God's Lonely Programmer

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Terry Davis, a schizophrenic programmer, has spent 10 years building an operating system to talk to God.

Terry Davis. Image: TempleOS

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In the beginning there is darkness. The screen erupts in blue, then a cascade of thick, white hexadecimal numbers and cracked language, "UnusedStk" and "AllocMem." Black screen cedes to blue to white and a pair of scales appear, crossed by a sword, both images drawn in the jagged, bitmapped graphics of Windows 1.0-era clip-art— light grey and yellow on a background of light cyan. Blue text proclaims, "God on tap!"

This is TempleOS V2.17, the welcome screen explains, a "Public Domain Operating System" produced by Trivial Solutions of Las Vegas, Nevada. It greets the user with a riot of 16-color, scrolling, blinking text; depending on your frame of reference, it might

new concept of "personal computing" necessarily meant programming and tinkering and breaking things.
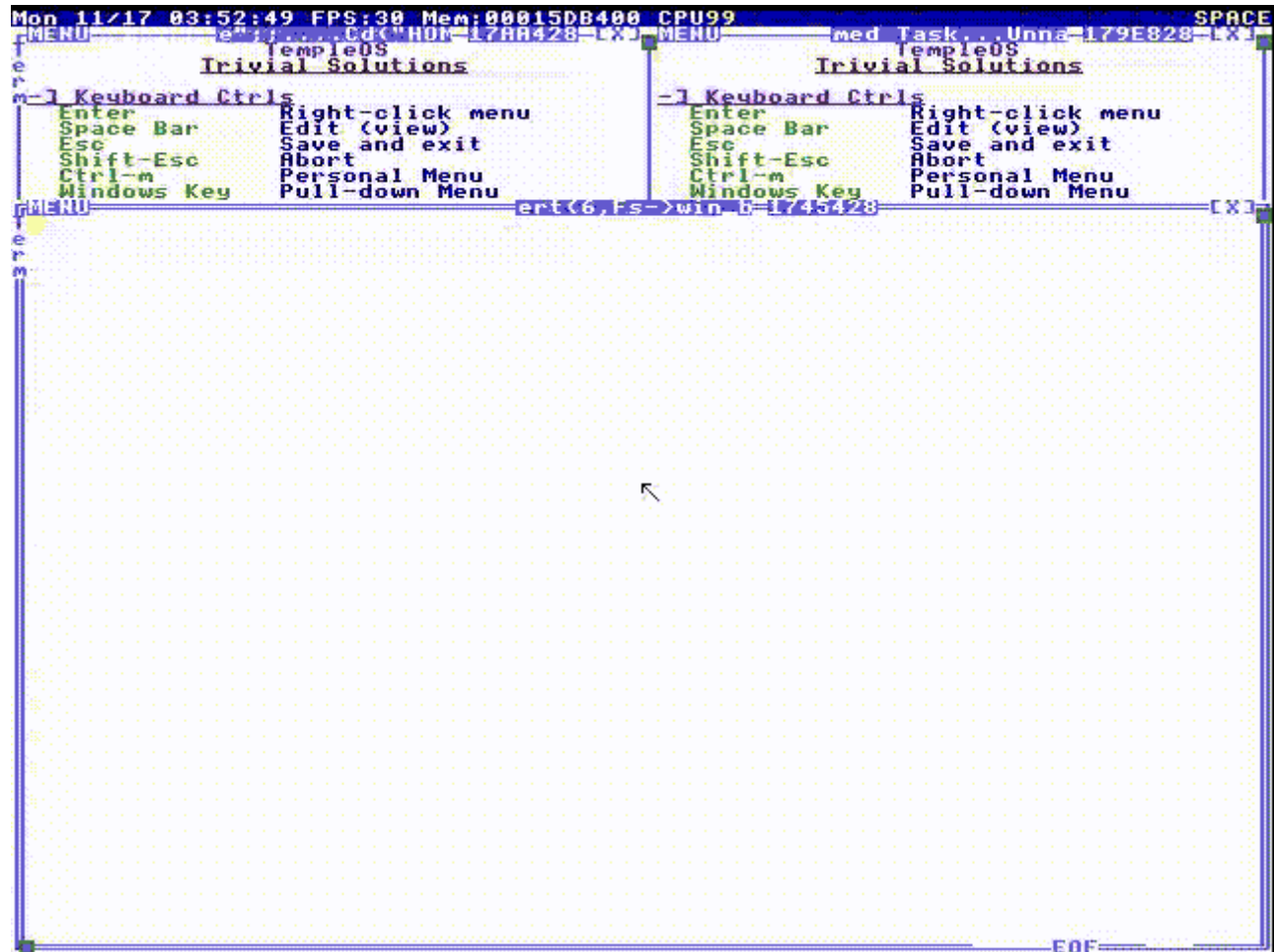
Gif by the author

It's all innocuously familiar. You see a sprite-based first person shooter called *Castle Frankenstein* and a dollar-bill icon that opens a budgeting application. *Vocab* is a multiple-choice quiz (can you define "folliculous"?). A *Battlezone* homage opens with the admonishment, "Write games, don't play them!"

Then there are less mundane features. Pressing F7 anywhere in TempleOS summons a pseudo-random "tongues word." Five F7s at the command prompt might produce downmarket Dada like "flashedt ARE evil madly peacemaker." Shift-F7 inserts a Bible passage. (Or, less revelatory, the copyright notice from Project Gutenberg's e-text Bible.) *Jukebox* offers a collection of PC-speaker tunes with Biblically inspired lyrics, like this gloss on Mark 4:37: *Lord, there's a storm upon the sea / Lord, there's a storm upon the sea / Relax, fellas / (Sea became glass).*

44-year-old Terry Davis, the founder and sole employee of Trivial Solutions. For more than a decade Davis has worked on it; today, TempleOS is 121,176 lines of code, which puts it on par with Photoshop 1.0. (By comparison, Windows 7, a full-fledged modern operating system designed to be everything to everyone, filled with decades of cruft, is **about 40 million lines**.)

He's done this work because God told him to. **According to the TempleOS charter**, it is "God's official temple. Just like Solomon's temple, this is a community focal point where offerings are made and God's oracle is consulted." God also told Davis that 640x480, 16-color graphics "is a covenant like circumcision," making it easier for children to make drawings for God. God demands a perfect temple, and Davis says, "For ten years, I worked on programming TempleOS, full time. I finished, basically, and the last year has been tiny touch-ups here and there."

Within TempleOS he built an oracle called AfterEgypt, which lets users climb Mt. Horeb along with a stick-figure Moses. At the summit, a round scrawl of rapidly changing color comes into sight—the burning bush. Before it you should praise God. You can praise Him for anything, Davis says, including sand castles, snowmen, popcorn, bubbles, isotopes, and sand crabs.

"The Holy Spirit can puppet you," the screen reads. When you press the spacebar, an onscreen timer stops, and a corresponding Biblical passage appears. "Sometimes interpretation is tricky," Davis says in **one of his many YouTube demonstrations**. He describes this AfterEgypt oracle as a technical improvement on speaking in tongues or using a Ouija board, and points to 1 Corinthians 14:2: "For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries."

Davis hasn't hesitated to speak to the world about God's digital temple. Back in 2004, he was calling it the **J Operating System** and **OSNews profiled his work**. He later renamed it LoseThos—a somewhat murky reference to a scene in *Platoon*—and had a **productive conversation with the contributors at MetaFilter**, where his work was introduced as "an operating system written by a schizophrenic programmer."

He has been diagnosed with schizophrenia, having dealt with mental health issues since the mid-1990s. Because Davis often communicates in blocks of text produced by his oracle, or with apparently off-topic declarations about God, he's had accounts **banned from SomethingAwful** and Reddit. He can be aggressive and confrontational, sometimes denouncing critics with profanity and call them "nigger."

This has gotten him **"shadowbanned" on Hackernews**, meaning he's visible only to users who've explicitly chosen to see his "dead" posts, and has led to a lengthy discussion about how to manage a fellow message board member's mental illness. MetaFilter and **Reddit** have similarly touching, frustrating conversations among people grappling with basic questions of empathy and community.

But none of this is the recognition Davis is looking for in building God's temple. "It's nice when getting attention," he says, "but now I know what it's like." It rarely means more people using TempleOS to talk to God.

So, what compelled him to build a 16-color world in worship? I wanted to understand, as best I could, how he's spent a decade as God's lonely programmer, a voice in the wilderness shouting the good news.

Davis emails me regularly and late into the night, in Courier font, from a two or three year-old Dell desktop running Ubuntu. Unable to work, he collects Social Security disability and spends most of his time coding, web surfing, or using the output from the **National Institute of Standards and Technology randomness beacon** to talk to God—he posts the results on his webpage as "Terry Davis' Rants."

He drinks a lot of caffeine and lives mostly on a 48-hour schedule

parents he says, "We don't interact that much."

Terry Davis was born in December 1969, in West Allis, Wisconsin, just west of Milwaukee, the seventh of eight children. His brothers and sisters were close, but about his relationship with them today he says, "Jesus did not talk to his siblings—he wanted nothing to do with them, strangers are better. I am the same way."

His dad was an industrial engineer, and the family moved a lot while Davis was growing up, from Wisconsin to Washington to Michigan to California to Arizona. In an elementary school gifted program, he started using an Apple II; in the early 1980s, he learned assembly language on a Commodore 64, then continued programming throughout high school. Then he enrolled at Arizona State University, where he earned his bachelor's degree, then a master's in electrical engineering in 1994.

After graduation he stayed in Tempe, Arizona, partly because he had a job. As an undergrad he'd been hired at Ticketmaster to program operating systems. He liked the work, but when the company shifted him to research projects that never seemed to pan out, he decided it was time to look elsewhere. He was 26, had a master's degree, and he wanted to use that knowledge to build satellite control systems. In early 1996 he sent out some resumes to defense contractors.

He'd grown up Catholic, but later embraced atheism. "I thought the brain was a computer," Davis says, "And so I had no need for a soul." He saw himself as a scientific materialist; he believes that metaphor—the brain as a computer—has done more to increase the number of atheists than anything by Darwin. He still considers himself scientifically minded. "Today I find the people most similar to me are atheist-scientist people," he says. "The difference is God has talked to me, so I'm basically like an atheist who God has talked to."

Davis describes how that happened in a fragmentary, elliptical way, perhaps because it was such a profoundly subjective experience, or maybe because it still embarrasses him. "It's not very flattering," he says. "It looks a lot like mental illness, as opposed to some glorious revelation from God." It was a period of tribulation, but to this day he declares, "I was being led along the path by God. It just doesn't look very glorious."

In mid-March 1996, "I started seeing people following me around in suits and stuff. It just seemed something was strange," he says. He thought it might be part of a background check by one of his prospective employers, but it unnerved him. He began connecting it to a side-project he'd worked on involving computer control

unknown.

He got thinking about conspiracy theories and the men he'd seen following him and a big idea he'd had. He spooked himself. "It would sound polite if you said I scared myself thinking about quantum computers," he says now. "And then I guess you just throw in your ordinary mental illness."

He left town. Driving south with no clear destination, he says, "I was listening to the radio and it seemed like the radio was talking to me." It spouted commentary on everything he did. He believed the end of the world was at hand. His head swam with conspiracy theories and apocalyptic foreboding.
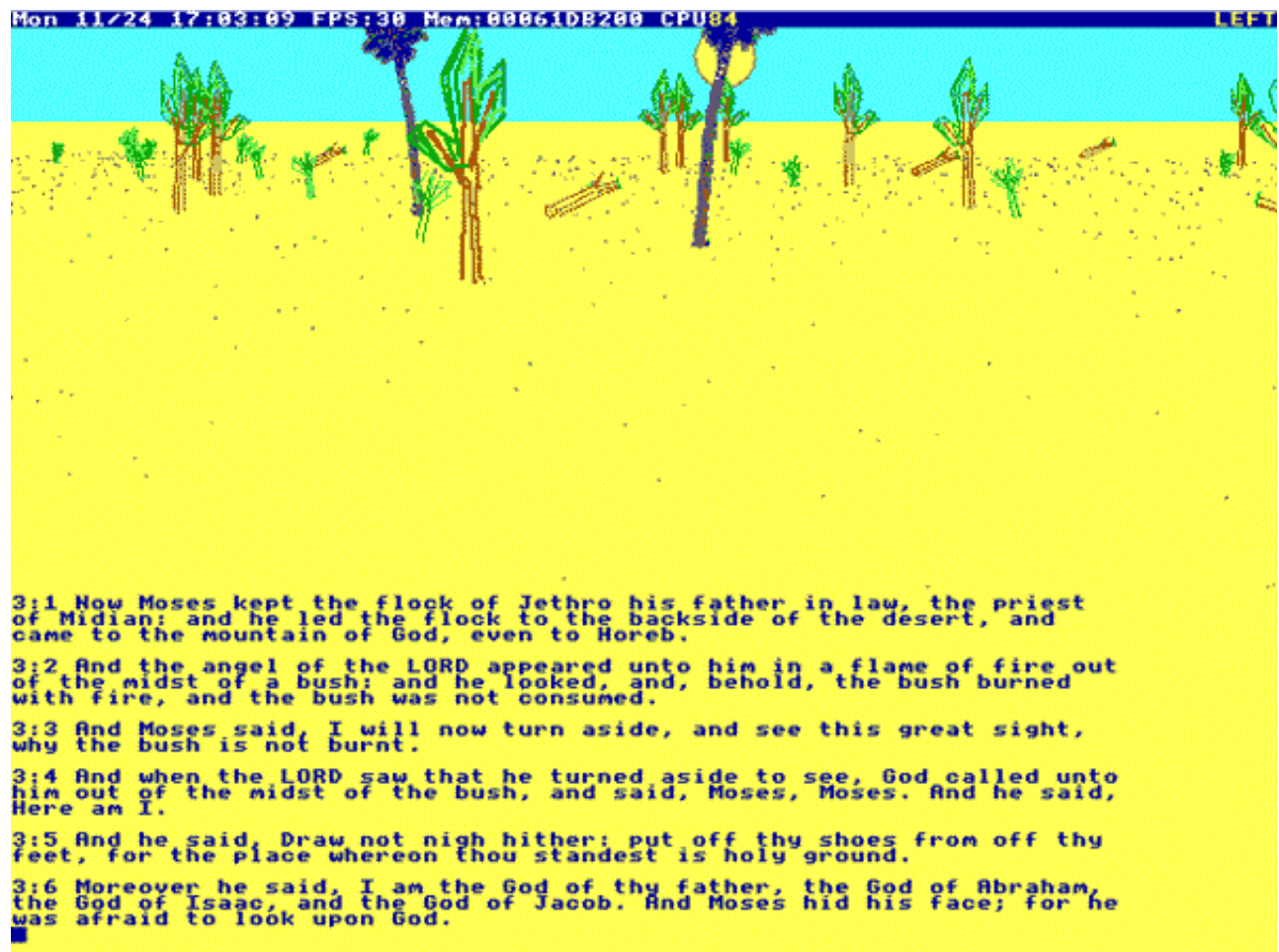
Gif by the author

He ended up in Marfa, Texas, where he abandoned his car —a Honda Accord his parents had given him. He'd started thinking about Big Oil and the conspiracies alleged to have suppressed more efficient, water-based engines. He'd torn off all the side panels from his car looking for a tracking device, then stopped the car and pitched the keys into the desert. He walked. A cop pulled up and ushered him into the

At the hospital, he overheard doctors talking about "artifacts" on his X-ray scans. Panicked at the thought of artifacts supposedly left inside by alien abductors, he bolted from the hospital, despite the broken collarbone. When he tried to steal a pickup truck idling nearby, the police caught up with him. In jail, he reasoned that he could open his cell door by flipping the circuit breaker; he broke his glasses and stuck them into the cell's electrical outlet, only to realize he had non-conductive frames. The police rushed in. "I think I stripped," Davis says, "because I was thinking of corporate logos being bad or something."

He was taken to a mental hospital, where he refused to eat the food, thinking it might be drugged. He broke a window with a chair. Released after two weeks, he sought to emulate Jesus by giving away all his belongings; he donated to Goodwill, and delivered presents to his siblings' children. He may have crossed into Mexico at some point, then had to bribe his way back across the border. He just drove, looking to street signs to divine God's will. Later he lived on the streets.

"In the Bible it says if you seek God, He will be found of you," Davis says now. "I was really seeking, and I was looking everywhere to see what he might be saying to me."

"Looking back on it, I'm not especially proud of the logic and thinking. It looks very young and childish and pathetic," Davis adds. He compares the experience to having a switch flipped, one that revealed his deepest conscience and morality. "I felt guilty for being such a technology-advocate atheist," he says. He thought of the Amish and *Little House on the Prairie*—simple, decent ways of living with God.

In one of his rants, he writes, "In 1996, I off-handedly decided to give a few dollars to charity for the blind. I was an atheist from 1990-1996 and gave nothing to charity. Perhaps, that act caused God to reveal Himself to me and saved me." He estimates he gave about $10,000 to the Newman Center, Arizona State's campus ministry.

By July of 1996, his mental state had calmed enough that he returned to Arizona. For the next year he lived on credit cards, trying to make a business out of a **three-axis milling machine** he'd prototyped. (It was obvious to him that 3D printing would be the next big thing, but it was also painfully slow.) After an errant Dremel tool nearly set his apartment on fire, he abandoned the idea.

"From 1996 to 2003, about every six months I would have what they call a manic episode and I would end up in a mental hospital," he says. He hasn't been to a hospital since; once diagnosed as bipolar, he's since been declared schizophrenic. He now only takes a single medication, and shrugs off the diagnosis. The label doesn't concern him. "For those first few years, I was genuinely pretty crazy in a way. Now I'm not. I'm crazy in a different way maybe," he says. He says he's learned not to freak out.

As 64-bit computing began trickling down to desktops around 2003, Davis saw it *as* the next big disruption. He dusted off some code from ten years earlier, when he'd worked on operating systems for Ticketmaster and tinkered on the side. "It kind of developed on its own," he says, "I didn't plan it."

But the idea of a digital oracle grew out of his earlier methods for talking to God. At first he'd open a Bible to a random page, and it would speak. Yet he had a general sense of where the book had opened, whether he might be choosing from Genesis or Revelation. He began using coin tosses to choose a page number; then he expanded his technique to include all the books in his library. Soon he'd settled on a digital timer for his oracle, AfterEgypt.

He kept the rest of the programming simple. God told him to stick to 640x480 and 16 colors, with only a single audio voice. Like Noah, he built as he was commanded. "It's really obvious what to do next," he says, "and it can keep you busy for the first ten years." But now he's finished.

He talks to God constantly, and his God is conversational, even chatty

"The way God works is he caused the course of my life. I can see how it's been a charmed life in some ways, so I think He planned it," Davis says. Sometimes he seems to believe TempleOS will exist for 1,000 years, that it will be embraced and perfected by the giants of Silicon Valley, and that he will be recognized as King Solomon 2.0. Other times he seems less certain, even vulnerable to doubt. "Is it going to be as big as Solomon's Temple?" he asks. "I don't know. But we'll see. What else is there?"
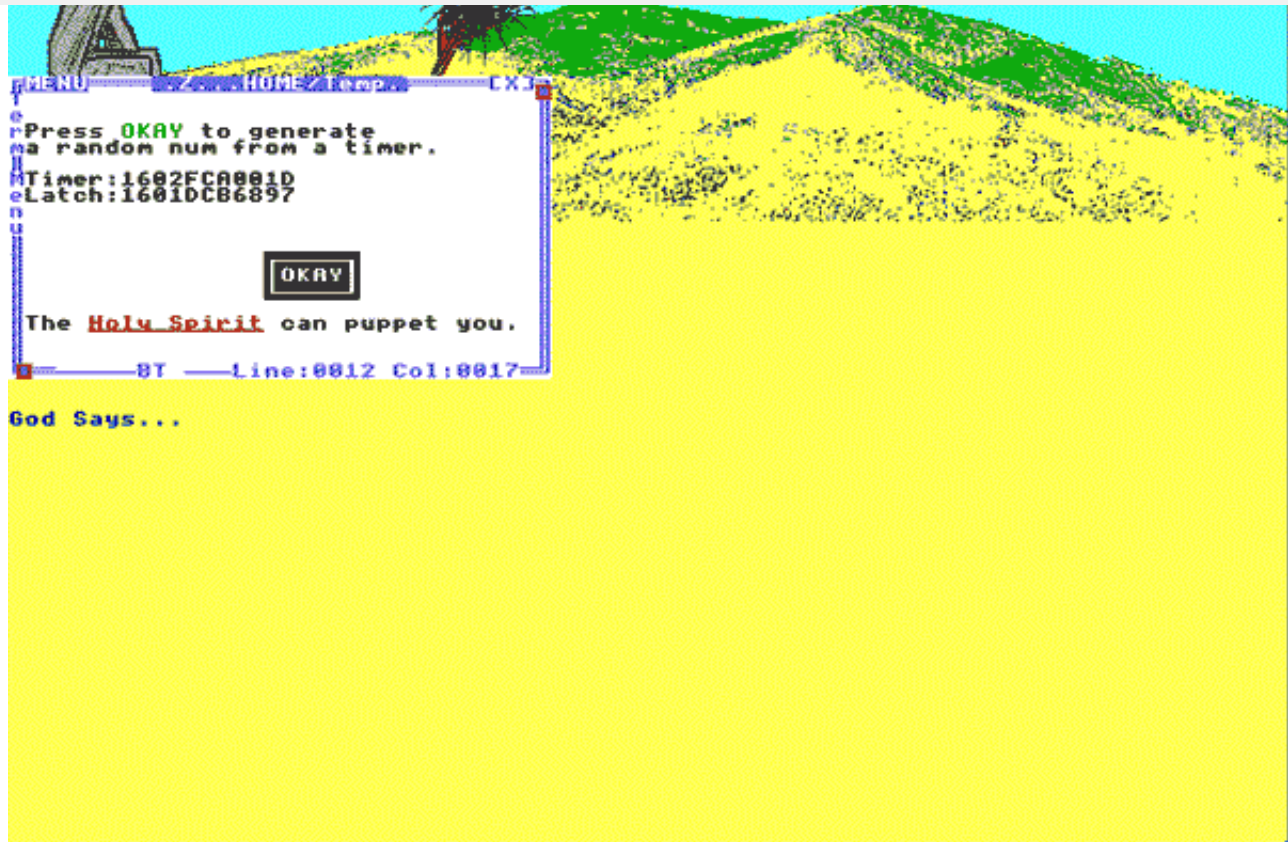
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He talks to God constantly, and his God is conversational, even chatty. In fact, Davis believes he's proven God speaks to him. He believes anything can be an oracle; that the divine word reveals itself through randomness.

At least a dozen times on his webpage, **he describes putting a question to his mother**. If he won the lottery three times, he asks, would she believe? No, she responds, because improbable things happen all the time. "I can sit down with my parents and praise God and open the Bible randomly," he says, "and it will talk." For him this is both astounding and undeniable, an ongoing revelation, like winning the lottery ten times every day. Yet, he says, "They just ignore it because it's against their way of thinking. They just ignore the facts.

Terry Davis asks God about war ("Servicemen competing") and death ("awful"), about dinosaurs ("Brontosaurs' feet hurt when stepped") and His favorite video game ("Donkey Kong"). God's favorite car is a "Beamer," and His favorite singer is Mick Jagger, though if He could sing He'd want to sound like Christopher Hall from Stabbing Westward. His favorite national anthem is Latvia's. His favorite band is, no surprise, The Beatles, but Rush and Triumph are pretty good, too. Classical music is poison. The best thing Bill Gates could do to save lives, God says, is work on

The words pour out on TempleOS.org, a torrent of verified random numbers, news links, YouTube videos, and scriptural exegesis. It's the dense work of a single, restless mind writing ceaselessly without an audience.

After two months of emails and phone conversations, I know more than when I began; specifically, I've accumulated more raw data, more facts about his life and experience. But I suspect I've only sketched a shadow. The full reality remains unreachable, an irreducible mystery.

One morning, Davis emailed me about this story, saying, "What people are going to read is, 'It's about a pathetic schizophrenic who made a crappy operating system.' My perspective is, 'God said I made His temple.'" It echoed something he'd written before: "I don't care much about you and your story. It's not likely to be what it actually is—world news with God claiming His temple."

I can't disagree. Theophany belongs to those who can see, and the rest are barred from its consolation. Davis believes he has proven he can talk to God through random numbers; he calls his parents sheep, because they cannot believe this. The word they —we—have for him is schizophrenic, and the condition is never cured, only treated. Terry Davis has offered the world a temple to a God who speaks only to him, and is and still waiting for everyone else to listen.