



WHAT MATTERS NOW | June 1, 2007



[Home](#)

[Blogs](#)

[Daily Shvitz](#)  
[Faithhacker](#)

[People](#)

[Events](#)

[Forums](#)

[Video](#)

[Shop](#)

 

[First Person:Change](#)



# I've Got a Secret

## Unitarianism is a pre-teen crypto-Jew's best friend

by [Theodore Ross](#), May 29, 2007

TAGS: [Change crypto-Jews](#) [Mississippi](#) [Passing school](#) [Unitarianism](#)



It is 1984 and I am nine years old and ready for my first sleepover at the home of Manning Montagnet, an impressively freckled youngster and my fourth-grade classmate at the Christ Episcopal Day School in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Manning lives in an antebellum mansion not far from the marina where the Montagnets—regatta types all—keep their sailing yacht. I am invited here less because we are close friends than for my newness both to the school and the Gulf Coast, having migrated south from New York with my mother and older brother a few months earlier. The combination of my brutish Yankee accent, adventurous use of four-letter words, and close personal friendship with [Lawrence Taylor](#) (strictly speaking untrue, but I did own his jersey) make me quite an exotic creature for Manning. The sleepover serves as a preteen version of scientific observation. Of course, I possess another trait he might find more intriguing than my slouching Northeastern cultural mores: I am a Jew pretending to be Unitarian.



**Rubadubdub, thanks for the grub:** And watch out for that stuff on the fries. For dinner that night, Mrs. Montagnet, a tautly strung Stepford type, serves a tempting platter of cheeseburgers, French fries, and Barq's root beer. After strategically positioning my napkin on my lap, I greedily select a burger, pile on the fries, and cover them in ketchup and mustard. Then I draw a deep breath, bring the burger to my lips, and take a single ravenous bite. A long moment of transported chewing passes before I notice Manning and his mother staring at me, their hands folded primly in front of them, their posture unmistakably one of prayer. Manning's cherubically speckled face is blank with shock, his mouth rounded into a stunned and disapproving *O*. Mrs. Montagnet smiles—to this day I can still see the flecks of red lipstick marring her enormous front teeth—and places a hand on my wrist.

“Taaeed,” she drawls, “I’m not sure about *your* home, but here, we ask the Lord’s blessing before we eat.”

Slowly, carefully, I return my hamburger to the plate and steeple my hands into the appropriately penitent position. I bow my head just as Manning begins: “Lord, thank you for this bounty we are about to receive....”

I am not invited back.

\* \* \*

My mother first traveled to Mississippi in the late '60s on a college road trip. Driving the coast in her obligatory VW Beetle, this nice Jewish girl from Queens, daughter of the local B'nai Brith chapter president, took in the great oaks and the Spanish moss, and, for reasons impossible to parse in any rational fashion, decided that someday she would live there. Two kids, a divorce, and a failed Manhattan medical practice later, she did just that. It was her belief that the area's sick would never accept medical care from a *New York-woman-Jew*. Her solution was to discard her religious identity and construct a new one... as a Unitarian.



**Mississippi marrano:** Hiding in plain sight in the land of Spanish moss Even a Jewish girl in Jewish New York, surrounded by Jewish friends and family in a mostly Jewish neighborhood where whitefish was as available as White Castle, can feel overwhelmed by a sense of otherness. Blame it, perhaps, on her hooked nose (which she had surgically altered soon after moving South). Or perhaps it was the bland bigotry of the Italians residing in their part of Jamaica, Queens. Or maybe it was the constant reiteration of the Holocaust story, with its grim narrative of separatism, anti-acculturation, and death.

Our family was Americanizing anyway: our ceaseless clamor for Christmas trees; our substitution of sporting idols—*and G-d said bless the Brooklyn Dodgers*—for spiritual ones; our domestic diaspora spreading to white-bread enclaves in Minnesota, Arizona, New Jersey, and California; and the inevitable passing of our patriarchs and matriarchs, each survived by un-bar mitzvahed offspring who in turn marry non-Jewish spouses. Even if we hadn't moved to Mississippi, my mother would have followed the trend in disposing of as much of her—and my—Jewish identity as possible.

In New York, I had received practically no religious instruction: no rabbi, no Talmud, no Hebrew school, no kashrut, no temple. My parents had provided me with a circumcision, matzah ball soup at Passover, Hanukah instead of Christmas, and little else. As such, in Mississippi, I found it easy to be a Christian, at least at school. Still, I never doubted that I was Jewish, and what's more, my mother never actually asked me to. Our pseudo-Unitarianism was a pose, plain and simple. Because I never took the dislocation of my identity seriously, it wasn't until later that I felt compelled to ask myself a simple question: Am I still a Jew?



### **Laundry's more fun on E:** A Unitarian church in Washington, DC

promises ecstasy At Christ Episcopal, I found that I enjoyed Bible study class and its stories, even the New Testament ones. I attended Mass, prayed (not with any sincerity, but I did move my lips), followed the sermon, and even took Communion. I recall with great clarity the pride I felt at being asked to solo in “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” during the school’s annual Christmas Pageant. Dressed in a white floor-length robe, I faced the old church ladies and their bored husbands, my stern teachers, the straight-laced parents of my Christian schoolfellows, and I delivered the Lord’s tune of righteous retribution upon the unbelievers. I hit the notes both high and low as the unsuspecting congregation fondled their prayer books and placed cold cash on the donation plate.

Although I must admit I enjoyed putting one over on the goyim, a part of me knew this was, at the very least, highly strange, and I always hoped to avoid discussing my sectarian affiliation. Occasionally, though, someone would directly ask about it and I would be forced to answer. I found this problematic for two reasons. First, although I wasn’t religious, I still *felt* Jewish, and lying about it unnerved me, even if, at that age, I wasn’t wholly aware of it. Second, lying, and more importantly living a lie, is stressful. I didn’t know the first thing about Unitarianism, and if I ever ran into someone who did, I knew the entire charade would immediately disintegrate. This worried me. Here, my mother’s selection of Unitarianism as our crypto-religion helped—no one knew what it was, and being Southerners, they were too polite to inquire.

Truth is, I never actually witnessed any antisemitism—not even Jew jokes, which had been de rigueur for both Jew and non-Jew alike back in New York. Christ Episcopal even boasted its very own “out” Jewish pupil, Hillary Dattel, a shy, chestnut-eyed fifth grader who skipped school for Passover and spent the Mass in the library. No one singled her out for ridicule or censure, except perhaps for the assumption that she inherently knew more about bagels and smoked fish. While this might make the decision to hide seem pointless, to my mother at least, it remained necessary. Avoiding the disapproval of peers who proved more tolerant than she had anticipated wasn’t good enough—she needed us to belong in a way that required no approval and implied no condescension.





**A likely story:** The flaming chalice, symbol of Unitarianism I can't account for the choice of Unitarianism. I've tried asking my mother, but when I do, this glazed-over, faux-senile distance settles over her face, as if she were trying to reconstruct the mental processes of another person. What drives me crazy about it is the specificity. Why not just adopt some amorphous form of Protestantism (as she did later when she remarried, converting to Episcopalian)? Unitarians, with their flaming chalice symbology, their rejection of the tripartite Godhead, and the long history of their seminal leaders being burned alive, sounds altogether too much like someone wanting to be caught in a lie.

Which I never was. At twelve, I returned to New York to live with my father as a secular Jew. I visited Mississippi every summer and I continue to do so now that I am older, married, and have a son. Eventually, I told a few close Mississippi friends my story. None seemed overly surprised, apparently having already conflated my inherent abrasiveness with a generic Jewish identity—making all New Yorkers Jewish, even those who aren't.

The true reckoning with this history relates less to me than my son, Jerod. Not that I'm concerned with how he might explain his religion to others when he visits his grandmother on the Gulf Coast. Unlike my mother, I am optimistic enough to believe he can safely acknowledge his Judaism. The real issue is here, in Brooklyn. When my wife returns to work full-time we will place Jerod in daycare. I am told by one of my (Christian) work colleagues that a local synagogue has an excellent program with steep discounts for those willing to join the Reform congregation. I find myself reluctant to do it, though—a hesitancy I attribute to the lingering impact of my childhood deception.

My mother always intended the Unitarianism we assumed to be temporary, a convenient untruth that would forestall further conversation. Yet it is still with me. I have never been able to slip fully back into the Jewish identity any more than I was able to shed it as a boy.

[print](#) [delicious](#) [digg it](#) [reddit](#) [technorati](#) [Sphere it](#) [Stumble it](#)

Theodore Ross's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in Harper's Magazine, Tin House, the Believer, McSweeney's, Saveur, the Mississippi Review, and elsewhere. He is an editor of



Harper's Magazine and lives in Brooklyn. This is a photo

[More...](#)



## Anonymous

Jun 01, 2007

8:36 am

---

### [brooklyn reform shul](#)

If it's the Brooklyn Reform shul I think it is ([www.congregationbethelohim.org](http://www.congregationbethelohim.org)), you should give it a try... there are so many interfaith families. You might just end up finding another place to explore your relationship to your Jewish identity, and for your son to explore his, too.

[reply](#)

---

## Post new comment

Your name:

Please add 2 + 7: \*

You must complete this math problem to prove you are not a spammer.

Subject:

Comment: \*



- Allowed HTML tags: <a> <em> <i> <strong> <strike> <b> <cite> <code> <u> <ul> <ol> <li> <dl> <dt> <dd> <p> <br> <img> <blockquote> <table> <tr> <th> <td> <h1> <h2> <h3> <h4>
- Lines and paragraphs break automatically.
- Images can be added to this post.
- Use <!--pagebreak--> to create page breaks.

[More information about formatting options](#)

Save my Comment Information for next time.

Preview comment

Post Anonymously

[Log in now!](#)

[Login/Register](#)

## MAGAZINE

Browse by Section

Browse by Author

## Also in Jewcy



[Guide to Genetic Testing](#)

[Is intermarriage the cure for cancer?](#)



[Be Nice, or We'll Crush You](#)  
[Is criticizing Jews professional suicide?](#)



[The Morning After](#)  
[Saying "I do" is the easy part.](#)

## Popular Tags

[anti-semitism](#) [Antisemitism](#) [Atheism](#) [books](#) [Celebrity](#) [Dating](#) [Dating Bloggers](#) [gossip](#) [Iran](#) [Iraq](#) [Islam](#) [Israel](#) [Judaism](#) [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) [Monica Osborne](#) [Movable Snipe](#) [passover](#) [politics](#) [Religion](#) [sex](#)

[Dev Blog](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Contact](#) | **JEWICY** | [Submissions](#) | [About Us](#) | [Masthead](#)

Hosting provided by [Tilted Planet](#)