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# Quarterlife

## Coming to Terms

It was October 24, 2013, when I touched down at Tri-Cities Regional Airport in Blountville, TN. I knew the weather was unseasonably cold, and I was inappropriately dressed in a short sleeve oxford, tie, and ill-fitting suit that hung limply on my frame. My heart pounded in anticipation as the wheels hit the tarmac. I craned my neck—meerkat like—up to the window as the spiderweb metropolises and patchwork farmland gave way to the soft peaks of Appalachia. It was my first time on American soil in 22 months, and I was supposed to be returning to my home and family as a changed man.

I had spent an interminable amount of time in the air, crossing the International Date Line, transferring flights in Tokyo, then Atlanta, and finally, home, making friends during each flight. By the time I landed in Atlanta, my flight companion and I had swapped snacks and stories, and she was jolted from her sleeping position on my shoulder when the jumbo jet hit the tarmac at Hartsfield-Jackson in Atlanta.

She, like the man from Manila to Tokyo and the woman from Atlanta to Tri-Cities, had expressed some curiosity about the fact that an otherwise normal looking twenty-something had chosen to wear a suit and tie on a series of grueling international flights. My sheepish explanation

each time was that I had just served a two-year mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the rural Philippines, proselyting a faith I was quite unsure of on my best days, and ardently (and inwardly) opposed to on my worst.

In my two years abroad, I learned a lot, but not necessarily what was expected. I became fluent in another language, and strongly attached to another culture. I was randomly assigned companions (roommates of sorts) and learned to live with each one. I learned to cook, using nothing but a propane tank hooked to what was essentially a camp stove. I learned that muriatic acid makes quick work of dirty bathrooms when squirted with abandon before hurriedly closing the door. When my bi-monthly stipend ran out, I sometimes asked my parents for money, but more often than not, I went hungry. I walked miles every day under the Southeast Asian sun. To put it simply, I grew up.

Many Mormon missionaries return to their homes and families completely changed men, having absorbed and shamelessly clung to the dogma, doctrine, and culture pounded into them throughout their two years of commendable service. For many young men and women, the prospect of abandoning their homes and families is a fearful, daunting task. For me, this very same prospect was the adventure of a lifetime. For others, the tenants of the Church were a life raft in a storm tossed sea. For me, they were a cement boot.

This indoctrination is made possible by a rigid and unyielding set of rules, meticulously laid out in a handbook that each missionary keeps in his breast pocket. Absorption of this material makes any missionary a well-oiled machine, and causes many missionaries to return home as robots. Some former missionaries keep their handbooks as a souvenir and a testament of obedience. To quell any curiosity about my personal regard for the rules, my own handbook was destroyed in a late summer downpour while my companion and I were walking home to our

apartment. I tossed it nonchalantly into our pile of trash to be burned when we got home, and didn't request another copy.

Fortunately for me, my continued refusal to embrace Mormonism came as no surprise to anyone. Chalk it up to my affinity for things like gin and independent thought, but I have just never been a good fit for the Mormon Church, and have all but left it. I'm blessed to be part of a family of the sort of people that are now called members of the "Mormon Left," in other words, people who pick and choose what to believe and what rules to keep. The weekly emails I received from my parents always focused on my personal well-being and my future, not on my obedience to rules or the effectiveness of my proselyting efforts. Any discussion of the Church was brief and broad, if not outright subversive. My parents simply told me to do what I do best, which was to love the people I serve. That came easily, and since I wasn't brainwashed like most of the other missionaries, my transition into the real world was essentially seamless.

There was some culture shock, sure, but mostly as a result of leaving a developing nation and returning to my pretty cushy life in a highly developed one. My parents' home seemed palatial, and when Dad handed me the keys to his old Acura and a brand new iPhone, I felt like a prince. The refrigerator was overwhelming, bursting as it was with luxuries like deli meats, Olive Garden takeout, and an applaudable variety of cheese. Hot showers were overwhelming too. Gifts poured in from friends and relatives, congratulations for a job well done. I adjusted rather quickly.

What I lost was my sense of purpose.

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Knowing that I would start all over socially and financially (meaning that I would be friendless and poor for some time) I borrowed some inspiration from *Seinfeld's* George Costanza. He

had the “Summer of George,” and I was determined to make 2014 the “Year of Derek.” Like everyone else who is bitter and alone, but not entirely pessimistic and unbearable to be around, I decided to “take some time to focus on myself.” I was going to keep off the weight that starvation in the tropics had afforded me, wake up early, watch less television, read a book every week, do yoga, be nicer to my family, budget, read the news—*everything*. I had essentially given myself a year in which to self-actualize.

I woke up one day in March only to realize that the 32” waist in my Levi’s simply wasn’t going to cut it. In what seemed like the blink of an eye, but was really the result of holiday feasting and a dozen or so trips to Popeye’s, I had put on 35 pounds. I woke up 30 minutes before most of my shifts at work—which usually began at 11. I was snappy with my family, and on some days, the palace started to look a hell of a lot more like a prison. I started binge watching reruns of *Law & Order SVU* on my rare days off, and Mom could barely hide the disappointment in her face when she would arrive home from a day of volunteering to find me on the couch in my underwear, exactly as she’d left me that morning. While there are technically still a few weeks left on the calendar, the Year of Derek has turned out remarkably like the Summer of George.

A lot has happened in the space of a year, and most of it either didn’t seem good or simply wasn’t. My congenial nature and disregard for rules had helped me gain a lot of friends during my missionary service, most of whom were predictably from the Mountain West or Southern California, where all the Mormons live. I was never without someone to talk to, and I even gained a leadership position along the way, enabling me to help the people I cared about make their missions more enjoyable through my own personal brand of genuine understanding and complete disregard for rules. I kept in touch with these friends when I got home, but distance has since taken its predictable toll on these friendships.

My long term girlfriend couldn't bear the two year wait without male company, and six months into my mission term, announced her engagement to a man she had known for only three weeks. While this would be considered rash and idiotic in the real world, it's all too common in the realm of Mormondom, where a combination of sexual abstinence and pressure to marry young causes couples to rush into a marriage they believe will last not only in this life, but in the afterlife as well. Needless to say, I lost her too.

The sudden dearth of any semblance of a social life and the fact that I was no longer occupied with a litany of rewarding tasks caused me to regress into a depression that I have spent most of the year attempting to recover from. I watched bitterly as acquaintances from high school graduated from Harvard, got Congressional internships in DC, and with almost sickeningly increasing frequency, settled down with that special someone. Each day seemed to present an overwhelming pile of evidence that I simply wasn't measuring up in almost every aspect of my life.

Ironically, a series of memorable meals have served as solace through these awkward and sometimes outright dark times. One in particular was pivotal in me chilling out about not having entirely self-actualized at ripe old age of 23. What I learned each time, and especially in the story that follows, was that objectivity is a much better tool than comparison in determining my accomplishments and my place in the world.

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It was October 18th, almost a year to the day that I returned from the Philippines, and my old high school friend Amy McLaughlin was in town from Knoxville, where she is pursuing a graduate degree in Applied Mathematics at UT. I quickly shed my work uniform in favor of a sweater and slacks, in preparation for dinner, and doused myself in my favorite cologne. I was

meeting Amy at Macado's, an amazing sandwich shop that had recently come to Kingsport by way of Central Virginia. I sat in my car nervously anticipating Amy's arrival, trying not to sweat through my dress shirt, trying to think of all the ways I could be clever and funny and most of all—not boring and pathetic, when a tap at my window jolted me from my internal pep talk. Catching my surprise, Amy threw her head back in her trademark, uproarious laughter.

We exchanged greetings and took a table near the back, where we were met by a frazzled yet kind looking waitress with bottle blond hair and skin that looked remarkably like a catcher's mitt. We deliberated over the menu for quite some time, thanks to Amy's lack of prowess with the Macado's experience.

“What should I get?”

“Well, I like the Coney Island, the Ragtime, the Titanic...”

“Wait wait.. I don't really like red meat. I feel like all of those have red meat, knowing you.”

“Of course you don't. Good God, you ridiculous hipster. Well I hate to tell you, but this isn't a 'gluten free' kinda place.”

“(Laughs uproariously) Derek, come on. Get on board here.”

“Well, what in the hell *do* you people eat?”

She eventually settled on some kind of turkey concoction loaded with bacon, and I watched her silently and deliberately dissect her sandwich over the course of the meal, discarding the turkey in favor of the ample bacon, which she ate with reckless abandon. We caught up, and I found out that her internship doing mathematical analysis at a movie theater had landed her a guaranteed job after her graduation this December. The job would keep her in Knoxville. I hesitantly

discussed my own life, hating to acknowledge that I was *still* an undergraduate student and *still* a valet.

I lamented the success of some of the people we had graduated with who had gone on to the Ivy Leagues and glamorous internships before she stopped me abruptly and debunked each of my assumptions. Our mutual friend who had attended Harvard apparently had a hell of a time with the rigorous academic course load, and didn't get accepted into Harvard Medical. Turns out she's back in the Tri-Cities, and much happier here than she was in Cambridge. The girl on Capitol Hill turned out to be spinning her wheels, finished with her undergraduate at the University of Alabama, but unable to get the kind of job she wanted. "And Derek," Amy said, pointing out the obvious, "you were gone for three years. You've done a lot. No one is doing as well as they seem."

The brief flare up of a pity party thus extinguished, we returned to lighter topics, laughing loudly and enjoying ourselves. This laughter prompted the waitress to come sit with us. We offered her food off our plates and told her to relax for a sec. She declined, and went instead to attend to her other tables, which she quickly pointed out were "much less fun than y'all."

When it was time to get the check, we asked our waitress to take a picture of the two of us on this happy occasion. "I don't mean to get in y'all's business," she said, "but are y'all boyfriend and girlfriend? Cause if ya aren't, ya should be." This garnered a laugh from Amy and a response that I felt was a little quick and emphatic in the negative. "I'm from Knoxville; he's from Kingsport. We're just friends." Our waitress told us to work it out. I left her a \$20 tip, hoping for a karmic reward that would allow it to.

Our conversation gave me a valuable sense of perspective, and the invaluable reminder that the early twenties are a time to flounder, to discover, to learn, to make mistakes, and then learn

from those. “No one is doing as well as they seem.” And it didn’t matter what the top 10 students of my graduating class were doing anyway, ever. Comparison is a tool of destruction, the ultimate weapon against the fragile self-esteem cultivated by helicopter parenting and the universal exceptionalism of literally every child born since 1990. For the first time in an entire year, I looked at myself through a lens that wasn’t entirely self-deprecating, and more importantly, untainted by what others were doing, and realized that I had accomplished a lot, and have a lot left to enjoy. Some proverbial doors have closed on certain opportunities, but others remain wide open, available to me and anyone else with the ambition, optimism, and courage to pursue each path.