

How Gareth London Argued with God, and had to Leave the Room as a Result

During the long and turbulent school-days of my youth, I had just two friends to shield me from the chaos and violence. One was Richard Borogove, of whom I've written already. The other was Gareth London: this is a story about him.

In many ways, Gareth was the complete opposite of Richard. Gareth was straightforward, whereas Richard was (over) complicated; Gareth was friendly and outgoing, whilst Richard was reserved and retiring. They were both clever, but Gareth's intelligence was wholly practical, while Richard's brains were focussed on the theoretical, to the exclusion of all else. More importantly, when playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, Gareth was always a Fighter, whereas Richard was a Wizard (I played a Thief, thanks for asking). Gareth's home computer was a *Commodore 64*; Richard favoured the *Sinclair Spectrum* (48k, natch). But despite their differences, they held each other in high regard, and the three of us were steadfast friends. It was the kind of uncluttered friendship you can only really have while you're young; before jobs, and politics, and family, and life intrudes. Richard once described us as "three sides of the same coin".

One of the few classes that the three of us had together was R.E. - Religious Education*. Mostly these classes involved tedious retellings of Bible stories, which, in my experience, come in three flavours: 1) Someone missteps, and God beats the shit out of them and their civilization, 2) God does something random and arbitrary: everyone else spends the rest of the story making up justifications for Him, and 3) Jesus does magic. Occasionally, however, we would discuss what these stories meant; this was the closest the school came to teaching philosophy. At that age (we were about twelve – but twelve was much, much, younger in those days) we were all hungry to learn what life was all about, what the point was, what it all meant. And it definitely seemed possible that adults knew these answers, but were just keeping them secret, in the same misguided way that they'd tried to keep the existence of sex a secret from us (this is going back a good few

* Even at the time, Richard Borogove observed that this title was "somewhat oxymoronic, given the natural enmity between religiosity and education." I wanted to know what 'oxymoronic' and 'enmity' meant.

years now – it’s hardly a secret nowadays). Now, it didn’t seem likely that our R.E. teacher would accidentally let the meaning of life slip, but you never knew. Gareth even went so far as to sit in the front row, just in case any wisdom didn’t make it as far as the second.

Our R.E. teacher rejoiced in the name of Kingsley Mount. He was, in Gareth’s words, a colossal twat. He was a follower of that particular brand of Christianity that holds bombast a greater virtue than kindness; and places evangelism before charity. He was loud and brutishly jolly, quick to share his unhealthy obsession with a rugger-bugger version of Jesus. (Worryingly, he was not actually the most insane of the school’s R.E. teachers – that honour must go to the one who believed that the angels held his toes in trust).

On the day of our story, Mr Mount decided that he was going to prove the existence of God, using pencils.

Firstly he wrote the word “TRUTH” on the blackboard, using only straight lines to form the letters. Then he held up a box of school-issue yellow writing pencils.

“If I were to drop these pencils on the floor,” he said, “Do you think they’d form the word ‘TRUTH’?”

“No.” choruses those pupils who could bring themselves to reply.

“Aha!” cried Mr Mount, “Quite right.”

Other than being valuable advice on the futility of using dropped pencils to convey short messages, most of us were not entirely clear what life lesson we were supposed to be taking away from this. But Richard must have seen where it was going, because I remember him sighing at this point. Fortunately for the rest of us, Mr Mount was about to expand on his theme.

“Even if I dropped these pencils over and over again, do you think I’d ever form the word ‘TRUTH’, or any word, at random?” he asked.

“No.” chorused those pupils whose will to live was not yet exhausted.

“And yet,” he said, “Think about how simple a single word is compared to how complex the world is. Think about butterflies and seashells and kittens and people. They’re a lot more complicated than a simple little word aren’t they?”

“Yes.” said the survivors.

“So do you think that something like a person could be formed at random? By pure chance? Think about how your bones and muscles and heart and lungs are perfect for the job they do. Do you think that could have happened by accident?”

“No.” said the zombies.

“Of course not” he roared, “That’s why Christians like me believe in God. There’s no other explanation for the complexity of life. It can’t have happened by chance. That would be like me dropping these pencils and them forming not just a single word, but a whole sentence, a whole book!”

There was a pause, and then Gareth raised his hand.

“So,” said Gareth, “What you’re saying is that if you drop the pencils, and they *don’t* form a word, then –bingo– God exists?”

A small wave of laughter rippled across the classroom. Kingsley Mount looked at Gareth, trying to decide if he was being insolent, or posing a genuine question. To this day I don’t know.

“Yes.” agreed Mr Mount, finally, “Basically.”

He allowed a few seconds for the class to absorb the implications of this, and then he began to put the pencils away. A murmur ran through the class. He looked up.

“Well?” asked Gareth.

“Well what, boy?” asked Kingsley, clearly irritated.

“Aren’t you going to drop the pencils?” asked Gareth.

The class looked on expectantly. Unfortunately, only one of us was really familiar with the concept of a ‘thought-experiment’, and that someone – Richard – was busy mentally rolling his eyes*.

“I’m not going to drop the pencils.” Mr Mount said, “I’d break all the leads.”

“He’s worried about what they’d spell out,” muttered Gareth.

“We all know,” said Mr Mount, crossly, “That they wouldn’t spell out anything.”

He shoved the pencils back into the box, and it was at this point that – just maybe – God intervened. The bottom of the box was pushed open by one of the inserted pencils, and the entire bunch dropped through and accelerated floor-wards in accordance with the laws of gravity. Before they’d even finished bouncing, Kingsley Mount swooped to pick them up. The entire class leaned forward over their desks, chairs scraping on floor, but Gareth was the quickest. Mr Mount dumped a handful of retrieved pencils on his desk, but Gareth had already sat back in a satisfied way.

“What did it say?” whispered someone.

Gareth waited a moment, and said quietly, but with an air of finality:

“Bollocks.”

The class exploded with laughter. Mr Mount exploded with rage, ordering Gareth out of the classroom.

Later, I asked Richard Borogove if he thought the pencils that really spelled that.

“It doesn’t matter” was his verdict, “Maybe they did. Certainly stranger things have happened. Or maybe they fell randomly, but Gareth read their meaning correctly anyway. That’s what humanity is all about: randomness goes in, meaningfulness comes out.”

And that’s pretty much the end of the story. Minor victories, crushing defeats: of such things were my school days comprised. But the three of us survived school, and eventually emerged into the real world, not exactly unscathed, but more-or-less intact. Three sides of the same coin.

* Richard would never forgive me if I failed to point out the flaw in Mr Mount’s analogy: namely that the alternative to ‘God did it’ is not one massively improbable event, but rather an iterative series of mildly improbable events accumulated over vast stretches of time.

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I am no writer. I mean, I write, obviously. Hopefully, I make myself clear. But I cannot convey the reality of those three words. Gareth was dead. Words are just tokens, coins to exchange meaning. Sometimes we can forget that they are not actually the things they represent. And sometimes we cannot forget. Gareth was dead. I can tell you this, tell you again and again. But you will not understand it. You will not feel it. They're just words.

Maybe if you'd grown up with him. If you'd played innumerable computer games with him, praying that the tape would load, that the fickle machine would not reset, so that you'd get your five minutes on *Jet Set Willy* or *Ant Attack*. If you'd watched videos with him, until the early hours of the morning; *Bladerunner*, *Top Secret*, *The Blues Brothers*, all on a Betamax player the size of a suitcase. Perhaps if you'd eaten chips with him on the way back from the off-license. Or you'd walked through the woods with him, telling scary stories and pretending not to be scared. Or watched *Airwolf* with him, and thought it cool, not ironic cool, but cool cool. Maybe if you'd talked about money and sex and death with him, not really believing that any of these things would ever touch your life. Maybe then I could tell you that Gareth was dead, and have it **fucking mean something**. But you didn't, and I can't.

Maybe you've lost someone yourself. No, not 'lost'. I mean; maybe someone you love has died. Is dead. Maybe then you can guess at how Richard and I felt, if you've felt something similar. But in that case I don't want to remind you. And probably I don't need to remind you. The first time death enters your life, like a whirlwind, like a nightmare, you don't forget that. When death kicks in the door to your comfortable house, and storms in, and grabs your best friend and smashes his head against the wall, again and again and again, you don't forget that. And then, before you can do anything, before you can fight back, death goes, and you're left standing in a bloody mess, and your safe and comfortable life looks suddenly alien and terrifying.

And the worst of it is, the world continues. Without your friend in it, the world continues. As if he were nothing, the world continues. It continues, but anything you never said to him will now never be said. He'll never watch another film with you, or play another game. He'll not share your triumphs, or commiserate over your defeats. You won't ever hear him laugh again.

Gareth was dead. Suddenly, randomly, meaninglessly, dead.

I was destroyed. Richard was, well, Richard kept it together, but I could tell he was affected. He hates to show emotion, but his mask slipped a couple of times, by choice, I think, out of solidarity with the rest of us.

I don't really remember the funeral. I mean, I remember the details; the black umbrellas, the grey sky, the coffin than was slightly wider than the grave (and yes, we laughed then, without shame, for Gareth would have laughed louder than any of us). I don't remember what I felt; it was all too unreal. There was no gravestone yet, just a simple marker – I hadn't thought about it before, but headstones take time to make, whereas death arrives suddenly. I didn't say goodbye. I didn't say goodbye because I didn't believe he was gone.

So six months later we revisit Gareth's grave. By now, I've worked out that that he's not coming back, that somehow we're supposed to muddle on without him. Say goodbye and move on.

I buy overpriced daffodils from the stall outside the cemetery - it seemed the thing to do. Richard does not. Instead, when we get to the headstone, Richard takes a handful of yellow pencils from his coat pocket, and places them carefully into one of the flower-holders.

He blinks, and clears his throat.

"When you meet God," Richard says, addressing Gareth's headstone, "just make sure you tell him 'bollocks' from us."