

The Passion of the Wilt-Mold Mothers

Notes on the piece and its meaning

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Abstract

The Passion of the Wilt-Mold Mothers is the story of a mother and her children, animals of indeterminate species. At the opening of the piece a blight of mold comes that wipes out her their only source of food for the winter, the Ilex, or winterberry as it is commonly known. Unable to produce milk, and starving together as they hibernate in their burrow, the mother, our protagonist, eventually makes the decision, conscious or not, to eat her children. She emerges from the ordeal a survivor, and speaking a new language acquired while in the throes of a starving sleep and amidst blood dreams. *The Passion of the Wilt-Mold Mothers* is a story of apocalypse, suffering, starvation, motherhood, murder, survival, and ultimately of a salvation of sorts. The work, a concert-length musical drama in eight parts, was commissioned by Quince Contemporary Vocal Ensemble, and composed based on text written by Webberly Ebberly Finnich.

Background to the Composition of the Piece

For the better part of a year, and through most of the composition of *The Passion of the Wilt-Mold Mothers*, I met every-other Friday with a man named Narvel Meek (who liked to joke that he would inherit the Earth), a Jehovah's Witness, former addict, rail-thin diabetic, and animal-less animal lover. Narvel was assigned to our household after I agreed to talk with the Witnesses when a couple of them knocked on my door, unannounced. I was explicit; I am and atheist and they were not going to convert me, but I enjoy learning about other people's faiths and would be happy to meet with them. Narvel showed up a couple weeks later, also unannounced, a tall, well-dressed black man in his early 60s, as best I could tell. The first time he came I made the mistake of eating lunch in front of him, and his blood sugar dropped, and rather than ask for a piece of fruit, he instead left suddenly. The next time I made a point of eating an early lunch, so that we could talk. It was clear that he had the intention of trying to convert me, despite my strong assurances to him that this was not even remotely possible. I resolved to be completely frank about my own beliefs (to do otherwise would have been patronizing, to say the least), and in doing so to explain my own understanding of evolution, natural selection, human prehistory and the like.

I had already been doing a decent amount of reading in these areas in order to write *The Passion of the Wilt-Mold Mothers*. Somehow I felt that this piece, more than others I've written, was an allegorical origin story for humanity. Meeting with Narvel allowed me to clarify my understanding of what I was learning, and forced me to defend the ideas to a person who firmly believed that they were lies maliciously intended to confuse and lead the individual away from God. It also forced me to deepen my knowledge of the Bible, which deepening I felt had dual utility, since I was writing a *Passion*—a work whose very title has sacred resonance.

Early on it was clear that Narvel and my discussions would stray drastically from the normally heavily scripted conversations that Witnesses have with potential converts. We never made it through the first chapter of *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* because each paragraph would inspire a lively debate. In our first weeks we came to the question of whether the Christian God is a loving god, or a cruel god— he, of course, saying loving, and me saying cruel. The various points that each of us made aren't important—the Old

Testament is full of God's cruelty and the New Testament is filled with God's love, a fact which illustrates most clearly not that God is cruel or loving, but long term historical shifts in attitudes toward violence, cruelty and power. I attempted an argument I felt quite sure of: that it was cruel of God to harden Pharaoh's heart in Exodus, thus justifying his plagues in order to demonstrate his divine power at the expense of an untold number of lives. However, when I opened to the verse in *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, I found that the Jehovah's Witness translation had altered the passage to place the blame on Pharaoh. In the Witness translation of The Bible, God "allows Pharaoh's heart to be hardened," thus removing God's bloodlust, and placing the blame for his people's suffering squarely on Pharaoh's shoulders.

When Narvel left I immediately drove to a bookstore with the intention of purchasing a copy of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, which I had been eyeing for quite some time anyway. When I got there, however, the copy had sold. I browsed for a while, and eventually purchased a copy of Noam Chomsky's Managua Lectures, *Language and Problems of Knowledge*. This slim volume would take me quite some time to get through, and would lead me subsequently to read his *Language and Responsibility* and *Reflections on Language*, both collected in *On Language*. Chomsky had been extremely important to me as a young activist (I don't think this experience is unique), but I had never read his linguistic theory and was resistant to it at the time because it challenged a belief that I had that the individual was a blank slate formed by conditioning and socialization, rather than possessing of a human nature and even an individual nature.

As a not-quite-so-young activist and artist I found myself more receptive to Chomsky's ideas. In fact, my art and my organizing had been leading me more and more toward an investigation of human nature. I no longer believe, as I had when I was younger, that the violence and exploitation so integral to the human condition are mere aberrations resulting from oppressive systems having been imposed upon the otherwise peaceful human animal (an idea I had taken largely from Marxist and anarchist thought). My pieces that work with text, which are without question for me my most important work, deal almost exclusively with personified animals in violent or desperate situations. They are bleak, but comically so, I hope. To meditate on violence in the human animal seems a strangely Hobbesian thing for an anti-authoritarian leftist to do –Hobbes' *Leviathan* arguing for strong centralized government in the face of "the war against all" that is the "natural condition of mankind." The argument is compelling, and I have also been convinced by Steven Pinker's arguments in *The Better Angels of our Nature* that the State in combination with social norms of propriety have facilitated an overall reduction in violence throughout our history.

It was Chomsky who gave me the insight as to why I write these musical pieces about animals. Sitting on my bed in a hotel room while on the road for my work as a union organizer, I decided to watch Chomsky's debate with the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Chomsky has largely kept his linguistic work and his political work separate, and has maintained that they are unrelated. However, in this debate Chomsky argues that the methods by which humans acquire language and put it to use –not through rote learning and imitation, but through the invention of entirely new-to-the-individual sentences early in childhood development –is evidence that human nature is fundamentally one that desires creation, creative work and creative inquiry even in the absence of the coercive violence of capitalism and the coercive repression of the State. For Chomsky it follows then that human beings should organize themselves to maximize this creative urge and eliminate violent and

coercive barriers to it, and furthermore that the scientific investigation into human nature is paramount in order to understand what an ideal and just society could be. Chomsky, an anarchist, posits that this society is relatively horizontally organized through federation, and a minimal use of coercive force. Pinker, on the other hand, sees the possibility of peace through strong centralized government with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Both, notably, are optimists when it comes to the fundamental question of whether humanity is capable of living at peace with itself.

I don't engage in scientific investigations into human nature. I have, however, spent, in addition to composing, a significant portion of the last decade-and-a-half engaged in social justice work. I worked for racial justice as it relates to housing in both Syracuse, NY and Post-Katrina New Orleans. I also have spent years as a labor organizer, working with nurses, the overwhelming majority of who are women, to stand up against their almost exclusively male bosses. My work has been guided by Marxist economic reasoning and a New Left understanding of intersectionality (the approaches not being mutually exclusive, as some argue). Human nature, as I have come to understand it, lies somewhere between Pinker's conception of it (Pinker channeling Hobbes through evolutionary psychology), and Chomsky's conception of it (Chomsky channeling Rousseau through evolutionary linguistics). Equally impressive to me in my work has been the selflessness and commitment to others that I have seen from some activists (a selflessness and commitment I don't personally possess) and the territorialism and shortsightedness I have seen from others, especially as they rise to positions of power. Reading recently, as I worked on this piece, Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was a particularly chilling experience. The methods by which Eichmann worked with Jewish leadership to orchestrate a genocide that would have otherwise been bureaucratically impossible were remarkably similar in their mechanism to the way in which the labor movement thinks about leadership and mobilization. I don't believe, as some have claimed, that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is evidence of Arendt's own internalized anti-Semitism. Rather, it strikes me as getting to the heart of something true about humanity's relationship to leadership and power. It is a dark conclusion, but it seems to me reductionist to explain the negative either through the base/superstructure conception of Marxism, or as byproducts of an oppressive State, as anarchists are inclined to do. At a certain point it makes more sense to acknowledge that humanity evolved both a propensity for cruelty and compassion. As the primatologist and animal ethologist Franz de Waal, author of *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* says, "being both more systematically brutal than chimps and more empathic than bonobos, we are by far the most bipolar ape. Our societies are never completely peaceful, never completely competitive, never ruled by sheer selfishness, and never perfectly moral."

A Hobbesian and Evolutionary Psychology

Fundamentally I too, along with Chomsky and Pinker am an optimist when it comes to humanity. At the climax of the piece the following is sung in the voice of the children, who are about to be eaten:

*And the children say: Our smiles, our games were built upon our fear of violent death
And the children say: We are scared.*

The fear of a violent death: The hummingbird beats its wings
The fear of a violent death: A mossy hump of soil, into of which our mother dug our nest.
Into which each life was built.

The fear of a violent death: A mossy hump of soil.
The fear of a violent death: Bare ribcage of a last year's leaf.

Pale green head, lifted up on the neck of a sprouted seed.

The children, here, are making a direct reference to Hobbes, who posited that the primal fear of a violent death at the hands of another is the basis for all civilization, laws and morality. It is this fear, Hobbes postulated, that drove humanity to settle in the first communities and develop what we now know as civilization. Against this death “the hummingbird beats its wings,” and “our mother built our nest.” Notably, though, being non-human animals, the mother and her children cannot build civilization, laws and morals against this death, and when faced with both her own starvation, and the starvation of her children, the mother protagonist chooses to enact a violent death upon her children in order to save herself. The religious overtones of this act are self-evident. The mother finds salvation in the very act of taking her children’s flesh and blood into her body

And the piece does offer salvation, in a sense. The final movement of the piece, *Hymn and soliloquy* takes the tone of a Christian song of praise, at least initially. Who are we praising? Our protagonist, the mother, of course. She made an impossible choice to survive by eating her still suckling children. Should we ask her to have made any other choice? Should she have starved and died along with her children, in order uphold the principle of motherhood? Again, here, we can turn to Pinker for answers. Pinker addresses the issue of neonaticide both in the essay, *Why They Kill Their Newborns*, originally published in the *New York Times*, and in his book *How the Mind Works*. In both he uses evolutionary psychology to investigate why mothers sometimes kill, and in the case of *How the Mind Works*, even eat their children. He argues that from the perspective of the selfish gene, a concept pioneered by the zoologist Richard Dawkins (infamous for his polemics against the existence of God, but far more interesting as a writer on evolution) any parent must choose to invest the limited resources available to her in which, if any, of her children. In abundance the choice is not difficult; the resources are invested freely. In scarcity she must choose between investing those resources, to her own detriment, in offspring with dubious chances for survival already, as opposed to saving those resources for other, more robust offspring either that she currently has, or that she expects to have in the future. The choice is not a rational one, but rather is driven by an emotional response that is genetically hardwired into the parent and manifests itself under given conditions of scarcity. There is not much point in moralizing about this, because infanticide and subsequent cannibalization of the bodies is commonplace in the animal world. My wife and I nearly adopted a beautiful boxer-mastiff mix that was the sole survivor of a litter of puppies that had contracted parvovirus, and was killed and eaten by their mother (in fact, in a previous version of this piece one of the children left the nest and then returned to spread disease to her siblings). What makes Pinker’s writing controversial at all is that he claims the same evolutionary

tendencies are encoded in the human brain as well, and seeks to explain the act of human infanticide through evolutionary psychology. As is often the case when an evolutionary psychologist offers reasoning for one of the darker corners of human nature, Pinker was accused of morally sanctioning the killing of babies.

In *Hymn and soliloquy* we may be accused of morally sanctioning the killing of babies. In conversation with bell hook, the filmmaker Charles Burnett said, regarding his film *Killer of Sheep*, “People felt that because the film did not resolve anything happily that it was depressing. Whereas I though [...] why wasn’t it significant, the fact that this person just struggled and survived? The only thing you can ask someone to do is to stay alive, to continue moving. [...] Why can’t it be a victory when folks survive potentially tragic events? It’s like you weathered the storm.” Our protagonist has weathered the storm. Ecological catastrophe has come, and she has lived to see another season. The controlling image, here, in fact, is not the mold that kills the Ilex berries, but a rising flood. In *Part II, Which describes an unpleasant dream, and other things* the image is introduced:

*To feel the breeze, to smell the river’s mist,
Floating under water
Holding on for dear life
Hold me little daughter
Onward as we sink down to the bottom of the river*

It returns in *Part IV, The part about the eating*:

In the flood, a young mother, clinging to a branch

And finally it is resolved in *Part V, Hymn and soliloquy*

*The desperate giver turned her head and snuck a bite away
At the very highest tides, you know, the river flows the other way*

*The river goes the other way
The river flows the other way
It turns around as if to say, “I’m backing up, I’m going mad.”
And all the water flows away
The river goes the other way*

*As if to say,
“I’m giving up I’m going out I’m taking leave of everything”*

Our protagonist avoids being subsumed in the flood by metaphorically becoming the flood herself. A blight of mold comes that causes starvation and death, and rather than give in to death, she herself becomes the cause of death in order to survive.

At this point she turns to the audience as if to explain her actions. Returning to my conversations with Narvel, the Jehovah’s Witness, as I mentioned before, Narvel was an animal lover without animals. His wife was highly allergic to pet dander. Therefore coming to my house was a treat for him. My wife, Sarah, and I have a dog and a cat, but on top of

that we regularly foster animals at our house for the local shelter. It is not uncommon for us to have an extra dog in the house: one who has some sort of special needs, whether this means that something has made them afraid of people, or whether they, for example, are deaf. In addition to this we regularly have between one and half-a-dozen or more cats and kittens, some of whom need to be bottle-fed. Currently we are raising and training a two-month-old piglet. Narvel loved our dog, Sasha, to the point that one day a group of Witnesses came by without Narvel in order to invite us to an event at the church, and all of them knew Sasha by name though they had never met her. He also loved to help me bottle-feed the kittens. He was gentle and tender with them, clearly empathetic, so it surprised me one day when he revealed that he did not believe that they had souls. I, of course, agree with him, but our reasoning follows completely different paths. For him animals were put on earth by God to serve the purposes of humanity, and lack sentience of their own. I, of course, don't believe in the soul, and believe in the human-animal as an animal more fundamentally similar to than different from other animals, especially those in the taxonomic family of *hominids*, or great apes, which includes not only gorillas and chimpanzees, but also modern humans and other extinct species of humans (Neanderthals, for example). Still, though Narvel was theologically motivated to make the distinction between human and animal, it is a distinction that many secular people feel the need to make as well. The neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran says in *The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes Us Human*, "Science tells us we are merely beasts, but we don't feel like that. We feel like angels trapped inside the bodies of beasts, forever craving transcendence." Likewise Frans de Waal observes that unfailingly when he speaks publically about animal behavior he always ends up fielding questions as to "what makes us human." Though neither Ramachandran nor de Waal have found a satisfactory answer to what, if anything, fundamentally differentiates us from our animal kin, our capacities for deep empathy and language are tentatively offered up by each respectively, though each also acknowledges that new research continually erodes claims of human uniqueness.

Pinker in *The Better Angels of Our Nature* theorizes that widespread literacy has played a critical role in the reduction of violence. He argues (an argument later echoed and supported by scientific research in *The New York Times* under the heading *For Better Social Skills, Scientists Recommend a Little Chekhov*, by Pam Belluck) that the ability to take the perspective of another individual increases the reader's overall capacity for empathy. The study described in *The New York Times*, notably made the distinction in a manner that is slightly more fine-grained. Only reading literary fiction, as opposed to popular fiction or non-fiction showed an increase in empathy among respondents. The results are encouraging for those of us who toil making serious and difficult art with an ear toward the world around us. Pinker believes that literature plays a role in the reduction of human violence. When the protagonist at the end of the piece turns to the audience to address the events that have transgressed she herself is violating the barriers that supposedly separate animal from human. She, through the act of storytelling, is appealing to our empathy by employing language. There is nothing particularly special about this. We are, of course, listening to a work of fiction. The work has already engaged in multiple techniques of artifice that have asked of the audience that disbelief be suspended. Largely the work has been sung in English, with portions sung in an invented language that fulfills primarily the role of allowing the music to progress while the text itself, and the plot is in a moment of repose or ambiguity. The audience has entered into a pact with the work to accept that words are being sung in English

verse that can only exist as an act of fiction (no non-human animal, of course, can speak these words). It is then at the end of the piece that the protagonist addresses the audience in what is presumably her own and a new language. This, though, is a fictional slight of hand. For the invented language of the piece to function as a language, and not merely as a series of random sounds it is designed using Chomsky's concept of Universal Grammar. Chomsky theorized that the human capacity for language did not only evolve culturally as our cognitive abilities increased, but that the fundamental aspects of human language and grammar are hardwired in our brains. These include the hierarchical structure of sentences, and the potential for the grammatical transformation of sentences with identical meanings into different forms (from the active to the passive voice, for example). Chomsky argues that evidence from studies in early childhood language acquisition prove that we do not learn this Universal Grammar by rote, but rather inherit it as part of our evolutionary cognitive endowment. The invented language spoken at the end of the piece, and sung at various times throughout the piece, follows these rules of Universal Grammar, meaning that fundamentally though it is a fictional language, it is specifically still a fictional human language –it exists as a possible human language, comprehensible, translatable and recognizable as a language as opposed to a random or functionless series of phonemes, meaning that the same act of personification of the animal protagonist is occurring when she speaks her soliloquy as when she sings in English. She begins:

*Kon ja ohmatam ayes eutais geoostatars ja sibemetam ens gut ge guts meu'es
ohn bom ge boms meu'es kun veos vahtan doomla. Ja sibemetam kai ahtan
irabatmakayn ni maye veos imzanuvia eutai soola poleskonfeazunelet ge
geoostatars vi nim vahtan het ceval kun het noowela sahia irabatmakayn
malastriko [...]*

As should be clear to the listener, the text is an actual, functional language, with tenses, conjugation, regular and irregular verbs, etc. What is unclear to the listener is its meaning. The text is a translation of a heavily edited interview with a woman who lost her young child to violence. It is heartbreaking to read, of course, and this heartbreak should be conveyed in the performance of the text. However, the origins of the text should be unknown to the audience, as useful as they may be for performance. It would harm the integrity of the piece for the literal translation of the text to be known; the piece could take on overly specific political and social implications as a result, and this could undermine the story being told. However, it may be helpful for performance to bring out some similarities between the translated text and the verse that has been sung earlier. At the climax of the piece the children meditate on the nature of their existence, and of death:

*And the children say: Life is but an illusion that makes matter move
And the children say: Hunger is but an illusion that makes matter merge
And the children say: Death is but a word for the merging of matter*

The text has the quality of impossible insight for a child, amplified by the fact that they are described as saying it in unison. The intended effect is one of increased artifice and distancing from the events at hand. I was surprised, therefore, when I found in the interview I translated similar insightfulness in this real-life child who had lost his life. His mother

describes him as constantly questioning the nature of existence, and of the tangibility and plausibility of God (in whom she questioningly believes, a point that comes through in spite of the fact that the interview was published in a periodical serving a faith based community). This lost child had a persistent fear of the unknown, and specifically of death, and his mother would constantly try to reassure him that he would live a long life –a fact that turned out not to be true. In the end she is left to wonder about the circumstances of his death, his suffering, where he is now if anywhere, or if he is simply gone. We can imagine an audience attributing this meaning to the words they are hearing spoken, even if they are unsure what they mean. Or we can imagine an audience believing that the protagonist of the story is attempting to explain herself: to explain her starvation, her lack of options, what true hunger feels like, etc. Each audience member is left to interpret the act, and the text as she feels fit. What remains is a protagonist who has survived, simply, not triumphed, but lost and survived. The conclusions to be drawn are open-ended: obfuscated by a language barrier.

Human Prehistory: An Origin Story

According to some Paleo-archeologists, humanity itself went through a starvation period similar to that of the blight that falls upon the protagonists of the piece. DNA evidence concludes that about 70,000 years ago the total human population of the earth fell to between 3,000 and 10,000 individuals. There is even a mitochondrial Eve –a real once-living woman from whom all of the mitochondrial DNA extant in today’s humans descends, indicating a narrow population bottleneck in our pre-history. Anatomically-modern human remains date back 200,000 years, meaning some presumably ecological event occurred fairly late in human history (30,000 years past the midway point) that widely impacted the survivability of conditions in Sub-Saharan Africa, where all anatomically modern humans lived at that point. Brian Fagan, in his book *Cro-Magnon*, articulates one theory as to the cause of the bottleneck: that of the eruption of the supervolcano Toba. Toba’s eruption in Indonesia without question occurred around the time of the population bottleneck in human history, and also coincides with population bottlenecks in other mammals. It immediately precedes the last global glaciation, and the volcanic winter that ensued may have been the tipping point that caused this. It is without question that the eruption spewed an enormous amount of ash and toxic gasses into the atmosphere, and these could have contributed to global climate change, though this causality, as well as its relationship to the observed population bottlenecks are strongly contested. Still, one can imagine ancient humans witnessing events similar to those that the protagonist of our story witnesses in the opening:

*Under Ilex, under Cornus
Sleeping under powder-leaf as*

*Cooling in the later summer
Brought us mold, upon the Ilex*

*All the leaves upon the Cornus
Wizening with every hour*

*Leafy falling ash about us,
Stippling in azure powder*

Whatever ecological catastrophe befell early humans, it seems to have functioned as a selection pressure that gave rise to cognitively modern humans. In the wake of our near extinction our brains evolved to function in the same manner that they do today. This would mean that our language capacities (not believed to be present to the same extent in other now-extinct species of humans such as the Neanderthal) evolved at this historical moment, and our tool making abilities became significantly more refined. Shortly after this the first modern humans began to migrate out of Africa and populate the rest of the world. To underscore this, if a human being from 100,000 years ago were cloned and raised among today's humans, they would not be capable of cognitively functioning in the same ways that we do. However, if a human were cloned based on DNA from an ancient individual born after the population bottleneck, they would be just as capable of functioning in today's world as anyone else born of contemporary parents. If Pinker and Chomsky are right, and humanity is capable of one day living in peace with itself, it seems that the tools necessary to do so were born at the moment when we were closest to our own extinction. Salvation is offered in our own survival and language is born.

As it was for humanity, so it is for our protagonist. She lives through her own personal apocalypse, and emerges speaking a new language. Of note is the fact that this language only appears in two other places in the piece. The first time it appears is while she is dreaming in *Part II, Which describes an unpleasant dream and other things*. The next time it appears is in *Part IV, The part about the eating*. Throughout the rest of the piece it is used syllabically for musical purposes, but never in a manner that is languageful, to coin a term. Through language future generations of this fictional animal's offspring may act to protect themselves and live more peacefully, motivated by "the fear of a violent death," as the children say.

Conclusion

Jehovah's Witnesses are members of an apocalyptic religion. They believe that Paradise will one day be restored on Earth after Jesus returns to destroy sin. The Paradise on Earth aspect of the religion is a significant doctrinal difference they have with other Christian sects, and is supported by scripture (this time consistent across translations). In their view only 144,000 souls will be admitted to Heaven, and the rest of those who have been saved will live on an Earth where Eden has been restored. For those of us who have not been saved, our earthly deaths will be permanent. They cite in support of this 144,000 claim Revelation 7:1-8 and 14:1-5. As evidence of the coming apocalypse they cite anecdotally current deteriorating familial and social relationships as well as the prevalence of disease and violence. Though I have declared myself an optimist when it comes to humanity, one outstanding question as to our future remains: that of global warming. It is possible that we are heading toward unimaginable ecological catastrophe. In that sense, *The Passion of the Wilt-Mold Mothers* may be interpreted not only as an allegorical origins story for humanity, but also as a story of apocalypse. One should be cautious about drawing parallels between

religious prophecy and scientific prediction. They aren't the same thing. That said, during the Cold War many scientists believed that global nuclear annihilation was a near certainty. The fragility of civilization and the looming possibility of the End of Days seem to be deeply embedded in the human psyche, though I would hesitate to say that they are evolutionarily encoded.

Narvel would regularly ask me about my predictions for the future of humanity: whether we could achieve true peace. He believed that it is foretold. I, of course, am less sure. One day not long ago we were debating the finer points of the Witnesses' belief that only 144,000 souls would be admitted to Heaven. Though I could not see a scriptural reason to disbelieve the specific number, what I failed to understand was why Jehovah's Witnesses took these verses literally, but then treated as metaphor those immediately following specifying that the 144,000 souls would only be men, would all be virgins, and would be descended from the twelve tribes of Israel. The practical answer to this question is that this would exclude elders of the church that Witnesses believe are included in the 144,000. I saw as I made this argument a rare flash of anger in Narvel, uncommon in someone normally so gentle and open in our conversations. Presumably he felt cornered, and frustrated by being unable to offer a better answer. Shortly thereafter he admitted that he had been hoping all this time that he would convert me, in spite of my assurances that this was not a possibility. I told him again that this was not going to happen, and he said that in this case he could better serve God by talking with people who were open to the faith. As he left we agreed to remain friends. I suggested we grab a drink sometime, and he reminded me that he was an addict, so we settled on coffee.

I was surprised by how sad I was when he left. A few weeks later I told an ex-Mormon friend of mine in a Skype session how much I missed my conversations with Narvel, and he coyly suggested I invite some Mormon missionaries to stop by. As we were talking I missed a call. I asked my friend to give me a minute to listen to the voicemail, and heard, "Hey Curtis, how are you. Long time no see, seems like. This is Narvel, the gentleman who comes over and points to the bible sometimes. Uh, I started to say it's good to hear your voice, but I should say it's good to hear your recorded voice. Actually I kind of miss you and our discussions a little bit. I was thinking of stopping by. I'll give you a call maybe next week and see when's going to be good for you, but tell Sarah I said hello, and I'll talk to you soon."

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