
PERSONAL VOICES

Immortal for Quite Some Time

Part 2*

(after the autopsy, after the funeral, after AIDS)

Scott Abbott

I've started to read John's missionary letters from Italy. Nearly one a week for two years. From what Mom told me when I asked about them, I expected requests for money, reports of trouble, and depressed silences. John communicated all of that, of course; but his letters are profoundly uplifting as well (or is it fraternal nostalgia I'm feeling?).

From Genoa, John's first assigned city after two months learning the Italian language and missionary techniques in Provo's Language Training Mission:

November 17, 1970

Dear Family,

Sorry I haven't written the last two weeks. I wrote two weeks ago, but never sent it. I don't really have that much to say, and I think it's dumb saying the same things every week.

We started teaching a young boy, 17, about a month ago. He came to every meeting, was reading the Book of Mormon, but didn't

*For Part 1, see *Dialogue* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 105-14.



John and Michele, Genoa, Italy, November 1970.

believe in God. I have gotten so I really love this guy, Michele. Last Sunday he came to church and was really upset, down etc. He finally told us he wasn't going to come anymore. He said he knew our church was the best church around but that he just couldn't believe in God. He doesn't know why but he's been sincere, he tried to believe, but he just can't. He tries to pray but how do you pray to someone who "doesn't exist" to you. I've never felt worse. I can't tell you how much I learned to love him. It hurt me so bad. I'd give anything if he could accept God, get an answer to his prayers. I never knew I could be hurt so bad. But then he told us he wasn't coming anymore, because he couldn't be part of us and not believe everything. He wanted, he wants to believe but he tried, and it didn't work for him. I don't know why; I almost started to cry. Well that's that. I just pray for him every time I pray. I can't see how God can let this happen to such a great guy. I don't know

John's pencil slides from the "w" in "know" to slash across the rest of the sheet of paper. The second page has a long p.s. about

buying “a real good camera for Christmas,” a request for recipes, especially for Mom’s cinnamon rolls, and a final note asking Mom to tell our piano teacher that he’s been playing the piano at church for the last month.

Desire works powerfully between a missionary and the persons he teaches. They are attracted to each other, pleased by reciprocal interest. They feed mutual longings for religious community, for order, for divine love. They join in fervent prayer. They share self-sacrifice and service. The missionary teaches truths calculated to enhance life, to bind families, to give purpose. The investigator accepts the teachings as truths, changes lifelong habits, takes on the name of Christ, and becomes a new person. The remarkable transformation reinforces the missionary’s sense for the truth of his message. The two years he is sacrificing become unforgettably beautiful.

Because the potential for intimate personal relationships is so high under these circumstances, missionaries are required to work in pairs at all times, and their mission president transfers them often from city to city. The rules of conduct are made explicit in a handbook every missionary is told to read daily, along with the scriptures.

In Mom’s storage shed I find a black, six-ring notebook similar to the one I had received two years earlier. It contains the Church president’s essay on “The Calling and Obligation of a Missionary,” a “Church Organization Chart” depicting the Church’s hierarchy, and an essay on “The Conduct of a Missionary”:

Conduct yourself circumspectly . . . Guard against familiarity with the opposite sex. There must be no courting, kissing or embracing. Your kisses should be for home consumption and be brought home (unused) to your loved ones where they belong. Kissing and hugging aside from this lead to immorality. . . . Immorality is the bane of missionary life.

John’s handbook also contains a section on “Ordinances and Ceremonies,” a list of “Scriptural References on Tithing,” and “Un Sistema Uniforme Per Istruire Gli Investigatori.”

On blank pages at the end of the notebook, he compiled several vocabulary lists, including Italian food words and the following list of idioms translated from Italian:

it serves you right
it looks good on you
damn
in the wolf's mouth
the beauty of it is
draw water for your own mule
he hasn't even discovered America yet
I'm broke
he is an ace
make like the devil's advocate
I lick my own mustache
what a bore
he was born lucky
I don't care
sleep with angels or have beautiful dreams
I don't feel well

On one page he copied John Henry Newman's "Lead, Kindly Light." On another he collected a hodgepodge of maxims:

You set your personality for eternity during your mission
Don't set limits on your service to the Lord
Turn my friends over to the Lord
Let no obstacles stop you, it's stupid if you do!
Obedience, the first law of the universe
I have responsibility to God because I have the Melchizedek Priest-
hood
No sacrifice is too much for the Lord
Don't let bad feelings out, it's my responsibility to keep them can-
ned
Christ suffered for me, what do I owe him?
The priesthood is the power to act as if you were God
As soon as I open the window Satan is waiting to get in, and will if
I'm not careful
Discouragement and depression are tools of Satan
Work to get the spirit of the Lord
Keep the Sabbath holy
Know the Gospel

I distinctly remember the feelings of commitment and faith that motivate a missionary to submit himself completely to a system perfectly designed, as he supposes, to bring him salvation here and in the next life. The rewards are immediate and substantial and include security, power, and a sense of direction. The absolute faith also breeds absolute rhetoric (or is it the absolute rhetoric that breeds the absolute faith?): for eternity, no limit, no obstacles, the first law of the universe, no sacrifice, as if you were God, and Satan as the absolute antithesis.

I wish John had embraced a gentler vocabulary, one far enough from the march of Christian soldiers to provide space as he found and developed needs this productive system could not address.

I check my own black binder to see what thoughts I collected as a nineteen-year-old missionary:

Be like a duck, unruffled on top, but paddle like hell underneath.

The ladder of life is full of splinters. Never slide down.

Atheist—a man without an invisible means of support.

“Questions”: Will you wait womanish, while the flattering stream / Glosses your faults away?

In addition to that misogynist fragment from C. Day Lewis, I copied uplifting sayings by Samuel Johnson, Emerson, John Kennedy, Lincoln, Thoreau, Longfellow, Edgar A. Guest, Benjamin Franklin, St. Francis of Assisi, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Norman Cousins, W. C. Fields, Socrates, Dale Carnegie, William James, and Adolph Rupp. In most cases I didn't even know who the author was, much less the context of the quotation.

A nineteen-year-old, suddenly required to teach answers to questions he has never asked, grasps at straws.

25 January 1971, from Cagliari, Sardegna

Dear Family,

I was transferred from Genova this week to Cagliari Sardegna. I'm really sorry to leave because it's a great town and great people whom I love very much. Michele came to the apartment Thursday and I got to talk to him for a little while. He's a great guy, and I'm sure he'll accept God and the Gospel when the time is right. Then he, Elder Nelson and I went to

the port in a taxi. I bought my ticket and paid for my bike. It cost me about \$15.20 in all. It was raining so we waited inside till 5:00. Then we took my stuff on the ship (they got to come, too). They waited till 5:30 and then Elder Nelson left, but Michele waited. I was on the ship, he was on the dock. We couldn't talk because of the distance and the wind. We just looked at each other. Finally at 6:30 (I was supposed to leave at 6:00) he had to go. We said good-bye. I sure felt sad, and realized how good a friend he'd been. I'm sure I'll get to see him again though.

Well my address is Via sanna randaccio 63, Sardegna, Italia 09100.

Love, John

We just looked at each other.

In contrast, I keep my distance. I keep myself out of trouble. I circumvent messy situations, personal entanglements, potential failures. I calculate. I protect myself.

Responding to John's death, I find that that's not enough. So I write to reveal myself. I write to unearth motivations, to track down fears, to open myself to change.

I ask a friend to read my manuscript, apologizing, as I hand it over, for the exhibitionist quality of my writing.

Her reply: An exhibitionist, perhaps, but you're wearing a full suit of clothes under the overcoat.

16 February 1971

Dear Family,

Well Cagliari's kind of a slow city right now, it's only because we aren't working hard enough and don't have enough faith, though. My companion and I are starting to get along better. My organ "playing" doesn't seem to be improving but a funny thing happens. When I play before or practice I can't play any of the songs but then during the meeting I can, not at all perfect, but all right. There's only one person who can be helping me.

Right now I'm having a hard time. I want to study, work etc. but I don't want to. I just kind of want to exist. I really miss being able to be alone. It's one thing I really dislike about my mission. It's hard to live with my companion. We're about alike as a cat and a dog. I haven't felt at all

like a missionary, close to god, or anything else the last couple of days. I hope I can pull out of it soon.

Love, John

On the back of this envelope John wrote “Send me Scott’s address.” Reading his note, decades after the fact and in the third person, I still feel the warmth of something approaching conversation. How I wish I could talk with him—with you, John.

24 February 1971

Dear Family,

My companion was sick Sunday night Monday and Tuesday but other than that it was an alright week.

Thanks for sending my letter. It was from a guy I met when I went to the Junior Civitan Seminar 3 years ago.

We had a party Saturday. We went out to the sea and had a weeny roast. It was kind of fun, but not really.

Well I guess that’s all. One of our contacts gave me a seahorse (dead) but its really pretty.

Love John

Was the letter from the guy Mom thinks introduced John to gay sex?

It’s so tenuous, this construction of a life out of memories, a photo, and some letters.

25 February 1971

Dear Mom & Dad,

There’s something I have wanted to tell you for many years now. I love you, and the example you’ve been to me, although you haven’t seen me follow it, until now. I had more or less hypnotized myself into not seeing the real you. Looking at only your mistakes, which weren’t or were just little, and enlarging them, making them into large oversized lies, and telling myself this was my parents. I fought, argued because it kind of pleased me for the moment to see you get angry etc, but I always felt really bad afterwards. There were so many times I wanted to

accept you but I just didn't and couldn't change; I told myself the reason was because I didn't want you to be pleased or satisfied with me. I'm sorry I caused you much heart-break and sorrow. I always wanted to be close to Dad, like my friends were with their dads, but I wouldn't let myself. I was too proud to accept, what I called then, "defeat." There aren't any two lovelier or better people in the world. Two people who have sacrificed for and loved their family more. I love you, each.

I always had big dreams but was too lazy to do anything about them. As I look back I see two roads, one the example you set for me and the other the way I followed. I am really sorry I didn't change and become a better person while I was home and follow your example.

Thank you for everything. I love you, and wish I could show it more effectively. Dad, you said that you considered me and my mission as part of the mission you didn't serve (officially). Well, let's see what I can do to make us both proud of what I do. It'll be hard but with your faith and prayers, I can do it.

Thanks again.
Love, your son John

John is feeling remorse. He wants to be good. He is a missionary of the Lord Jesus Christ and the gospel of repentance is working powerfully within him. Confession eases his soul and makes progress possible. His desires, however, will conflict increasingly with the system he has internalized.

How can I be so sure? Don't I, after all, believe in repentance, change, spiritual rebirth?

Not in the black-and-white sense of the question. Not in the sense of absolute change or conversion. Not any longer.

My own life is the product of a Mormon worldview. National Honor Society president in high school. College graduation with honors. Mission in Germany. Marriage to an intelligent and beautiful woman. Graduate studies at Princeton. University professor. Seven children.

Yet in and through it all runs a web of conflicting desires. They too make me who I am.

2 April 1971

Hi,

This has really been a good week. We highlight it tomorrow when we baptize Sister Accardi. She is the lady from Holland.

The Calabrese are trying to make up their mind about tithing, 10%. They agree that it's right, but that they should only pay what they can afford. He's a teacher and makes 130 mille Lire a month.

We got a telephone call a few minutes ago. Another one of our members died. He was in a car accident. He was inactive, and I have never seen him.

Well, I'm out of things to say, so ciao,
John

p.s. I'm getting better at the organ.

A good week. John would have met with the Calabrese family to bear testimony that the law of tithing came from God and that blessings would follow if they paid tithing first and worried about their bills later. The inexperienced nineteen-year-old could be confident about sacrifice and its attendant blessings because he had watched his parents donate to the Church 10 percent of a junior high school teacher's meager salary, plus a monthly "fast offering" to provide assistance for the needy, plus periodic deep-cutting assessed donations to a building fund. And while doing so they expressed pride and pleasure at being co-builders of the "Kingdom of God on Earth."

15 April 1971, from Cagliari

Dear Family,

Saturday we had a very wonderful and exciting experience, Sister Accardi was baptized. The first of many here in Cagliari. When the President was here for the Conference in March [he said] that he would get plane tickets and fly over if we had a baptismal service of 4 people. Well, remember the Calabrese family? They've been estimated for the 17 of April. The Lord has revealed to my companion and me that this is the right date. And as the handbook says an estimation is always a baptism. So, we're going to have a few baptisms here on the Rock. Their only real problem now is tithing. Sister Calabrese told us how their money situation is. He receives 130,000 mille Lire a month (about 220\$) and after the rent, taxes, and these kind of things that have to be paid they have

40,000 mille Lire (64\$) to live on for the rest of the month, with tithing 13,000 mille Lire 22\$. Well, they're going to have to have the faith to pay their tithing despite everything, but the Lord wants them baptized so they'll overcome this obstacle.

It's Easter or Pasqua in Italian. It's really a big thing here, too. They have chocolate eggs, vacazion from school and horrible church services. Last night we went into one of the churches here and it's sickening to see the paganism. Apparently the Catholic church rakes in the \$ this time of year. The incense, the statues of the madonna or Mary, of all the Saints, the Priests officiating over the communion or sacrament. It's really sad to see these people doing things like this. Well, that's the reason we're here.

Love, John

The Catholics would be ecstatic to rake in 10 percent. If John had been more tolerant of this kind of difference, could he have been kinder to himself?

Late in his mission John was transferred to Milano as a zone leader, responsible for several districts of missionaries. He had a car, which he hated, a leadership position which he accepted and disliked, periodic bouts of depression, and continued struggles to fit the missionary mold and to "perfect himself."

5 November 1971

We had an experience Wed. that I want to share with you. We had taken our clothes into a laundry and I went back to get them. She had them all wrapped up and then told us the price, L7,500, over \$10. She had ironed the shirts, washed my socks specially, because "they were wool." I got angry and we yelled at each other for 2 hours because I'm sure I told her not to iron my shirts. Well finally I just paid her and left. I told myself I wasn't even going to apologize for yelling at her. Well that night when I knelt down to pray nothing came out, no matter how hard I tried. I got in bed and started thinking of a scripture in the Bible, Matt. 6:14-15: "For if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." I decided to go back and apologize and at that moment felt the peace I needed. I was able to pray.

A mission works on you that way. You truly want to be a better per-

son. You try to follow the example of Jesus Christ. You strive to be humble. You burn to be filled with saintly love. I am still grateful for the spaces those feelings opened inside me.

12 November 1971

Dear Family,

It's 4 o'clock and I'm just getting around to writing. I have just been talking to the Signora Sicardi and listening to the birds that were settling down outside in a big tree, in the courtyard. It's funny this tree. They say that in the summer birds flock to it by the hundreds to rest there for the night. Just sitting by the window, watching, listening, gives one that extra little boost to continue in life, it takes away all unpleasant thoughts, all desires to do what's wrong. Just seeing and hearing the little birds sing takes one away from this world of strife and hate. I've never seen this kind of tree before but would like one in my home.

We have a sweet little old landlady. Everyday we talk a little. Her husband died about a year ago and she is all alone. She has lost all she had, money, trucks, etc. and cries when she thinks of the injustice, the sacrifice she's gone through. She was going to live with her sister in America but fell and broke her arm which hasn't completely healed yet. She is always trying to help us, dusting our room, shaking the rugs, and telling us to be a little more orderly.

Milano is different from my other cities, and I'm sure once we get working hard I'll love it. As of yet I'm still getting used to the smog which I don't care for too much. It has rained just about all week. Signora Sicardi gave us an ancient umbrella to use. It works good!

I'm having an awful time getting myself going here in Milano. It's starting to get cold, the leaves are leaving their trees, and coats are being pulled out.

I'm happy I'm here, and am happy only when I'm doing my best. It's hard though, especially for me.

Well I love you each, and am waiting to see you again.

Love, John

As the weeks and months passed, John grew closer to his “sweet little old landlady.” He discovered she was going to lose her apartment if she didn’t come up with some money. She had sets of nineteenth-century furniture and crystal and dishes to sell, and John decided to help her. There were several quick notes home describing her need and the furniture and promising it would be a good investment. The \$3,000 should be sent immediately.

Our parents indeed had money in the bank, although \$3,000 was an enormous sum for them, saved over the course of a decade. They sent the money. There were difficulties with crating and shipping. The furniture sat in a U.S. customs warehouse for months until another substantial sum was paid. An Albuquerque antiques dealer was finally found to take the furniture on consignment. Several years later, long after Mom and Dad had resigned themselves to a total loss, someone bought it for about the money already spent. So, except for the headaches and worry, it didn’t turn out too badly. Mom ended up with a set of crystal. Signora Sicardi saved her apartment. And John satisfied a generous need to be of assistance.

23 December 1971

Until yesterday I still hadn’t been able to get back into the spirit of missionary work. I lost a whole month here in Milano without accomplishing a thing. Yesterday however we started working. It is sure hard to keep a strong testimony if we don’t use it. I have found out that each period of depression I let myself fall into it takes longer and is harder to pull myself back up. For that reason I have decided to “fall no more,” to occupy my thoughts with the work and nothing else.

Why isn’t Scott getting married?

Reading this, I’m left wishing I could have talked with John about why I broke off my engagement. I would have answered with questions: Because the intimacy was too much for me? I wanted space for myself? I wanted to be “clean”? I was only twenty-two? There would have been questions for John as well: Is Mom right about gay sex and the Junior Civitan Seminar? Had you had homosexual feelings before that? And of much deeper

import: Why didn't we talk about such things, John? Why didn't we talk?

John says he let himself fall into depressions and decides, biblically, to fall no more. What tensions were at work in him as he tried to be one possible version of a saint and yet felt, perhaps, "unholy" attractions? What memories weighed on him? Did he lie to his stake president when he asked if he were sexually pure? How did those lies, if he did lie, work in him as he exhorted others to be honest and pure, as he sought the "guidance of the Holy Spirit"?

Firmly centered in a strictly defined theological and cultural system, John had no fulcrum outside that system. Soon after his mission, when he broke away from the Church whose prohibitions were eating him alive, he faced a difficult task: creating a self without that center.

15 January 1972

Dear Family,

I have been really having a hard time this last little while and haven't written for that reason. I just couldn't think of something to say that I felt. Well, things have happened both good and bad. I have had some of the most spiritual experiences I've had on my mission but have also been very very down. It seemed everytime I started to write I couldn't find anything to say.

4 March 1972

I am really sorry I haven't written more than I have lately, but there hasn't been much to say and I hate to send cruddy letters, also as you know it's very hard to write letters. I start, get about this much written, and then go all "bla" inside and can't write anymore. It's really hard to keep myself on a high spiritual plane.

I hate driving "Little Horse," our car. It's expensive but also nerve racking. This week we must have almost been hit 20 or 30 times, each time the car missed us by less than an inch. Our "guardian angel" must have really been helping us. Alma asks if we are ready to die in this moment, I have to say no, because there are so many things I have to do

before I go meet my Lord. As I said, I hate to drive. It takes twice as long to get anywhere than if we used bikes and costs so much more.

At the end of a subsequent letter describing a joyous meeting with an investigating family, he adds a quick note about the car:

Well another interesting event happened Monday night. I just about totaled our little car. We hit another guy coming through the intersection but thanks to our Father in Heaven no one was hurt.

In another letter written in March 1972, John begins a paragraph with his usual “Well” and then continues with the now common theme of depression:

I haven’t been happy lately, largely because I’m not satisfied with myself to any degree. I have been very depressed and because of that haven’t done the work, which makes me in turn feel worse about myself, becoming more depressed which I imagine is what made me make myself sick for the last two weeks. My temper has been bad, my emotions on the rampage etc. What I thought when I heard I was to be a Zone Leader was “Why?” I didn’t want it. I was shocked because since I’ve been here in Milano I haven’t done anything hardly at all. I realize what I have to do but it’s so very hard for me to do it.

I got a real nice letter from Scott today. All of the Elders want to see Carol’s picture. If you have one that is in color I’d like that. Well, I love all of you. Don’t worry about me. I’ll do fine from now on! Thanks for everything. I love you, John.

What did I write him? Did Mom send him a photo? Our sisters were so beautiful!

John was a zone leader, second only to the assistant to the president in mission hierarchies. I never achieved any such position, perhaps because of a parodic sketch several of us did at a mission conference poking fun at our all-too-serious mission president. Or was it because I refused to get up regularly at 6:00 A.M.? Or because I spent as much time reading Bertolt Brecht as I did reading books on the approved list for missionaries?

For a European missionary, John had remarkable success, baptizing whole families and several single people. I helped

teach only one woman who was baptized, and until the final hour it was nip-and-tuck whether she would choose us or the Jehovah's Witnesses. It's no wonder, then, that my strongest memories are of chance encounters while knocking on doors: the energetic old woman who ushered us into a packrat's apartment and claimed to be Max Weber's daughter whom the world had forgotten; the publisher who regaled us with stories of American authors he knew and sent us away with armloads of his books; the students who prayed with us and then taught us songs protesting our country's war; the Freemason who recounted Lessing's parable of the rings to teach us that religions are true only as they make their adherents good people; the beer-bellied behemoth who bumped me down three flights of stairs while shouting about the anti-Christ.

One memory stands out. I find it described in my missionary journal:

December 1968, Wuppertal, Germany

The Wiebers weren't in church today, the Branch President tells us on the Sunday before Christmas. Could you visit them and see how they are doing? Brother Wieber fell from a scaffold, as you know, and broke his back. Little Sonja also ended up in the hospital with twitching legs, probably from malnutrition.

We get the address, check our map of Wuppertal and environs, and set out on a clear cold morning. First the Schwebbahn, the hanging train that snakes along the steep Wupper valley. Then a bus to the city limit. Another bus over icy country roads to a wind-swept stop in front of a house surrounded by white fields. The Wiebers, it turns out, live in the low cinderblock shed across the yard from the house. Sister Wieber opens the door slowly, looks at us with dull eyes. Two of her children huddle under a blanket on a mattress in a corner. Greasy food wrappers litter the floor. The stove is cold.

We try to clean up. We build a fire with the last few sticks of wood and the food wrappers. The stove belches smoke. We put the fire out and open a little window to clear the air.

There's a knock at the door. A Catholic priest with a box of food enters, speaks softly, leaves the food. We leave as well.

Teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ is our task. We have no training, no resources, no place on our weekly report for time spent getting firewood for the Wiebers. Hours tracting—hours

teaching—hours traveling—and if they add up to 60, it was a good week.

It's pitiful.

March 19, 1972

Friday night we went out for baptismal interviews with the Carnieletto family. Brother Carnieletto and I went into the kitchen. We talked for a while, started the interview, read from the scriptures and were periodically interrupted. First the plates on the refrigerator started rattling, he moved them, then a stack of clothes fell for no reason at all. Other things like that, that shouldn't have happened. He told me it was Satan trying to interrupt us and I fully agreed. We spent about one and a half hours talking, clearing up problems and questions and then we knelt in prayer. He offered a very sincere beautiful prayer, pleading with the Lord to help him know the truth. Then I offered a prayer. It was one of the most beautiful experiences I have ever had in my life. We both felt the Spirit of the Lord, which was very very strong. Oh, it was beautiful. The next day they got baptized and it was so very beautiful, so very very beautiful. They asked me to confirm the father, was I ever grateful, I love them as much as any family I ever baptized. Brother Canieletto paid me a very high compliment. He said that I really helped him during the interview to make up his mind. They say each missionary can touch the heart of certain people and I believe it.

So do I, even as I attribute the rattling plates to the refrigerator's compressor. John loved them, and they loved him. And then he was transferred again.

After his mission, John attended BYU for a while. He trained to be a chef in the kitchen of the Hotel Utah. He worked in restaurants in Houston, San Diego, and then Boise.

One of the medical forms from the Boise clinic where John was treated twice in the weeks before he died said that he "denies homosexual activity."

Who asked him the question?

Was there still enough Mormon Puritanism in him that he felt guilty when confronted with what had infected him? Or was he simply what Nietzsche's Zarathustra called an "awful counter-

feiter, you have no choice! You would use cosmetics on your illness when showing yourself naked to your doctor.”

I put down John’s letters. I have hundreds of questions and no one to ask. A brilliant orange sunset across the western horizon. Slowly it flames pink. The sprinklers swish rhythmically. A lawnmower goes silent. The light fades. I throw Honey’s dumbbell again and again and she brings it back to me, wagging her tail.