

## Through a Glass, Darkly

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When I told Avis Hill I liked his native-stone fireplace and chimney, he said that his wife and he had built it, as they had other parts of the house, which was one of those modest but comfortable and attractive homes speckled along a stretch of Route 214 that makes up the hamlet of Alum Creek. He had lost, he explained, about \$75,000 during the controversy, presumably for legal costs and other support of the cause. This included his plumbing business, and now he has become a full-time minister of the Freedom Gospel Mission in Alum Creek.

The Rev. Hill is younger than Ezra Graley by a good ten years—a small wiry man that I imagine was a scrappy, high-energy hell-raiser as a kid. He vaunts his independence and his lineage from early North Carolinian mountaineers, the sort that takes a stand so tough that invaders bog down and give up. I found him likable. When not merely echoing old points he and others have scored many times, he can be open and honest. Topics he had not thought a lot about before brought out this side. Like this one.

HILL: In the Kanawha County textbook controversy there was a book in the elementary class that, in that book, taught role-playing, and they had a street riot. It was right in the book, and the teacher was to show the kids, and they were going to act out a street riot, OK? Today you sit down to watch television—I've walked in some houses, and there's some programs on TV today, one in particular, it's called "The Hawk." And I go into someone's house and I'm sittin' there and here comes a little fellow, three years old, and he's showing his muscles. And here that little rascal jumped right straight at me, and the parents thought that was funny: "He's a hawk." It works on TV. When Evel Knievel tried to jump the Grand Canyon, the next day the hospitals were full of little kids who tried to jump fences and ravines and things, see? So the role-playing and the little kids—they—they go ahead and show the rioting. They—they—teach to role-play. Well, it'll come back home to you. It'll catch up with you. That's the reason there have to be guards in the schools today.

MOFFETT: Do you think people tend to do the things they read about?

HILL: Monkey see, monkey do. And yes, it works that way. It sure does.

MOFFETT: Of course for the original riots there wasn't any model, at the beginning.

HILL: Well, at that point there was just that oppression and people got fed up. And there was no other place for them to vent their frustrations except in the streets, because they weren't understood, they weren't listened to, they weren't done on, they were talked about, they were third- and fourth-class citizens.

MOFFETT: Do you think people who don't feel that need but who do role-play, say, in school or read about it, are going to have some of the same strong reasons —

HILL: I think psychologically, I think subconsciously, I think —

MOFFETT: Even if they don't have these real circumstances in their life?

HILL: I think that for every action that takes place in a person's life if they would open their mind or allow themselves to be in a position to where that can affect them subconsciously I believe it will plant the seed there, and I believe that somewhere it'll start to break them down. That may be farfetched —

MOFFETT: There's some problem about telling the difference between the real thing and the made-up thing?

HILL: I think most people in life fantasize a lot.

MOFFETT: You think most people do confuse the real-life thing with things in books?

HILL: In fact, we have a group of people that don't know reality. I think we have a problem today with people being able to realize what reality really is. And the TV and actors, it's all so much reality, as we watch it on the screen, and it's one thing to read it with the mind but it's another thing that brings it into a whole new sense in role-playing — when you act it out.

MOFFETT: You're saying it's more powerful than reading is?

HILL: Oh most definitely. I preach the word of God teaches that. He says, "Be ye not just *hearers* of the word, but be you also *doers* of the word." Faith without works is dead. If you read something that's just like going to school. You go to school and you got your degrees, you're out. What good is education, what good is knowledge if you store it in your head and you never put it to use? When it becomes productive it's not while it's stored up here, but it's when you go to putting it together, and actually bringing it about. And that brings it into a whole different realm; role-playing brings it into a whole different realm than just reading it.

MOFFETT: In role-playing you pretend to be somebody else. Do you

think that's a bad idea to do that? That they'll forget who they are. You know what I mean, if you—

HILL: I mean, let's look at it from this perspective: how many movie stars do you see that lost their identity from role playing? [Laughs.] You know, they wind up OD'ing on drugs or wind up dead in some motel room because they've lost their identity. Sure, role-playing, it tends to have an impact on peoples' mind. And there came a time in the textbook controversy, to be quite honest with you, I realized I know that as far as the educational structure and as far as mainstream society is concerned, I was looked on as a nobody; I was spoken of as a backwoods fundamentalist Bible-toting, foot-stomping, Bible-thumping preacher. You know. *National Geographic* looked at me as self-ordained, but that didn't bother me, but there came a time when back a few years ago when I was recognized and the press was beating a path to my door, and the Japanese press and BBC and NBC and ABC and CBS, and they knew me by my first name, and they were there and I was on the boob tube at six o'clock every night, and people were calling and the Donahues and this and that, and there came a time in my life—that, you know, just human nature, the old ego starts building, the head will start swelling. That happens with man. Same way in any other thing; all you have to do is pat people on the back and tell them how good they are and lift them up and bolst them up, and, man, you can make them think they're the Queen of England, or they're the King of France.

MOFFETT: So you feel you went through some kind of development from all this yourself?

HILL: Sure I did. Sure I did. I—I—I where I started [Laughs.], when I started I—I—I was on an ego trip for a while. There's no one that gets thrust out like that that can keep from getting an ego trip to a point.

MOFFETT: There's an awful lot of attention.

HILL: Yes, but I'm glad I woke up, you know, I didn't go off the deep end.

MOFFETT: Well, maybe you just learned something from that.

HILL: Oh, I'm sure I learned, yeah, I don't look at life in any other way except every day is a new learning experience. If I don't learn from each day there's something wrong. I'm not going to stand still. Either you go forward or backward—

MOFFETT: That's mainly why we're here.

HILL: Right, so each day is learning and I learned a lot. If I had it to do over again, the basic philosophy that I—is still the same today. I've learned some new techniques; I would do some things differently, but I'm not saying that my ultimate goal wouldn't still be the same.

MOFFETT: Well, I'm not going to try to center on role-playing because we're not here to do that, but I know what their rationale is. Some of

them say the way to learn what other people feel is by getting in other people's shoes.

HILL: It is a way to learn. Yes it is.

MOFFETT: Do you feel it's misused? Is that it?

HILL: Yes, abused and misused.

MOFFETT: You mean it wouldn't *necessarily* be a bad way to learn?

HILL: I've used it. I use it in church.

MOFFETT: How do you use it there?

HILL: I use it from the Word, a positive part of the Word. As I said, the Scripture says, "Be ye not just hearers but be ye doers of the word." Now —

MOFFETT: Do you mean in the sense that in your preaching you act out the things you might say — ?

HILL: Well, I believe in divine healing. A lot of churches, a lot of religions don't believe that. I believe that in God's word, in His word he said, "They shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover." Well now, I don't believe that I can just talk and it happens. I believe when God's word comes alive is when you put it into effect, and you go to using it. I don't think I have that healing power — don't get me wrong — but what I'm saying is that God's word don't lie, and if it's truth, and I feel it is, then if I carry out the truth then he'll comply. He cannot lie, he has to — carry out what he says he'll do. If he doesn't he's a liar and then what's the point of me serving him? You see what I'm saying? So yes, I encourage when someone is sick I encourage using the Scripture. It says, "Anoint with oil and pray." I anoint with oil and I pray. I *carry out* the word of God. That's role-playing, but it's from a positive standpoint of not hurting, not tearing down but building —

MOFFETT: There's a connection I haven't quite gotten yet — it may be my problem — between your role-playing idea and the word of God. You were saying — ?

HILL: OK. I don't — I don't — I'm not teaching role-playing as something — some fantasy or some playing the part of Jesus, you see. Maybe the role-playing is, you put yourself in the shoes of this particular situation that we've presented here, but it's role-playing to the extent that it is factual, that it'll work, and it does work, and what I'm saying —

MOFFETT: Do you put yourself into another role?

HILL: I put myself into — I'm a Christian, number one, and that's all that's necessary. He said, "These signs shall follow them that believe." I'm a believer. So I'm automatically in that role. The only thing that does not *make* it work is the fact that I don't *do* it. When I *do* it, then God's *obligated* to honor his word, because he said, "I cannot lie." That's what the Scripture says, he cannot lie, so if he *said* to do it, we *do* it. And by *doing* it, puts the faith in God we have to work.

MOFFETT: I guess you mean by role-playing, in this case, you mean putting on — putting yourself into a higher role than one ordinarily plays, one that God has sort of set for us?

HILL: [Sigh.] In essence, the —

MOFFETT: A more elevated role than we usually play.

HILL: Yes indeed, yes, because the Christian is weak, because it is there and it has *been* there since Christ's days, but the church has just failed to use it. They have looked over the top of it. They're overlooking. There's so much more there, *in* the word of God *for* the church, but they're failing to put their faith to work and they're failing to *use* what he has given us.

MOFFETT: This makes me think of that whole issue about, you know, interpreting the Scriptures. Do you feel that your approach is the literal interpretation, or do you find yourself varying, sometimes more literal and sometimes more symbolical?

HILL: No, there are symbolical, symbolic passages in the Bible — words, candles, trees, and things — they take on a symbol —

MOFFETT: Revelation — it's pretty hard to take that literally.

HILL: Yes, right, so there are symbols to be used. So when we say "literally" I don't mean literally word per se but I do mean the interpretation of that word without taking away out of the Greek, or the Hebrew, of that interpretation.

MOFFETT: But apparently some ministers feel that some books of the Bible have to be interpreted literally and some not. For example, Genesis, there's a feeling there that that should be interpreted literally but not others. How's a person to know which parts of the Bible to take literally and which not?

HILL: Those things which are literal are just as plain as the nose on your face. They're spoken absolutely, you don't have to read, you don't have to search it out, it's there, it's plain and —

MOFFETT: Well, Christ spoke in parables often —

HILL: Yes, he did, to get his point across.

MOFFETT: When he was speaking to the people.

HILL: Yes, they couldn't understand.

MOFFETT: Right. But those you don't take literally, right? Because He Himself, Christ Himself explains many of those to the disciples. When He speaks of tares, he doesn't mean tares.

HILL: Oh, I see. Yeah, well no, in that, when he speaks of when the good seed was planted and the tares came up, that choked it out. No, I speak to that as Christ meant to them, "To Christians you are the sheep, you are His sheep, you are His followers, and those tares are the world, those who are unsaved that will grow up amongst you." So he said, "Abstain from the presence of evil." So, you don't — because the bird

lands in your hair, don't mean you let him grow a nest there, so to speak. That's a parable itself. So not literally — but I *speak* it as literally: yes, this is what Christ told the disciples. This is what he's telling you today.

MOFFETT: Do you try to give any sort of guidelines to your own flock about where to interpret more literally and where not to? This is a big issue, it seems to me, because there's an awful lot of disagreement among Christians about passages in the Bible, and a lot of it has to do with how symbolic it is. And when it is symbolical then people interpret the symbols differently.

HILL: Yes, I know that. I realize that.

MOFFETT: And it seems to me that this creates a lot of differences among very well meaning Christians.

HILL: Well, now you see, I know the interpretation I have will differ with a lot of people, but the interpretation of God's word — I've read different Scriptures and will get different interpretations, and different sermons from the same Scripture.

MOFFETT: And all believe it's the inspired word of God, sincerely.

HILL: Yes, yes, but, as we read in the Bible, it says, "The half has never been told," and we only scratch the surface, and that's what makes the word of God so intriguing, so interesting. That's what makes it still the world's best seller, because there's so much in there that's never been brought out, and it's deep and there's secrets in there.

MOFFETT: People are at different levels of understanding and that is something that you have to realize.

HILL: Yes, sure do.

MOFFETT: You know, like when I was a child I spoke as a child —

HILL: And when I became a man I put away —

MOFFETT: And that whole passage in Corinthians is obviously implying that when you grow up you see differently.

HILL: But you go toward God, you don't go away from him.

MOFFETT: Right, everybody is going toward God, but they're at very different stages.

HILL: Surely, oh yes, right, we call that sanctification in the church we go to.

MOFFETT: Varying degrees of sanctification, right?

HILL: Yes.

MOFFETT: Well, seems to me what this means is people are bound not to understand each other, unless they realize just that, that they're all at different stages of understanding, and they're all going to God but they're talking about it differently. It's too bad to see them conflict about it.

HILL: It is, it is for a fact, it is for a fact, but on the other hand, just to give you an example, the Episcopalian priest who was in the forefront as far as the clergy is concerned was Jim Lewis, who was front and center

protextbook. Jim's Episcopal faith, and many Episcopalians didn't agree with Jim Lewis because I've got their names and addresses, and many of his friends left his church over it. I don't believe the Christians today — the Bible is absolute in Romans about the gays and homosexuals and about "thou shall not kill" and being proabortion, and Jim stood for those things, and Jesus even spoke, he said, "Ye shall know them by their fruits." I don't believe that a Christian can take a life, like a — they can call it a fetus if they want to . . . and try to clear their conscience with it. In all good conscience I could not take two gay women and bring them into my church and bless their marriage. I could not allow the Communist party to have meetings in my church. You see what I'm saying? So there's a deep split between me and Jim Lewis. And Jim once asked me, I was standing in a parade in South Charleston on Armistice Day, last year. The Communists were coming down to disrupt that Armistice Day parade. Our congressman was there. Jim was there holding up his peace signals and signs, and I was there carrying the American flag. And "There's no peaceful co-existence with Communism." You can't co-exist with Communism. They push and push and push. Jim came over to me and said, "Avis, why can't you and I have a dialogue?" I said, "We don't believe the same way. Your standards are different from mine, and as long as your standards are different from mine it's an impossibility for us to have a dialogue." We cannot compromise. I cannot compromise my beliefs. I'll not let down in what I believe, fundamentally. Fundamentally as an American I cannot coexist with Communism. . . . Cause what they're wanting is my freedom, they're not there to bargain.

MOFFETT: Was that the big difference of opinion between you and Lewis?

HILL: A good bit of difference, yes. Well, not particularly Communism, cause I didn't call Jim Lewis Communist, and I'm not calling him a Communist today, you understand? Jim Lewis served in the Marine Corp. I'm not calling Jim Lewis a Communist, and I don't want nobody to ever think that I called him that. However, I'm somewhat upset about how Jim Lewis can do those things. I just can't for the life of me understand him.

MOFFETT: How do you account for a guy like him? Been in the Marines —

HILL: [Sigh.] Somebody somewhere has turned him sour.

MOFFETT: Does he seem sour about this country? I don't know him, you see.

HILL: Well, you see, that's what I can't understand. He *talks* that he's not, but he *shows* that he is.

MOFFETT: Shows it by — ?

HILL: By allowing these forces, who are anti-American, to come into his presence.

MOFFETT: Anti-American? Are they Communists?

HILL: Yes, they're Communists, and I think it's anti-Christian to want to kill a baby. . . . He may not think so, but I think it is, because I believe when God said in the Ten Commandments "Thou shall not kill," he meant it. . . . I believe that God would allow me to kill if the Communists were overpowering America and he meant to protect my family. . . . But I don't believe that God meant for us to kill babies, for us to kill children. . . . I believe government is creating, is sanctioning murder today, in abortion. And I believe that because of that, I believe America is going to pay for that. I believe doctors and nurses and hospitals and institutions are going to pay for that.

MOFFETT: What do you think about the soldiers who killed all those civilians in Vietnam?

HILL: Well, yes we did.

MOFFETT: You know, once we got over there and got the war going and all.

HILL: Sure. Right.

MOFFETT: A lot of guys feel guilty about that—

HILL: Sure they feel guilty.

MOFFETT: And many have cracked up.

HILL: And it would surely upset me, it would surely upset me to kill, but you've got to realize something. We weren't the aggressors.

MOFFETT: Were you in Vietnam?

HILL: No, I wasn't, but I have a lot of friends that were. We weren't the aggressors. We were defending the people, who wanted to be free, and Vietnam was invaded, by the—atheistic society of Communist China, North Vietnam, and we were defending freedom. . . .

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MOFFETT: How did you become a leader?

HILL: Just happened. A week before school started I had been in a twelve-week tent revival in St. Albans, and we'd seen hundreds of souls come to the Lord and make decisions. I had people out of the church kept coming to me all summer long. The books were on display all summer, being showed different places, and the Sunday before school started—Labor Day on Monday, school was to start on Tuesday—at the St. Albans roadside park, some of the people had been coming to tent meetings said, "Rev. Hill, please come over to the roadside park Sunday." Said "Whether you look at the books or not, we'd like for you to give the invocation, and the benediction." They'd been after me so long finally I gave in. . . . I didn't have time all summer. And even though the group had been meeting, and they'd had the big meeting up at the warehouse and had been on



the radio, and Jim Lewis had been on the radio, I'd stayed completely away from it, didn't want to get involved. Went up there that Sunday just to offer the invocation and benediction. . . . and when I got there they had the books there on display, and they started bringing me books and showing me passages, and I began to leaf through them.

And that spring before school was out my daughter was going to Ann Bailey Elementary School, and the teacher gave my daughter — she was a fifth grader — a book on evolution, how we evolved through the monkey thing, and told my daughter to read that book and bring it back and give a report on it to the school. My daughter brought it home and I was — at that time I wasn't even going to church — but I had that strong Christian background, upbringing. She turned to me — and my daughter had gone away to church camp that summer before, and she'd made a decision to serve the Lord, and she'd always been taught in creation and she'd always been taught that evolution was just a theory of Darwin — she came to me and she said, "Daddy," she said, "My teacher told me that I had to give a report on this book," and said, "I don't believe in it and I don't want to give it. But she told me that if I didn't give the report on this book she'd fail me." I said, "Honey, you tell that teacher" — and at that time, it was before I was in church and I used some well chosen adjectives to go along with it — I said, "You tell that teacher that you don't have to give that report, that your daddy said you didn't have to give that report on that book." She went back to school the next day and she went to stand up in class. The teacher said, "Paula, will you stand up and give your report now?" She said, "Mrs. So-and-So" — whose name I'll not use — "I'll not give that report, and I'll not read that book in class." She said, "I have a book I *will* read," and she opened her Bible — and I did not coach her because it didn't bother me that much at that time — she opened her Bible, and she began in Genesis 1, "In the beginning God —" and the teacher failed her.

And then I went up there on that Sunday afternoon, and I saw that garbage, that trash, that four-letter words, and if I had've spoken when I was going to school, if I'd have got caught writing on the bathroom *wall* when I went to school, the principal would have tanned my hide and probably expelled me, and now there they were in plain view that did not need to be in the school books, in the textbooks, and there they were being brought out in the education concept saying, "OK, here it is, society approves it and it's alright, now let's do it." And that upset me. My daughter was failed because *she* believed in creation and was being *forced* to read about evolution and give a report on it. She received an F, and now I read it in the textbooks.

And today I . . . drive by the schools and I see quart wine bottles and I see beer bottles and I see students drinking and I see them smoking their dope, and that wouldn't have existed in 1961, not in West Virginia, not in

this county that I graduated from. When I went to school in 1961 our school was twenty years old and it looked like it was a new one on the inside. You didn't see students leaning against the walls with their feet on the wall, dirtying and defacing the school with initials and names all over it.

MOFFETT: Do you feel it's all the fault of the school?

HILL: I feel it's all the fault because the discipline's broken down, and the kids were just as mean then as they are now. [He goes into a long speech here blaming schools for crime and other ills.]

As I was leaving, he gave me a copy of a record album that he and his family and friends had made, titled *Textbook War—Hills of West Virginia*. In large red letters, the word "war" leaps out of the front cover, which bears also a photo of the Rev. Hill, surrounded by his family, squatting on the steps of the Kanawha County Jail wearing a coonskin cap and holding a long mountaineer's rifle. His wife, two sons, and two daughters are wearing costumes of red, white, and blue. On the back of the cover is a collage of news photos of events of the controversy. The Rev. Hill sings (very well) and a spirited, highly accomplished bluegrass band of fiddle, piano, and banjo play several songs written about the "textbook war." However appalling some of the ideas expressed in the words may strike some of us, it is nigh impossible not to fall in with the rollicking music and exuberant performance. For one reason or another I recommend the album most highly. With the Rev. Hill's permission I include here the lyrics of three of the relevant songs because they may express best of all what the protesters felt they stood for as well as what they fear. Another of the songs appeared at the end of chapter 3.

Kanawha County Surprise  
Robert Hoyer

*Chorus:* Kanawha County, gave them a surprise!  
They never figured we'd ever uprise.  
We were still willing to compromise.  
But our little children will never read those lies.

When the police arrested Graley, Horan, and Hill,  
They figured prison would soon break their will,  
But he will perish who takes up the sword.  
You got the law, cops, but we got the Lord.

*Chorus*

Well, the liberals will come, and they'll stripmine the land.  
They'll steal and they'll rob and they'll take what they can.

Liberals will send their children off to Yale.  
Miners can go on and go off to jail.

*Chorus*

Our Lost Heaven  
Joy Harmon

(Sung to the tune of John Denver's "Country Road")

Our lost Heaven, West Virginia, dirty textbooks, broken-hearted  
mothers.

Life is rough here, rougher than the sea.

Our rights have all been taken, protesting peacefully.

*Chorus:* Country road, take me away from home, take me today.  
West Virginia, our lost heaven.  
Country road, take me away.

All my memories gather 'round her,  
The way she used to be,  
The way I want to remember.  
Discontentment hangs across the sky,  
Like the morning sunshine,  
Makes me want to cry.

*Chorus*

I hear a voice in the morning as she calls me.  
Radio reminds me of my home. I'm astray.  
Ridin' down the road I get a feelin'  
That I should 'a left home  
Yesterday, yesterday.

*Chorus*

Give God the Glory  
Avis Hill

While travelling down life's highway seeking Satan's evil ways,  
I wandered in and out of all worldly things today.  
I hurt the ones that loved me and caused them all that pain.  
But Satan had his holt on me, and I could not refrain.  
I thought in desperation. I was no good within.  
I felt my friends would be better off  
If I would put an end to my wicked ways, deceitful plots and all my  
personal gain.  
I'd take my life and end it all so they could live again.  
My Christian friends approached me and they told me how to live.

They said I turned my back on God and I had no peace within.  
And through these wonderful people, well, I changed my life of sin.  
I want to give God the glory for taking me back in.  
And I want to tell the world about Jesus and how he saved my soul.  
And I want to tell the world about Jesus and how he made me whole.  
Yes, I want to give God the glory for saving my soul.  
I want to give God the glory for making me whole.  
Well, he picked me up, cleansed my heart, and gave me the victory.  
Now I want to give God the glory for saving a wretch like me.