

MORMON TARBUTI

TL Cannon

As teenagers, my friend Brian and I would sit in front of our Latter-day Saint chapel in New Jersey, watching men in yarmulkes and dark-haired women in sheitels and black dresses walk to and from Shul. Reform and Conservative Jewish kids attended public schools with us, but we knew very little about the Orthodox Jewish children that walked by. None of my friends at school spent nearly as much time in church activities or followed as many rules as I did, but I knew these passerbys' devotions had an even greater intensity than mine.

I saw my Orthodox Jewish neighbors as a colorful part of world religions, a tapestry of which Mormonism occupied a small space—a space in which I took great pride. I felt our faith was incredible, but felt no need for it to be exceptional. When adults and children stood up in front of our congregation and said that they knew that our church was the true church, I wondered if the bearded dads that walked by were telling their children the same types of things.

“Why are there not Orthodox Mormons?” we once asked my father, who was the bishop.

“None of us are orthodox,” he said. After pausing, he added, “Or maybe we all are.”

If we weren't Latter-day Saints, Brian and I probably wouldn't have been friends. He was short, uninhibited, and unconcerned about what others thought of him. I was tall and self-conscious. Brian was in a social group we called “Ginkers.” It seemed to be a pejorative term unique to central New Jersey, which was roughly defined as troublemakers in black jeans and heavy metal T-shirts who embodied the *Beavis and Butthead* characters. He was likely at the apex of the ADHD spectrum and was a terrible student with little support at home.

Since we were the only Mormon boys in our grade, and since being Mormon was (and is) an immersive experience, we were extremely close. We grudgingly participated together in scout camp, road shows, mutual, and temple trips to Washington, DC. We drove to seminary in the dark New Jersey mornings to memorize scriptures and listen to lessons. Many were from Utah, transplanted men who used faux curse words and taught in the hyperbolic CES style that ruled the era—telling us how “awesome” Book of Mormon prophets were with tearful testimony. Though difficult to make sense of what was being taught, we felt that the adults in our church truly cared about us. While the staff at the high school were incredibly wary of Brian, the adults at church saw his mischievousness as non-malicious and even recognized some level of genius.

Brian was an object of deep curiosity at our school. He had six brothers and lived in a small house on the humble end of our town. It was the type of working-class New Jersey neighborhood described in Bruce Springsteen lyrics: factory smells in the air, chain-link fences, and old Chevrolets parallel parked everywhere. In my memory, it was always gray. I would enjoy sleeping over at his house, despite the *Lord of the Rings* atmosphere. There were holes throughout the dry wall and urine stains on the wall. His brothers would argue incessantly about meaningless topics like whether their dad could swim to Staten Island, how high you had to drop a quarter from to kill somebody, and how long a colon was. Kids at school, hearing that I had slept over, would ask me whether his father was a polygamist and why they didn’t believe in birth control. My answers were angry and defensive. Besides him being one of my favorite friends, our journey through Mormon life together made us seem almost as close as siblings.

Some of his infractions of rules were creative and universally appreciated among peers, like when he commandeered the school’s PA system, circulated rocks in the fan vents of unpopular teachers, or snuck inappropriate CDs into the DJ disc changer at church dances.

Other more impulsive infractions were less appreciated, like when he took off his shoe and smashed a hanging hallway clock between periods. Our school was one where ninth graders were studying for the SATs and identifying their college reaches, targets, and safeties. His antics began to grate on this population of serious students. I was quiet and well behaved, so our friendship was confusing to them. They didn't understand how Mormon we were, and how tight of a community that exists therein.

In high school, our friend and co-priest Ed, who attended a different high school, died. From my understanding, it was an overdose of something. Brian, having attended multiple wrestling camps with Ed, was closer to him than I was. I remember sitting next to Brian at his funeral, watching him stare at the ceiling in deep thought, as speakers spoke in rambling generalities about a teenager so young that effective eulogy was impossible. Our priest's advisor, Brother McCullough, became more determined than ever to keep us on the straight and narrow.

The Sunday after Ed's funeral, instead of teaching another conventional lesson from the handbook, he chose to show us a replay from the ninth inning of the Yankees game from the day prior. It was a no-hitter thrown by the one-armed Yankees pitcher Jim Abbott. We watched as, in a manner incongruent with the mood of our devastated quorum, Abbott was hoisted in the air triumphantly by catcher Matt Nokes after the final out of the game. Brother McCullough exhorted us to always lift each other up. He seemed to be looking at me more than anybody else, as if he was hoping that I would be Brian's Matt Nokes.

Brian did indeed become more elusive over time. The image he projected, as he entered his late teens, was a caricature of an anti-hero in a 1980s seminary video. He had purple hair, nose rings, and increasingly irreverent behavior. Brother McCullough would still always stop by to check on him and drive him to various events—whatever Brian would agree to attend. He would bring ice cream to his house and stop

by Brian's restaurant to teach gospel lessons. I was often there as well, playing the role of peer cheerleader for the church and our quorum.

Late in our high school years, after Brian had been left back a grade, we drifted slightly apart. I would see him in the back of the student parking lot as I walked by with my friends in varsity jackets. He would be slouching near the chain-link fence, a familiar face in a dark background of Metallica T-shirts and cigarettes.

We met at Vinny's pizza one Saturday late in high school, when his church attendance had become more sporadic. Brian predicted that I would go on a mission and get married very quickly, and that he would still be working at Taco Bell when I returned. There was nothing wrong with that life path, from my point of view, but it was the first time I had detected a fatalistic tone in his voice. Though I don't remember having a religious anxiety about his lack of church activity, I was extremely sad not to see him there. Church seemed more boring and less palatable without my friend.

About one month after that meeting, he showed up to school with a somewhat lewd symbol shaved in his head, or at least that was how the haircut was interpreted by our school administrators. He was suspended indefinitely and dropped out, never graduating. This event began the lowest days of Brian's life. His parents kicked him out of the house. He worked two jobs for a total of eighty hours per week at Denny's and Taco Bell. He lived in his car for some of the winter of 1995, in between restaurant shifts.

Brian came to my mission farewell, which was the first time he had attended church in eighteen months. When the meeting was over, I saw him walking in the parking lot. Butterflies were rising in my gut as I considered two years away from home in a white shirt and tie, while the non-LDS friends that attended my farewell would be returning to their dormitories with Scarface and Shaquille O'Neal posters hanging on the wall. I could not help vainly shuddering at the image of a future balder version of myself returning in two years wearing a poorly fitting

CTR T-shirt. It felt like youth was ending abruptly that week. Seeing him was an incredibly welcome distraction from my fears. I caught up with him, and we stood next to the oak tree that we used to climb on to the roof of the church as kids.

“Can you write me a letter and let me know how it is out there?” he asked.

“Sure.”

“Brother McCullough is still suggesting I work toward going too.”

“Are you considering that?”

“Not really.”

Brian serving a mission felt like a ludicrous proposition at the time, but I knew that I should write him anyways. I wrote a reminder to myself in the front of the red missionary journal that I had purchased at Deseret Book.

On an October day in 1996, long after the infectious religious fervor of missionary work had been incorporated into my personality, I was riding my bicycle through the narrow streets of a city in western Taiwan thinking about Brian. As my companion and I pedaled past the bustle of the train station, through the pungent scent of bean curd being sold by street food vendors, and between the beechnut stands with Chinese characters in neon lights, I began to describe Brian’s family. I told him about nine kids in a tiny house in a New York suburb, and that we were the only two Mormon boys in our huge school. He was intrigued. Over the noise of mopeds, Elder Wilson asked if I had written Brian. How had I forgotten this promise I had made fifteen months earlier?

At nearly the same time, Brian received a call from his mother while on a shift at work. The stake president and the area General Authority had decided to make select visits to people in the stake, and Brian was on their list. They were at Brian’s house when she called.

Understanding from the tone of her voice how badly she wanted him to come, he asked a coworker to cover for him. He took off his

apron quickly, spit out the snuff in his mouth, and drove home. He only stayed five minutes and made no eye contact but agreed to meet with President Baxter on another occasion. Two weeks later, he drove to President Baxter's house after his Taco Bell shift.

"Brian," President Baxter asked, "Tell me what you are doing with your life now?"

Brian noted that he was working three jobs, taking classes at the community college, and had a girlfriend.

"OK," he said, "Those are all good things . . . what is your goal in life?"

"What do you mean by goal?"

"What can you see yourself doing in 10 years?"

"Well," Brian said, "I don't really know . . . maybe move up the chain at a restaurant?"

President Baxter showed Brian the paper he was writing on. In the top left corner, there were three small words written: "school," "girlfriend," "work."

"Does this seem like a full life to you, Brian?" he asked in a slow, whispering voice.

Not really clear on what a full life meant to President Baxter, other than that it would include participating in church, he asked him to explain more.

"What about getting married in the temple, serving a mission, pursuing a career? I know you well enough to know that you are a smart kid. You could do anything you wanted to."

As Brian was considering this statement, President Baxter picked up another paper and started frantically writing, in large letters, the goals that he thought would be attainable for him. He was writing rapidly, with multiple exclamation points. As he wrote, he was bobbing his head up and down like the conductor of an orchestra. Every goal he wrote down was punctuated with an exclamation mark.

"Stable and loving family life!," "Community Service!," "Graduate degree!," "Stable Job!," "Business Leader!"

President Baxter felt that it all started with a mission.

In the aftermath of his writing, President Baxter was perspiring. His short and spiky hair was damp. Brian had seen numerous displays of passion from adults, but none started and ended with his potential.

Brian showed up to church a few weeks later and told Bishop Guarnieri that he wanted to work toward a mission. Surely skeptical of the proposition, the bishop still appeased him by reviewing the necessary steps. By the next week, Brian was confessing infractions and submitting his tithing in cash piled inside a CD case (he had no bank account). Two weeks before I returned from my mission in Taiwan, Brian left for a mission to Europe.



More than twenty-five years have passed since Jim Abbott's no-hitter, and I am standing at a corner on Market Street and thinking about contacting Brian. I follow his social media peripherally and know that he lives here. My career takes me to San Francisco every January, and every year I think about calling him, but always decide against it. Not feeling like the same kind of Mormon I was previously, I can't stomach the idea of being a familiar face in a dark background to Brian.

I saw him occasionally over the first few years of his marriage and then not at all after he attended my own wedding a few years later. That was nearly a decade before November 2015, when my family's religious life seemed to become more complicated. We have had different experiences in Mormonism and, like hundreds of other families, have different ideas about how to proceed in the face of another ungraspable policy.

I try to speak with my Jewish and Catholic friends about the difficulties of navigating Latter-day Saint and family life. These friends clearly can't understand because they are unable to fathom a religion that is oriented around literal belief, full immersion, and converting

others. They wear their necklaces with the Star of David or a Cross, enjoy holy days with their family, attend mitvahs and communions, and sing the songs of their people. Worrying about their degree of belief in the particulars is not a part of their experience. There is one day where a Jewish friend tells me about her “Mormon” coworker, who I discover lives a not-so-Mormon life. I tell her that he “used to” be Mormon, and she looks confused. Religious identity is not fluid in her world.

These friends of other religions, regardless of specific personal beliefs, retain their religious identity, while the ex-Mormons and inactive Mormons I know seem to swim in the identity of what they are not. My wife and I attend a few functions with dozens of newly disillusioned and/or disenfranchised Mormons, who get together and blow off steam about gratuitous historical and political topics, in between the sad stories of painful falling outs with ardent family members. I meet many people trying to keep their family intact. There are those who don’t wish to attend but their spouses do, those who wish to attend and their spouses don’t, and couples in which neither wish to attend resulting in bitter conflict with their extended family. I have never been more grateful for my family, both immediate and extended, but I still feel the need to sort things out with therapy. A web search yields dozens of LDS psychologists that specialize in “faith transitions,” yet they are so in demand that I find it hard to get an appointment with any of them at a convenient time.

Trying to forge a future that involves worshipping Jesus Christ and conveying religious morality to our kids, we try other churches, sometimes directly after our LDS services. At one point, we find ourselves as one of five to ten LDS families that attend a community-service oriented Unitarian church with floor to ceiling windows, wondering if we can find inspiration from a symbolic chalice that represents the “warmth of community.” We try other churches with rainbow flags hanging from their eighteenth-century stone edifices and smiling pastors in Air Jordans. They are all uplifting places, but none feel quite like

home. They are not singing our songs or praying in a style that is familiar to us. At BYU, I would always hear people say that they disliked the culture but loved the gospel, and I would nod my head in agreement. That statement makes less sense to me now. I try to remember why we said that, and why we tried to generally deemphasize the idea that there even is a Mormon culture. In a faith that seems to emphasize belief at least as much as values, I can see how the disenfranchised and skeptical feel like there is little common currency left to share with their families.

I begin to listen to the types of podcasts that interview the giants of that burgeoning wing of intellectual Mormonism that is less dogmatic and uses terms like “our faith tradition.” They are the authors whose books are an analgesic to Latter-day Saints around the world that look around at their congregations and wonder if they have gone mad, looking for some company to share the burden of acknowledgement that the type of belief we strive for seems elusive. Many of them normalize doubt while defending the faith—sometimes in ways that feel like creative obfuscations about the basic facts of sticky historical issues like the Book of Abraham, but at least tackle the issues with an acknowledgement of how hard they are to understand and accept. I am energized by this new language and relatable point of view, but I find that the discussions in podcasts only nip at the edges of tough issues, and never get too raw. As I consider my own situation and the plights of the families I have recently met, the conversations begin to sound like viewpoints of people who never *really* had to choose.

One day at work, my fellow oncologist, a member of a Reformed Jewish congregation, expresses astonishment about an inactive Latter-day Saint patient with a terminal illness, who says she is estranged from most of her family because of religious disagreement. After I tell him that most LDS families are not like this, I begin to wonder if that is truly a strange occurrence across other religions. I can’t help looking at Mormonism through the lens of Judaism and, for a short time, become

obsessed with the history of Judaism, wondering whether the fears of a watered-down version of Judaism were realized after the reform movement of the early 1800s. The religious history is too different for a useful comparison, other than providing a rough sketch of the various ways that religions can be meaningful to people.

Disturbed by this view from the other side, I want to feel the wonder of a quintessential Latter-day Saint story of redemption, faith, and growth. I tell myself it is silly and selfish, after all that Brian has been through and overcome, to avoid him because of my own sheepishness. I decide to call him. He agrees to meet me at a sushi joint on Market Street. He will come over from work.

He greets me as if I am a business acquaintance. He is wearing the type of millennial-inspired Bay area business wear that everyone else walking around San Francisco seems to wear. His tight jeans are not a denim color, and he has a button up shirt under a fleece that zips down at the top. The human part of him looks the same, but the clothes seem too large, or maybe his face looks too much like the Brian I knew to wear something like this. He has a beard, which is sort of auburn colored. It is as if adulthood grew onto him, as opposed to him growing into adulthood.

His eyes still shift constantly as he speaks, just as I remember. His manner of speech, fast paced and heavy on details, is not typical for the Mormons I know. Yet I find that he is speaking a lot about church things. We rehash memories of our New Jersey life for nearly two hours.

He works eighty hours a week and has a high position at one of the most profitable companies in the world. His limited spare time is spent between his bishop duties and shuttling his four kids around. He seems extremely happy and is a willing and sympathetic listener who clearly grasps the complexities of church life and has thought deeply about them. His life seems perfect. It is not just the worldly success that strikes me. There is a remarkably empathetic and kind look in his eye.

I have no doubt that he has been a Brother McCullough–like figure to many struggling kids.

As I speak with him, it strikes me that orthodoxy is a two-edged sword. Could a church of nonliteral believers have changed Brian's life so dramatically? The same sort of orthodoxy or immersive nature of the church that seemed to save Brian and propel him into orbit is the very same force that seems to have repelled many other families. The magnitude of the seismic shock of disaffiliation in our faith seems far out of proportion to other faiths, but look at what that orthodoxy has done for Brian. The visit does leave me with a reminder of how remarkable this faith can be. Sharing stories about our past in New Jersey and his mission experience leaves me with deep feeling of inspiration and nostalgia. As beautiful as all of that is, I feel a slight distance between us, and I can't decide if it is rational.

I return home from the trip and am considering why I feel this distance. I am having a conversation with a Jewish patient who asks me if I can give a speech about cancer to her "Jewishly" group at the Jewish community center.

"What does 'Jewishly' mean?" I ask.

"To me, the word represents all of the people within the realm of Judaism. Those who are religiously Jewish, Yehudi Tarbuti (culturally Jewish), or participate in Jewish events with family and friends."

The idea of having a gathering that bonds all sorts of people under one broad religious and cultural umbrella is foreign to me. My Latter-day Saint friends say there is no such thing as a cultural Mormon because there is no singular Mormon culture. They recite the oft-repeated comment that our identity really is as a child of God. But I think they are missing one point. There is also no singular culture of Daoism, Catholicism, Judaism, or Buddhism, yet people in those groups can attend their niece's weddings together in mixed company. Their leaders, to the best of my knowledge, are not making well-meaning directives to avoid

counsel from a family member who does not believe literally. If there are leaders making those types of statements somewhere, they don't have a high degree of visibility among the members. There is not the tacit exclusion of those who find the history of the religion unlikely, or the gender roles untenable.

Mormons lack the distinct sartorial characteristics of the Orthodox Jews. There are no earlocks or dark hats and very few cultural emblems. Does the combination of intense immersion without acknowledging a culture exacerbate the thud of leaving the Church? We are not even supposed to say *Mormon* anymore. Several generations of LDS families, many of which are enormous, seem to have an increasingly varying style and degree of belief. I wonder if these families dream of baby blessings that emphasize family more and priesthood authority less and of family weddings that everybody could attend. People who leave, feel like they are gone.

From this point of view, thirty-five years after I tried to make sense of Mormonism in our Jewish neighborhood, it is my dad's second answer that seems most accurate to me—only orthodoxy lives outside the shadows. This does not change how grateful I am for the joy that many of us, especially Brian, have derived from the current system. I tell my Jewish colleague, after he asks me a series of questions based on the premise (fair or not) that the LDS Church is uniquely alienating to those who are not *all in*—that many religions have probably wrestled with the question of whether or not this joy and growth would be at risk if the seminal religious events were executed in a way that acknowledged and accepted that the same religious ceremony can have deeply literal meaning to some and mostly cultural to others. I selfishly hope that the answer is that it would not.

My meeting with Brian in San Francisco led to other meetings, sometimes with his brothers. Several of Brian's younger brothers followed behind him on a similar path. They tormented teachers and administrators at our high school, most of them never graduating,

before making their own Mormon-fueled comebacks. They achieved the graduate degrees, marriage, career success, and the other measurables that seem to be beyond the reach of their troublemaking peers who didn't have the church support or the mission experience. It is hard being Mormon, but it is not easy to not be one either.

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