
*Essay**Patrick Madden**Divisions*

"Divisions" is a backtranslation from the Spanish *divisiones*, which Mormon missionaries in Uruguay use as a translation for the Mormon slang "splits," which is a day (or a few hours or a few days or weeks) of work with someone other than your regular companion. In the two years I was in Uruguay I did divisions with Elders Gull, Yeates, Haynie, Barrow, Dosedall, Newton, Stewart, Lunceford, Howard, Lawrence, Clifford, Rees, Jackson, Griffin, Baird, Romeu, Jones, Shepherd, Jones, Cardiff, Arnold, Granat, and at least twenty-five others. That's not even counting the local kids I worked with or the guys whose names I'm forgetting. Lots of divisions.

I have felt emboldened on divisions. I have felt myself filled with authority and confidence. I have felt alone with quiet missionaries who led me around as they would a dog. I have stumbled through half-conversations, struggled with Spanish, when it was new to me, and with *Portuñol* (a Portuguese and Spanish hybrid) when I visited the *frontera* with Brazil. I have learned from other missionaries' techniques, approaches, work habits, jokes, sayings. I have taught others the same things. I have spent whole days floating on a cloud, everything going right, an intimate friendship at its inception, conversations that lifted and sustained and made me feel like there was nothing else in the world I'd rather be doing.

I did divisions with Elder Yeates more than anybody. The first time our companions left us and went off to work together, Yeates was only about a week in the country, and I had been there just over a month. We were both still struggling with Spanish, and I didn't know my area very well. All I can remember from the day is a lot of small talk complaining (while, at the same time, glorifying) about being left alone (together) and not knowing Spanish, a guy in the *almacen* who condescendingly explained to us the whole monetary system when I tried to buy some Brazilian sandwich-cookies and fumbled for a second with my change, and an *evangelica* who took our memorized

invitation to learn more about our church and our beliefs as an opportunity to tell us all she believed. This would have been fine—we were, after all, looking to talk about such things—but she lost us within the first few seconds and seemed not to pause even for breaths until fifteen minutes later, after I had stolen several sideways glances at Yeates and had almost broken down laughing.

One day we were doing divisions in Yeates's area and were sitting down to speak with a kind old woman who had accepted our invitation to listen. The woman was a *campesina*, raised on a farm in the countryside, and had never pronounced such strange-sounding names as "Madden" and "Yeates." Madden she got fairly easily and within the neighborhood of correct, though she couldn't figure why it needed two *ds*. But when she got to Yeates, through some strange combination of her Uruguayan pronunciation and what I suppose she supposed might be correct in English, she came up with "Shits." She repeated it, "Shits, Shits, Shits, Shits, Shits," and because we were snickering, she repeated it all the more. "Shits, Shits, Shits, Shits, Shits." We never told her how to really pronounce it, and Yeates told me afterward that he heard it said that way all the time. Made it hard to keep his concentration sometimes.

I liked Elder Yeates. He was one of the most successful missionaries in the country during that time. He and his companions baptized more people than almost anybody else. He was a hard worker, a strong persuader. We always give credit to the Holy Spirit for turning people's hearts, but you have to admit that the Spirit's conduits, the missionaries, have something to do with it, too. Yeates's success at baptizing came in areas where missionaries had been discouraged and almost given up. Places, they said, where the people were too cold and unwilling to listen. But Yeates never bought into those stories, and where other missionaries were half-hearted and filled with excuses, he was gung ho. When I worked with him we pedaled as fast as we could to get from one appointment to the next; we planned the most efficient routes and the most effective methods for finding new people; we ate quickly and studied scriptures scrupulously; we followed mission rules religiously. I always worked pretty hard myself, but a day with Yeates wore me out. He was amazingly dedicated, though I sometimes, now, question his motivation, and by this I question my own.

About a year after the "Shits" incident he and I were doing divisions again because I was to interview twelve people who had committed to be

baptized the following Sunday. In the game of numbers, twelve is a lot of people for one week, and this wasn't a one-time thing. Yeates always had lots of people on deck and was baptizing nearly every week. The twelve had listened to all the missionary lessons, had given up smoking and drinking, had promised fidelity to their spouses, had promised not to fight so often with brothers and sisters; they had been to church, communed with the saints, read in their Bibles and their Books of Mormon. Most of their interviews went well: they were truly converted, they said, and wanted to dedicate their lives to God. They believed that Jesus had died for their sins and were relieved that they could become clean again. Two of the interviewees, a husband and wife, confided that they had not been legally married, which was a stumbling block because the church required it as fulfillment of the law of chastity. They and their son would wait to be baptized until they were married. Still, I approved nine others as ready for baptism, so I was surprised to learn the next week that none of them had gone through with it. One had to work, another slept late. This family was contacted by their *evangelista* cousins whose ideas about the Mormons made them nervous. Lots of different reasons, but one result. Maybe some of the people we were pushing into the water weren't as ready and converted as we'd hoped.

Yeates and I followed each other throughout the country. For nearly two years, nearly everywhere I went, Yeates was nearby. First in Paysandú, then in the neighboring towns of Carmelo and Colonia, then in northeast Montevideo, where Yeates and his companion often dropped in when we were eating lunch and asked me to do baptismal interviews, then across town in another neighborhood, then in a third area of Montevideo, where once again we worked together, and once again I told him, in spite of my aversion to profanity, "I'm on you like a fly on Shits."

I was on divisions when Elder Peterson and I rode past a young man and his two kids with an *hola*, then stopped and turned back to talk with them. He accepted the book we proffered, and when I went to his house to continue teaching him, my companion and I found him at his typewriter, writing a letter to our church's leaders asking that he be allowed to join. Another time, at that same corner, under the shadow of the mosqueish Catholic church, my companion, Elder Shepherd, and his companion for the day, Elder Wells, were straddling their bicycles, strapping on their helmets, as the mission president and I drove by in his car on our way to inspect missionaries'

apartments. President Robbins saw them and said, "When we drive by, roll down the window and yell 'Huevos!'" He knew that people all over Uruguay called us eggs, but I'm not sure anyone ever explained to him that they were using the slang for testicles. I told him, quickly, "No, you do it," and he did. "Huevos!" he yelled, and held out the O sound until his mouth curled into a mischievous smile and he ran out of breath. I had never seen him so human.

I was on divisions when Elder Moore, sick to his stomach, was throwing up every few blocks and trying to refresh his mouth with chewing gum that fell out each new time he vomited. I was on divisions when Elder Hawkins and I were cornered at the end of a dirt road by a drunk screaming for us to leave, threatening with a gun he didn't have on him at the moment, grabbing for my crotch. I was on divisions when I visited Hermana Graciela Lopez in the intensive care unit of the Sanatorio Americano, saw her emaciated, uncovered, naked to the waist, stuck here and there with tubes and monitor cables. Her breasts were completely flat to her ribcage; this scene I can't forget. I felt no shame for her, no tinge of impropriety at seeing her this way. Because she was dying. I want to make some metaphor of her breasts, givers of life, Gaea's bounty, dying. But I leave it at that. They were deflated, reduced to sagging, yellowed skin, and I could see the hills and valleys of her ribs beneath them.

I was also on divisions one clear summer day with Elder Granat, who had the most and the loudest ties of anybody. He figured, *If I'm gonna have to wear almost the same thing every day for two years, I'm gonna have some variety and color about it.* We spent our day together in his area, so I tagged along to the appointments he had set up. Granat was funny, and his humor brought out my own funny side. During our lunch we did impersonations of our church's leaders and mused that Moroni, son of Mormon and an ancient prophet who, in resurrected form, showed Joseph Smith where to find the gold plates that were to become the Book of Mormon, probably didn't speak English very well. Certainly it wasn't his native language. We rattled off our memorized rendition of Moroni's words to young Joseph, exaggerating accents and stuttering through difficult phrases. Our version of Moroni sounded somewhat Russian.

Several times during the day we passed a large cardboard box on the side of the road, nestled in some tall grass. The first time we passed we almost didn't notice it, but it was enough to make us stop. Inside were five spotted

puppies squirming and mewling, with pale eyes barely open, and short, velvety fur barely grown in. Someone had left them to die.

I think we were shocked and scared of the responsibility of having found them. People killed unwanted puppies all the time. Every now and then you'd see a torn, bloody bag in a canal, beset by crows. Sometimes carcasses, clinging scraps on rib bones. Mangy, three-legged, pale-eyed dogs prowled in packs, eating garbage, defecating on sidewalks and in yards, begging for nourishment at the apartment complexes. Too many dogs already. Not enough people to care about them.

We discussed our part in the cycle, turned the box on its side, facing away from the road and toward the grass, and rode away. Several times we returned. The puppies had not left the box. They huddled together, cold or scared, I don't know, and we agonized with the weight of the decision facing us. In between the times we returned, we changed our doorway-approach and asked people not only if they would like to read the Book of Mormon but if they'd like a puppy or two. Nobody did. We finally left the puppies by the side of the road where we had found them.

The conflict I felt then lives on in my memory as an epitomal example of the sharp difference between theory and practice. Things are so much easier when they're seen from above, outside. I often take in the television news like I'd take in a movie: so many dead, so many wounded, police investigating, rising crime rate, more cases of incurable disease; look, here's more devastation. I don't know those people, and the news rarely tries to portray them as much more than statistics. I read my history book like I read my science fiction: in 1776 the United States of America declared independence; in this year we fought this war; so many people died; in this year this law was passed. The information is cleansed and processed, sterilized for mass consumption by people accustomed to the passive reception of cold facts with no connection to their personal lives.

It was easy to hate the grownup dogs with all their mange and fleas and dirt and chases and tails-between-legs. Even easier to hate the idea of them. Thinking about it theoretically, hypothetically, it was better to let the puppies die. There were already too many stray dogs roaming the streets, and missionaries who frequent the dogs' haunts without authorization are often chased and bitten and slobbered on and forced to kick back from pedals or stoop and grab rocks (rarely throwing them; just stooping was enough). Whoever left the puppies in the box at the side of the road probably

rationalized his action something like this: too many dogs already. Just like some Uruguayans saw missionaries and were able to dismiss us. Just as I sometimes let myself dismiss some Uruguayans.

But real puppies—white with black and brown stains and sagging eyebrows and sagging velvet fur and black, wet noses and stringy whimpers and thumps and scratches against the box and an oxymoronic sweet smell of freshness and urine—aren't *too many dogs already*, and you can never really make that kind of statement. You can say that many kids from single-parent homes in slum neighborhoods will later turn to drugs and drop out of school and commit crimes and end up in jail, but you can't say that *this* kid will because sometimes he won't. And you can't take away his opportunities—although we sometimes do—simply because you don't see a bright future ahead of him. Puppies aren't people, it's true, but puppies aren't what you're reading about or thinking about or population-control-planning about either, and when they're there in front of you, helpless and unaware of what someone has resigned them to, what can you do?

You can want to expand the analogy, for one, and make the puppies represent people and us represent God. Playing God is a large social issue: it makes up parts of the arguments against murder, abortion, and euthanasia, but it might also be argued as part of school-voucher programs and government aid and arms dealing and soup kitchens and domestic violence and hurricane relief and supply caravans to war-torn countries. God doesn't only kill people, he sustains them, and though some say playing God is usually limited to extreme cases, you could argue that we're always playing God, or never. God is not only causing pain and death and destruction, or allowing such things, He's the giver of life; all good things come from Him. You can wonder about the great flood, which must have taken with it innocent children along with their wicked parents, or about natural disasters or manmade atrocities, and wonder why God lets those things happen. You can wonder how young Mormons can ignore this evidence and preach a loving, saving God who is our Father; how they can ask people to make radical changes in their lives and promise them happiness in such a world. And yet we did, and still do.

Granat and I had read about missionaries who converted whole congregations, whose powerful testimonies shook foundations and touched listeners with a fire of conviction that the message was true. These powerful

men and women were fearless in the face of persecution and walked boldly into churches and synagogues and took over pulpits. I once went to a Catholic mass on Christmas and sang a special offertory hymn. The priest afterward was gracious in his thanks. But I had never set foot inside any other church's doors, and neither had Granat, and we were thinking of visiting either a *Salon del Reino* of the Jehovah's Witnesses or a *templo evangelico*, because both groups were as serious about their faiths as we were about ours. We were rivals of sorts. Not rivals in any real sense, but they did their own proselytizing and took issue with our beliefs, and though we were supposed to avoid conflict, and tried hard to do so, an occasional clash was inevitable.

There was an *evangelico* church not far from Granat's apartment, so we chose to visit it. Besides, it was a Saturday, and Granat was sure the congregation would be there; he'd hear the guitar amps and the clapping every week when he was riding home. We got to the meeting a little late, and so the commotion when we walked in was mostly whispers and elbows and turning heads. A woman graciously stepped aside to offer us a seat on her bench near the back, and we joined in with the handclapping and refrains. The place was pretty well packed. Streamers and construction-paper decorations adorned the whitewashed walls, and the room was lit by several naked bulbs hanging from the middle of the ceiling. A short succession of men and women spoke from the pulpit about the sanctity of motherhood, and we realized that the next day was Mother's Day. One tends to lose track of time on a mission.

Somewhere along the way, as we sang with them and shared their enthusiasm, we lost our burning desire to preach to the people there. I think the impulse to convert them was born of an egotistical we're-right-you're-wrong kind of notion. That and the sign-seeker's wish for greatness and personal glory in the shadow of God's power. I was no less sure of the truthfulness of the message we were sharing, but I wasn't so sure the best way to share it was the way we were planning. The impulse died hard, and I was somewhat relieved when our request to speak from the pulpit was denied. We asked quietly and in private after the meeting was over, and the leader of the group said, kindly, "Maybe some other time. Now we're going to have refreshments. Won't you please join us?"

The brownies and the pizza were wonderful—*pizza al estilo uruguayo*: thick, spongy dough for crust, no cheese, just rich tomato sauce and onions and peppers and oregano—and we were flattered to be asked so many

questions as we mingled with the crowd. Children asked, "You guys are from the United States?" and with our yeses they became wide-eyed and whispered to their friends. Old women called us sons, men our age called us brothers. There was a line to shake our hands, and each greeter said, "May God bless you." The women stepped up on tiptoes and inclined their cheeks with eyes half-closed.

"It's against our mission rules to kiss women," we protested. We tried to joke through the explanation: "They don't want us getting in any trouble."

"Oh!" smiled a small man with curly hair and a mustache, "But you can't complain about kissing the men!" And he grabbed my by the shoulders and kissed my cheek.

What could I do? The murmur went quickly through the hall—the Mormons only kiss men—and then the women offered us their hands and the men offered their cheeks. We sat for a while on a bench in the corner conversing with a small group of people who were curious about what we believed. Everybody comfortable, filling up on hot chocolate and pizza. For a time then we were one; our divisions were healed.