

Tying Flowers into Knots

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MIRRORS TELL ONLY THE TRUTH, or so they say. And tonight as I stare at my image in the glass, I think I look the same as always: for the past five years I've worn a white shirt and tie almost every day, the first two years in France, these last three in Provo.

Five years seem like eternity. I hate white shirts. And I hate ties even more. When I was in the Missionary Training Center as a new missionary, they told us it was a necessary sacrifice to wear a uniform for two years, to lose our identities, to become disciples and missionaries. Ever since then I've been searching for the scripture that speaks of this strange sacrifice. Choice was never involved, my regular clothing never voluntarily sacrificed in favor of Swedish knit, because obedience is better than sacrifice, or so they say. So whenever the mirror reflected anything but white and tie, I thought it lied.

I tie my tie single Windsor, twisting the pink and pale blue roses around on each other. Floral print was a grave sin when I was in the MTC, punishable by withdrawal of the Spirit. The rules allowed only solid, subdued colors or bold stripes, nothing else being appropriate for servants of the Lord. Rumors of the previous MTC president's wife held that she had been guardian of the tie. To demonstrate the gravity of our daily tie choice, they told us her story, a woman defending the faith: she would carry a pair of scissors with her to cut short any Spirit-repelling knots, patterns, or colors. Nowadays nobody says anything to the missionaries, as long you're wearing a tie with a knot. Fashions change, they say. Looking in the mirror, I wonder if I'll ever tie another tie or sport another white shirt.

About six months ago I couldn't take it anymore. "My name is Todd," I told the missionaries on the first night. "Elder Ormsbee is my brother who's on a mission and Brother Ormsbee's my dad. I'm just Todd." They had always told us that missionaries would never respect us if we allowed them to call us by our first names. Instead, I found that the elders and sisters were more willing and open to me when I was just Todd, a person. At first, it was odd, and there was an

ominous feeling that we were all breaking some sacred code. But after I got used to it, my name rounded clean and whole coming out of the mouths of missionaries.

We could give out twice as many copies of the Book of Mormon on Preparation Day as we could on regular work days. Jeans and tee-shirts didn't threaten people as much as dark business suits. We seemed like normal people who loved Jesus. Not the CIA. Once in southern France, in Aix-en-Provence, we contacted a woman at the local Musée de Cézanne on P-Day. She was very touched by what we had to say. In fact, we didn't even have to ask for a rendez-vous. She was so excited to share the gospel with her husband and family that she insisted we come to her house that night. When we showed up in suits and name-tags, she was shocked and offended by our deception. After a lengthy scolding, she pointed her finger at us and said the chillingly lovely words, "*Que des menteurs!*" ("Nothing but liars!") Throwing the book at us, she slammed the door shut. Smoothing our ties, without a word, we turned to find something else to fill the evening with.

My first night as an MTC teacher, I found seven brave young men, sitting in a little cinder block room waiting for their new language instructor. They were to learn French and Tahitian. I only spoke French, so I would be their teacher for only a couple weeks until someone who had served in Tahiti could be found to replace me. Geneva, Switzerland, seemed farther away than two months. And closer to God. But I wanted to do this. So I looked around the room and introduced myself in French. Maybe it was nostalgia for my own mission, maybe it was a socialized response, or maybe it was real: the room was filled with the power of God, and it was coming from those seven men. My mother always jokes that there is a strange genetic defect in our family which connects our kidneys to our eyes, making us especially susceptible to tears. I guess I inherited this strange trait. I sat in the chair at the front of the room and, looking at them, cried.

My tie turns out a little short tonight, the knot somewhat lopsided, but I gave up caring months ago. I hardly ever wear my suit because it's too big and I look dumpty, but tonight I'm going to hear the testimonies of nine of Jesus' disciples. There's a tradition in the French department at the MTC that on the last night before leaving for the field, the missionaries in each district meet together with their three teachers, who can bring their spouses if they have one. The whole crowd crams into the tiny cinder block classroom to talk. The missionaries usually speak of their love for each other and about what they have learned at the MTC, maybe a word or two of appreciation for the teachers, and they talk about Jesus.

The teachers often share last words of love and advice. After two hours of testimony, the tensions of saying good-bye mount pretty high, so laughing and joking begin right after the closing prayer. I've been to fourteen such nights, my favorite part of teaching at the MTC. Tonight will be the fifteenth and last.

A special meeting was called for the European language areas only. On our shift there were about two hundred teachers present. Leading the meeting was our boss's boss, who works at the MTC instead of in Salt Lake City. He began with his "Afterglow" voice to tell us that he had been inspired to institute a new methodology into our classrooms. Language was to become our priority. We were to speak the language in all activities, including gospel lessons, even if the missionaries couldn't follow what we were saying. We would no longer follow the pace the missionaries were able to handle, but would instead be given a rigid agenda that was to be obeyed exactly, regardless of an individual missionary's inability to keep up or another missionary's boredom. I know this is from God because it will increase efficiency and decrease teachers doing whatever they please, he finished. Questions?

My first night in Nice, France, my companion took me to a member's home, la famille Karsenty. Over the next three and a half months I would spend in Nice, I would learn that Frère Karsenty was the most Christlike individual I had ever met. But in their tiny living room, on that first night in France, I understood nothing. Their three children ran around, crawled under my feet, and jumped into my lap. Over the bedlam my companion had a great conversation with Frère and Soeur Karsenty. I could only watch, scared to death, feeling very alone. Seeing my lost expression, the youngest child, a little girl about four years old, crawled onto my lap and took my face in her tiny hands. With a serious expression, she looked into my eyes, holding my face tight, and began to chatter.

Of course, I couldn't decode her child's French fast enough to comprehend what she said. Sensing this, she began to enunciate each word with a tug at my tie. Giving up, she shoved her clenched fists into her hips and turned to look at her mother. Everyone was watching by now. I didn't want my companion or these members to see me cry, so I bit my lower lip as hard as I could in the hopes of diverting my attention from the sense of inadequacy growing just under my skin. With a nod from her *maman*, she turned back to me and, looking me over, spotted my name tag. With an expression of satisfaction, she reached into my pocket, pulled out the black plastic, studied it for a moment, and then, pointing with a tiny finger at the words she'd been searching for, put the tag in front of my eyes. "*Jésus-Christ*," she pronounced slowly and with care.

With her free hand she poked my chest with her finger and said, "Missionnaire." Then back to the tag, pointing at the word, "Jésus." I bit down so hard that the inside of my lip bled warm onto my tongue. But biting my lip couldn't stop what I felt from coming out.

I have a question, I blurted.

I knew that in Doctrine and Covenants the Lord had promised that every one of his children would hear the fullness of the gospel in his or her own tongue and language. But I believed from my own experience that missionaries really could learn the language easier in the field. Rather than teaching me French, the MTC had provided me with a safe place to learn about the last phrase in that same verse: "for the revelation of Jesus Christ." Was I really a teacher at the MTC just so that missionaries could score higher on their French test the week before they left? I asked. What if they struggle with the language? Does this really mean they don't have enough faith?

As soon as I said it, I knew I shouldn't have. My too quick temper got the best of me as I asked these questions of our director, whose balding head turned bright crimson. He responded in kind. Every teacher looked at me disapprovingly.

The next day I received a note that I had been placed on probation and would be watched carefully. I was honestly sorry to have let my anger get the best of me, so I went to the director's office to apologize. As I walked in the door, he coldly told me to sit down. For the next hour I said nothing. I could only listen in disbelief.

You are not worthy to be an MTC teacher, he said. I wonder that the missionaries can learn anything from you. I doubt you have the testimony necessary to teach here. Don't you know that God is guiding this work? How dare you question my authority? I am your boss. You're just lucky I don't ask you to leave right now.

For the next two months the director and others wrote letters to go into my "official file." A copy of each letter was courteously left on the chalk tray in my classroom for the missionaries to see, and for me to read. Once a letter was hand delivered, right in front of my class, telling me that I was being watched and if anything at all was reported by anyone, my employment would be terminated without notice or discussion. The letter gently reminded me that my testimony was deficient.

Driving to the MTC, my mind wanders to the meeting we had a couple of weeks ago, and why I had decided that the time to leave had finally come. I had gone to a special meeting for MTC teachers where one of the administrators from church headquarters came to speak and answer questions, followed by a brief address from the MTC president.

The administration building has a special room for such meetings.

There are three large chapels in a row for Sunday meetings and culture classes. Pulpits, pianos, and microphones sit on the south ends of each of the three rooms, and bright orange plastic chairs form crisp, straight rows easily skewed by people sitting in them. The two center walls which separate the three chapels fold in upon themselves—a glorified version of the accordion walls in every Mormon edifice—so that one great big meeting hall can be formed. Throughout that special day, every six months, all teachers from each of the three shifts—morning, afternoon, and evening—file in to hear the words of an administrator from Salt Lake City.

When I walked into the large chapel, early enough to get a good spot near the back, I saw they had already collapsed the walls. The custodial crew had turned all the orange chairs to the East, facing the big stand which looked like the stand in any ward chapel, complete with veneer and plastic flowers. (One time while I was a teacher there, a general authority had come to speak to new mission presidents and, because the flowers weren't real, he refused to give his talk.)

For that evening's meeting the administrator's secretary had prepared the typical overhead projections, each one slipped into its own sheath of plastic so it could be used over and over without much wear. Certain responsibilities had been delegated ahead of time to able-bodied teachers to ensure the smooth running of the program. A teacher strategically placed by each of the three doors dimmed the lights at just the right moment, and another dutifully flipped the switch on the overhead projector which blew up the clear blue bar graph depicting the efficiency rating of missionaries leaving the MTC last quarter. Silence. The graph showed that this last group of missionaries spoke their languages poorer and didn't know the commitment pattern as well and were therefore less prepared to serve the Lord than the ones before them. This decrease in efficiency reflected a lack of commitment, motivation, and Spirit. The teachers were duly appalled. My tie was choking me.

The next overhead illustrated growth projections for the church over the next ten years. Moans of ecstasy rippled through the congregation. God's work is moving implacably forward. See it? It's right there on the screen! But how, asks the administrator, can we expect the Lord to do his part if we're not training the missionaries to work at their highest rate of efficiency? He bore his testimony of the programs implemented at the MTC, he knew they were inspired by God, the apostles were directly involved. In Jesus' name, he sat down.

I couldn't help but wonder what God really thought of all that.

As the memory fades, I steer the car along 900 East west of the Provo temple, a pillar by night, and turn into the parking lot. Two weeks ago I knew that the time had come to leave the MTC. But as I walk across the

street tonight for my last meeting with this district, my throat catches.

One of the elders hadn't come to class. Looking out the window, I spotted him sitting by himself outside, his head in his hands. I gave the class something to do and went to talk to him.

Hey buddy, what's up? I asked, smiling as I realized I hadn't used the "appropriate title," so I probably couldn't feel the Spirit.

I'm going nuts, he said. I can't speak this stupid language. If I hear one more talk on worthiness, I'll shoot someone! What am I doing here anyway?

Why do you think God wants you to go to Bordeaux, France? I asked.

I know what you want me to say, he answered, frustrated.

So humor me. Why?

You want me to say that God loves me how I am and has called me because I'm me. That's hard to swallow here, Elder Ormsbee.

I know.

One of the assistants to the president got up to bear his testimony. As the zone leader, I was visiting the Geneva district that Sunday and had gone to church with them. The assistant looked dramatically around the fasting congregation, tears in his eyes. I'd never known anyone who could cry on demand until I met him. It was a tool he used often. Charity, Elder, I said to myself.

The last time I had seen him cry, I had almost punched him. My companion and I served alone in a small Swiss town called Fribourg. He was only a zone leader at the time, our ZL. The phone rang one morning. The ZL's voice explained that he and his companion had found, taught, and engaged a woman to be baptized that Sunday.

Just between you and me, I don't want our district leader here to interview her, he said. I know you'll do a better job, Elder Ormsbee. Will you come to Lausanne this morning? he asked, emphasizing the appropriate invitational structure.

Sure, I guess.

Who would have guessed? The train ride through the Swiss countryside was deceptively beautiful and comforting. Arriving in Lausanne, I was whisked immediately to the ZL apartment where I was briefed on the situation:

The woman has a few problems, but you couldn't believe how she was found, or how we felt as we taught her, or how many tears we've all shed together. Besides, the ZL team has to baptize soon so the rest of the zone will follow. I know you'll have a powerful experience, Elder Ormsbee. Just remember everything we told you.

That night during the interview the woman answered some of the Big Five questions in such a way that I knew I would have to call the mis-

sion president for advice. I never told investigators that they couldn't be baptized, just that I was too inexperienced to know how to handle difficult problems they might have. She reacted violently.

I hate you! she screamed. I knew the minute I saw you that you were evil! I knew that you would stand between me and God!

She ran out of the room to get the ZL. He convinced her to wait until tomorrow and give me another try.

What's the problem? he asked me as we left. I told you that she's ready.

I have to call the president, I said.

Look, you don't understand, Elder. I know she's ready. If you'd just open your heart to the Spirit, you'd know too. Is there something in your life you should tell me about?

I stopped and looked at him. What do you mean?

Is there something preventing you from feeling the Spirit? That woman should be baptized. I know it, and my companion knows it. But you don't seem able to feel that same thing.

He shed a few tears.

Later on the phone I explained to the president the woman's situation and asked his advice. He asked to speak to the zone leader, who took the receiver from me, mumbled a few uh-huh's, then asked me to leave the room. A few minutes later he leaned out the doorway and said the president would like to speak to me again. His deep, booming voice, which always stirred fear and awe in my heart, asked if there was something I needed to talk to him about. When I said no, he told me that I was a good district leader, but maybe it would be better to let someone else do the interview.

During the train ride back, I looked at my reflection in the window. There I was, white shirt and tie, a missionary with a name tag. Was that really me? What was I doing on a train in the middle of Switzerland? In the window's images I could see the couple sitting across the aisle from me. They were young and beautiful, a typical Swiss couple, playing with their little girl. I stared at their reflections and realized that I loved them.

One day one of the missionaries I was teaching physically attacked his companion for breaking a rule. As I recall, the disobedient missionary was humming a song from the 1960s. In the middle of an impassioned "do-wah-ditty," the more righteous companion jumped up and shouted at him.

I'm sick of being your companion! You're always breaking the rules! The Spirit is always with me, unless I'm with you!

Throwing himself across the room, the obedient elder clutched his companion's throat and banged his head against the floor. Shock paralyzed me for an instant, but not the other elders. You son of a bitch, one of them screamed. Before I

knew it, the two other missionaries were fighting to get the crazed missionary off his companion. The sisters shrieked. As I jumped into the middle, the enraged elder escaped our grasps and ran screaming from the room. His companion rubbed a bruised throat, the sisters cried, and the three of us panted heavily. I went straight to the counseling center to get some help.

Your missionary is a perfectionist, just help him to love himself. The reply from the counselor surprised me because of its apathy.

Wait a minute. He just tried to kill his companion in front of six people. The problem's a little deeper than perfectionism.

Don't tell me my job, Brother. I know this elder very well.

Are you aware that he was abandoned by his mother, lived with his homosexual father, and single-handedly raised his younger brothers and sisters? I demanded. This elder needs help, and all you can tell him is he's a perfectionist.

Brother, I'm a professional. I know what I'm doing. The counselor threw each word deliberately, his index finger quivering in front of my face.

That missionary eventually went home, broken and hopeless. I've seen him on the BYU campus from time to time. He won't even look at me.

In nightly prayer meeting a new rule is announced to the French teachers. Apparently it has been determined that taping pictures of Jesus to the classroom doors detracts from the work, so we are asked to remove them all immediately. Recently it has been hard to remember why I love teaching at the MTC. Then I enter my classroom. Nine reasons keep me coming back. I sit down to watch them play and laugh with each other before the other teachers arrive for their farewell testimony meeting.

Graça had asked me to baptize her just two nights before. Now we stood in the font together. She looked at me trustingly. I said a silent prayer. I was nervous. I had only baptized once before, just last week, and I had dropped her. The past few days my companion had been coaching me on how to baptize so that I didn't drop Graça. I was scared to death of ruining this for her. I had told her about dropping Jamal, but she insisted that I was to baptize her.

I raised my arm to the square, a sign of her rebirth. All I could feel was my love for her and for the Lord. I felt as though I were on fire.

Maria da Graça da Silva, I began. Ayant reçu l'autorité de Jésus-Christ, je vous baptise au nom du Père, et du Fils, et du Saint-Esprit. Amen. (Having received authority of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.)

As she lay down into the liquid death, her nose pinched, her eyes squeezed shut, I sighed a heavy sigh of relief. I hadn't dropped her, and Graça hadn't wanted to wear socks, and she forgot to bend her knees as she went under the water, and her feet slipped on the tiles, and she kicked my legs out from under me, and like Alma and Helam I went under the water with my convert. Lying on top

of her under the water, my cheeks burned with embarrassment and shame. Calculating where the congregation was, I tried to get up with my back to them.

Standing up, rubbing the water out of my eyes, I saw the most incredible sight I have ever seen. Graça came up out of the water, reborn. Her face at that moment burned into my soul. Breaking the rules she knew too well after four months with the missionaries, she stretched out her arms and, like Americans do, held her face next to my chest. Crying in each other's arms, she said over and over again, in English, Thank you, thank you, Elder O.

The mirror shows my puffy face. I have survived three years as an MTC teacher. I think of the nine missionaries who are leaving the MTC in two days' time to serve. Not surprisingly, they each have a sincere desire to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Each has a unique personality, with strengths and weaknesses that they have consecrated to God for their missions and for their lives. For three years the missionaries' power and love have been tangible every time I've entered the classroom. No matter what they were doing. No matter what they were talking about. No matter what they were fighting against. Knowing that tonight was my last night and as a final gift to me, each of them stood at the end of the farewell testimony meeting and said the first phrase that I had taught them in French. *Je sais que Jésus-Christ est mon Rédempteur.* (I know that Jesus Christ is my redeemer.)

In the mirror now, it's just me. I untie the pink and pale blue roses, loosen the tie's grip around my neck, and slide the knot off the end of the short, skinny end. A few seconds more and my white shirt lies crumpled at my feet. I thank God and go to sleep.