

## **An Atheist Goes Undercover to Join the Flock of Mad Pastor John Hagee**

by Matt Taibbi via quill - Rolling Stone *Monday, May 5 2008, 9:36am*

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The following is an excerpt from Matt Taibbi's new book, "The Great Derangement" (Spiegel and Grau, 2008).

I pulled into the church parking lot a little after 6:00 p.m., at more or less the last possible minute. The previous half hour or so I'd spent dawdling in my car outside a Goodwill department store off Route 410 in San Antonio, clinging to some inane sports talk show piping over my car radio -- anything to hold off my plunge into Religion.

There was an old-fashioned white school bus in front of the church entrance, with a puddle of heavysset people milling around its swinging door. Some of these were carrying blankets and sleeping bags. My heart, already pounding, skipped a few extra beats. The church circulars had said nothing about bringing bedding. Why did I need bedding? What else had I missed?

"Excuse me," I said, walking up to an in-charge-looking man with a name tag who was standing near the front of the bus. "I see everyone has blankets. I didn't bring any. Is this going to be a problem?"

The man was about five feet one and had glassy eyes. He looked up at me and smiled queerly.

"Name?" he said.

"Collins," I said. "Matthew Collins."

He scanned his clipboard, found my name on the appropriate sheet of paper, and X-ed me out with a highlighter. "Don't worry, Matthew," he said, resting his hand on my shoulder. "A wonderful woman named Martha is going to take care of you at the ranch. You just tell her what you need when you get there."

I nodded, glancing at his hand, which was still on my shoulder. He waved me into the bus.

I had been attending the Cornerstone Church for weeks, but this was really my first day of school. I had joined Cornerstone -- a megachurch in the Texas Hill Country -- to get a look inside the evangelical mind-set that gave the country eight years of George W. Bush. The church's pastor, John Hagee, is one of the most influential evangelical preachers in the country -- not because his ministry is so very large (although he claims up to 4.5 million viewers a week for his Sunday sermons) but because of his near-absolute conquest of a very trendy niche in the market: Christian Zionism.

The whole idea behind Christian Zionism is to align America with the nation of Israel so as to "hurry God up" in his efforts to bring about Armageddon. As Hagee tells it, only after Israel is involved in a final showdown involving a satanic army (in most interpretations, a force of Arabs led by Russians) will Christ reappear. On that happy day, Hagee and his True Believers will be whisked up to Heaven by God, while the rest of us nonbelievers are left behind on Earth to suck eggs and generally suffer various tortures.

So here I was, standing in the church parking lot, having responded to church advertisements hawking an "Encounter Weekend" -- three solid days of sleep-away Christian fellowship that would teach me the "joy" of "knowing the truth" and "being set free." That had sounded harmless enough, but now that I was here and surrounded by all of these blanket-bearing people, I was nervous. When most Americans think of the Christian right, they think of scenes from television -- great halls full of perfectly groomed people in pale suits and light-colored dresses, smiling and happy and full of the Holy Spirit, robotically singing hymns at the behest of some squeaky-clean pastor with a baritone voice and impossible hair. We don't get to see the utterly batshit world they live in, when the cameras are turned off and their pastors are not afraid of saying the really dumb stuff, for fear of it turning up on CNN. In American evangelical Christianity, in other words, there's a ready-for-prime-time stage act -- toned down and lip-synced to match a set of PG lyrics that won't scare the advertisers -- and then there's the real party backstage, where the spiritual hair really gets let down. I was about to go backstage, to personally take part in the indoctrination process for a major Southern evangelical church. Waiting to board the bus for the Encounter Weekend, I had visions of some charismatic ranch-land Jesus, stoned on beer and the Caligula director's cut and too drunk late at night to chase after the minor children, hauling me into a barn for an in-the-hay shortcut to truth and freedom. Ridiculous, of course, but I really was afraid, mostly of my own ignorance and prejudices. I had never been to something like this before, and I didn't know how to act. I badly wanted to be invisible.

The bus was nearly full, and mostly quiet. Here and there a few people sitting together or near each other huddled and chatted, but I could see right away that a great many people on the trip had come alone, like me. They were people of all sorts: younger white men in neat middle-class haircuts, a matronly Mexican woman quietly reading a romance novel, a few scattered weather-beaten black folk in secondhand clothing whom I immediately pegged as in-recovery addicts, a couple of ten-alarm soccer moms who would prove the loudest people on the bus by far, a few quiet older men of military bearing.

The one obvious conclusion anyone making a demographic study of the Cornerstone Church population would come to would be that it's a solidly middle-class crowd. These are folks who are comfortable eating off paper plates and drinking out of gallon jugs of Country Time iced tea over noisy dinners with their kids. They're people who grew up in houses with back yards and fences, people with families. This particular journey to God is not a pastime for the idle rich or the urban obnoxious.

I sat down next to a frankly obese Hispanic woman who was carrying what both looked and smelled like a paper bag full of cheeseburgers.

"Some weather we're having, with this rain," I said.

"Tell me about it!" she said, introducing herself as Maria. "It truly is an act of God that I even made it here today." She told a story about having to drive down from Austin in bad weather. God had helped her four or five steps along the way. "It just seems like God really wants me to come on this trip," she said. "Otherwise, I would never have made it."

"It looks like God is going to give us a rainstorm all the way to Tarpley," I heard a voice behind me say.

This oddly uniform style of dialogue ringing all around me made me shift in my seat. I felt nervous and unpleasantly certain that I was about to be found out. When Maria asked me why I'd come on the retreat, I bit my lip. When in Rome, I thought.

"Well," I said, "since the new year, I've just been feeling like God has been telling me that I need to get right spiritually. So here I am."

I paused, wincing inwardly. An outsider coming into this world will feel sure that the moment he coughs up one of those "God told me to put more English on my tee shot" lines, his dark game will be instantly visible to all, and he'll be made the target of one of those Invasion of the Body Snatchers-style point-and-screech mob scenes. But nothing could be further from the truth. You simply cannot go wrong praising God in this world; overdoing it is literally impossible. I would understand this better by the end of the weekend.

Maria smiled. "I feel the same way. Have you ever been to one of these Encounters?"

"No, I haven't," I said.

"Me neither," she said. "I'm really excited."

"They're wonderful," said the matronly Mexican woman in front of me, turning around. "They really change you forever."

I slunk in my seat, trying to look inconspicuous. My disguise was modeled on other men I'd seen in church -- pane glasses and the very gayest blue-and-white-striped Gap polo shirt I'd been able to find that afternoon. Buried on a clearance rack next to the underwear section in a nearby mall, the Gap shirt was one of those irritating throwbacks to the Meatballs/Seventies-summer-camp-geek look, but stripped of its sartorial irony, it really just screamed Friendless Loser! -- so I bought it without hesitation and tried to match it with that sheepish, ashamed-to-have-a-penis look I had seen so many other young men wearing in church. With the glasses and a slouch I hoped I was at least in the ballpark of what I thought I needed to look like, which was a slow-moving hulk of confused, shipwrecked masculinity, flailing for an Answer.

One of the implicit promises of the church is that following its program will restore to you your vigor, confidence and assertiveness, effecting, among other things, a marked and obvious physical transformation from crippled lost soul to hearty vessel of God. That's one of the reasons that it's so important for the pastors to look healthy, lusty and lustrous -- they're appearing as the "after" photo in the ongoing advertisement for the church wellness cure.

In these Southern churches there are few wizened old sages such as one might find among Catholic bishops or Russian startsi. Here your church leader is an athlete, a business dynamo, a champion eater with a bull's belly, outwardly a tireless heterosexual -- and if you want to know what a church beginner is supposed to look like, just make it the opposite of that. Show weakness, financial trouble, frustration with the opposite sex, and if you're overweight, be so unhealthily, and in a way that you're ashamed of. The fundamentalist formula is much less a journey from folly to wisdom than it is from weakness to strength. They don't want a near-complete personality that needs fine-tuning -- they want a human jellyfish, raw clay they can transform into a vigorous instrument of God.

I was very, very, very good -- at everything!" shouted our hulking ex-paratrooper pastor, Philip Fortenberry, into the barely visible mouth mike that curled around his ruddy face. "I was a Green Beret -- top of the class. Six feet four, 225 pounds. A star athlete, basketball player. Starting outside linebacker on the varsity football team..."

The crowd cooed as our spiritual leader rattled off his macho credentials. Our supercowboy pastor was the perfect foil for the Revenge of the Nerds-style crowd of fatties, addicts, loners and broken-

home survivors populating the warehouse-size building where we were all destined to spend the next three days together. In his introductory speech, Fortenberry did everything but tape-measure his biceps. His autobiographical tale of an angry overachieving youth who fell into a young adulthood of false pride, only to rebound and be reborn as a turbocharged, Army-trained enemy of Satan ("A friend of mine once joked that he saw my picture hung up in a post office in Hell," he quipped), was to serve as the first chapter of our collective transformation -- and to work it had to impress the hell out of us scraggly wanna-be's.

It did. "I'm going to start tonight by telling y'all two stories," he began.

The first was a story from his Army days, about having to take a training flight in the Pacific Northwest as a young man and being trapped in the back of the transport plane when the landing went wrong and the plane ended up crash-bouncing along the runway. "If you've ever been in the back of a C-130, you know what I mean," he said, and I saw nodding heads all through the audience. The pastor subsequently would not miss a single chance to drop the name of a piece of military equipment.

The second story was more personal. It was about being a little boy in a small Southern town whose father ran around on his mom with a local barmaid. Dad used to bring little Junior to play golf with him, keeping his arm around the barmaid in the golf cart for the entire eighteen holes; finally Dad left Mom to shack up with the barmaid in a house down the road. Dad was so busy with the barmaid that he never came to see Junior's ballgames. But from time to time he would come back home to Mom, moving back into Junior's world, turning his life upside down.

"And every time he came back," the pastor said, waving his hand up and down and his voice fairly breaking with tears, "it was like one more bounce along that runway, bouncing in that C-130, tearing my little boy's world apart."

The pastor fell silent, still using his hands to demonstrate that bouncing transport plane of fate, as he surveyed his hushed audience. Fortenberry then stood staring at his audience in full pre-weep, his eyes wrinkling with incipient tears. The grown macho man unashamedly breaking into boyish tears in public is one of the weirder features of the post-Promise Keeper Christian generation, and Fortenberry -- himself a Promise Keeper, incidentally -- had it down to a science. "You never came to my ballgames, Dad," he'd screech, his face wrinkling like a raisin with grief at the word "ballgames."

I heard sniffles coming from the audience.

Sensing he had his crowd in an emotionally vulnerable state, the pastor then plunged into a story about how his bitterness at his father's abandonment had pushed him, in high school, to become just about the best basketball player you could imagine. Young Fortenberry, we learned, had scored lots and lots of points in high school and had many great games.

How great were those games? Well, he told us, they were really great. Some of the stories wandered irrelevantly into the specific stats of some of those games; he also punctuated his storytelling with oddly vigorous and adept pantomimes of jumpers and hook shots. It was a weird scene, like listening to a married man wax poetic to a mistress in a roadside motel room. "But after a while I realized that all those thousands of jump shots" -- here he mimicked a jump shot -- "and all those thousands of moves" -- he ducked his head back and forth, Tim Hardaway-style -- "hadn't brought me any closer to Dad."

The program revolved around a theory that Fortenberry quickly introduced us to called "the wound."

The wound theory was a piece of schlock biblical Freudianism in which everyone had one traumatic event from their childhood that had left a wound. The wound necessarily had been inflicted by another person, and bitterness toward that person had corrupted our spirits and alienated us from God. Here at the retreat we would identify this wound and learn to confront and forgive our transgressors, a process that would leave us cleansed of bitterness and hatred and free to receive the full benefits of Christ.

In the context of the wound theory, Fortenberry's tale suddenly made more sense. Being taken on that eighteen-hole golf trip with the barmaid, and watching his family ditched by Dad, had been his wound. It was a wound, Fortenberry explained, because his father's abandonment had crushed his "normal."

"And I was wounded," he whispered dramatically. "My dad had ruined my normal!"

The crowd murmured affirmatively, apparently knowing what it was to have a crushed normal.

After introducing us to the concept of wounds and normals, Fortenberry told us one last cautionary tale before sending us to our first group session. It was about a paratrooper who had done a tandem jump with a training dummy for some Army exercise or other, only to have the dummy's chute fail to open. The dummy had plunged to the ground, crashing through the trees and landing with a thud in a bush. Fortenberry's Army buddy had taken advantage of the situation to have a little joke at the expense of some other exercising soldiers on the ground who weren't privy to the fact that the troopers were jumping with dummies. The Army buddy had cried and wailed in asking where the "body" had fallen, leaving the soldiers on the ground to think that someone had just been killed.

The soldiers had felt guilty, Fortenberry explained, because they'd failed to help what they thought was a fallen comrade. Why? Because they'd been afraid to look behind the bush.

"So I'm telling you now, as you go into your groups," the pastor explained, "don't be afraid to look behind the bush."

I wrote in my binder: "LOOK BEHIND THE BUSH." Then I waited as my name was called out for group study.

The groups were segregated. Men with men, women with women. Each group was led by a life coach, who was actually a recent graduate of the program. At the beginning of the group stage, the coaches were all called up to the front of the chapel, and Fortenberry would call out the coach's name first, then the names of his group members.

My coach's name was Morgan. Morgan was a big man, ex-military, with curly black hair, a black mustache and a softening middle. He looked a little like a post-rehab version of Keith Hernandez -- soft-spoken, deferential, all nose and mustache.

There were four other men in our group. Besides myself, there was Jos, a huge Mexican with a sheepish expression and a steam-boiler body; Aaron, a squat and alert Pennsylvanian with a clean-and-jerker's build; and Dennis, a somewhat vacant and medicated-looking man pushing forty with a bald head and stubby beard. Dennis looked like a distantly menacing version of Homer Simpson after electroshock therapy. Seated just a few feet away from us in our tight circle, he gazed out at us like he could barely make out our faces.

Once Morgan had us all gathered together, we looked for table space in the cafeteria area of the

main building. Ominously, each of the cafeteria tables had a fresh box of Kleenex resting on top of it.

"Well," Morgan said, "I think what we're going to do to start is this. I'm going to tell you my story about my wound, and then we're going to go around in a circle, and each of us is going to just tell his story. Is that OK?"

Everyone nodded. I noted with displeasure that I was seated first after Morgan in clockwise order. Already I was panicking; what kind of wound could a human cipher like myself possibly confess to?

Morgan told his story. Even a perfunctory look at my fellow group members told me that we had people here with some very serious problems, and yet Morgan's wound was a tale that wouldn't have even ruined a week of my relatively privileged childhood, much less my whole life -- something about being yelled at by his dad while he was out playing with remote-controlled airplanes with his friends as a thirteen-year-old. He hammed up his trauma over the incident in classically lachrymose Iron John-in-touch-with-his-inner-boy fashion (again, there is something very odd about modern Christian men -- although fiercely pro-military in their politics and prehistorically macho in their attitudes toward women's roles, on the level of day-to-day behavior they seem constantly ready to break out weeping like menopausal housewives), but his words were bouncing off a wall of unimpressed silence radiating from the group.

Blank stares. This was a tough crowd. Five minutes into our group acquaintance, we were at a full 9.5 out of 10 on the International Uncomfortable Silence scale.

Morgan turned, glanced again at my name tag and sighed.

"Well, uh, OK, then," he said. "Matthew, do you want to tell your story?"

My heart was pounding. I obviously couldn't use my real past -- not only would it threaten my cover, but I was somewhat reluctant to expose anything like my real inner self to this ideologically unsettling process -- but neither did I want to be trapped in a story too far from my own experience. What I settled on eventually was something that I thought was metaphorically similar to the truth about myself.

"Hello," I said, taking a deep breath. "My name is Matt. My father was an alcoholic circus clown who used to beat me with his oversize shoes."

The group twittered noticeably. Morgan's eyes opened to tea-saucer size.

I closed my own eyes and kept going, immediately realizing what a mistake I'd made. There was no way this story was going to fly. But there was no turning back.

"He'd be sitting there in his costume, sucking down a beer and watching television," I heard myself saying. "And then sometimes, even if I just walked in front of the TV, he'd pull off one of those big shoes and just, you know -- whap!"

I looked around the table and saw three flatlined, plainly indifferent psyches plus one mildly unnerved Morgan staring back at me. I could tell that my coach and former soldier had been briefly possessed by the fear that a terrible joke was being played on his group. But then I actually saw him dismissing the thought -- after all, who would do such a thing? I managed to tie up my confession with a tale about turning into a drug addict in my mid-twenties -- at least that much was true -- and being startled into sobriety and religion after learning of my estranged clown father's passing from

cirrhosis.

It was a testament to how dysfunctional the group was that my story flew more or less without comment.

So it began. Our meetings were a prolonged, cyclical course of group-directed confession and healing that began on Friday evening and continued almost without interruption through Sunday afternoon. The basic gist of our group exercises was this: We were each supposed to reveal to one another what our great childhood wounds were, then write a series of essays and letters on the wound theme, taking time after the writing of each to read our work aloud. The written assignments began with an autobiography, then moved on to a letter written to our "offenders" (i.e., those who had caused our wounds), then a letter written to Jesus confessing our failure to forgive our tormentors.

Unfortunately, my one fleeting error of judgment about my circus-clown dad had left me shackled to a rank character absurdity for the rest of my stay in Texas. I soon found myself reading aloud a passage from my "autobiography" describing a period of my father's life when he quit clowning to hand out fliers in a Fudgie the Whale costume outside a Carvel ice cream store:

I laugh about it now, but once he chased me, drunk, in his Fudgie the Whale costume. He chased me into the bathroom, laid me across the toilet seat and hit me with his fins, which underneath were still a man's hands.

Again no reaction from the group, aside from an affirming nod from Jos at the last part -- his eyes said to me, I know what you mean about those fins.

After each of these grueling exercises we would have lengthy, fifteen-to-twenty-minute sessions singing unbearably atonal Christian hymns. Then we would have teaching/Bible-study sessions led by Fortenberry on the theme of the moment (e.g., "Admit the Truth About Our Wounds") that lasted an hour or so. Then, after Fortenberry would waste at least half the session giving us the Marlboro Man highlights of his professional resume ("I was the manager of the second-largest ranch in America, 825,000 acres...") and bragging about his physical prowess ("If someone was to slug me, I could whip just about anyone here"), we would go back to the group session and confess some more. Then we would sing some more, receive more of Fortenberry's hairy lessons, and then the cycle would start all over again. There were almost no breaks or interruptions; it was a physically exhausting schedule of confession, catharsis, bad music and relentless, muscular instruction. The Saturday program began at 7:45 a.m. and did not end until ten at night; we went around the confess-sing-learn cycle five full times in one day.

We were about a third of the way through the process when I began to wonder what the hell was going on. Fortenberry's blowhard-on-crack-act/wound gobbledygook were all suspiciously secular in tone and approach. I had been hearing whispers throughout the first day or so to the effect that there was some kind of incredible supernatural religious ceremony that was going to take place at the end of the retreat ("Tighten your saddle, he's fixin' ta buck" was how "cowboy" Fortenberry put it), when we would experience "Victory and Deliverance." But as far as I could see, in the early going, most of what we were doing was simple pop-psych self-examination using New Age-y diagnostic tools of the Deepak Chopra school: Identify your problems, face your oppressors, visualize your obstacles. Be your dream job. With a little rhetorical tweaking and much better food, this could easily have been Tony Robbins instructing a bunch of Upper East Side housewives to "find your wounds" ("My husband hid my Saks card!") at a chic resort in Miami Beach or the Hamptons.

True, I could see some other angles to what was going on as well. Virtually all of the participants of the Encounter identified either one or both of their parents as their "offender," and much of what Fortenberry was talking about in his instructional sessions was how to replace the godless atmosphere of abuse or neglect that the offenders had provided us with God and the church. He was taking broken people and giving them a road map to a new set of parents, a new family -- your basic cultist bait-and-switch formula for cutting old emotional ties and redirecting that psychic energy toward the desired new destination. That connection would become more overt later in the weekend, but early on, this ur-father propaganda was the only thing I could see that separated Encounter Weekend from the typical self-help dreck of the secular world.

But then, midway through Saturday, Fortenberry and the coaches started to show us glimpses of the program's end game. The wound, it turned out, was something that was inflicted upon us because of a curse, a curse that perhaps spanned generations in each of our families. Alcoholic parents abused their children, who in turn carried their parents' curse to their adult lives and became alcoholics themselves -- only to have children and continue the pattern again. Now, why was that curse there to begin with? Here was where we could get into religious explanations, see the footprint of Satan, etc. We were unhappy because of earthly troubles from our childhoods, but those troubles were the work of a generational curse, inflicted upon us by devils and demons -- probably for unbelief, bad behavior, disobedience, worship of the wrong gods and so on.

This little bit of semantic gymnastics helped transform all of us at the retreat from being merely fucked up to being accursed carriers of demons. Having ridden an almost entirely secular program to get our biographies out in the open in a group setting, Fortenberry could now switch his focus to the real meat and potatoes of the weekend: Satan and the devils inside us.

He started off slowly, invoking the godly curses of Genesis -- the sweat on Adam's brow, the pain of Eve's childbirth, etc. -- the punishments for eating of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. "How many of you women out there have had babies?" Fortenberry asked. "Can I see some hands?"

A dozen or so hands raised.

"Now, did it hurt?" he asked.

Laughter. Of course it hurt.

"Let me ask you a question," he said. "Why do alcoholics give birth to alcoholics? Why do the fatherless give birth to the fatherless?" He paused. "There are some people out there who will tell you it's genetics. It's in our genes, they say. Well, I tell you, it's not genetics. It's a generational curse!"

Fortenberry then started in on a rant against science and against scientific explanations for cycles of sin. "Take homosexuals," he said. "Every single homosexual is a sexual-abuse victim. They are not born. They are created -- by pedophiles."

The crowd swallowed that one whole. One thing about this world: Once a preacher says it, it's true. No one is going to look up anything the preacher says, cross-check his facts, raise an eyebrow at something that might sound a little off. Some weeks later, I would be at a Sunday service in which Pastor John Hagee himself would assert that the Bible predicts that Jesus Christ is going to return to Earth bearing a "rod of iron" to discipline the ACLU. It goes without saying that the ACLU was not mentioned in the passage in Ezekiel he was citing -- but the audience ate it up anyway. When they're away from the cameras, the preachers feel even less obligated to shackle themselves to facts of any



kind. That's because they know that their audience doesn't give a shit. So long as you're telling them what they want to hear, there's no danger; your crowd will angrily dismiss any alternative explanations anyway as demonic subversion.

A team of twenty of the world's leading scientists wouldn't be able to convince so much as one person in this crowd that homosexuals are not created by pedophiles.

Fortenberry told a story about a nephew of his who called him up one night. "Both of his kids had fallen on the ground in respiratory distress, half-conscious, writhing around, gasping for air," Fortenberry said. "And I said to my nephew, I said, 'It isn't something they've done. It's something you've done.' "

The crowd murmured in assent.

"I told my nephew to look around the house," Fortenberry continued. "I said, 'Do you have a copy of Harry Potter?' And he said yes. And I said, 'That's your problem.' So I told him to go get that copy of that book, tear it in half and throw it out the window. So he does it, and guess what? Both of those kids stood up completely recovered, just like that."

He snapped his fingers, indicating the speed with which the kids had jumped up in recovery. The crowd cooed and applauded. I frowned, wondering for a minute what life must be like for a person mortally afraid of toothless commercial fairy tales. It struck me that Phil Fortenberry's nephew was probably more afraid of Harry Potter than Macbeth, which to me said a lot about this religion and about America in general.

Here I have a confession to make. It's not something that's easy to explain, but here goes. After two days of nearly constant religious instruction, songs, worship and praise -- two days that for me meant an unending regimen of forced and fake responses -- a funny thing started to happen to my head. There is a transformational quality in these external demonstrations of faith and belief. The more you shout out praising the Lord, singing along to those awful acoustic tunes, telling people how blessed you feel and so on, the more a sort of mechanical Christian skin starts to grow all over your real self. Even if you're a degenerate Rolling Stone reporter inwardly chuckling and busting on the whole scene -- even if you're intellectually enraged by the ignorance and arrogant prejudice flowing from the mouth of a terminal-ambition case like Phil Fortenberry -- outwardly you're swaying to the gospel and singing and praising and acting the part, and those outward ministrations assume a kind of sincerity in themselves. And at the same time, that "inner you" begins to get tired of the whole spectacle and sometimes forgets to protest -- in my case checking out into baseball reveries and other daydreams while the outer me did the "work" of singing and praising. At any given moment, which one is the real you?

You may think you know the answer, but by my third day I began to notice how effortlessly my soft-spoken Matt-mannequin was going through his robotic motions of praise, and I was shocked. For a brief, fleeting moment I could see how under different circumstances it would be easy enough to bury your "sinful" self far under the skin of your outer Christian and to just travel through life this way. So long as you go through all the motions, no one will care who you really are underneath. And besides, so long as you are going through all the motions, never breaking the facade, who are you really? It was an incomplete thought, but it was a scary one; it was the very first time I worried that the experience of entering this world might prove to be anything more than an unusually tiring assignment. I feared for my normal.

On the final morning of the weekend, we gathered in the chapel for the Deliverance. Fortenberry,

dressed in his standard Western shirt and hiked-up jeans, sauntered up to the lectern wearing a solemn and dramatic expression. "This is fixing to be the biggest spiritual battle that ninety-nine percent of you will ever face," he said. "But let me tell you something. It's already been won. It was won 2,000 years ago."

The crowd cheered. As the applause tailed, he held his hands up Mussolini-fashion, asking for quiet. The crowd complied. It was quite dramatically done, this whole business, whatever we were working toward. And at that moment, I spotted a younger kid who had been at the retreat all weekend working a soundboard for the musical parts zipping behind the crowd to some kind of dimmer panel. He turned a switch and the lights dimmed slightly; though it was morning, the light in the building suddenly turned unnatural, like the light during a partial eclipse.

Throughout the whole weekend, Fortenberry had been setting himself up as an athletic conqueror of demons. Now, on the final morning, he looked like a quarterback about to take the field before a big game. The life coaches assembled around the edges of the chapel, carrying anointing oil and bundles of small paper bags.

Fortenberry began to issue instructions. He told us that under no circumstances should we pray during the Deliverance.

"When the word of God is in your mouth," he said, "the demons can't come out of your body. You have to keep a path clear for the demon to come up through your throat. So under no circumstances pray to God. You can't have God in your mouth. You can cough, you might even want to vomit, but don't pray."

The crowd nodded along solemnly. Fortenberry then explained that he was going to read from an extremely long list of demons and cast them out individually. As he did so, we were supposed to breathe out, keep our mouths open and let the demons out.

And he began.

At first, the whole scene was pure comedy. Fortenberry was standing up at the front of the chapel, reading off a list, and the room was loudly chirping crickets back at him.

"In the name of Jesus, I cast out the demon of incest! In the name of Jesus, I cast out the demon of sexual abuse! In the name of Jesus..."

After a few minutes, there was a little twittering here and there. Nothing serious. I was beginning to think the Deliverance was going to be a bust.

But then it started. Wails and cries from the audience. To my left, a young black man started writhing around in his seat. In front of me and to my right, another young black man with Coke-bottle glasses and a shock of nerdy jheri curl -- a dead ringer for a young Wayne Williams -- started wailing and clutching his head.

"In the name of Jesus," continued Fortenberry, "I cast out the demon of astrology!"

Coughing and spitting noises. Behind me, a bald white man started to wheeze and gurgle, like he was about to puke. Fortenberry, still reading from his list, pointed at the man. On cue, a pair of life coaches raced over to him and began to minister. One dabbed his forehead with oil and fiercely clutched his cranium; the other held a paper bag in front of his mouth.

"In the name of Jesus Christ," said Fortenberry, more loudly now, "I cast out the demon of lust!"

And the man began power-puking into his paper baggie. I couldn't see if any actual vomitus came out, but he made real hurling and retching noises.

Now the women began to pipe in. On the women's side of the chapel the noises began, and it is not hard to explain what these noises sounded like. If you've ever watched The Houston 560 or any other gangbang porn movie, that's what it sounded like, only the sounds were far more intense.

It was not difficult to figure out where the energy was coming from on that side of the room. Some of the husbands glanced nervously over in the direction of their wives.

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I cast out the demon of cancer!" said Fortenberry.

"Oooh! Unnh! Unnnnnh!" wailed a woman in the front row.

"Bleeech!" puked the bald man behind me.

Within about a minute after that, the whole chapel erupted in pandemonium. About half the men and three-fourths of the women were writhing around and either play-puking or screaming. Not wanting to be a bad sport, I raised my hand for one of the life coaches to see.

"Need .. a .. bag," I said as he came over.

He handed me a bag.

"In the name of Jesus, I cast out the demon of handwriting analysis!" shouted Fortenberry.

Handwriting analysis? I jammed the bag over my mouth and started coughing, then went into a very real convulsion of disbelief as I listened to this astounding list, half-laughing and half-retching.

"In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, I cast out the demon of the intellect!" Fortenberry continued. "In the name of Jesus, I cast out the demon of anal fissures!"

Cough, cough!

The minutes raced by. Wayne Williams was now fully prostrate, held up only by a trio of coaches, each of whom took part of his writhing body and propped it up. Another bald man in the front of the chapel was now freaking out in Linda Blair fashion, roaring and making horrific demon noises.

"Rum-balakasha-oom!" shouted Fortenberry in tongues, waving a hand in front of Linda Blair Man. "Coom-balakasha-froom! In the name of Jesus Christ, I cast out the demon of philosophy!"

Philosophy?

It was obvious that virtually everyone in the crowd was playacting to some degree or another. I was reminded of the Tolstoy story "The Kreutzer Sonata," when the male narrator described marriage as being like the bearded-lady tent in a French circus he'd seen. You pay a few francs to go in, and when you come out, and the carnival barker shouts at you, "Was that not the most amazing thing you've ever seen, monsieur?" -- well, you're too ashamed to admit that you've been had, and so you nod your head and agree: Oui, monsieur, it was really something! That's how people come to say

marriage is a blessing, and that's how you can get fifty-odd high school graduates puking demons into three-cent paper bags for a Deliverance.

The whole thing -- the demonic expulsions, the trading of miraculous wives' tales, the crazy End Times theology based on dire predictions that come and go uneventfully once a year or so -- it's all a con that is done with the consent of the conned. Which is what gives it strength. If everybody agrees to believe, it is real.

The hooting and howling went on seemingly forever. It was nearly an hour and a half before Fortenberry was done. He had cast out the demons of every ailment, crime, domestic problem and intellectual discipline on the face of the Earth. He cast out horoscopes, false gods, witches, intellectual pride, nearsightedness, everything, it seemed to me, except maybe E. coli and John Updike novels. At least four of the men and about six of the women writhed and screamed and fussed themselves into sheer physical exhaustion, collapsing in chairs by the time it was over. Several of the coaches actually had to bring Wayne Williams and the other young black man behind the chapel to subdue their demons. By then most of us men were just sitting there mute, looking around absent-mindedly, waiting for it to end. I was sitting there, clutching my demon vomit bag -- perhaps the single greatest souvenir of my journalistic career -- when I made the mistake of closing my mouth. A coach rushed over to me.

"Matthew!" he snapped. "Keep your mouth open! Let the demons out!"

"Oh, right!" I said. I straightened up and opened my mouth in the shape of a letter O.

Meanwhile, Fortenberry was tiring.

"I cast out .. uh .. In the name of Jesus, I cast out the demon of pornography. I cast out, in the name of Jesus, the demon of disconnect."

Fortenberry shook his head as though trying to revive himself. He had been at this for a long time. His stamina really was astounding, a testament to his military training.

Afterward, a frightening thought shot through my head. It occurred to me that over the past decades, any number of our prominent political leaders (from Jimmy Carter to Chuck Colson to W himself) had boasted publicly of their born-again experiences, broadcasting to Middle America an understanding of their personal relationships with God. But whereas once these conversions were humble things -- Billy Graham whispering and putting his hand on W's shoulder in Kennebunkport, or even (in the case of Tom DeLay) a flash of recognition while watching a televangelist program -- the modern version might very easily be this completely batshit holy-vomit/demon-exorcism deal. The thought that any politician could claim this kind of experience and not be immediately disqualified from public service seemed utterly terrifying.

We were called back to chapel, and this time the drill was speaking in tongues. We were asked to come up to the front of the chapel and let a life coach anoint us with oil, hold our heads and speak to us in tongues. Fortenberry instructed us to "just let it out. Just let it out and it'll come out."

He didn't come right out and say, "Just act like you're speaking in tongues." But it was damned close. Once again, Fortenberry greased the process by telling us a story about how he'd once been at a service where folks were speaking in tongues, and he was skeptical, but it had just flown right out of him -- and now it just shoots right out of him, almost on command.

I went to the front. One of the coaches grabbed me by the shoulder and splashed a big puddle of oil on my forehead. Then he began to speak in tongues:

"Gam-bakakasha. Hoo-raaa-balalakasha... Come on, Matthew, let it out."

American Christians who speak in tongues basically all try to sound like extras from the underworld set of Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. If you want to pull it off and sound like a natural, just imagine you're holding a rubber replica of Harrison Ford's heart in your hands: Umm-harakashaka! Loo-pa-wanneee-rakakakasha, Meester Jones!

But I didn't think of this at the time and just went another route.

"Let it out, Matthew," the coach repeated, clutching my forehead. "Just open your mouth."

I shrugged and rattled off the lyrics to the song "What is Autumn?" by the Russian rock band DDT:

What is autumn? It's the sky  
The crying sky below your feet.  
Flying about in puddles are the birds  
and clouds. Autumn I've not been with you for so long!

It's actually a beautiful song, but with my eyes rolled back in my head and recited in Russian it sounded demonic enough.

"Hmm, very good," my coach said. "Good job, Matthew."

I kept going, on to the next verse. "What is autumn? It's a stone..."

"OK, that's good," the coach said, annoyed, moving on to the next guy.

"It's important that you practice," said Pastor Fortenberry. "It sounds silly, but when you're at home, when you have a little time, just try to let it out. You'll get used to it, and soon you'll be speaking in tongues like nobody's business!"

He then pronounced us baptized in the Holy Spirit and fully qualified now to cast out demons.

He held up his hands in triumph.

"Hallelujah!" he shouted.

The crowd jumped up, and we all threw up our hands.

"Hallelujah!"

He called out Hallelujah! again. We repeated after him. And we repeated after him again. Arms in the air. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

I felt a twinge of recognition from somewhere as I threw my arms up over and over again.

We had graduated.

By the end of the weekend I realized how quaint was the mere suggestion that Christians of this type should learn to "be rational" or "set aside your religion" about such things as the Iraq War or other

policy matters. Once you've made a journey like this -- once you've gone this far -- you are beyond suggestible. It's not merely the informational indoctrination, the constant belittling of homosexuals and atheists and Muslims and pacifists, etc., that's the issue. It's that once you've gotten to this place, you've left behind the mental process that a person would need to form an independent opinion about such things. You make this journey precisely to experience the ecstasy of beating to the same big gristly heart with a roomful of like-minded folks. Once you reach that place with them, you're thinking with muscles, not neurons.

By the end of that weekend, Phil Fortenberry could have told us that John Kerry was a demon with clawed feet, and not one person would have so much as blinked. Because none of that politics stuff matters anyway, once you've gotten this far. All that matters is being full of the Lord and empty of demons. And since everything that is not of God is demonic, asking these people to be objective about anything else is just absurd. There is no "anything else." All alternative points of view are nonstarters. There is this "our thing," a sort of Cosa Nostra of the soul, and then there are the fires of Hell. And that's all.

*Adapted from the forthcoming book, "The Great Derangement" by Matt Taibbi. Copyright 2008 by Matt Taibbi. Published by Spiegel & Grau, a division of Random House Inc. Reprinted with permission. Names of Encounter Weekend participants have been changed to protect their privacy.*

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