and often painful battles of the soul, most of which are waged silently and alone, in the heart and in the mind.

In late 1979, after three years at the MTC and as an undergraduate in psychology at BYU, I undertook for one of my classes a preliminary survey of the most prominent stresses missionaries encounter at the MTC. Since all sixty-three of the respondents I'd chosen were going on French-speaking missions, my sample was not random, unless you consider that mission calls are issued randomly. Consequently, the response of these missionaries may not represent those of all missionaries — English and non-English-speaking — to their experience at the MTC. At the same time, I believed then, and still do, that most missionaries would not take serious issue with the reactions of the French-speaking missionaries I sampled in 1979.

Of the five categories causing missionaries the most stress, "interpersonal relations" headed the list. This included dealing with companions, teachers, and other members of the district, as well as peer pressure to conform or succeed, fear of failure, and feelings of competition. In response to my request for additional details, one missionary wrote, "The peer pressure here can be ridiculous. It is difficult to march to the beat of a different drummer when you know that if you do you'll be off beat." Another added, "It's hard to help others when you're the one who needs the most help."

Second on the list was "regimentation," including the daily schedule and routine, long hours of work and study, the lack of social life, inadequate sleep, not enough time to study the gospel and theology, and the daily physical education classes, which were judged either too long or too short. "The hours give no time for anything but the work," one missionary wrote. "There is next to no change. A lot of preparation day is taken up by routine chores. No social life at all, no discussion on any subject other than the gospel. People think you are an apostate if you do!"

The missionary discussions ranked third. This encompassed memorization, presentation to other missionaries and teachers, and discussion recall and review. "Discussions have been hard for me," responded one missionary, "because the rest of the class was going too fast and I could only remember half the lines we were supposed to have memorized. Also, the teachers expected me to pass off the discussions when I wasn't completely ready which made me even more depressed."

Learning a new language caused less stress than I'd initially thought. "Language," including learning, speaking, feelings of inadequacy, and the

inability to express one's feelings, ranked fourth. One missionary explained, "Self-expression with the other district members is basically denied to us, unless we break the rules." "I think it's good to get us speaking our language," another wrote, "but I don't think it should be our first priority while we're here. It's more important that we get to know our companions because we're going to be with them for eight weeks. My companion and I were here for four weeks before I felt that we had a good relationship."

Last among the top five stresses was "rules." This general category included, of course, all MTC rules, although the following were specifically mentioned in the missionaries' responses: lack of privacy, lack of individuality, and always having to be with a companion. "Sometimes," noted one missionary, "it's not really necessary to obey some of the rules, and it's hard to always obey the letter of the law." Another wrote, "It's really hard to change from life before a mission. There's a lot of stress on keeping the rules and sometimes it's hard, and you always have to keep them in mind because they take some adjusting to." Finally, a third missionary explained, "It's hard learning to obey all the rules and not always knowing why. This is especially hard in a world where everything you do usually has to have a reason."

Other, less prevalent stresses included the various required language and discussion examinations administered to missionaries during their stay; minor, unspecified distractions which can prevent missionaries from concentrating fully on their training; and homesickness.

Another category of potential stress, which I failed to take into account at the time but which I later realized can affect many missionaries, is guilt — not only over personal inadequacies but more particularly over what their branch and mission presidents refer to as "unconfessed past transgressions." Besides their weekly stewardship interviews with teachers, missionaries are also interviewed at least twice during their stay at the MTC by their branch president, who is the only non-missionary member of the branch. As far as I could see, the only difference between these two sets of interviews was that the branch president's emphasized moral worthiness, whereas teachers were instructed not to venture into moral areas at all. This is not to say that the subject didn't come up. It did, for many missionaries felt more at ease talking with someone closer to their own age and, presumably, experience. Typically, this emphasis on moral worthiness resulted in a missionary's simply needing to be reassured that past lapses did not necessarily make him unworthy now. But in other instances, especially where the missionary's sense of self-condemnation had become almost debilitating, all we could do was encourage him to talk to his branch president.

For a time, though I understand this is no longer a practice, branch presidents were counseled to follow up belated confessions with a series of probing personal questions. They were expected to determine, for example, when the transgression first occurred (before the missionary was interviewed for his call, or after; before he was set apart, or after; before going through the temple, or after); the nature and extent of the transgression; and if the transgression was sexual, the sex and marital status of the partner, if the partner had chil-

dren, if pregnancy occurred, if an abortion was performed, the number of times the transgression occurred, and the number of different partners. Finally, at the end of each month, all branch presidents were to categorize the confessions they'd heard according to transgression, ranging from fornication/adultery, homosexuality, oral sex, masturbation, petting, abortion, and bestiality to stealing, and alcohol, tobacco, and drug abuse. These numbers were to be totaled on a special form and turned in to the mission presidency where they would be aggregated and sent to Church headquarters for further study. "There is no repentance without suffering," the branch presidents were instructed in their *Branch President's Handbook*. "You do your greatest service when you require the sinner to suffer."

For their part, confessing missionaries were required, in order to repent fully and to remain on their missions, to write to their parents, bishops or branch presidents, and stake presidents confessing, though not specifying, their transgression, expressing their sorrow at having deceived them, and asking for their forgiveness. If the infraction was deemed serious enough, they would be sent home where they would usually be disfellowshipped or excommunicated. Although I don't know if as much emphasis continues to be placed on belated confessions, the MTC administration and missionary department are still striving for a balance between what they see as necessary worthiness and a moderate approach to confession.

While in my experience all missionaries confronted some, if not all, of these and other stresses and pressures, only a few were ever distressed enough to leave their missions early. Statistics on the number of missionaries leaving early for reasons other than poor health are difficult to come by, but according to the official figures I saw while at the MTC I would hazard that not more than 5 percent of all missionaries leave their missions early. A dropout rate this low speaks well, I think, of both the strength and determination of the missionaries themselves as well as the support systems offered by the MTC in the form of usually sympathetic and caring branch presidents and teachers.

Perhaps the best evaluation of a missionary's stay at the MTC is expressed in the following two letters from missionaries themselves. The first was written anonymously and left under the door of an MTC administrator in late 1977. It reads:

I am one of the so-called "dummies" that passes through the missionary system much too frequently — the missionary that never quite "gets it together." Despite my efforts, I didn't reach the minimal discussion goal nor am I doing so well on the language. Yes, I'm one who seems destined to junior companionship, one who sits in class eyes glazed because his mind is still focused on the day before yesterday's grammar lesson.

As I approach departure date, I feel little "spurts" (I guess you could call them that) of rebellion coming out of me more and more as I'm made to feel less adequate by the day. "Why do I feel good about my devotion and desire to do my best, and all anybody else can concentrate on is my somewhat meager results?" I catch myself wondering sometimes. Also, "To whom and where do these weekly statistics go? Why are they so important when my efforts are so overlooked? How come he's praised for eight discussions and I'm being continually prodded for my three — which took me almost twice the effort?" These questions (and several other factors) lead up to the

“biggie” that I can’t understand. “How come I’m leaving this place feeling like I’ve failed, like I’ve wasted everyone’s time but my own, when I’ve worked harder here than ever before, anywhere, for any reason?”

Please, consider these things. I am no longer feeling this way, because I know I gave it my best shot. Sure I slipped a lot, but I always got back up and kept going. I also realize I could have done more, and everybody should.

I’m hoping this will give you some insight into the “not-so-ideal-missionary-material” missionary, and how what is average and motivating for many, ridiculously simple for others, can be depressing and defeating for some.

Shouldn’t the emphasis be on effort and determination for some, rather than quality and quantity of work? I know my stay here would have been more productive and uplifting with more of this type of attitude reinforcing my efforts.

P.S. Might I refer you to the parable of the talents? It seems all one can do is multiply what he has.

The second letter was written by a missionary I knew and worked with. The hope it suggests is highlighted by the fact that this missionary had to deal with one of the most difficult, taxing experiences, both intellectually and spiritually, of any missionary I met during my six years at the MTC. He wrote as he was preparing to leave the MTC for the mission field:

Well, it’s finally true, I’m actually going. I never really had a chance to say good-bye in an appreciative way, so I would like to take that opportunity now. If I hadn’t been so stupid before my mission, I may have been able to show that I have a bit more of a personality than just negativism. When I first came here I was a little unstable, maybe insecure is a better word. I’m not saying that right now I’m filled with confidence, but I feel a lot better about myself. I can remember as if it were yesterday when one of my teachers took me out of class and showed me some concern. I suspect I will have somewhat of the same feeling and need when I get to the mission field. I only hope that my first companion will have the same patience with me and show me the same concern.

I know my personality needs to do a lot of growing yet, but the thing I’ve learned the most here is that while the discussions are important, in order to get them, your mind has to learn to thrive on thinking good and doing good to others. I was so worried about my inadequacy as a student that I forgot or didn’t realize the true meaning of being a missionary. I know others tried to explain it to me, but I guess a closed mind doesn’t listen very well. I’ve really learned a lot here, and I know that if I will apply those things, I’ll be able to take the gospel to those who really want it. I would like to write to you again, if it’s okay, and show you that I can actually present the discussions and speak the language understandably.

Perhaps, as Viktor Frankl has suggested in *Man’s Search For Meaning* (1963), discomfort, suffering, and pain such as missionaries sometimes encounter at the MTC enable many of them to discover deeper meaning in their lives, their missionary experience, and their church commitment.

At the same time, I don’t doubt that for some missionaries the one or two months spent at the MTC can be a depressing, humiliating experience that can deeply scar them and their relationship to the Church for life. But this was not my experience — either as a missionary at the LTM or as a teacher at the MTC. The six years I spent at the MTC were ones of successes and failures, triumphs and tragedies as the missionaries with whom I worked repeatedly tested the limits of their strengths and convictions. Confronting what was for the vast majority of them the greatest intellectual and spiritual

challenge of their young lives, most missionaries coped surprisingly well with the rigors of a full-time commitment to the Church. For most, this meant fulfilling an eighteen-month to two-year mission, whether or not they managed during this time to integrate fully into their lives the contradictions of belief, faith, and knowledge. For others, leaving their missions early, however painful, seemed the only honest and hence appropriate answer. I learned again and again that returning home early, or not entering the mission field at all, usually required as much, if not more, courage and integrity as remaining on a mission.

With every district of missionaries I taught, the highlight was without a doubt the testimony meeting held the evening before they departed for the field. After two months of close association, there was almost nothing they didn't know about each other. They'd not only shared one another's burdens but had exposed to one another their common humanity to a degree they were unlikely to repeat ever again. After two months, they were no longer strangers but had grown closer to each other than they were to their own parents, brothers, and sisters — perhaps even their own future wives and husbands. And now, faced with the breakup of the district that had nurtured them, they groped for the words to express their feelings. Following the farewell testimony meeting of my first district of missionaries, I remember writing in a diary that no longer exists how I wished every member of the Church could attend such a gathering, how poignant and profoundly touching it was, how much I'd come to respect, admire, and love every missionary in that district, and how I knew that each had experienced something of a minor miracle in his life.

After nearly four years at the MTC, I remember attending a missionwide teachers' training seminar. The administrator conducting the workshop commented early in his presentation that most instructors stayed only about six months. I hadn't before given much thought to the length of time I'd spent teaching part-time, and his remark caught me off guard. I began wondering if I hadn't started to lose whatever effectiveness I'd managed to acquire. And I had to admit that it was becoming increasingly difficult to sustain the same level of enthusiasm from one district to the next. But in the next instant, I realized how much the MTC had come to mean to me, how I still looked forward to the arrival of each group of new missionaries, how much I depended on them, and how much I would miss them.

I remembered Elders Liddiard and Malcolm, whose love of the arts and personal sensitivity had set them apart from the rest of the members of their districts; Elders Spencer and Hill, who had postponed their missions until their mid-twenties, after they had first determined what place the Church had in their lives; Elders Evans and French, two companions of opposite natures, who'd learned that strengths and weaknesses can complement each other; Elders Lasker and Leishman, strangers before entering the MTC, but close friends after, the one seeing himself in the other and helping to support him through the trial of an early release; Elders Evans and Kutney, recent Canadian converts whose commitment to the Church was both spiritual and intellectual and who'd struggle with the dilemma of reconciling the one with the other; and Elders Eaves and Lee, who'd helped me realize that patience can lead to

understanding and hopefully compassion. I remembered these missionaries and hundreds of others, as well as the many different teachers I'd worked so closely with, Elders Lussier, Nelson, Devine, Wilson, and Liddiard, and Sisters Nguyen, Young, Valentine, and Crawford — all of whom epitomized in different ways everything that I'd come to cherish about the MTC.

Eventually, two years later, as I approached graduation from BYU in 1982 with a master's degree in public administration, I realized that I would soon have to leave the MTC. Much to my surprise, though, I didn't find the prospect nearly as difficult as I'd feared. Perhaps I had grown tired of the routine and regular turnover of missionaries and looked forward to the change. Perhaps, knowing that the time was finally coming, I'd subconsciously prepared myself for the break. Perhaps I wasn't ready at all and had only talked myself into accepting the inevitable.

For some teachers, especially those who have taught at the MTC for more than one or two years and have come to measure their place in life by the success of their interaction with missionaries, leaving the security and support the MTC offers can be as painful and traumatic as a death in the family. And while I'm sure I felt some of that, I had consciously tried to distance myself somewhat from the last district I had worked with, not wanting to compound the mixed feelings I was experiencing. At first, I prided myself on not missing the three to four hours of daily drills and memorization. But now, nearly five years later, I must confess that sometimes, while in Provo ostensibly to visit my parents, the bittersweet memories of the six years of my life spent surrounded on all sides by those rough brick walls tug gently at my consciousness, and I find myself driving past the MTC to see if, and how, it's changed. And in small ways it has. But since leaving I've come to realize that in many ways — in ways that mattered most to me — it never will; and that whatever contribution I might like to think I made pales in comparison to the debt I will always owe.

I remember once reading, sometime during those six years, Wallace Stegner's nostalgic, evocative essay, "Hometown Revisited" (1958). In it, he describes his return to the Salt Lake City of his youth, remembers fondly and with evident affection the streets, houses, canyons, and mountains he haunted on the verge of adolescence, and concludes that "home is what you take away with you" (p. 482). Later, I came across Margaret Mead's moving autobiography, *Blackberry Winter* (1973), and her similar perceptive observation that, after years of anthropological fieldwork, she discovered that home is often what you come back to. Perhaps. But thinking back on my six years at the Missionary Training Center and the faces of the many missionaries who, whether they knew it or not, deeply enriched my life, and realizing what they have meant and still mean to me, I can't help wondering if sometimes home isn't also what you leave behind.

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