

My Mother Tongues

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You can't forget your first time. Mine was in the back of a beige '68 VW bus, which I'd just bought from my mom's boyfriend. I was taking Annie home from an Assemblies of God revival meeting. She wasn't my girlfriend. She was—though she'd never say it—too good for me. I was a high school freshman hippie wannabe, dirty blond hair swirled behind my ears and wearing a khaki army jacket with a purple "Love" patch sewn on the left shoulder. Annie was older, graduated, smart and chic, and worked a desk job at IVC. When we pulled up at her curb that night, I slid open the side door of the van and we sat on the ledge, talking about the one thing she said I had left to do. She kept smiling as she breathlessly explained how easy it was and how right it felt. "All you have to do," she said, "is let your tongue go." And so, hoping she'd like me better if I did it, I took her hand and at 11:17 that warm Sunday night in late summer 1971, awkwardly, like a stuttering first grader, started to speak in tongues.

It was no torrent of syllables, that cascade of "eeko-shanda-halala-baba" I'd heard in the revival service that night. It was more a dribble of phonemes. And it was in the quiet voice of prayer, not conversation, let alone shouting. Like a penitent's prayer it kept getting stuck, then restarting. Annie spoke at the same time as I did and kept squeezing my hand as though milking it. Her tongues were smooth, slick, confident. She'd done this for years. If I was a leaky spigot, she was the Jordan River—though I thought my spiraling syllables were more colorful. My tongues-speech was like a studio remix of other languages, snippets of Spanish, French, German, Hebrew, Russian, sliced and respliced into a new language. Annie's was more uniform, direct and plain.

Still, imagine playing your first jazz solo in front of Miles Davis. That's what it felt like. How did I do it? Well, I'd prepared.

Studied up, taken mental notes, and wired spiritual gusto into my brain from the power grids of Pentecostalism.

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I was baptized a Southern Baptist in San Jose, California, at the age of six. We heard only English in that church—sterile, Bible-based sermons every week. But by the time I turned nine my parents divorced; my mom whisked me into an apartment across the street from our old house and started taking me to Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto. That same year our school district gave us all I.Q. tests. My score was high and for the next two years the city bused me across town to a special school where I started Spanish classes in the fifth grade. My first encounter with another tongue. I hated it. But I was good at it.

One night in sixth grade my mom left me home alone and came back the next day with a new husband she'd married in Reno. My special school days soon ended; I enrolled in a rowdy junior high in town and, egged on by a squirrely cousin with a knack for petty crime, I launched into a year and a half of shoplifting, burglary, glue-sniffing, pot-growing, barefoot hitchhiking, and stashing whiskey and Grove Press books in my junior high locker. Two suspensions from school later, Mom's Reno marriage crashed and I got hit with a new blow: I broke into a car for what must have been the hundredth time, but this car turned out to be owned by a juvenile public defender. He saw me stealing his stick shift knob, ran up and grabbed me, slammed me against the hood of his car, then called his cop friends, who took me to jail. The cops kept phoning my mom but couldn't reach her till two A.M. She was out late with her new boyfriend—an amateur pornographer whose ex-wife had once threatened Mom with a shotgun.

The public defender didn't defend me. I got six months probation.

This plot was not turning out right for a Baptist boy genius. Still, I cut almost all of my freshman year in high school and lay in front of the TV in my underwear, except when I was meeting with my probation officer, drinking what liquor I could from Mom's stash, and teaching myself how to play piano and guitar. Sundays I went to church. It was hell, till John Fischer got hired as a new

youth minister at our church. He formed a garage band, I passed the audition, and we started rehearsing. John quickly detected how brazenly unreligious I was, and, as a condition of staying in the band, got me reading *Good News for Modern Man*.

That grey paperback book was the semi-official New Testament of Jesus Freaks, of whom I was about to become one. What sucked me in? A parade of late-sixties providence. My best friend, Larry, started shooting heroin; two girls at high school got raped by a guy who picked them up hitchhiking; I barely talked my way out of arrest for shoplifting, nearly got caught growing my pot crop in the heating closet, and, worst of all, had to spend two summers with my real dad, a schizoid Southern Pacific switchman who bullied and whipped me between taking me to ballgames and the railroad yard. Then another girl I knew drowned in the Pacific—her dismembered torso, chewed up by sharks, washed up weeks later. I got so scared I started to read *Good News* seriously for the first time. About two a.m. one night I prayed, begged Jesus to help me feel something, anything but fear, and felt a sudden peace, maybe for the first time in my life. With that, I took off on a solo flight into my new life.

I'd hated Spanish before, but now, at a high school that was forty percent Mexican, I savored it—for example. I understood what some people were saying about me, the skinny Jesus Freak who toted a fat black Bible around campus each day. Secret eavesdropping got me obsessed with learning foreign languages. I took classes not only in Spanish, but in French and German as well. I tried to take Latin, too, but no one else wanted to, so the only Latin teacher turned me down. No mind: I studied it on my own from books at the city library next door to campus. I saved up money I made selling drawings and bought pocket-sized manuals on Hebrew and Greek as well—the biblical languages, which I craved to learn. I bought up Living Language record sets in Italian and Russian from the local St. Vincent de Paul store. When a boy from Egypt joined our sophomore class, I got him to teach me a little Arabic.

A girl in my art class, Diana, noticed my Bible and recruited me into her Bible study group. Every Tuesday night we met, read aloud from the New Testament, shared thoughts on what we'd

read, then had long silent prayers—well, not silent, but whispered, all of us breathily praying to Jesus for a half-hour or more. Now and then, I'd hear half-voiced senseless syllables bubbling up around the room. I guessed this must be speaking in tongues, which sprouted up in so-called "charismatic" church groups, not to mention the old-line holy-roller churches I'd shunned out of what I thought was good taste. Speaking in tongues was authentic, my Bible study friends notified me: just read First Corinthians 12 and 14 and Acts 2. Those texts formed the power plant of this extravagant new neurological gospel, where one knew one had been "spirit-filled" only by speaking in tongues.

Seemed like a natural fit for a language geek like me. But most of it that I heard didn't sound bona fide. It babbled and shuddered. The languages I studied didn't. Now and then a church friend would brag about how someone heard their speaking in tongues and identified it as some African dialect or, in one case, "Ancient French" (Annie told me that one). I needed anecdotes like that. Because I wanted to believe, and, more to the point, I wanted to speak in tongues myself. Because that was how you got "full gospel" status in Diana's Bible study group—which was now pretty much the total population of my friends.

So I tried an experiment. I took my little reel-to-reel tape recorder around campus for a week, taping every authentic foreign language speaker I knew. I also taped a few of my friends speaking in tongues. Then I'd listen to all of them in sequence and see if the tongues sounded as real as the known languages. I taped friends who spoke Hindi, Serbo-Croatian, Farsi, and all the standard European languages. I even got a lapsed Jew to recite his old bar-mitzvah texts into the microphone. The real language speakers loved being archived this way. And my tongues-speaking friends loved the thought I might validate their gifts. They happily recorded their devout mumbling into my machine.

I listened over and over to the twenty-minute tape. I tried hard to hear tongues sounding like "real" languages. But it was tough, partly because I knew which was which. I played the tape for friends who didn't know what I'd done and asked them if they could identify the languages. I hoped no one would say, "Hey, that one's not a real language." But linguistic competence at Mountain View High was rare. And most of it was in my own head.

I wish I'd kept the tape. But I had no money and had to keep using the same three-inch reel for everything, including, this time, James Taylor on the radio.

Our Bible study group drifted from church to church, everything from old-line Assemblies of God to the New Sweet Home Church of God in Christ, where we were the only white people in the room. We went to revival meetings in big tents, crack-of-dawn prayer meetings in cramped storefronts. Everywhere we went, people spoke in tongues. Much of it sounded grotesque—a kind of spasm where syllables got squeezed out by God like paste from a tube. The speakers convulsed as they held their hands up, shaking, crying, and if the spirit was strong, collapsed on the floor. They blubbered from the top of their speaking range down to the bottom. Phony, I thought, though ecstatic, like whirling dervishes. Maybe divine, but not from a God you'd want to spend much time with.

Some tongues-speaking was calmer, almost matter-of-fact in the way the random syllables rolled from the speakers' mouths. Evangelists often interjected it between English sentences as they held the arms of folks on whom they were about to lay hands, letting each person fall back on the floor, quivering—a move they called being “slain in the spirit.” These interjections usually sounded like “she bought a Honda” or some similar phrase. I went back and forth on whether to trust them. The tongues-speaking I admired most came from the lips of John Hole (pronounced “hula”), a retiree from Denmark who spoke English with an accent and seemed to speak in tongues with the same accent. How much Danish was in his tongues-speaking, I had no clue. But it was sing-songy and lyrical. He sometimes stood up in Calvary Gospel Temple and started up with it, even interrupting the pastor's sermon.

I held out for a long time. I was not only skeptical, I was shy to boot. But Annie took me through the door. For her, I'd let my tongue go. I could feel the syllables form in my mouth, a divine confection of all the languages I'd studied. It was like scat singing, but without the melody, a stumbling improvisation from the huge cache of phonemes stored in my self-educated tongue. I remember lots of the words—I said them for years—words like “puriaki”

and “kantistima.” If I worried that other people’s tongues sounded too little like real languages, I worried that mine sounded too much like a mere collage of foreign words I knew. But the spirit burned in me so strongly, I learned to snuff out worry.

Once I’d done it with Annie, the word spread. And the news became my password to the inner circle of the group.

Tongues were mostly for prayer, I heard, so I tried praying in tongues for longer and longer spells—even timing myself with the chrome alarm clock in my bedroom to see how long I could go. I handwrote a two-page list of people I knew who might need a boost from God, bowed over the list, held each name in my mind for a moment, pressed my hand on the paper, and kept whispering generic praise talk, peppered with tongues, for up to an hour at a time.

Our group started holding prayer meetings at six o’clock each morning at Diana’s house—technically her mom, Alice’s, house. Alice was the matronly, grinning, recovered alcoholic who mothered the group. She was Aimee Semple McPherson with half the charisma and one-tenth the glamour. When we met for prayer in her living room, we all knelt or slumped on whatever furniture we could claim—footstool, couch, chairs, and the giant furry pillows everyone seemed to own in the early ’70s. We softly moaned, “we love you Jeeeesus,” “we praise you Jeeeesus,” or just “Jeeeesus,” till someone spoke up, burst out with a prophecy or tongues-plus-interpretation. A prophecy was a message from God, speaking in his native English to the group, a short soliloquy in a loud voice. Tongues were the same format, but needed an interpretation, which someone besides the tongues-speaker had to give. The rub was this: if you spoke in tongues, you hated for someone to interpret it as a warning, or worse, a curse. And if you interpreted, you wanted to make sure the person who kicked off this two-step voice-of-God interlude felt well repaid for speaking out in half-crazy syllables then waiting for someone to make sense of it. So it was a dicey process.

What were the messages? Ersatz Isaiah, whose book we read all the time, as though preparing a dramatic monologue for an audition. Touches of the Psalms. Generic fond phrases about how we were His chosen ones, His beloved children, and so on. At its best, a message answered some collective inquiry we’d made,

sometimes with a plain “go ahead,” etc., or, more obscurely, a “continue on the path you’ve begun to walk,” which was small help, but made us feel tingly.

We did all this God-talking for two years. In that time God told us to visit four female wards at Agnews State Hospital every Sunday, singing and praying with women who talked funny in their own right. He told us to rent a cinder block building in Sunnyvale for a coffee house/drop-in center on a corner where one road ran into a low-rent suburb and the other into the parking lot of a topless bar. He told us to mortgage a house in that suburb and convert it to a halfway house for druggies and drunks. He told us to refurbish a slummy eight-unit apartment complex in Mountain View for a second, much bigger halfway house. We did all those things.

We had good credit but no credentials for all this ad hoc social work. We’d just make our halfway-house clients garden, cook, clean, repaint walls, and, of course, listen to us talk about how Jesus could help them get better. We laid hands on clients and prayed for them. And we sang gospel songs at all hours, Jim Newell and I strumming guitars and everyone clapping. When the clients went to sleep we had more prayer meetings. Then we had them again in the morning before anyone got up. Tongues flowed in every meeting.

We sang in tongues, too, most often at the end of a song, where we called it “singing in the spirit.” We’d hit the last chord and then keep singing in pentatonic scales (think the black keys on the piano), soaring ditties with ad hoc lyrics that mimicked our prayers, all checkered with tongues. These singing spells would last five minutes or maybe ten, maybe more—hard to say, since we were trying to stay outside time in a kind of mock-eternity. Heaven help us if we let a clock on the wall curb our praise.

Although I sang in tongues from time to time in private prayers, I had one semi-operatic tongues-singing moment—or, should I say, weekend. Our group—which we now called the “Wineskin Group,” from Matthew 9:17—took a trip to the Santa Cruz Mountains. We met in a friend-of-a-friend’s cabin that I saw had a record player and a Gregorian chant LP. It was a kind of music I’d never heard. It was like tongues-singing, I thought, only

better. I kept putting it on as background music while people milled around and talked. On an urge, I got up and walked far into the woods where I thought no one could hear me and started singing at the top of my lungs, some in tongues and some in English. Then I went back into the cabin and put the chant record back on. When my friends made me shut it off, I went back into the woods and started up again.

Such was the life of a Pentecostal Jesus Freak splashing through the undertow of the Sixties. In this little New Testament counterculture, tongues made me feel both more-than-human and less-than. It came from God, I thought, but also from a pit in the brain buried so deep it seemed like a dinosaur bone. Language that exceeded language, I thought, and yet a language that hadn't yet turned into one—formless, murky, and sometimes not much more than a toddler's prattle.

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As quickly as the Wineskin Group had once jelled, it soured. Pastor Rounds, the preacher at Calvary Gospel Temple, took sick and died. We were half the choir on his radio show, "Camp Meeting Time," where we took turns bearing testimony into the microphone as he played banjo and the choir clapped in time. Once he died, his successor dropped the show and threw us out of his church because we wouldn't give back the printing press the church had given us to print our own tracts and halfway house ads. We spent weeks writing a defense of our right to the machine, typed it up, printed it on that very press, and stood on the sidewalk in front of the church one Sunday passing the document out to stunned churchgoers. That cut our last cord to any regular church.

Alice started drinking again and having nightly apocalyptic visions and daily public conversations with an invisible Jesus. Her screwy conduct and the liquor on her breath began to ward away clients from the halfway houses and the employment agency she used to finance them. Jim, my guitar-strumming partner, moved away. A "concerned citizens" group started a petition to shut down our apartment complex because they thought the drunks and addicts were a threat to the neighborhood. The leader of that

group stood up at the city council, started his rant against us, and fell over dead. A sign from God, we thought. The neighbors got scared of us, not our clients. But our creditors weren't scared of either and within weeks we had to move out: clients, furniture, dishes, tools, even the printing press. We went into foreclosure and I started to drink again. I ditched my Christian friends and started a garage band. I stopped speaking in tongues and started peppering my English with its two foulest words.

But like any ghost, the Holy Ghost can haunt you. I kept nosing through churchy books and tracts and tuning in to broadcast preachers from Reverend Ike to Oral Roberts to Jim Jones. On a dare I went to a Mormon sacrament meeting in Los Altos. Six months later, I was a sober, short-haired, brown sportcoat-wearing, tithe-paying Mormon. I'll leave the conversion story for another time, though I will say I couldn't have joined up without the church's Articles of Faith assuring me it believed in tongues and interpretations. Of those I was a fan, an expert. But what came with them now was the church's headier, semi-intellectual twentieth-century past, not to mention its modern-day "Pursuit of Excellence" program. Which I needed.

Still, I never heard anyone speak in tongues at church. I soon learned that Mormons had redefined tongues into the ability to learn languages faster in order to do missionary work. That was okay, though, because I didn't really want to speak in tongues anymore myself and happily traded the Pentecostal intoxication of my teens for the sturdier intellectual side I saw in the church—this was, after all, near Stanford University, where *Dialogue* had been born a few years earlier. I was ready, even ripe, for the reinterpretation of tongues.

In time I learned that early Mormons used to speak in tongues the way I had. I wondered if they had the same intimate bond with what I now call my "mother tongues"—the tongues I was raised on after being born again in the wilderness of Jesus Freakdom. Did those Latter-day Saints wonder about the mental sources of their divine blather? Did they compete for the sweetest, most affective tongues-speaking? Were tongues that miracle that helped enshrine their faith in the halls of authenticity they claimed?

No matter. Nowadays, I'm happy to siphon and filter my faith through something between high-church scholastic exegesis and the lowbrow cant of modern populist Mormondom. In a way, the life I lead as an LDS scholar bears its own multilingual traits. One has to speak in many tongues of faith to peel away one's complex personal orthodoxy. Still, the glossolalia at which I became proficient as a teenager has slid from my vocabulary.

Well, not quite. A couple of years ago, sleepless from a racing mind, I conceived a way to quiet it. Lying in bed, I started to move my lips and let them slowly unwrap again the gift of tongues. The thoughts in my skull started to slow. I was whispering God's special language and feeling the peace that—as St. Paul put it—*passeth understanding*. I quickly fell asleep under what I'd never realized was both the corniest and most blissful sedative.

I don't know who said it first, but we are what we remember. As I coast down the downhill path of middle age, I find myself grabbing for whatever shrubs of the past can slow me down, keep the many-faced "me" of five and a half decades from slipping away. So I have got this crazy little addiction again. When I'm lying on my side in the dark, I often slip into that old familiar nonsense—my mother tongues, completely dubious and therefore transcendent. Many a night around three A.M. they drive me past the road sign that reads "understanding" into the darkness where the vivid, restless "I" of my brain can get lost again, go blissfully extinct till I awake into the next Mormon morning.