

## Adventist Jitters | BY REBECCA MUNSEY

**I**mminent return was the motivation of the individual. Any action could be justified by the urgency. Then decade followed decade; period followed period; and finally the urgency of imminent return lost impulse.

At first, it was hardly noticed; "IT" the sly loiterer whispering trash in the mind about the length of time, the time line, how to occupy the time.

Mission outreach, offerings, jobs, and placements still drew on the impulse of urgency, but it was becoming a side current—something that could run in us increasingly polluted and unnoticed, a kind of white noise.

But then a moment's quiet—a full stop. What was it? The thing that was so urgent? So imminent? Was the imminence the thing, or the urgency? Or was there an even larger con? Was the larger con the return?

The query had first been about the date. When would it happen—that length of time? The time line. Now, no one really cared; the silent query was about the con.

### This Generation Shall Not Pass

Jathan is twenty years old, attends Walla Walla University, and is a sixth-generation Seventh-day Adventist. His grandparents five generations removed hosted the first-ever camp meeting for Seventh-day Adventists in Illinois. Both of them, George and Rufina, were circuit-riding preachers ordained in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Rufina was heavily criticized for leaving her babies home to go preach, but for her there was a fervent urgency that warranted the risk.

When they moved west, George physically helped the push to build Walla Walla College with prayer and nails. The letters from that time that survive in our family give a real sense of belonging to the club of those who had gone before. They were consociates to something of

great consequence. There was enjoyment in the press of urgency; God's return was imminent.

Jathan fingers these letters from a century and a quarter ago and marvels at the paper.

"You won't get this kind of lasting crispness from recycled paper," he tells me.

"No," I reply. "I guess you won't."

### On the Road with the Icon

No one really minds a good con. A bad con is one that doesn't know what you really want.

In 1972, when I was fifteen, I was attending Gem State Academy. We knelt on the floor to see if our dress hems scraped the carpet. We studied the *Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and discussed the moral dilemmas of Hester Prynne.

I was disciplined three times while attending Gem State. Once for novels I was reading—found in my dorm room or that were underlined. Once for wearing the "make-up of a whore of Babylon." And once for general attitude complaints. Almost anyone who attended Adventist Academies after 1950 would tell a similar story. Mine is not unique.

What was the mind-set I was reacting to? Television. It was the mind-set of George Carlin, *A Clockwork Orange*, and the rise of idolized celebrity culture. This was my world. I was being asked to pretend that the moral dilemmas of Hester Prynne were alive and relevant, which they were not.

What of a child born in 1972, looking closely around them in 1987? By the 1980s, most cultural and social memories had been erased. *A Clockwork Orange* had given us the vision of where we were headed, but it was soon withdrawn. No one really had the stomach to watch its violent truth then, but we were new to the violence vector.



Adventists in the 1980s were almost fully without a sense of consociation. They were a demography. A demography with specific preferences. The vectors were difficult to recognize—the change was beginning to be felt more strongly. It is the change you see, that you discipline against, and wring your hands about—not the vectors. Like nonswimmers lumbering toward the water, Adventists searched for some solidly accessible thing, something with its own authority, the thing that did not need our witness. When we found it, it was unexpected but already familiar.

And what of my nephew born in 1988? As a bright, curious, aggressive male in natural, intuitive reaction to the culture of Natural Born Killers, Reservoir Dogs, Sam Kinison, and Gangsta Rap, he had a one-in-ten chance that he would be on some sort of drug for depression or to calm him down, clam him up, make him controllable and able to sleep at night, and overcome the symptoms of what he was in natural reaction to.

## SEE YA!

While Jathan was attending a Seventh-day Adventist grade school he began to tell me:

"See ya, wunt want to be ya."

It was a phrase popularized by drug dealers in the 1980s—a salute as their drug addicted customers scuffled away to get high.

"See ya, wunt want to be ya."

## A Conversation with No Point

I am thinking about a conversation I could have with Jathan now that he is twenty. I would show him *Godzilla vs. Mothra*, the Japanese version from '64, where a giant Lizard does battle to the death with an evil winged creature. It fascinated me the first time I saw it.

His reaction would be mild, even bored. He might say, "My first *Godzilla* was the '98. Like *Jurassic Park* only tamer; *Jurassic Park* done another way." He would be talking about a different version where the blood is realistic and the creatures... glossier.

I would play an album by Bread (*Baby I'm a Want You*) and I would make him watch an episode of Phil Donahue with me. Phil would introduce a new problem to us and the important thing would be a discussion about the problem, not any solutions.

I don't believe Jathan would see a conspiracy in any of

these artifacts. He just wouldn't recognize that he is seeing artifacts of things that he is still in reaction to, that are still part of his demography. He would have no sense of a situation that was a potent experience.

## WHAT?! WHAT?!

So I would show him a collection of advertisements for Daniel and Revelation Seminars. I would point out that each year the beasts get more graphic, more terrible-glossier. "Look at the whore of Babylon," I'd say, "see how sexy she's gotten?"

We would listen to an album of the Wedgewood Trio or the Heritage Singers and we would sit and watch an hour of 3ABN together—well, maybe thirty minutes. We'd watch Danny Shelton introduce a problem or an experience and then try to imitate therapeutic openness, but without any real discussion, just an imitation of openness.

The problem would be something gone wrong in the demography, a problem that could be enjoyed by the demography as a whole. *I'm a gay Seventh-day Adventist*. No, that is a personal difficulty. *I am a twenty-something Seventh-day Adventist youth on fire for God*. Better, yes. *I am an abused Seventh-day Adventist youth who had left the church, been into drugs, and am now back*.

Very good, that's an hour. The important thing would be that we would all seem to be communicating about the problem; we would be in agreement about seeming to communicate.

For Jathan, these would be a series of unrelated events. He would stare at me blankly and say: What?! What?!

He would not recognize that he was seeing Dominant subsume Substrate.

Swept up in some gentle nostalgia, he might say to me: "See ya, wunt want to be ya."

## Your Child's Disorder May Be Yours, Too

Popular culture is confusing, but it is easily accessible. It carries its own authority and does not require our witness. We can relax and be entertained. It is why special music in churches feels like an audition for Angels Broadcasting Network.

Listening, I feel like a judge on *American Idol*; that's *Ed Sullivan* done differently—with cruelty and humiliation. It's how a pastor giving a PowerPoint sermon can stand in front of a movie still of Christ dying on the cross and implore the congregation:



"Do you claim the blood of Christ for your own?  
DO YOU CLAIM THE BLOOD FOR YOUR OWN?  
DO YOU?"

And in the pew in front of me I can hear a man answer, "Yes! I CLAIM THE BLOOD FOR MY OWN," while he flips through photographs on his cell phone.

### What Is Going Away?

What is going away? What has already gone? Jathan's grandparents are part of the last generation who has any memory—any active living memory—of consociation. They are exhausted from the effort of urgency. What they all—that generation—have in common is that they



didn't think of themselves as part of the mix. They thought of themselves as having different values, different priorities. They were a part of something with substance and consequence but no entertainment value.

They watch as their grandchildren get tattoos of butterflies and crosses on their flawless skin. They pray at weddings where rings are exchanged and gasp over the diamonds that appear everywhere on the body—even on the watches. They wonder why we are so needy for display; does so much attention need to be attracted to the individual by dress and attitude? When we tell them that this is our world—it should be attractive—and we live in it beautifully, in connection with our culture so we may be witnesses, they seem more bullied than convinced.

My generation belongs to the mix but with a hopelessly

conflicted personality about doing so. My generation is the referee between the generation of consociation and the generation of demography. As such, we offer value-free ritual. We didn't want to belong to the club of those who went before because we believed it was the club that failed us, or maybe the message of the club that failed *with no sense of the cultural objects we attached to ourselves so unguardedly.*

Nor do we want Jathan's generation not to belong to anything at all. Our marriages dissolve one after another, we are depressed, distressed at getting old, and in doubt about why Jathan's generation doesn't feel the angst of belonging to the demography. Why don't they seem to want to be anything more than a slight expression of certain demographically expressed preferences. Why don't they feel any urgency?

There seems to be no sense in any of us of the sequence in which the cultural objects took their shape or the consequences. That's reckless.

Would Ellen White have watched Food Network, or only 3ABN? Does it matter if there are fewer people today that have read Ellen White than there were in 1900? What would it matter in the face of movies, online games, or television?

Jathan's generation is in the mix and of the mix, and a few of them will move the mix forward. They see all the movies and play the online games. They know who the celebrities are and what the celebrities wear. And since the dancing celebrities carry no real weight there remains room for other novelties.

I spoke with a young man just back from an overseas mission in a nasty, dirty country. I was sympathetic: what a nasty, dirty little country—and so far away. He tells me that the way he and his wife kept in touch with their culture, their home, was through online games. They both enjoy graphically violent online games as a way to relieve stress. They are glad not to be missionaries still in a nasty, dirty little country but once again home, where the Internet connection is consistent.

Jathan's generation is in the mix and wants the status and respect that come from strangling aesthetic, eviscerating ethics, and numbing sensitivity.

### Can You Hear Me Now?

There are many people who watch television simply to prevent themselves from thinking. Still, claims that one's soul has hardened raise suspicions in all of us. Confession



drifts easily into melodramatizing (no pride equals that of self-lacerations). It is that dread of one's emerging self that counts twice; stranger's skepticism doesn't.

And what of the situation into which we are now steered? A future where the value of the story keeps going down? Our culture itself is being remade, reduced to clips bites, fractals, and mixes. Sitting through a sixty-minute session of worship seems like an unreasonable commitment.

We use DVR to pause, fast forward, hold for some other time—anything not to have to stay with something from beginning to end. When the narrative is disposable—obsolete—how will we teach a story as important yet as fragile as the story of God's meeting men where they are?

The more video games become our entertainment model, the less patience we have for conventional story lines—once upon a time, a widow lost a coin and she was scared, upset, and worried.

The bare ugly simple truth is that all of us feel something intruding into our personality, destroying the oneness and tranquility God offers, splitting it like a wedge, breaking it open—possibly forever.

### Facts We Know but Don't Speak Of

There was a short time—in the 1970s and 1980s—when seriousness was also a part of the mix. There was real discussion.

Seriousness is no longer part of the mix. The ideal is for agreement. Why ask the tough questions? It is crazy hard to think about any of it.

The gospel has gone to the whole world and the end has not yet come. Why is that? Why is it that the gospel has gone to the whole world? It has gone so widely, so thoroughly in fact, that churches now talk about the etiquette of converting from one denomination to another and allowing a culture to remain vital while including something else. The gospel in one way or another has been preached to the whole world, the end hasn't come, and we aren't talking about it.

Why is that? A powerful generation is going away from us—the last group for whom consociation had a meaning, for whom a sense of urgency could still be felt.

The vectors aren't always recognized, only the change. You see people in reaction, notice a change, and then don't speak of it. No one likes to believe that the

vector that carried them into demography can then be completely lost within the demography. But that is what happens. All of the ideas and belief, the convictions, are gone, and we are left with only value-free rituals.

My uncle Frank performed a ritual of some significance last week. It will be the last time he is able to do so. He dedicated his most recent great-grandchild to God. As a girl, she is born into the mind-set of *Pretty Woman*, *27 Dresses*, and Britney, Paris, and Lindsey. She will be in reaction to the notion that to be feminine, a woman is to be constantly on display, a kind of pathology in and of itself.

As a medical norm, she will begin puberty at eight, not ten—as her own mother did—or twelve, as her grandmother did. She will know the affections and attentions of hyperactive boys processing too much information absent a reliable guide to healthy masculine development. Will Quentin Tarantino's *True Romance* be their guide, or will *Knocked Up*? She will be in reaction to a culture that places no value on critical judgment. What matters in her culture are choices and preferences, and choice in important matters is becoming just too troublesome.

Her great-grandfather, Frank, is of the last generation who knew big words like *consociate* or *adulthood*. The word *adult* meant something very different for him than it will for her. The culture makes available to her only the grimmest, most false-seeming adulthood possible. Endless adolescence is what will be offered her, the attraction of inappropriate attention, aspiration, and the most amazing, dazzling material possibilities. That is it. Nothing more is available to her, maybe a little mist of energy that will feel rather like love and will be called her "spiritual side."

Adults are now those adolescents in a position of control, in the world of children who are part of nothing larger than the shimmer. Adults once made difficult choices, set unpopular priorities. They remained mindful of larger issues. Adults could be trusted to say No, there is no need for this in my life, this is a value for some but not for me.

Are we all just part of nothing larger than the tantalizing gleam of today, unable to feel urgency or imminence for any coming event? ■

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