

# Open Letters.

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Dispatches from near and far



*July 9, 2000 (Vol. I, No. 3)*

This week,  
Open Letters features the collected letters of:  
Sarah Vowell,  
Blue Chevigny,  
and Jonathan Goldstein;  
as well as a conversation with Todd Strandberg.

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# Open up.



The opinions expressed in Open Letters are solely those of their authors, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the staff of Open Letters, or of its subsidiaries. We have no official position, for instance, on Sarah Vowell's contention that Mel Gibson was underrated in "Conspiracy Theory"; on Blue Chevigny's belief that most movies "suck and are absent of insight"; on Jonathan Goldstein's assertion that being told one has a "perfect penis" is "the kind of compliment that sticks with a person"; or, finally, on Todd Strandberg's claim that humanity is "becoming more and more wicked as the years progress."



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# Satellite of Love

A letter from the editor, on this week's issue.

Los Angeles, California • July 9, 2000

Dear Readers,

This week's letters (and conversation) seem to revolve around three recurring and interconnected themes: faith, love, and the movies. In this week's first letter, for instance, Sarah Vowell writes about her faith in her fellow man, her love of country, and the movie "The Patriot." When I realized two weeks ago that the Fourth of July was fast approaching, I wrote to Sarah and asked her if she'd be interested in writing a letter about the holiday, and the republic for which it stands.

Personally, I've always had a "Dazed and Confused" take on the Fourth. In that movie, set in 1976, a social-studies teacher shouts to her class as they leave for summer holidays:

This summer, when you're being inundated by all the bicentennial fourth of July brouhaha, don't forget you're celebrating the fact that a bunch of slave-owning aristocratic white males didn't want to pay their taxes.

But then again, I'm Canadian. Sarah is American, as she'd be the first to tell you; she's also the author of "Take The Cannoli," a wise and funny new collection of essays about the American landscape. And so I suspected that Sarah might have a slightly more thoughtful approach to the holiday than I did.

And indeed she did: Sarah decided that the best place for her to ponder American patriotism, circa summer 2000, was in an overstuffed reclining stadium seat at her local Manhattan multiplex, watching Mel Gibson kick a little Redcoat ass.

Which is what her letter's all about. One of my many hopes for Open Letters is that the form of the letter will expand to include many different types of writing: memoirs, reportage, how-to's, essays. Sarah's letter is the first to venture into the territory of film criticism.

Blue Chevigny also writes about the movies this week, but her letter, I think, is about faith first and the movies second. I first got to know Blue via a series of zines that she sent out several years ago to a few dozen friends. One recounted a series of dreams she'd been having; another was about the way that she and her friends had become obsessed with "My So-Called Life"; a third was about the Beatles; but they all functioned, to my

mind, as the best sort of personal correspondence: They weren't directed to me, specifically, but they were intimate and revealing and engrossing in the way that only a letter (or a zine, I guess) can be.

Jonathan Goldstein is a Montreal writer who wrote one of the first dispatches for Canadian Letters, a section of Saturday Night magazine, where I used to work. He's also the author of an unpublished novel entitled "The Last Comedian," in which a character says that Lou Reed's song "Satellite of Love" "sounds like the kind of song you make up when you're seven, during a long drive, just to make everybody in the car crazy."

This summer Jonathan's hosting a weekly show on CBC radio called "Road Dot Trip." The idea is that he's going to spend the summer traveling across Canada, interviewing people and recounting his adventures. He wrote for Open Letters this week about love and loss. No movies.

Finally, we have a conversation with Todd Strandberg, creator of the Rapture Index. For more on Todd, and a look at this week's index, see page 10.

Most of my Open Letters thoughts this week focused on how to get the word out on Open Letters. A quick check with accounting confirms that our promotion budget still stands at \$0, so we're kickin' it grassroots-style. A reader in Carrboro, North Carolina, for instance, has pledged to put up posters with the url on them while she's out walking her dog. Many readers are kindly forwarding the daily reminders. We're registering with various search engines. (No one told me you had to do that; I was under the impression that the operating principle behind Google and Hotbot was Harry Potter-style magic.) And as always, I'm eager to get your suggestions, as well as your help. Please send any big ideas to [editor@openletters.net](mailto:editor@openletters.net).

Next week: the return of Chana; another letter from X.; and more. Stay tuned.

Yours truly,

Paul Tough

# American Dreams

A letter from Sarah Vowell, on patriotism and "The Patriot."

New York City • July 4, 2000

Dear Paul,

Maybe the nicest thing about seeing "The Patriot" was standing in the ticket line, hearing my fellow Americans say that word. "Two for 'The Patriot' please." "One for 'The Patriot' at 5:30." Because no one I know uses the P word anymore. If they do, it's an adjective – patriotic. But I seem to move in circles where even that word has been replaced by "jingoistic." Like the other night at the Magnolia Bakery after dinner – I was with some friends and we stopped in for dessert – everyone went for the cookies or the banana cream pudding with Nilla wafers except for one guy, Andy. I pointed at his cupcake with the little American flag stuck in the top and asked him, "What made you get that?"

"I was feeling jingoistic," he said.

I enjoyed the movie. Watching a story line like that is always a relief. Of course the British must be expelled, just as the Confederates must surrender, Hitler must be crushed and *yee-haw* when the Red Sea swallows those slave-mongering Egyptians. At yet another recent dinner Stephen and I were arguing with Eric about the British royal family, whom Eric likes because "they make no sense." We spent forty-five minutes yelling, "No, Eric, there shouldn't be a monarchy!" It was the most fun I've had in months, taking the moral high ground on a topic free of the pitfalls of Cuban children or Palestinian statehood.

I've read some editorials about "The Patriot," the kind that always accompany any historical film, written by professors who insist things nobody cares about like Salieri wasn't that bad a sort or Roman gladiators maybe didn't really have Australian accents. A little anachronism is part of the fun, and I don't mind if in real life General Cornwallis never lost a battle in the South, as he does rather gloriously in the film. Isn't art supposed to improve on life?

Personally, I think there's more than enough historical accuracy in "The Patriot" to keep the spoilsports happy. I'm part spoilsport, on my father's side, and I felt nagged with quandaries every few minutes during the three-hour film. American history is a quagmire, and the more one knows

about it, the quaggier the mire gets. If you're paying attention during "The Patriot" and you know your history and you have a stake in that history, not to mention a conscience, the movie is not an entirely cartoonish march to glory. For example, Mel Gibson's character, Benjamin Martin, doesn't want to fight the British at the beginning of the movie because he still feels bad about chopping up some Cherokee into little pieces during the French and Indian War. At that point, as a part-Cherokee person myself, I lost a little of the sympathy I'd stored up for Mel because he'd been underrated in "Conspiracy Theory." And did I mention Mel's character lives in South Carolina? So at the end of the movie, you look at the youngest Mel junior bundled in his mother's arms and think, Mel just risked his life so that that kid's kids can rape their slaves and vote to be the first state to secede from the Union.

Now, I am not one of those America-first, flags-on-the-front-porch kind of patriots. I am more of a "despite" patriot, believing in the inherent truth and beauty of the nation's founding documents despite the fact we've never, not even in the beginning – especially in the beginning – lived up to anything close to a more perfect union. But (A) show me somewhere better (and if you say your native Canada, Paul, I suggest you tell me why you moved to L.A.), and (B), I think I'm a better person because I have words like "more perfect union" to live up to. The other day, in the subway at 5:30, I was crammed into my sweaty, crabby fellow citizens and I kept whispering under my breath "we the people, we the people" over and over again, reminding myself we're all in this together and they had as much right – exactly as much right – as I to be in the muggy underground on their way to wherever they were on their way to.

"The Patriot" did confirm that I owe George Washington an apology. I always liked George fine, though I dismissed him as a mere soldier. I prefer the pen to the sword, so I've always been more of a Jeffersonhead. The words of the Declaration of Independence are so right and true that it seems like its poetry alone would have knocked King George III in the head. Like, he

would have read this beloved passage, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights – that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," and thought the notion so just, and yet still so wonderfully whimsical, that he would have dethroned himself on the spot. But no, it took a grueling, eight-year-long war to make independence a fact.

I never think of this.

I think about the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution all the time. Mainly because I watch a lot of TV. I keep my small, 95-cent copy of the two documents handy so that I can fact-check the Constitutional interpretations in the shows of David E. Kelley and Aaron Sorkin. In my little booklet, the Declaration and the Constitution are separated by only a blank half-page. I forget that there are eleven years between them, eleven years of war and the whole Articles of Confederation debacle. In my head, the two documents are like the A-side and B-side of the greatest single ever released, recorded in one great drunken night, but no, there's a lot of bleeding life between them. Dead boys and dead Indians and Valley Forge.

I'm not much on war stories. I haven't hit anyone since I was twelve years old (hi, Sherry). I prefer verbal sparring, so I like courtroom dramas and, especially, Sorkin's "The West Wing." It's about the senior White House staff. It often leaves me clutching my Constitution in tears. It's a little hokey, but that's why I like it. Sometimes the framer-style rhetoric is so intense it sounds like an action movie. They really say things like, "Let's get

out there and raise the level of public discourse!"

I swear Aaron Sorkin is sitting around with his 95-cent copy of the Constitution, too, reading the obscure bits. He conjured one surprisingly emotional story line, for example, out of the rather dry Article I, Section 2, the mandate for the census. Sorkin has picked up on something so obvious and simple. Namely, that the Constitution is and was a bottomless pit of story ideas – a prophecy of the stories that were to come. Any of the first ten Amendments contains within it the potential energy of a million stories waiting to unfold. Freedom of the press? "Citizen Kane." The death of Diana. "All the President's Men." The right to bear arms? Columbine, Lee Harvey Oswald, the scene in "Hannah and her Sisters" when Woody Allen's trying to kill himself with a shotgun but his forehead's so sweaty, the barrel slides off his face and the bullet flies into the wall. The right to a speedy and public trial? O.J., anyone?

A couple of times, I've forgotten to put the little Constitution booklet back on the shelf, and friends have stopped by, noticing it resting under the remote controls. I think they find my patriotism an amusing affectation – that it's cute and old-fashioned, the way I feel about the adorable way David's always bringing up Oscar damn Levant. I guess because my patriotism is so sentimental, so unthreatening. No one's ever put a bayonet in my hands to back it up. The closest I've come is shooting a Canadian while playing laser tag and going to Starbucks afterward: I sure miss you.

Happy Fourth of July,

Sarah



# A Moment in the Dark

## A letter from Blue Chevigny, on faith and the movies

Chicago, Illinois • July 6, 2000

Dear Paul,

When I moved to Chicago I didn't anticipate feeling this weird for this long. I always liked it here as a visitor from New York – the downtown skyline rearing straight up from the lake, the lake itself, where you can swim, just like that, without even thinking about it, the huge spacey apartments everyone seems to live in, where people have furniture, and closets you can stand in. But moving here, it was different. A year later I still have a lingering feeling that I'm outside of my real self, walking around in this weird place without pay phones.

Lately, I have been going to movies hoping to find insights, even little ones, into myself. There haven't been very many, because of course most movies suck and are absent of insight. But then there was one I saw about a month ago that, in spite of the obvious silliness of it in many ways, kind of moved me and made me think about major things. It was "Keeping the Faith" – you know, the one with the rabbi, the priest and the girl. It's embarrassing that this movie, with its goofy trailers and somewhat implausible premise, had anything to do with me figuring something out, but it did.

Anyway, the thing with this movie is that it was about this group of three childhood best friends who are reunited when the girl comes back to town, New York, for a temporary assignment for her job. The rabbi and the priest are still there, still best friends; the only difference is that now they are spiritual leaders, not adolescents. What's particularly interesting about them is that they are *hipster* spiritual leaders, in a Hollywood sort of way – they bring in big crowds to their places of worship by making a splash and having "up-to-date" ideas. Their goal as a priest and a rabbi seems to be to bring their faiths up to date as well. It sounds so corny, and it is, but somehow, this idea really appealed to me. They are doing all these cool things: talking about funny and racy stuff during sermons, starting this interfaith community center where Jews and Catholics and everyone else can hang out together and sing karaoke and plan community projects. It's all about community. In fact, there's one speech Ed Norton (who plays the priest) gives to his con-

gregation that particularly hit me in the gut. He is talking about faith, defining it sort of, and he says that faith is this hunch we all have that there's something larger out there, God in this case, keeping us believing that the world makes sense somehow. He says, We make sense as a community because we have this hunch in common that brings us back again and again to church to make that hunch part of something larger, a larger group. If we didn't have faith that this hunch is based on something, we wouldn't be here. The "we" he is referring to is his congregation, but I also felt like he was talking to the movie audience, to me.

I grew up without any religion – my parents both seem to be agnostics (at the most) – and certainly never did anything during my lifetime in an organized religious setting. My father's a lapsed Catholic, I guess, technically, though he only practiced for about a year between the ages of eight and nine and then lapsed. My mother's parents took her to church sometimes, I gather, at some Protestant denomination I cannot commit to memory no matter how many times I am told, but she quietly stopped going when she was old enough, and no one really minded. My parents believed in surrounding yourself with people, in friendship as a high priority, in helping your community. As kids, my sister and I never went to church or celebrated religious holidays for anything except gift-giving and eating and going to the movies on Christmas. We were like a lot of New Yorkers.

I grew up knowing lots of Jewish and Catholic kids, and throughout my life, I've had moments of Jewish and Catholic envy. I would feel a desire to celebrate Passover, especially, because it was both fun and filled with traditions, and I'd hope to be invited to Seders. I would feel envious of getting to go to Mass, because it seemed so communal – there's the taking of communion, for one, and the people all around you hearing the same words and saying things together. When I lived in Mexico in college and later in Nicaragua, being included in trips to Mass with families I was staying with, to these musty cool cathedrals on hot Sunday mornings, I would feel lifted up by some-

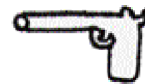
thing, well, religious. What the Catholic and Jewish people around me seemed to have was a certain cultural tradition, countless references they could make that others would understand, something concrete to accept or reject. They get to go through life with the sense that they are part of something larger, and it carries them around in their daily lives.

When I was about ten I started going to the movies. I was addicted to old black-and-white movies, starring Greta Garbo and Katharine Hepburn and Carole Lombard. I went to this revival house in the neighborhood where I grew up, almost every weekend, with my friend Elisabeth, or my dad, and saw a double feature. I papered my walls with 8 x 10's of old movies – from "Ninotchka" and "East of Eden." My ideas about men and women were informed by certain characters. I identified more with spunky actress-

es of the Forties, with their combination of awkwardness and grace, than with Princess Leia or Farrah Fawcett. I really did. They seemed more real to me.

But I never developed a religion. Not a regular one. Sure, I have things I believe in, moments I feel the larger forces at work. I was raised to believe that you should be good to other people, that you owe them something, that we are not operating as separate contained bubbles here. I still believe that. But there have to be places you can go alone, and just be you. That must be why now I still go to the movies feeling a little lost and looking for some moment in the dark, surrounded by other people, where I can feel like someone is telling me something I need to listen to, and I don't have to say anything back.

Blue



## We Never Got Along

A letter from Jonathan Goldstein, on an old flame.

Montreal, Quebec • July 7, 2000

Dear X,

I was watching *Frasier* and had just gone into the kitchen to get some crackers when the phone rang. The moment I heard Cassidy's voice, I knew there had always been this small part of me that had been doing nothing in the past four years but sit by the phone, waiting for something out there to bring her back to me. Through all kinds of relationships, there had been late drunken nights where I had punched her name into every search engine on the net trying to turn up any stupid little trace of her I could get.

The last time I had seen Cassidy was about a year after we had broken up. I was sitting in a Second Cup when she walked through the door in a big Joni Mitchell hat. Right behind her was a big

blond boy, also in a big hat. The friend I was having coffee with thought it was the most ridiculous thing she had ever seen, them walking in with their big floppy hats, but all I could think was that it could have been me. I could have been the schmuck in the matching hat trailing behind her.

Her new beau looked like her type, too. Whenever we ran into old boyfriends of hers on the street, inevitably they were big boys in army shorts and Kodiak boots, the laces undone, and their Ray Ban sunglasses pulled up onto their heads keeping their floppy bangs out of their eyes. They were the kind of guys who loped around swigging from monstrous jugs of milk, jugs bigger than my upper torso.

Cassidy and I looked nothing alike. She was this sparkly-eyed child star all grown up, and I was someone's uncle Shecky as a young man. Cassidy had long blond hair, and I had friends who called her Miss Piggy. When she shook their hands they said it was like a little pig had gotten right up on its hind legs and offered them a hoof. Cassidy was a very eccentric dresser, wearing sparkly little gloves and skirts made of neckties. She wore Superman T-shirts, big British combat boots, and colourful leotards like a little girl. There was something about her that made me feel like she was my sister, my baby-sitter, my daughter, and the bank teller I could never have all rolled up into one. But she was also so oddly beautiful to me, and I remember nights where it felt like I could have stared at her face forever.

One time we were sitting in a bar, drinking gin and tonics and not saying much, when a very drunk woman came over and said that we really looked interesting together.

"When people say stuff like that," I said afterwards, "they make the world a less cold place to be." And for the rest of the night I felt like we were Nico and Lou Reed.

We had met in an intro to Shakespeare class at McGill. After years of dead-end jobs, I had decided to go back to college and I was easily four years older than anyone in any of my classes. She sat beside me and we played hangman. She would choose quotes from Richard III, and I would use lines like "I feel like chicken tonight." Cassidy later told me that she and her friends had nicknamed me "Fonzie."

"In a good way," she said.

Cassidy started having me over to her house for study sessions where she'd make me fish sticks. I hadn't had stuff like that since I was a kid. Pretty soon we started dating.

From the get-go, we never got along. Once as we were leaving a party at her friends, as we were walking down their winding staircase, Cassidy, being the playful drunk kitten she was, ran off ahead of me, and that was how we walked all the way back to her house, with her at least a block and a half ahead of me, and she never looked back once. I tried to be cool. I even lingered over a box of books someone had thrown away. I rooted through it for a while and withdrew a copy of "Soul On Ice," but by the time I made it to her house I had wrung it to shreds. There was the time she so thoroughly insulted

my artistic vision that I came very close to running her over as she got out of my car to walk through the McGill campus gates; but instead I sat there, revving the engine and honking the horn as though to say: "Look at me! I'm impatient with rage!"

But there was tenderness, too, like how she would greet me at her door in the middle of the night in her Little House on the Prairie flannel nightgown and sleepily babble about the dream she had just woken out of involving Theodore Dreiser; how she told me, when we took showers together, that with my hair slicked back I looked like a 1950's teen idol; how she said I had the perfect penis, and I said that was the kind of compliment that sticks with a person; how she would repeat over and over about how she and her Chinese roommate, living under the same roof together, were every freshman boy's wet dream; how she said in her little-girl voice that from this time forward she was going to "keep her pie-hole shut"; how she told me that if she had to choose one person to spend the rest of her life with on a desert island, it would be me. There were picnics on Nun's Island that started off with Camembert cheese and foreign beer and ended in horrible fights about things I can no longer remember. There were so many fights, fights with yelling in the park, fights in pup tents, fights that scared her roommates.

To be honest, much of her anger towards me was justified. I had just gotten over a three-and-a-half-year relationship, and was never willing to commit in the way that I should have. Every so often, as we lay in bed she would smilingly ask me if I wanted to "go around" with her. That was what they used to call going steady in her old high school.

"What's the point of all that?" I said. "What's so bad about taking things as they come?"

She explained to me that if I was her boyfriend, or even just her friend, she would bake me a cake on my birthday, but as her fuck-buddy, baking me a cake would just somehow be a really cheesy thing to do.

And now here was her voice again. I could hear her eyes, off to the side and uncertain, her leotarded legs twisted around each other like licorice.

One of the first things she said was that she was thinking of becoming a mortician in order to best deal with her death anxiety. I told her that a lot of

morticians fuck corpses, and she said that I was still the same old asshole. We argued for a while and then she told me that the only reason she had even called me in the first place was to tell me that she was engaged.

If she was looking for some kind of reaction, she certainly got it. My stomach suddenly felt like a sandwich bag filled with sea-monkeys leaking water all over the place. I sat down on the kitchen floor and stared up at the dirty dishes in my sink as she talked about her new life.

"I'm brilliantly happy," she said.

She described her fiancé as some kind of saint, the kind of guy who spends whole afternoons talking to homeless people and really trying to solve their problems.

"Is he tall?" I asked.

"He's shorter than me," she said.

As we talked, she kept interrupting to get her cats a treat.

"I've become a real cat person," she said. "My cats are my life."

Of course I was tempted to say a great many things on the subject of her cat-personhood, but I wasn't going to take the bait.

"That's great," I said, and there had to have been a trace of something other in my voice – how could

there not have been? – but she wasn't biting either.

She told me that for Y2K, she and Richard, her fiancé, had gone up to his parents' place in the country with enough food and water to last them a few months, just in case something happened. I imagined her doing the shopping for them the way she did for our picnics, not skimping on anything, getting Dijon instead of regular brown mustard.

As stupid as it was, I sat there listening to her and wondering how she could have failed to fit me into her plan, how she could have been willing to leave me to die in the final reckoning.

Her cats were driving her crazy, being "very bad," so she had to go. I told her Richard was a very lucky man. I was tempted to add, "as long as you manage to keep your pie-hole shut," but I refrained.

There are some mornings when I wake up and feel like every woman I've ever loved is right on my chest, just sitting there, drinking coffee and talking to each other. It's like a part of you never entirely lets go. I wish I could say I'm going to get up now and toss away the nutty mix tapes Cassidy made me, but I never get around to buying much new music.

I'm going to leave a special request in my will, asking for Cassidy to be my mortician. *Look at him, all smug, she'll probably say.*

Jonathan



# Notes on Rapture

A letter from the editor, on Todd Strandberg's Rapture Index

Los Angeles, California • July 8, 2000

Dear Readers,

This week's conversation, which begins on page 11, is between me and Todd Strandberg.

I first read about Todd's Rapture Index in Wired magazine, back in the mid-1990s, and I've been checking it periodically ever since, as it's risen and fallen, as signs of the end of the world – at least as Todd sees them – have waxed and waned.

What's always fascinated me about the index is that it seems to me to embody a contradiction: it is an attempt to bring the tools and methods of scientific measurement and analysis to bear on a subject that is, by definition, beyond human comprehension: the mind of God.

Todd disagrees with me, of course: he believes that God is providing signs about the future to those who watch, and that if that's true, then the best way for us to spend our time here on earth is, precisely, to watch.

And watch he does. I went and visited Todd once, in the suburb of Omaha, Nebraska, where he lives, to write a story about him for Mother Jones magazine. He showed me the incredible array of web sites he has bookmarked on his computer, sites dedicated to weather phenomena and satanism and global economics.

I can't say I agree with Todd about much. I like South Park; he thinks it's a sign of the end of the world. But I liked hanging out with him, and I admire the care and devotion that he puts into the index. He is in many ways a pure scientist: he spends all of his free time gathering information that he thinks is drastically important, and he shares it with the world, with no remuneration for his labor. No material remuneration, anyway.

Below, the Rapture Index for this week. A brief explanation: Based on his research, each week Todd assigns a rating between one and five to each of the forty-five categories in the index. (This week, for instance, Liberalism, which Todd considers a sign of the imminence of the rapture, has fallen one point, from four to three, because of George W. Bush's strong showing in recent polls.) He then adds up all 45 numbers to calculate the Index; this week, it stands at 160, which is quite high, relatively. For a more complete explanation of all forty-five categories, see <http://www.novia.net/~todd/rap7.html>. To see the index itself, go to <http://www.novia.net/~todd/rap2.html>

Yours truly,

Paul Tough

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## This Week's Rapture Index

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# It Is Possible to Measure Everything

A conversation with Todd Strandberg, about the Rapture Index.

July 8, 2000

Todd Strandberg is a thirty-four-year-old supply sergeant with the United States Air Force. He lives in Bellevue, Nebraska. He is also the creator and administrator of the Rapture Index, a constantly fluctuating index of forty-five categories of human events and natural phenomena that together, Todd says, give an indication of how soon the rapture will occur. The rapture, according to some Christians (including Todd), is the traumatic event, predicted in Revelations, in which all believing Christians will be gathered up into heaven in an instant, leaving everyone else on earth to undergo the "tribulation," a seven-year period of chaos and war. Todd conducts his research mostly through online news sites; he maintains the index on a Gateway 2000 computer that sits on a desk in his living room littered with reference books, post-it notes, empty bags of microwaved popcorn, and a well-thumbed Bible. This interview was conducted by Open Letters editor Paul Tough, via email, in May, June, and July 2000.

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**Paul:** What's the point of the Rapture Index?

**Todd:** The Index was very much inspired by the Dow Jones Industrial Average. If the Dow is up 50 points, you know the general market is rising. If the Rapture Index is up 5 points, you can say the progression of Bible prophecy has increased.

**Paul:** Why did you start it?

**Todd:** The index was designed to standardize the observations people make about end-time events. As we get closer to the time period known as the tribulation, the Bible tells us, the quantity and number of natural disasters will increase. Man will equally go afoul, becoming more and more wicked as the years progress.

The need for an index came to me when I noticed there were a number of conflicting views on the intensity and frequency of one sign of the times – earthquakes. One group was saying quakes were increasing exponentially, while another group, pointing to the same data, was saying earthquakes were holding steady. If people can't even count something as simple as tectonic movements of the earth, what yardstick would they possibly use to measure something like apostasy?

**Paul:** So how did you decide to deal with that question? How can you take something like apostasy – or demonic activity, or false Christs, or some of the other, less tangible numbers in the index – and put a precise number on it?

**Todd:** Although some topics are hard to quantify in exact numbers, I believe it is possible to measure everything to some degree. To get a reading of apostasy you look for news reports of

doctrinal disputes in the Church. There are a number of web sites that specialize in keeping track of apostasy.

**Paul:** So what does the index stand at today?

**Todd:** The Rapture index stands at an active 160.

**Paul:** And what's the highest it's ever reached?

**Todd:** The all-time high was 176, set on May 24, 1999. The lowest reading was 57, set on December 12, 1993.

**Paul:** Can you give me an example of an index topic that you're tracking right now?

**Todd:** In the past week I've been particularly interested in drought. It has been very dry in several regions of the world. The Horn of Africa and the south central portion of Asia are in the grip of severe drought conditions. The United States has also been coming up short of its normal rainfall.

**Paul:** How does tracking drought connect to the coming of the rapture?

**Todd:** The Bible describes the seven-year tribulation as a time of unprecedented calamity – global drought, hundred-pound hailstones, and more earthquakes than a seismologist could dream about. Unless the bad stuff of Revelation is predetermined to start at the very beginning of the tribulation, it's a safe bet to expect a build-up ahead of the main activity. Jesus said the end-times would come like birth pangs, and everyone knows those grow more painful as you get closer to the birth. Because the rapture of the Church is set to occur before the start of tribulation, indica-

tions of any tribulation events must be taken as a warning sign of the rapture.

**Paul:** When you look at the way the index has been performing over the last couple of years, do you feel like it's pointing to the rapture arriving in a matter of weeks, months, or years? Or is it even possible to estimate?

**Todd:** The rapture is supposed to be a surprise event. The only way to judge the closeness of the rapture is to estimate the nearness of the events that will follow it. Matthew 24:42 indicates that any attempt at date-setting is pure folly: "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come."

**Paul:** So then I'm confused about the purpose of the index. You're trying to predict, at least roughly, how likely the rapture is to come soon, right? But if it's truly meant to be a surprise, isn't it likely that there won't be any signs at all, that it will come when we least expect it, at a moment of calm and peace and plenty?

**Todd:** Well, Paul, I knew you were going to ask me this. There's a scripture that says believers would not be in darkness about his coming. The fact that he tells us to look vigilantly for signs – that would indicate there is a benefit for those who remain watchful.

I would liken the coming of the rapture to the speculation that surrounded Boris Yeltsin's ability to hold on to political office. You just knew his days were numbered every time he ended up in the hospital, or when he lapsed into another one of his drinking binges. But during the three years of speculation, no one would have guessed Yeltsin would be calling it quits on January 1, 2000.

Don't get too focused on the word "surprise." Every day I wake up expecting the possibility of the rapture. If it happened tomorrow, I would in some fashion be surprised, but not totally. Of course, the level of surprise will probably vary from person to person.

**Paul:** So tell me about the last year in general – how does the index stand compared to a year ago?

**Todd:** The index has remained at very lofty levels for about four years now. After the Gulf War boom, in 1990, it dropped below the 100 point mark several times, but from 1996 to the present the index has never gone below the magic 100 level. If I had to venture a guess why the index

remains at such high levels, I would say we are getting very close to the fulfillment of these prophetic events. To put it simply, the predicted future is about to become the present.

**Paul:** Throughout history, prophecy has often been a fairly mystical field – people who put out prophetic messages, who dwell in the land of prophecy, tend to be a bit divorced from the material world. Do you feel that's true for you?

**Todd:** Because my allegiance is with a world that stands in opposition to the core value of this realm, I don't think I could feel anything but divorced.

**Paul:** But my sense is that you're a pretty rational person – that you like things that are precise and coherent and can be measured.

**Todd:** As a whole, I believe the men and women that employ themselves as prophetic watchdogs have amassed one of the most dismal records of any profession. I strive for that which is rational because I am looking for truth.

**Paul:** Do you ever feel prophetic messages on a more spiritual, intangible level – do you ever "just know" things?

**Todd:** Because there are so many false prophets out there claiming to receive supernatural knowledge, I've always viewed this area as being too dangerous to enter. The main reason I started my index was to counter the notion that every oddity of life – rare frogs dying out or whales beaching themselves – can be viewed as a sign of the approaching tribulation.

**Paul:** So that's what prophecy study was like before you came along? People would just say, here's something weird that happened, that must be a sign that the rapture is coming?

**Todd:** Yes. Success in the prophetic realm seems to rest on a speaker's ability to connect the most outlandish news items to prophecy. Premature death in the animal kingdom is a favorite of several end-time commentators.

**Paul:** The thing that interests me the most about you and your project is that you seem to me to stand between two worlds. You have all these tools and methods and tendencies that are hyper-rational, orderly, high-tech, material, mathematical – and you're employing all of those tools and abilities in the service of a field that has been, all the way back to the biblical prophets, completely

non-rational and mystical, that depends upon faith in things unseen and unmeasurable. Do you ever feel that tension?

**Todd:** You could say I "stand between two worlds," but I don't feel awkward or conflicted in my dealings with the prophetic realm. The only way to measure the supernatural is with physical standards.

I think most people get messed up when they try to gauge earthly matters with spiritual standards. I've seen many people try to link the occurrence of earthquakes with dates on which grievous immoral acts occurred. For example, if President Clinton vetoes a bill that would have restricted late-term abortions, and then the next day a 4.5 magnitude quake strikes in the Nevada desert, there is always going to be someone saying the two are linked. But in fact we have no way of knowing why any particular earthquake occurs. The Bible only says earthquakes will strike in greater numbers as we get closer to the tribulation.

**Paul:** You've chosen forty-five factors to track. Do you ever wonder if you've got the right ones? Do you ever wonder if there are other things that you should be tracking that would be more accurate predictors?

**Todd:** The forty-five categories have evolved over the years. I started with just twenty, but within weeks it grew to thirty, forty, and then forty-five. I've deleted several categories that turned out to be vague, or related to passing current events, and I replaced them with ones I believe to be more in tune with Bible prophecy.

**Paul:** Are there any categories that you've cut over the years?

**Todd:** Yes, I've cut out several categories. Greenhouse, New Age, Hurricanes, and Tornadoes were once listed in the index.

**Paul:** How did you make those decisions?

**Todd:** Some of the changes were made for cosmetic reasons. I didn't think "Second Roman Empire" sounded good, so I renamed it "Beast Government," and for the same reason, "World Church" became "Ecumenism." I rarely ever actually delete a category. The majority of the modifications were done to combine overly specific categories into ones that have a broader range. I moved "AIDS" into "Plagues," and "New Age" was redubbed "Occult."

**Paul:** How much of your time is devoted to the index these days? Does it ever interfere with other things in your life?

**Todd:** I normally devote several hours each day to prophecy-related matters. I spend most of my time answering email. It's a continuous flood that never ebbs. I get letters that range from the distressed to the deranged. The number two demand on my time would be reading through all the news web sites – both secular and Christian.

I don't have much of a life apart from my web site, so there's very little interference. I realize that may sound pathetic to some folks, but when you consider that the average male's life consists largely of beer and sports, I would say I have a better grasp of the fullness of life than most.

