The New REPUBLIC

Published on *The New Republic* (http://www.tnr.com)

Confessions of an Ex-Mormon

A personal history of America's most misunderstood religion.

Walter Kirn July 13, 2012 | 12:00 am

Before 2013 begins, catch up on the best of 2012. From now until the New Year, we will be re-posting some of The New Republic*'s most thought-provoking pieces of the year. Enjoy.*

I DON'T REMEMBER the missionaries' names, only that one was blond and one was dark, one was from Oregon and one was from Utah. They arrived at our house on secondhand bicycles carrying bundles of inspirational literature. They smelled, I remember, of witch hazel and toothpaste. The blond one, whose hair had a complicated wave in it and whose body was shaped like a hay bale, broad and square, wiped his feet with vigor on our doormat and complimented my mother on our house, a one-story, ranch-style affair in central Phoenix that never fully cooled off during the night and had scorpions and black widow spiders in the walls. The boys—because that's how they looked to me that evening, when I was thirteen and my brother was eleven and my parents were in their mid-thirties—shook hands with us and sat down in the living room, where my mother had set out lemonade and cookies and my father had turned off the television so we could talk. They smiled at us. They smiled with their whole faces. Then they asked, softly, politely, if we could pray.

It was 1976, the Bicentennial, and not a good time for my family. We were sinking, mired in gloom, isolation, and uncertainty. We'd moved to Phoenix a few months earlier, driving a U-Haul truck from Minnesota that wouldn't go faster than 50 miles per hour and didn't have room for all of our furniture. We'd left the small river town where I'd grown up because my father, a corporate patent lawyer who loved to hunt and fish in his spare time, had soured on the Midwest. He felt bored there, constrained by dull conformity; a vision of fierce desert freedom had come over him. In Arizona, a land of opportunity, booming and unfenced, he planned to enter private practice and spend his weekends outdoors under the sky. He'd fly-fish in the mountains, he'd shoot quail, he'd buy a Chevy Blazer with four-wheel drive, and he'd take us deep into the red-rock canyons to hike and camp and hunt for rocks and fossils. We'd love it, he told us. Our fresh American start.

But it didn't turn out like that. My father cracked. Too much longing and space, too little guidance.

It began when his own father died of lung cancer after a horrifying, swift decline. When my father returned from the funeral in Ohio, his legal practice was failing for lack of clients. Some mornings he didn't bother to go to work, just sat on the bench at his bus stop and browsed the paper, waving on the bus drivers when they pulled over. He started talking to himself in public, while eating in restaurants or buying shotgun shells. The tone of his ramblings was punitive, exasperated, like that of an angry coach. Addressing himself as "Walt," in the third-person, he charged himself with foolishness and weakness. "Walt, you pathetic idiot," he'd say. "Walt, you ridiculous stupid little ass." Sometimes strangers heard him and turned to stare.

The story of how the Mormons came was this: Headed home from a job-hunting trip to Blackfoot, Idaho, while changing planes in Salt

Lake City, my father suffered a breakdown in the terminal. His haunted mind attacked itself, nearly paralyzing him at the gate. He pulled himself together and boarded his flight, where he found himself seated beside a handsome young couple that radiated serenity and calm. They sensed his despair and started talking to him about their church, the center of their lives, and about their belief that the family is eternal, a permanently bonded sacred unit. (One reason he listened to them, he later told me, is that there had just been a terrible flood in Idaho—the deadly Teton Dam disaster—and he'd heard stories of how thousands of Mormons had immediately dropped what they were doing and convoyed in from states across the West to perform acts of cleanup and reclamation.) The next morning, in his bed at home, he woke up thrashing from a nightmare. My mother threatened to leave him; she'd had enough. Flashing back to the couple on the plane, he opened the phone book, found a number, dialed it, and said he needed help. This minute. Now.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints must have been used to fielding such distress calls. They dispatched a rescue party instantly: another couple, retired, in their seventies. Within an hour, they were at my father's side. They talked to him all morning behind closed doors and convinced him to go to church with them that Sunday. The service soothed him, lightening his mood. My mother saw this, grew hopeful, and didn't leave him. The bicycle-riding missionaries showed up a few nights later.

"Dear Heavenly Father," their prayers began. They sat hip to hip on our sagging, old blue sofa and milky beads of talcum-powder sweat ran down their temples and their cheeks. They blessed our family, our home. They blessed the lemonade. They asked that we hear their message with open minds. On the first night, they showed us a movie about a boy, Joseph Smith, who, one day in 1820, prayed in the woods behind his parents' farm and found himself face to face with God and Jesus. The lessons that followed described what happened next, from Smith's translation of a golden scripture that he found buried in a hillside, to the trials of his early disciples. Seeking peace to practice their new faith, they traveled west from settlement to settlement, harassed by mobs of brutal vigilantes who finally murdered Smith in Illinois. His people stayed strong, though. Under a brave new leader, Brigham Young, they undertook a 1,000-mile trek that brought them to Utah, their Zion in the wilderness.

The missionaries kept coming for six weeks, always at night, always hungry for our cookies. On Sundays, they sat next to us at services, one on each side of us, like gate posts. And then it was time; they told us we were ready. Standing in a pool of waist-deep water, dressed in white robes, we held our hands together as if to pray, let the missionaries clasp our wrists, leaned back, leaned back farther, and joined the Mormon Church.

LAST WINTER, I SAT drinking coffee in my living room, watching Mitt Romney speak on television after narrowly winning the Michigan primary. The speech was standard Republican stuff, all about shrinking the federal government and restoring American greatness, but I wasn't concentrating on Romney's rhetoric. I was examining his face, his manner, and trying—if such a thing is possible—to peer into his soul. I was trying to see the Mormon in him.

My motives were personal, not political. I'd never been a good Mormon, as you'll soon learn (indeed, I'm not a Mormon at all these days), but the talk of religion spurred by Romney's run had aroused in me feelings of surprising intensity. Attacks on Mormonism by liberal wits and their unlikely partners in ridicule, conservative evangelical Christians, instantly filled me with resentment, particularly when they made mention of "magic underwear" and other supposedly spooky, cultish aspects of Mormon doctrine and theology. On the other hand, legitimate reminders of the Church hierarchy's decisive support for Proposition 8, the California gay marriage ban, disgusted me. Deeper, trickier emotions surfaced whenever I came across the media's favorite visual emblem of the faith: a young male missionary in a shirt and tie with a black plastic name-badge pinned to his vest pocket. The image suggested that Mormons were squares and robots, a naïve, brainwashed army of the out-of-touch. That hurt a bit. It also tugged me back to a sad, frightened moment in my youth when these figures of fun were all my family had.

As for Romney himself, the man, the person, I empathized with him and his predicament. He no more stood for Mormonism than I did, but he was often presumed to stand for it by journalists who knew little about his faith, let alone the culture surrounding it, other than that some Americans distrusted it and certain others despised it outright. When a writer for *The New York Times*, Charles Blow, urged Romney to "stick that in your magic underwear!" I half hoped that Romney would lose his banker's cool and tell the bigoted anti-Mormon twits to stick something else somewhere else, until it hurt. I further hoped he'd sit his critics down and thoughtfully explain that Mormonism is more than a ceremonial endeavor; it constitutes our country's longest experiment with communitarian idealism, promoting an ethic of frontier-era burden-sharing that has been lost in contemporary America, with increasingly dire social consequences. Instead, Romney

showed restraint, which disappointed me. I no longer practiced Mormonism, true, but it was still a part of me, apparently, and a bigger part than I'd appreciated.

Sometimes a person doesn't know what he's made of until strangers try to tear it down.

A FEW MONTHS AFTER our baptism in Phoenix, having recovered the basic power to function, my family moved back to rural Minnesota, to a town about 40 miles from St. Paul where Mormons were few, and we promptly began to lapse. My little brother got all caught up in sports, my father resumed drinking wine and beer with meals, and my mother immersed herself in a new job as a nurse at a famous addiction clinic devoted to the gospel of the twelve steps. I remained faithful, however. I hung on. To abandon my family's deliverers so quickly seemed risky to me, not to mention impolite. What's more, I'd become a believer.

The teaching dearest to my young heart related to the transit of the soul through time and space and beyond them. The version of heaven familiar from my childhood, instilled in me by occasional attendance at a Lutheran Sunday school, had always struck me as sterile and impersonal—a cavernous amphitheater of clouds where rank upon rank of stranger-angels sang the praises of a seated wizard—but the Mormon afterlife seemed homier, a sort of family reunion among the stars. Like Dorothy waking from her dream of Oz, I would find myself resurrected with my close relatives, all of us smiling and at the peak of health.

One evening at church, a participatory play was staged to help us envision this reassuring place. Following a simulated plane crash that involved cutting the lights throughout the building and broadcasting sounds of chaos on the PA system, the congregation was ushered down a dark hallway into a room where the bishop and his wife stood dressed in white garments, illuminated by spotlights. Their arms were extended in welcome. Soft music played. Behind them were posters of galaxies and planets and a banner that read, "THE CELESTIAL KINGDOM."

Another source of uplift was my new status as a deacon of the Aaronic Priesthood, a junior spiritual order open to all faithful adolescent males. Chief among my duties as a deacon was the ritual shredding of loaves of Wonder Bread into little sacramental chunks. Every Sunday, my teenage pals and I would file down the aisles of our modest chapel distributing this holy meal, which also included paper cups of water filled from a tap concealed behind the pulpit. In my powder-blue suit and shiny brown clip-on tie, I felt handsome, useful, and respected. I also felt included, a new sensation for a kid worn out from changing schools. As I moved through the congregation with my tray, the grateful faces in the pews, male and female, young and old, dissolved my chronic feeling of separation and convinced me I'd found my place.

The strongest force binding me to the Church, however, wasn't religious, but hormonal. I found the girls of my ward more attractive than the girls at school. Perhaps because Mormon custom encourages young folks to marry permanently and early, often when they're barely out of their teens, the girls were precociously skilled at self-enhancement, favoring leg-slimming, grown-up-looking shoes, and eye-catching, curling-iron-assisted hairstyles. They also permitted discreet erotic contact that stopped just short of actual intercourse. The girl I liked best of all was Carla H., a hell-raising cheerleader two years my senior. Carla had sinful menthol-cigarette breath and a scandalous reputation. A couple of months before I fell for her at one of the ward's monthly Saturday night dances, she'd run away from home, the story went, and shacked up with the married manager of the franchise restaurant where she worked. The better brought-up boys avoided her because of this, but I, a new convert, was undeterred.

Carla's family, who I'll call the Harmons, was Mormon royalty. It traced its ancestry to pioneers who Brigham Young had dispatched to southern Idaho to irrigate the desert and start farms. The pious stoicism of these tough people was still discernible in Mr. Harmon, a mid-level corporate accountant with a lean, gray face and hollow eyes who rarely spoke directly to his children, just mentioned them in mealtime prayers. Above the desk in his orderly home office hung a rack of rifles and shotguns, and after dinner, he'd pull a chair up under them and organize the ward's books for hours on end while Carla and I watched television in the next room and Ken, her 19-year-old brother, smoked marijuana and tinkered with his Camaro in the garage. I felt bad for the man. He seemed defeated. One evening, he emerged early from his office and caught me and Carla with our shirts half off, but instead of saying anything, he walked silently past us into the kitchen, where I heard him turn the faucet on and splash water on his face. A few moments later he went by again, still ignoring us, holding a glass of milk.

My problem was that Carla wasn't loyal. I was her Mormon boyfriend, not her main one. Her main one was older than me and twice as

tall. I glimpsed him once, at the counter in her restaurant, dressed in a letter jacket covered in pins. I knew from his posture somehow that he and she had gone places I hadn't. My consolation was knowing that, in theory, she and I had a serious future together. In only three years, I'd serve my mission, sent by the Church to wherever they'd choose to send me—England, I hoped, because I was bad at languages but pined for foreign lands—and when I got home, I'd be urged to take a wife. It might be her. She'd hinted as much one night. "I'm getting this out of my system," she confided while we lounged in her brother's Camaro smoking dope. "Don't think this is permanent. I love the Church. I just can't give all of me right now."

I too had begun having trouble giving all of me. To my parents, the backsliders who no longer knew me, I was a scripture-reading wonder boy who the elders sometimes invited to speak at services on topics such as Teamwork and Moral Purity, but I knew better. I'd turned into a sneak. At my most recent Bishops' Interview—a ritual grilling required of every Mormon above a certain age—I'd been asked a series of questions that opened, absurdly it seemed to me, with this one: "Have you committed murder?" No, of course not. "Theft?" No again, though it depended. "Have you masturbated?" I started lying then. I lied right on down the remainder of the list. What's more, I was pretty certain that we all did. So why put us through the whole confusing ordeal? To be asked if you lied and be forced to lie again was annoying and dispiriting. It prevented you from pretending you were good, which is sometimes, with kids, what helps you to be good.

THE SUMMER I turned 16, I joined my youth group for a ward-sponsored bus tour of the Midwestern Mormon holy sites. The site I most looked forward to visiting was the spot in Independence, Missouri, where I was told that God would establish his everlasting kingdom around the time of the Second Coming. The way I'd heard it from a clued-in buddy who'd grown up in the faith, we would be called, via skywriting or trumpet blast, to gather at this consecrated place and erect a temple with our bare hands. We would go there on foot, the way the early saints had crossed the plains to settle Salt Lake City. It sounded like fun to me, and my buddy said it would occur within our lifetimes, after a period of shattering destruction. We didn't need to fear this havoc, he said, because of the stores of food and other supplies that the Church encouraged us to stockpile. I didn't let on that my family hadn't done this.

We left St. Paul and followed the Mississippi down along the continent's great valley of primitive fertility and mystery. In the buses, especially as evening fell, a cloistered sense of boy-girl possibility caused sweaty hands to wander in the rear seats, beyond the view of the chaperones up front. In the morning, we strolled through Nauvoo, Illinois, the city where Smith and his followers sought refuge after being chased out of Missouri. Our attention was directed to a hill where Smith had begun the construction of a temple, the rites and ordinances of which, my buddy whispered, were based on ceremonies Smith had witnessed in a Masonic lodge that he belonged to. "He stole them?" I asked. "So they say," my buddy said. "They say it was Masons who killed him, for taking their secrets."

Below the hill, on the flats along the river, was a cluster of wooden stores and houses restored by the Church as a living history lesson. Standing some distance from Carla to fool the chaperones, I watched with pretended fascination as reenactors dressed in coarse, dull fabrics rendered fat to make soap and spun thread on wooden wheels. The impression I gained was that we—spoiled modern teenagers—were in some manner heirs to these simple, cheerful drudges. When the going got tough after the Day of Judgment, we would shed our luxurious individuality, take up their tools and their rough-hewn way of life, and set out on the overland march to Independence. I could almost imagine this transformation in my case—my parent's house was surrounded by dairy farms, I'd been working at an auto shop that summer—but I doubted that Carla would make the grade.

On down the river we drove, into Missouri. The buses pulled over in a parking lot overlooking a leafy summer cornfield bordered by a tangled hardwood forest. We filed out and were made to stand in silence before what one chaperone, balding, tall, and stern, declared to be Eden, man's childhood home. It was also the spot where Jesus would return to rally the elect, he said. We were shown the broad rock where, according to our guide, the Savior would stand and speak. We were encouraged to stand on it ourselves. The boy who preceded me in line was crying when he stepped down off the stone, one hand pressed on his stomach as though it ached. As Mormons, we'd learned that a burning in our bellies meant we were in the presence of the Spirit, whose job was to confirm for people in doubt the truth of propositions their minds resisted. This was one of those. Eden in a cornfield? It had to be planted in something, I supposed, but then there was the matter of its size. For Adam and Eve it was spacious enough, perhaps, but could it hold all the Mormons who'd be left after the tribulations of the Last Days? Only if they packed in awfully tight.

As Carla and the others watched me, I mounted the rock in my untied tennis shoes and awaited intestinal confirmation of a story I suddenly found preposterous. Other tales from the trip had strained belief, but I'd strained back and managed to accept them. This one

was different, though. This one hurt to think about.

What happened next surprised me. As I gazed at the field and struggled to imagine a sea of faithful saints gathered to take instruction from God's son as nuclear mushroom clouds billowed on the horizon and vultures circled above the woods, my stomach cramped. Not a strong cramp, but a cramp. Was this the same as a "burning"? Well, say it was. What prompted it, though? I feared I knew: pure tension. The tension of glancing over at my friends and wondering if I could conceal the look of emptiness that comes from finally losing one's spiritual innocence.

Paranoia overtook me afterward. When I boarded the bus and headed toward the back row where Carla and I had sat on the way down, enmeshed in our comfy, conspiratorial romance, I saw that she wasn't there, that she'd changed seats. She'd plunked herself down across from a male chaperone, in a zone of good conduct where nothing could happen between us. She seemed to avoid my eyes when I approached, then turned around to face my chatty buddy in the seat behind her. I walked on past her and sat by myself with a radio I'd brought. It may have been all in my head, the change in Carla, but the change in me felt real. Later on, when we reached Independence, I played sick and listened to the Bee Gees on the bus while my friends continued with the tour.

BEVERLY HILLS, CALIFORNIA, 2008.

I'm 46, which is all grown up and then some, and I'm scanning a list of online classifieds for an affordable guest house or apartment where I can stay while pursuing a new relationship with a woman I met over the Internet and drove all the way from Montana two weeks earlier to meet for a first date. I have other business in the area—shooting is about to start on a movie of one of my novels, *Up in the Air*, and the director and I have things to talk about—but I can easily finish up tomorrow, at which point I'll face a choice: stay on in my costly, claustrophobic hotel room, secure a monthly rental, or say goodbye to Amanda (for now? for good?) and head back north toward Montana up I-15.

I narrow my list to three places, all guest houses, and hastily arrange to meet their landlords. My lousy credit scores will be a problem. My life has been spiraling down these past few years. A divorce from the mother of my two kids. Fat medical bills from repeated bouts of kidney stones, which are one of those puzzling ailments you blame yourself for because the doctors can't tell you what else to blame. A dwindling income due to a contraction both of my stamina and the publishing industry. I'm using Ambien to sleep, Ritalin to yank me back awake, and three varieties of narcotic pain pills to keep me from going fetal on the sidewalk when the stones start axing through my ureter. I should talk to my father, who has been where I am now and took extreme measures. But those measures aren't open to me—I closed them off—which may be one reason I'm in this mess.

I never served my Mormon mission. Decision time came when I was 17, the year I left Mormonism altogether and began my college education rather than postponing it to proselytize. The disenchantments of the bus tour had savaged my testimony but spared my spirit, allowing me to rebuild my faith around elemental principles of love and forgiveness, charity and sharing. What finally separated me from the Church was a loss of nerve, not a crisis of belief. My time in the ward had shown me at close range that God doesn't work in mysterious ways at all, but by enlisting assistants on the ground. I saw sick people healed through the laying on of hands, not suddenly and magically, but gradually, from the comfort that comes of feeling the group's concern. I'd heard inspired messages spoken in common English, sometimes from my own excited lips. This proximity to the sacred scared me off. Too much responsibility, it felt like. Too much pressure to side with the miraculous, which places demands on a busy, modern person. You sit down on a plane beside a gloomy lawyer who's cursing himself under his breath, and instead of ignoring him and reading a book, you have to ask his name and offer solace.

My stated excuse for sneaking away from Mormonism was skepticism about its doctrines, but I'd learned that most Mormons don't grasp all the teachings of Joseph Smith—nor do they credit all the ones they do grasp. After the bus trip to Eden, holy Missouri never came up again in conversation. As for the future temple in Independence, I found out that the spot where Smith said it would rise belonged to a Mormon splinter sect with a U.S. membership of about 1,000. The "sacred underwear"? It was underwear. Everyone wears it, so why not make it sacred? Why not make everything sacred? It is, in some ways. And most sacred of all are people, not wondrous stories, whose job is to help people feel their sacredness. Sometimes the stories don't work, or they stop working. Forget about them; find others. Revise. Refocus. A church is the people in it, and their errors. The errors they make while striving to get things right.

But I didn't have the patience, or the humility. I wasn't a son of stubborn pioneers. I was the son of the lawyer on the plane who'd suffered

the breakdown I thought I could avoid. I left the Church as abruptly as I'd entered it. No formalities, no apologies, no goodbyes.

When I meet with the first two landlords in Beverly Hills, they've already seen my credit files and don't seem to want to know much more about me other than why I'm standing on their property. At my third stop, I speak into an intercom and wait in suspense for an electronic gate either to slide open, meaning yes, or fail to budge, meaning time to hunker down, kick the opiates, and pay my bills.

"Great to meet you, Walt. I'm Bobby Keller. You want a Sprite or something? You look all hot. My sister, Kim, who you talked to on the phone, is at a church thing with our other housemates, but I can show you the place we hope you'll rent."

You can scoff at their oddities, skip out of your mission, run off to college, and wander for 30 years through barrooms and bedrooms and court rooms and all-night pharmacies, but they never quite forget you, I learned that day. How had Bobby discovered my secret? My Wikipedia page, written by some stranger. It was loaded with mistakes (it said I was still married, a detail that may have given Bobby pause when Amanda stayed over the next night—not that he said a single word), but the fact that got me a lease without a credit check and rescued my new romance was accurate: My first book, a collection of short stories that opened with a tale of masturbation and ended with one about a drunken missionary, had won a little-known literary prize from a broad-minded Mormon cultural group.

I furnished the guest house with chairs and shelves and tables that my new housemates had stored in the garage and not only gave me, but helped me clean and move. My latter-day Mormon double-life began. Away from the shady, walled-in canyon compound that I nicknamed Beverly Zion, I plunged into the arcade of bright temptations that my single and in-their-twenties new friends (Bobby, a personal trainer–turned–surfing photographer; Kim, a runway model–turned–mortgage broker; Sophie, a TV talent show contestant; and Lisa, a sales rep for a cosmetics firm—identities that I have tweaked for the sake of privacy) had presumably banded together to resist. I patio-postured at the Chateau Marmont. I Sunset-Stripped until the bands went home. What I didn't do was go back to church. Unnecessary. Mormonism, the religion of second chances, the faith that makes house calls, had come back to me.

In a way I remembered from my teenage years, my housemates did everything in groups, with friends from their Santa Monica "singles ward." They hit the beach for all-night bonfire parties and convoyed off to a giant monthly flea market held at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena. At least once a week, they threw a backyard cookout: burgers and chicken, rolls, potato salad, lettuce salad, Jell-O salad, ice cream. When everybody finished eating, we'd gather inside the main house's soaring living room to watch that week's episode of Sophie's talent show or one of the bloody, hard-boiled action movies that Bobby couldn't get enough of. The mood was casual and disheveled, reminding me of a fifth-grade sleepover. I was faintly aware of crushes within the group, of certain young men who had eyes for certain young women, but there was no withdrawing into pairs. Everyone paid attention to everyone else.

I'd forgotten that social life could be so easy. I'd forgotten that things most Americans do alone, ordinary things, like watching television or listening to music or sweeping a floor, could also be done in numbers, pleasantly. One night, I sat on the floor next to a kid, muscled and tall, rectangularly handsome, who turned out to be a quarterback for UCLA. I learned this from Kim; he'd never bothered to mention it. Too absorbed in the goofy talent show, too busy barbecuing chicken breasts or squirting Hershey's Syrup on bowls of ice cream, assembly-line style, while someone else stuck spoons in them. At Beverly Zion, that's how it worked: pitch in, help out, cooperate, cooperate. Divide the labor, pool the fruits. This reflexive communalism went way back in Mormonism and underlay a frontier economic system known as "The United Order." It had also inspired the early Mormons' symbol of themselves, the beehive. In Brigham Young's Utah, where speculative self-enrichment was explicitly discouraged (along with the mining and trading of precious metals, which Young decried as a barren, corrupting enterprise), the direction of the pursuit of happiness was toward the advancement of the common good.

It dawned on me that the purpose of Beverly Zion was not to seal out Hollywood at all, but to provide a setting for the enjoyment of a mutualistic way of life familiar from childhood homes and churches. Well, good enough: It kept me fed. It kept me company when I wasn't writing and when Amanda, also a writer, was on assignment. It provided me with a car when mine broke down, with a truck when I bought a used sofa and had to fetch it, with laundry supplies when I ran out of them, and with dog-sitters for Amanda's poodle when we flew to St. Louis to watch the filming of *Up in the Air*. It also provided me, thanks to Bobby's father, a product designer for a Big Three auto company, with an insider's discount on a new car that saved me a sweet 4,000 bucks. And in repayment for these kindnesses? Nothing. I asked. Just help finish this Jell-O salad.

"I mean it: Are they for real?" Amanda kept asking me. She'd grown up a Roman Catholic in Chicago and felt guilty about accepting favors that she couldn't instantly return. Beverly Zion soon overwhelmed this attitude.

One 90-degree afternoon in the backyard, Bobby held a fashion shoot for a publication named *Eliza* run by one of his sister's pretty friends. ("America's leading modest fashion magazine," was how Kim described it to Amanda, meaning no short skirts or low-cut tops.) The theme of the shoot was summer athletic wear and playing a golfer was a slim Korean girl who looked terrific bending over a putter and aimlessly tossing back her long, thick hair. Three weeks later, Bobby informed the house that he and the model, a Mormon, were engaged. Soon afterward, they married.

Amanda and I, who'd already been dating longer than Bobby and his bride had known each other, attended the wedding reception, which was held in the gym of a suburban church and reminded me of my adolescent dances. Abundant pink punch, a blend of juice and soda. Cakes and cookies and yet more cookies. A zany mood of juvenile abandon and a prayer at the end for safe trips home.

Afterward, in the car, on a dark freeway, Amanda said, "I give up: I want to join."

"Don't give up," I said. "We aren't them. We aren't."

"Maybe I'm not. You are, though," she said.

I didn't argue with her. Much as they had in 1976, when the Kirns lay awake in their broiling house, the Mormons had seen me through an ugly low patch, only this time they'd appeared unbidden. My checks had stopped bouncing. So had my moods. I'd knocked off the Vicodin, flushed away the Ambien, and replaced them with comfort food and group TV nights. I'd met George Clooney, but given up trying to be him. When I climbed into bed in the guest house after the wedding, I nodded off faster than I had in years, safe behind the walls of Beverly Zion.

DRIVING HOME from Los Angeles to Montana recently, I stopped for the night in Salt Lake City with the secret intent of showing Amanda, to whom I'd become engaged a few months earlier, that Utah wasn't the sensory exclusion zone of late-night comedy legend. We turned off the freeway onto a broad street originally laid out by Brigham Young to accommodate passing teams of horses, looked for a restaurant, saw nothing but KFC (past ten o'clock; too late for anything fancier), and pulled up in front of the Monaco Hotel. Having spent the weekend in Las Vegas flinging money at the roulette wheel and attending saucy cabaret shows, we were exhausted, but only she was sleepy. My easily excited ex-Mormon metabolism was still jazzed from the Strip and two truck-stop energy drinks.

At one a.m., with no one on the street, I left the hotel and walked up to the temple, a blazingly well-lit granite edifice built by stalwart pioneers and completed about 120 years ago, after 40 years of work. I sat on a bench regarding its Eastern face and the trumpeting gold angel on its main spire: Moroni, the being who directed Joseph Smith to the spot where the golden Book of Mormon lay buried. I was after something, I realized. A lift, a boost, a spiritual burning in the stomach. I'd never given up chasing that sensation. I tried to force things by praying with closed eyes—or not praying exactly, focusing my willingness. Nothing. The roar of big trucks on I-15, the pounding of my caffeinated pulse. Then I opened my eyes and saw something I'd missed: a simple carved symbol above the Temple's entrance that other religions might not have thought to put there. It told a story, it summed it up in stone. My father's story. A lot of mine. And, from what I knew, much of theirs—the Mormons.

Nothing mysterious. Nothing cultish. Just a handshake.

Walter Kirn is the National Correspondent at The New Republic. *This article appeared in the August 2, 2012 issue of the magazine.*

Source URL: http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/magazine/104901/ex-mormon-romney-religion-kirn