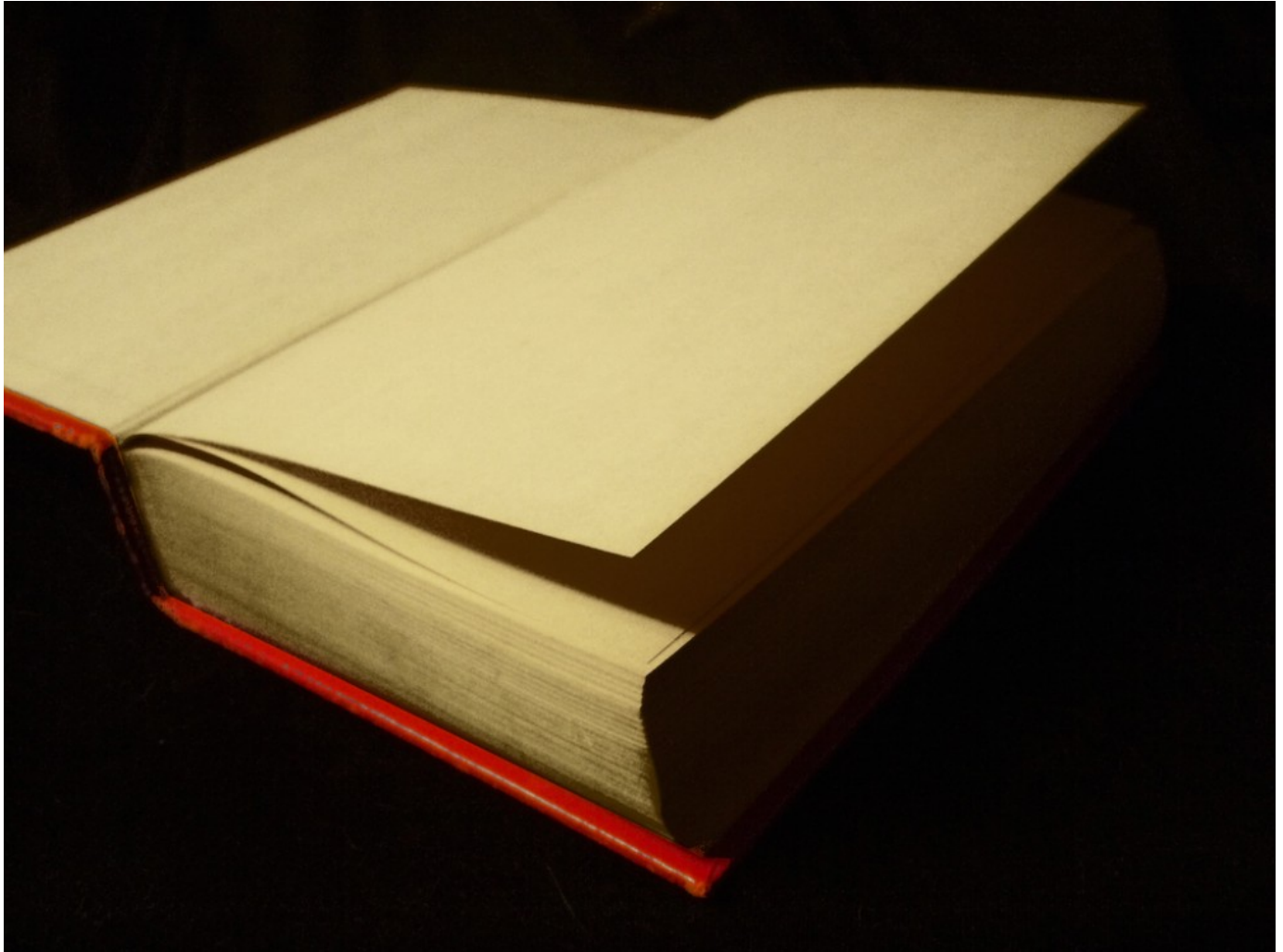


A story about finding a new story

I had the classic Texas Baptist starter package. I went to Carl's shop to trade it in.

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [March 29, 2017](#) issue



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I could tell you the story of how I found Carl in New Orleans, but it wouldn't do you any good. Carl moves his shop whenever the mood strikes him. During a stretch of time in 2008 he operated out of the back of a van. If you need Carl, you'll have to find him in your own way.

In my case, after some years of asking around, I ended up in New Orleans with some sketchy directions scribbled onto a scrap of paper in my wallet. I was supposed to look on St. Ann Street for a green door in a wall that led to an alley.

I walked up and down St. Ann a few times, cursing when I noticed that almost every door is green. Eventually I found it. A narrow wooden door that looked like it was a hundred years old. Behind the door an alley twisted back between buildings and turned to the right. Around the corner was a dimly lit shop called Bayou John's Voodoo Supplies.

I pushed open the door and a little bell tinkled. The man behind the counter looked old. He was working a crossword puzzle and smoking a cigarette that looked like it was rolled out of butcher paper. He squinted at me through the smoke. I spoke to him in an attempt to be friendly.

"You must be Bayou John."

As if he knew I couldn't possibly have anything to do with his world, he said nothing.

I spotted Carl at the back of the store. I brushed aside some dangling beads and walked past a glass case that was filled with ancient bottles. I moved my face closer to get a better look.

"Is that a real skull?" I called back to Bayou John.

He ignored me.

The contrast between Carl's corner and the rest of the store was striking. Carl's part looked more like a doctor's office. There was a well-lit Formica counter. Behind it were shelves that held rows of manila folders with colored tabs. Everything was clean and tidy. Carl was leaning on the counter reading a comic book. He straightened up when he saw me coming.

"My name's Gordon Atkinson. You must be Carl."

He nodded and said, "Nice to meet you. What have you got for me?"

"I've got a custom narrative. I've been working pretty hard on it since about '77, give or take."

“Yeah, well everyone that comes in here says they’ve got a custom narrative. But keep in mind I do *not* consider a standard narrative package with a couple of store-bought modules snapped onto the side to be a custom deal. Let me see what you’ve got.”

I slid my folder over to him. He whistled.

“Nice. This is a classic ’70s cover. Is this all original work?”

“Yep. I did the lettering myself. I was planning on continued custom work until I was maybe in my seventies. I figured after that I’d just settle down and live in it, you know?”

Carl opened the folder and began turning the pages.

“I like the script you were using in the ’80s. You’d have been twentysomething back then, right?”

“I was. Yes.”

“Such hopeful lettering. I can see the doubt creeping in during the ’90s.”

He ran his finger a few lines down a page and tapped it twice.

“Yeah, I see the breaking point right here. Based on a quick and cursory handwriting analysis, I’d say you were pretty well screwed by 2007.”

He flipped quickly through the pages to the end, rubbed the sheets between his thumb and forefinger, smelled the paper, then turned back to the first page.

“Classic. A Texas Baptist starter package. Golden years, too. Pre-’79. That whole thing went south after 1980.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Were your parents true believers or were they in it for other reasons?”

“No. True believers. Check their numbers.”

“Wow! Your dad scored a 94?”

“I know. That’s a legit score too. I saw his numbers. And he’s clergy.”

Carl looked up at me and smiled, then dropped his eyes back to the folder. He shook his head and grunted.

“A clerical true believer!”

He flipped through a few more pages.

“Such a loving father. And strict. Please tell me he still believes.”

“Oh yeah. In his seventies. Married. Still in love with Mom. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. God’s in his heaven and all’s right with the world. Showers of blessing all around. Never wavered. Never will.”

“I get some clergy narratives sometimes from true believers. But if you dig around you’ll generally find a pragmatic base. Like a false bottom. They wouldn’t score anywhere near a 94.”

Carl closed the folder and looked at me over the counter.

“So, full childhood immersion in an organic faith narrative bequeathed by true believers. I’ll look it over. Leave it with me and come back in a week.”

“OK. And you’ll be able to tell me what it’s worth? Or what I could get for it on a trade in?”

Carl didn’t look up. He kept skimming through the pages.

“I’ll tell you what you need to be told.”

Lately the whole idea of American Christianity is wearing thin.

I was feeling pretty good when I left. Feeling kind of proud about the work I’d done on my narrative. Feeling like I might get enough for it to get me started with a whole new story.

I passed Bayou John on the way out and said, “See you next week.”

He moved his hand slowly to his mouth, pulled his cigarette out and held it a couple of inches from his lips.

“Listen here. I rent part of my shop to Carl ’cause I need the money. But I ain’t got nuthin’ to do with y’all tellin’ your little stories and playin’ pussyfoot with each other

at the back of my store.”

I looked back at Carl. He closed his eyes and shook his head. I got the message. Best not to say all that much to Bayou John.

I spent the week wandering around the city, smoking cigars, drinking bourbon, and watching people. It was one of the best weeks of my life.

When I returned to the voodoo shop, I tiptoed past Bayou John. He looked at me through a cloud of cigarette smoke but didn't say anything. Carl came out from around his counter.

“Gordon, welcome back. Good to see you. Let's go into my office.”

He led me around his counter and through a dark green velvet curtain into a small room. There was a round table with three chairs around it. My narrative folder was sitting on the table.

Carl motioned to the table, so I sat down. He opened my folder and flipped a couple of pages back and forth.

“So. This is a very interesting narrative you have here. I've got a few questions, as you might imagine.”

“Ask away.”

“I'll cut to the chase. You're basically an agnostic.”

“Yes.”

“And while you love metaphysical discussions about God and the meaning of life, at your core you're an empiricist.”

“I think that's right.”

“You talk a lot about faith and trust and spirituality, but if I put you under stress, you're going to trust what you see with your eyes.”

“Yes.”

“So you're an agnostic empiricist.”

“I am. Yes.”

Carl stared into my eyes for about ten seconds. I didn't look away. He looked down at the folder and turned a couple of pages. He spoke again without looking up.

“And a Baptist preacher.”

“Well, was a Baptist preacher. I left that gig four years ago.”

“But you were an agnostic empirical Baptist preacher for 20 years.”

“Yes. I was.”

Carl tapped his index finger a few times on the folder.

“This narrative is a work of art. It's your grafts that fascinate me the most. Several strong philosophical scions budded beautifully into your family's Baptist stock. Your bindings are secure as hell too. But how did they last for 20 years? I've seen some lies and con jobs last that long, but never an honest graft. How'd you keep from going crazy?”

“Are you referring to Jung's First Law?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“Check the footnotes for my inclusion of Jung and Campbell entering the story in the late '90s. See how that dovetail supports the central narrative?”

“Joseph Campbell?”

I smiled.

“Will Campbell.”

“Ah yes, the hard-drinking, country Baptist prophet himself.”

Carl ran his finger down to the footnote, flipped two pages, read a bit, then flipped back. He shook his head.

“Nice. That's a nice fit. So you get Campbell's strong social conscience running through there. That's basically a sustaining ritual. Hell, that's as good as a secondary graft.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I kind of lucked into it. Didn’t know what I was doing. But anyway, it held together.”

Carl closed the folder.

“It did. For a time. But you and I both know there’s no way around Jung’s First Law of the True Believer.”

“Yeah. But I found a most unexpected loophole. I think it gave me maybe five extra years.”

“What’s that?”

“I owned it. Publicly. The agnosticism, the doubts, the anger. Hell, let’s admit it, the heresy. I started a blog.”

“Why didn’t the church fire you?”

“Love. They loved me. And I loved them. I’d been there a long time. I think they saw the writing as personal therapy or at least something I needed for reasons they didn’t have to understand. And I’m sure there was a little denial on their part and mine too.”

“Fascinating. And very rare. You stayed pretty healthy too. There was that bout of depression in ’06, but that could have been anything.”

“It all held pretty well until about 2008. By 2009 I knew it was over. I was so tired. I didn’t have anything left.”

“That’s what Jung postulated. Eventually you run out of gas. You can play all the tricks you want, but you can’t get around the First Law: clerics who are not true believers will either be charlatans or become emotionally unstable.”

“He was right. So I left in 2010 on good terms, before I went crazy. I found another job and have never looked back.”

“Have you considered the classic Baptist to Anglican move? Like Claypool? They certainly have room for your agnosticism. And the ritual plays well with your Jungian themes.”

“As a matter of fact, I was confirmed into the Episcopal Church in 2012. But I don’t know. Lately the whole idea of American Christianity is wearing thin. I don’t have the patience. I can’t hear anything. Church talk is unintelligible to me now. Like they’re speaking another language. So I was thinking maybe just chuck the whole thing and find something new.

“That’s why I came to you. I’m hoping to sell this narrative and get enough to buy a new story. Just start over.”

Carl was silent for a long time. I leaned over the table toward him.

“My story’s not worth that much, is it? I wouldn’t get enough for it to get me into something new?”

“Oh hell no. This is a very, very nice narrative. I know several collectors who would pay top dollar for it just to get a peek at your quirky structures, your grafts and bindings. And I think you’ve stumbled upon a bona fide Tertium Quid with your clerical confession of doubt. I mean you can’t get around the First Law, but you definitely found a third way and bought yourself some time. No, I could sell it. That’s not the problem.”

“Then what is the problem?”

“You’re the problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“How old are you?”

“Fifty-two.”

“Well, that’s pretty old to be starting with a new narrative, don’t you think? Look, even the standard worldview packages take 20 years or more to break them in. And I’m pretty sure you aren’t going to be happy with a standard package. So then we’re talking about customizing. I just don’t think you’ve got the time. And even if you do work out something cool for yourself, at your age it won’t really take root. It’s just gonna be a kind of mythic costume you walk around in. You sure you want that?”

“I guess I thought maybe I’d buy someone else’s custom narrative. Maybe a cool Christian Buddhist like Merton or a social activist Quaker who’s an amazing bowler

and lives in a small town where he's the only liberal but people love him anyway. Something like that."

"You don't understand. Collectors buy these narratives. Not people hoping to use them. You can't just move into someone else's story like a hermit crab switching shells. Custom narratives are like used shoes. They look comfortable as hell, but when you put them on they don't fit your feet."

"Well, what do people like me do when they trade in their narratives?"

"They don't trade them in, OK? I get these from dead people. I buy them from families of the deceased or at estate sales. I sell them to collectors or sometimes to writers who use them to develop characters. That's how this business works. I could sell you one of the custom narratives I've got in stock. But I'd just be taking your money. You aren't going to be able to use it."

"Well, then I guess just give me one of your standard narrative packages. What have you got?"

Carl looked at me for a few moments. He started to say something but didn't. Then he shrugged and left the room through the curtain. He came back with a notebook computer that he put on the table and opened. The light from the screen lit up his face. He tapped on the keys a few times and pushed his finger around on the track pad.

"I keep a selection of these on hand. You can pick them up pretty much anywhere. They're moneymakers. What can I say? People swap them out all the time. Most of them come with preloaded geographic settings. We just plug in your zip code and the software makes all the adjustments."

He clicked a few more times on the keyboard.

"I've got some typical right-leaning, evangelical, small-town, married-with-kids narratives. Bowling league, friends for life, with an assortment of hobbies and weekend entertainment modules already installed. Got a number of those.

"Got some granola packages. Pretty much what you'd expect—overeducated, politically correct, vegetarian or vegan, cause-oriented crusader packages. Again,

the specific causes and some of the details depend on your zip code.

“I’ve got some bandana-wearing, weekend-motorcycle-riding, generic-American-godism narratives. Slogan-oriented patriotism modules as add-ons. These come in both right- and left-wing political versions.

“You might want to look into one of the religious patriot packages that are all the rage these days. Your god and government are the good guys. Your enemies’ gods and governments cast as agents of Satan. What’s cool about these packages is they come as stand-alone mythic narratives or you can treat them as modules. You can snap them on the side of pretty much any standard package. Then you can tear around town not doing shit for god or country but making a helluva lot of noise. These are especially nice if you’re hoping to run for office.”

We stared at each other across the table for a few seconds. Carl shrugged.

“I don’t want to hear any more.”

He closed his computer.

“Look, man, they’re basic starter packages, OK? It’s what we all begin with. Where do you think that 1960s Southern Baptist package your parents gave you came from? Don’t knock the standard packages. They’ve all been tested and approved for our culture. You get a nice selection of emotional, intellectual, and social benefits with all of them that are pretty much guaranteed unless you totally screw it up. But even if you do you’ve still got a place in society. Most of these narratives need a screw-up character in them, so it’s all good, in a larger sense anyway.”

I leaned forward and placed my face in my hands and ground the base of my palms into my eyes. Then I slipped my palms up to my temples and rubbed them in circles.

“So what you’re saying is I can’t use someone else’s custom narrative. My choice is to keep the one I have or start new with one of these horrible, culture-friendly starter packages. Those are my choices.”

“Yes. Those are the only two choices. Well, the only two choices that make sense to most people. But sometimes, when it seems there are only two ways to go and things are getting desperate, a third way opens itself to our awareness. Your old narrative showed that you were open to that kind of thing. The Tertium Quid.”

“Have you got one in mind?”

“As a matter of fact I do. I’ll take your narrative and keep it here for you. I won’t sell it. It will be here in case you come back someday to reclaim it.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“I’m casting you out into the Negev. Like Abram you will journey by stages into the wilderness. You will have no narrative. No story will be your story. You will be an observer of humanity but will exist yourself in a kind of twilight state. You will walk in this third way until you find truth or until the end of your days.”

I closed my eyes and slowly moved my head back and forth.

“Look, Gordon, it’s not a punishment. Think of it as an extended Lenten period. For goodness’ sake, Jesus did it. He went into the wilderness. And in spite of your current attitude toward your old story, I have to think you still have a soft spot in your heart for Jesus.”

I started crying. There was no stopping it. I felt ashamed and put my face in my hands.

Carl got a box of Kleenex from the top of the fridge and handed them to me. I wiped my eyes and blew my nose. Then I took a deep breath and nodded.

“OK. But where should I go? How should I get started? Are there others like me out there?”

Carl didn’t say anything. He gathered up my folder and slid it into a fat manila envelope and sealed it with one of those little strings that wraps around a button. Then he left through the green curtain. He didn’t come back. I went out and he was talking on the phone to someone. He glanced at me and then turned away. I knew it was time to leave.

I walked through the shop toward the door. Bayou John was not in his usual place. I found him outside sitting on a stump with a cat in his arms, smoking a pipe. I stood in the doorway, wondering which way to go.

“Let me see your eyes,” Bayou John said.

I looked at him. He focused first on my right eye and then slid his view across my nose to my left eye.

“Give me your hands.”

I held my hands out. He grabbed them and turned them palm upward. He looked carefully at them for a few moments.

“Did he cast you out?”

“Yes.”

He grunted and puffed on his pipe. I said, “I thought you didn’t like me. You certainly weren’t that friendly the last time I was here.”

“That time your story was not my story. Now you are a man with no story. You might end up anywhere. Even back here with me.”

“Voodoo?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Voodoo is hot and wet. I think maybe you are a cold and dry man in your soul.”

I thought about what he said but couldn’t make sense of it. I said, “I don’t know where to start, which way to go.”

“That’s easy. You leave here and go down to the river. Every journey starts at the river. Every good thing comes to you when you find the deep waters.”

A version of this article appears in the March 29 print edition under the title “Trading in my narrative.”