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Marrow of Human Experience, The

William Wilson, Jill Terry Rudy

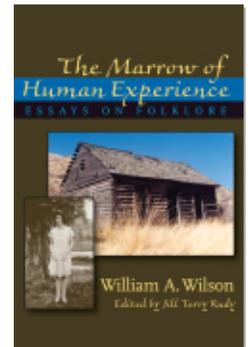
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BUILDING BRIDGES

Folklore in the Academy

In an effort to address the perennial questions of where a person with a PhD in folklore could find an academic position and how to succeed in the profession, I proposed that the Folklore Institute at Indiana University host a symposium in 1995 entitled, "Folklore in the Academy: The Relevance of Folklore to Language and Literature Departments." It was my intention to feature Bert Wilson as the role model because he had been an inspiration to me since I encountered him at my first meeting of the American Folklore Society in Austin, Texas, where we had a memorable discussion about his work on folklore and nationalism in Finland. Indeed, in May of 1995 when we held the symposium, Bert did inspire folklore students, and the many other colleagues present, to pursue their folklore scholarship within the larger context of the humanities. He presented his scholarly life history, a tale of "Building Bridges: Folklore in the Academy," with instructions for the next generation of folklorists who would like to succeed in academe.

More than a story of personal achievement, however, Bert's career narrative shared in this article embodies the principles of success for folklorists: the integration of scholarship and activism, of ideas and the work involved in implementing them. Both his scholarly work and his leadership have been built on the bridge that links folklore and society together. Utilizing this concept in academe, he pursued an interdisciplinary approach to his graduate education; in addition to his master's degree in English from Brigham Young University (BYU), at Indiana University he earned an MA in anthropology, an MA in Finno-Ugrian studies, and a PhD in Folklore, before winning a Fulbright Research Scholarship to Finland. With his faculty position at BYU in the English department, Bert effectively applied the principles he had learned in graduate school by establishing folklore courses in the curriculum and creating relationships with his colleagues. In fact, he deserves much of the credit for creating the foundation of folklore throughout

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the state of Utah. This article describes Bert's painstaking process of promoting folklore studies, which involved not only conversations and guest lectures at the university campus but presentations to public schools and organizations all over the state. He continued with his campaign to contextualize folklore in the social life of Utah citizens when he shifted to the English department at Utah State University in Logan. He expanded his folklore responsibilities there to include direction of the annual summer Fife Folklore Conference. Having been invited by Bert to speak at the conference, I found the event to be a lively example of building bridges between the academy and the public.

Especially important during the 1970s and early 1980s, Bert gave influential national service on the NEA Folk Arts Panel in Washington, D.C. He also continued his attendance at the annual meetings of several scholarly disciplines, where he not only remained current in scholarly developments but encouraged and directed younger scholars who, like myself, enjoyed his sense of humor as well as his broad intellectual reach. With these achievements came recognition and visibility and the offer to chair the English department at BYU. Lending his scholarly leadership in the capacity of chair, he encouraged interdisciplinary work in the English department, including cultural studies and feminism as well as folklore. He remained at BYU until retirement, directing the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies in addition to his many other responsibilities.

Paralleling his successful efforts to establish folklore in the academy and consistent with his intellectual vision of the field, his scholarship on nationalism and folklore in Finland remains central today. "Building Bridges" describes the training in Finnish language, literature, arts, history, and political life that Bert undertook to write the book *Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland*. In the book, Bert outlines with clarity the complex project by which folklore, identity, scholarship, and politics interacted in the phenomenon of Finnish nationalism, yielding the epic narrative we know today as the *Kalevala*. Not only does his scholarship on the subject outline the particulars of the process in Finland, contextualized in its historical moment, but it also provides the guidelines for those of us who continue to study the subject in its many guises around the globe as well as in the U.S. His work provides the blueprint for a very popular course I teach on "Nationalism and Symbolic Forms" in which folklore figures prominently. In his major scholarly work on a topic as relevant today as in 1976 when it was published, Bert has explicated the intricate relationship between folklore and society and made evident the role of folklore in political movements.

In the conclusion of "Building Bridges," Bert identifies Elias Lönnrot, compiler of the *Kalevala*, as an inspiration for him in the pressing work of collecting and sharing folklore as widely as possible. By linking folklore to the larger scholarly enterprise, to the humanities especially, and linking folklore to society, Bert Wilson has built bridges to establish and sustain the relevance of folklore in an interdisciplinary setting. His "Building Bridges" paper makes available the story of his success to any scholar with hopes of implementing his integrative ideas in an academic setting.

—Beverly Stoeltje

FOLKLORISTS NORMALLY STUDY AND INTERPRET STORIES OF OTHERS. I INTEND to alter that role and play storyteller myself. The story I tell will be my own. I pick up the narrative almost at its end.

Last year I turned sixty-two, which means that retirement looms closer each day. As I look at friends and colleagues in the American Folklore Society, I realize that large numbers of them are about my age, give or take a few years. That means that very soon folklorists holding major positions in universities across the land will be leaving those positions. At one time I thought our departure would be a good thing, opening up job opportunities for a younger generation of folklorists eagerly seeking university employment. Now I'm not so sure. Too many folklore slots, I fear, will be pulled back into other departments and offered to candidates in other specialties. If that happens, and it already has in some instances, much of the fault will lie with us. We will not be replaced by other folklorists because we have not built necessary bridges between ourselves and our colleagues and have not adequately demonstrated that what we have to offer is crucially important both to English departments and to the humanities in general.

To build these bridges, we must take an interdisciplinary approach to our subject matter; and, abandoning isolationist tendencies, we must be willing to rub shoulders with colleagues from a variety of disciplines and work with them in the nitty-gritty task of building programs that will benefit both them and us. These efforts should begin with the training of students in our major folklore institutions and should continue as these students later take positions somewhere in the academic community.

I entered the PhD program at Indiana University in 1962, committed to earning my degree in folklore but interested also in a host of related disciplines. I understood well that if I hoped to find a job some years hence, I would have to know more than just folklore and would need to connect folklore to other disciplines. I had already earned an MA in English and could have used that degree to satisfy one of my PhD minor requirements. I elected instead to pick up minors in both anthropology and Finno-Ugrian studies. I also took courses in language and linguistics. After passing qualifying examinations, I won a Fulbright Research Scholarship to Finland to conduct the study that led ultimately to my book *Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland* (1976a). In Finland, I attempted to contextualize my research by reading everything I could about Finnish art, literature, theater, music, education, and cultural and political history. The cross-disciplinary approach I developed through this research and through my earlier course work at IU has proved invaluable over the years, opening doors that might otherwise have remained closed as I developed my university career. In 1967 I left IU behind and settled comfortably into an English department at Brigham Young University—but, because of my training, I could have settled just as comfortably into history, anthropology, or humanities departments.

Now let me jump ahead for a moment to the present world and speak as a recent English department chair. Folklore students currently in training for academic positions, as well as the faculty members training them, sometimes live in an encapsulated world where folklore is the be-all and end-all of their existence. They seem not to realize that very few new PhDs will find positions that approximate those in the folklore departments they have just left. If these new graduates are lucky, they may find one other folklorist in the departments they join. More often they will be lone folklorists in departments that expect them to do more than just teach folklore.

If I were interviewing a candidate for a position in my department, I would look that individual in the eye and say something like this: "I enjoyed your presentation to the faculty. Your folklore credentials are excellent and testify that you could do a good job in teaching our folklore courses. Now tell me what else you can do. Could you teach composition? What literary periods are you most comfortable in? Have you had any training in rhetoric?" And especially I would ask: "What current literary theories do you find most compatible with your own teaching and research interests?" Successful candidates will most likely be those whose cross-disciplinary training has prepared them to answer questions like these.

Actually, answering those questions should be easier now than it was when I was hired. The received literary canon and formalist critical theory that held sway when I began my career have given way to postmodern theories that can bring folklorists squarely into the center of contemporary literary study: deconstructionist approaches that peel away layers of meaning to get back to the context that generated a text; reader-response theory that views a text as the collaborative creation of both teller and audience; new historicism that attempts to situate texts in their historical/cultural settings before hazarding interpretation; intertextual studies that see individual texts stitched together into much larger cultural fabrics; research efforts that focus on discourse, or interpretive, communities; multicultural emphases; the linking of aesthetic and cultural functions. These and other contemporary literary approaches should set bells ringing for most folklore students. If folklore candidates for English department positions will resist the urge to insult potential employers by telling them, "Oh, we folklorists have been doing those things for years" and will focus instead on shared approaches in a common interpretive venture, they should be able to demonstrate that they can indeed do much more than "just teach folklore" and should thereby increase their chances of being hired. The key is careful planning.

First, they should find out what is really going on in academic departments throughout the country and, early in their training, begin tailoring their programs to fit possible hiring needs. In this effort, they should be assisted by the faculty. In my judgment, it is unconscionable for faculty members to remain aloof from career planning and to pass students through their classes like objects on a conveyor belt, giving no thought to their futures.

Second, students entering the market should prepare carefully for specific job interviews. If I were applying for a position in a particular English department today, I would learn everything I could about that department and then I would make a presentation that would show how my folklore training could tie into and support central departmental concerns. To do that, I would get a catalogue and look at the department's course offerings. I would get a list of the faculty and spend some time in the library discovering what they had published. And, if possible, I would look at the titles of theses and dissertations completed in the department in recent years, since these would give good insight into the department's present research emphases. Candidates for positions in our department sometimes show up believing we are an old-style traditional department and gear their presentations accordingly, only to miss the mark pretty badly. A quick look at recent departmental thesis titles would have given them a better sense of what we are about. To be sure, some of these titles reflect fairly traditional lines: "Illusion and Reality in Willa Cather's *One of Ours*"; "Failed Marriages in Jane Austin." But many other titles would reveal a picture of the brave new world into which our department has moved: "Words That Sustain Life: The Life Story of Louie Jean Bahr"; "Trickster Discourse as a Model of Postcolonial Hybridity"; "Gender Roles in Popular Culture: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Gender in 'Star Trek'"; "Postcolonialism and the Emergence of African Feminism: An Islamic Arab Perspective"; "Electronic Mail and the Composition Classroom: An Ethnographic Study"; "Redefining the Slave Narrative Genre: From Traditional Autobiography to Contemporary Fiction"; "Off Roaders: The Cohesion of Western Folk Groups"; and "Daughters of China: Telling Stories of Separation, Suffering, and Hope."

Most of the theses in the second group were informed by theories familiar to folklorists. In fact, during the last year I served either as director or co-director of one-fifth of the theses completed in our department—a task that nearly killed me but that demonstrates our department's recognition of the centrality of folklore, including anthropologically oriented folklore, to our discipline. Clearly, in preparing for careers in departments like ours, folklore students would do well to heed the words of Annette Kolodny in a recent essay in *American Literature*:

If we are ever to have what Andrew Wiget calls "a new literary history that is both just and useful," then American literary specialists must move beyond the training that prepares us to analyze only texts written in English or to recognize only European (or "Western") antecedents. And we must become the intellectual colleagues of those, from a variety of disciplines, who can teach us to read across cultural boundaries. . . . American literary scholars must begin to create their own new frontiers, openly declaring their agenda as radically comparativist, demandingly interdisciplinary, and exuberantly multilingual. (1992, 15)

I mentioned above our department's recognition of the importance of folklore to the discipline of English. I don't want to overstate the case. Folklore still has its detractors, but the bulk of our faculty now supports our folklore program. Such was not always the case. Nor did our present circumstances come about by accident. They have resulted from years of hard work.

In a discussion of the state of our profession that developed on an e-mail list last November, Lee Haring referred to the intense "force of marginalization" lone folklorists experience in many departments; he suggested that folklorists have done little to remedy this situation because they prefer "to get on with what they do rather than build up their position[s]" (1994). Haring is correct: unless we change our priorities, unless we devote ourselves full tilt to building up our positions, we may in the near future have no remaining places where we can get on with what we do.

When I arrived on the Brigham Young University campus in 1967, eager to put my folklore training to work, I quickly experienced the isolation Haring talks about. For several years I did not even teach folklore—I taught mainly composition and lower division literature courses. Dismayed over prospects for the future, I realized that if things were going to change, I would have to change them.

My first step was to make myself part of the departmental team. I taught every class I was asked to teach, served on every committee I was asked to work on, accepted every extracurricular assignment that came my way. As a result, colleagues began to view me as a real person after all, willing to work for larger departmental interests. At the same time, I began practicing what my wife calls "hallology"—that is, I strolled the halls of the English department talking about folklore with any department member who would listen. But I did not just talk about my work. I asked these colleagues about their work as well and, when possible, tried to tie our interests together. Before long, invitations to give classroom guest lectures began coming my way. Then, as people across campus learned about me, other invitations came along. I never turned any of them down. I talked several times in a library lecture series; I gave a talk sponsored by the honors program. I even made a presentation to the American Association of University Professors.

As a result of these and other efforts, the department gained confidence in me and eventually added two undergraduate folklore courses and one graduate class to its curriculum—additions that had seemed beyond hope when I first arrived on campus. As soon as I had prepared syllabi for these classes, I took them to the chair of the anthropology department. He liked what he saw and cross-listed the classes in his department, thus assuring a continued cross-disciplinary approach. As students in these classes began submitting folklore collections, we developed them into the BYU Folklore Archive, which further strengthened the folklore presence on campus.

But I did not confine my activities to campus. As soon as word spread that there was "this folklorist" at BYU and that he could talk about some pretty

interesting stuff, speaking invitations began arriving from the community. I accepted them all. I talked at junior colleges and in the public schools, at local libraries and historical societies, at genealogical organizations and at church gatherings. I talked to the Catalyst Club, a group made up of spouses of chemistry professors, and I talked to the Sons of the Utah Pioneers. I even talked to the Forest Service and to miners about forest and mining lore, subjects I knew almost nothing about. Both the State Historical Society and the Utah Endowment for the Humanities sponsored lecture series in local history and signed me up. Like an itinerant preacher, I dragged my tired bones across our large state, never knowing whether I would end up speaking to an audience of three or three hundred, but always willing to talk about folklore with whoever showed up. Always my aim was to increase the visibility and credibility of folklore in the state and thereby to make it difficult for the university to ignore this growing awareness.

Early in this process I became president of the Folklore Society of Utah, an organization that had struggled along weakly for years. I got together with the director of the Utah Historical Society, Charles Peterson, and worked out an agreement whereby the Folklore Society could hold its yearly business meeting at the annual meeting of the Historical Society if the folklorists would sponsor one of the sessions in the program. This provided us an opportunity to take the message of folklore to a still broader audience, and it gave students from folklore classes at BYU and from the University of Utah an opportunity to present papers in a “scholarly” setting.

These activities persuaded editors of the *Utah Historical Quarterly* that we were pretty good folks and, as a result, opened the pages of the journal to folklore publication. In 1976 I edited a special issue of the journal on Mormon folklore, drawing on papers submitted by students in a graduate seminar I had just led on the subject—two of those papers later received best article awards for that year (Wilson 1976d). In subsequent years, Margaret Brady edited a special issue on ethnic folklore in the state (1984), and Thomas Carter edited another on material culture (1988). What’s more, the pages of the journal have remained open to individual articles on folklore.

In 1978 Charles Peterson, who had left the State Historical Society and accepted a position in history at Utah State University, persuaded me to join the faculty there and to continue the work begun earlier by prominent folklorist Austin Fife. During my USU years, I continued the same pattern of activity I had begun at BYU. In addition, I accepted a five-year appointment as editor of *Western Folklore*; served four years on the NEA Folk Arts Panel, serving the fourth year as panel chair; and served eight years on the board of directors of the Utah Arts Council, this last position making me automatically the chair of the Utah Folk Arts Panel. These positions, though time consuming, again added to my leveraging power and helped make possible the expansion of the folklore curriculum at USU (this time with courses cross-listed in the history department), the establishment of the Fife Folklore Archive, and, especially, the

development of the annual Fife Folklore Conference into a nationally recognized summer program.

In 1984 I returned to BYU as chair of the English department, a position I held until 1991. Many of my colleagues supported this appointment because they had come to believe that a folklorist actually had something to offer the department. As chair, I worked hard to hire new faculty trained in contemporary literary theory and especially to establish a strong emphasis on cultural studies. I also worked hard to support the legitimate research efforts of department members in all areas of our discipline, not just in those related directly to folklore. And I continued to practice hallology, discussing with the faculty their research and teaching projects and, where appropriate, suggesting related reading in folklore. Some of them responded by incorporating folklore approaches into their teaching and by encouraging so many students to take folklore classes that we have not been able to handle them all. Most important, they also made folklore a major field of emphasis in a recent departmental curriculum revision.

Though I am no longer chair, this cooperation has continued. For example, four of us—a poet, a rhetorician, a feminist critic, and I—recently developed and team-taught an exciting new course in cultural studies. Such a class would have been unthinkable not too many years ago. In the class, we viewed the quilting film *Hearts and Hands*, read literary works with references to quilting, and then made a quilt in the class. Students individually made blocks from a particular fabric or with a design representing something important to them. A few of the more experienced students next stitched these different blocks together. Then we set up quilting frames in the classroom and spent one long class period tying the quilt. Each student submitted a narrative explaining his or her block. Later, at a gathering at one professor's house, we recorded the stories. With each block and accompanying story representing a different life, the experience opened the door for us to talk about everything from narrating to cultural diversity. On one of the walls of the stairwell leading to our departmental offices hang portraits of all the English and American winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature, symbolizing the traditions we have come from and still cherish. On the facing wall now hangs our quilt, symbolizing the culturally diverse and rich world we are moving toward, a world in which folklorists have much to contribute.

I have also continued my efforts to build bridges to other disciplines. I have spoken several times in an anthropology symposium; I have met with historians to discuss ways we might cooperate on local history projects; I have spoken twice to the theater department on the folklore backgrounds of plays currently being produced; I have given several university-wide honors lectures; and I have published several general-interest articles in the university alumni magazine and have by this means taken the message of folklore to some 150,000 alumni and university supporters. Finally, as the new director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, I have broadened the scope of the research

we support to include not just history but all the arts, humanities, and social sciences. For the first time in its history, funds are now flowing from the center in support of folklore research.

I am aware that some may be appalled by the story I have just told, considering me a braggart of the worst order or, worse yet, someone who has abandoned the pure scholarly life for politics and administrative advancement. I can assure you that, given a choice, I would much rather have devoted myself fully to scholarship and teaching and left to someone else the task of building up the discipline, of securing folklore positions. But who might that someone have been? Whatever some might think of my efforts, I take comfort from the knowledge that at BYU we now have a limited but solid folklore program, that we have developed a folklore research archive, that many of our undergraduate and graduate students now see how folklore relates to their particular disciplinary interests, that we have trained and sent out graduate students who have done well in folklore doctoral programs, and, above all, that we have enriched the lives of numerous students who see the world differently as a result of having taken a folklore class.

In all the efforts described above, I have had one principal goal—not to lionize myself but rather to develop my credibility to the point that my voice, speaking on behalf of all those voices we folklorists represent, cannot be ignored. I have always been inspired by the life and work of the Finnish scholar-patriot, Elias Lönnrot, who, while serving as a district doctor in remote northern Finland, battling cholera epidemics, and struggling with his own ill health, managed to trek mile after mile on foot through the Finnish hinterlands to collect the epic poems from which he eventually composed the *Kalevala*. As he brought the epic to completion, he wrote to a friend: “A lot of work these poems have been, but I’m not sorry, if they are at last suitable” (Lönnrot 1990, 1: 91). A lot of work it is to earn a graduate degree, to train ourselves broadly in our own and related disciplines, to establish programs in the universities that hire us, and to sacrifice ourselves for the advancement of the discipline. But if in the process we find the means to give voice to the carriers and performers of the traditions we study and value, then our work will also prove suitable, and we will have no reason to be sorry.