On Being Human

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Only a week before I received the invitation to write this introduction, two faculty members who are team-teaching an introductory class about world arts and cultures queried me. Their course concerns concepts and perspectives in the intercultural, interdisciplinary study of art, aesthetics, and performance. Among other matters, it examines the performative representation of cultural identity. The instructors sought articles outside their own fields that students should read. Immediately I recommended William A. (Bert) Wilson’s “On Being Human: The Folklore of Mormon Missionaries.” It deals as much with behavior, performance, and culture as it does with the lore of a particular religious identity. The piece is imminently readable; Bert is a marvelous storyteller and a fine writer. Based on a huge quantity of recorded data, personal experience, and years of reflection, this essay contains numerous insights about the nature of narrating and its impact on people’s emotions, behavior, and interactions.

I met Bert Wilson at Indiana University. He was completing his graduate studies in the Folklore Department as I was beginning mine. His book *Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland* (1976a), which grew out of his dissertation, remains the best study of the use of folklore in nationalistic movements. When we first met we talked about his interest in Mormon folklore. He was dissatisfied with earlier works. Either the publications consisted largely of documentation without analysis or, written by outsiders, the interpretations were inadequate and inappropriate. As a practicing Mormon, Bert has an “emic” or insider view of the traditions. He was a missionary to Finland. He has participated in some of the lore that he reports and analyzes in his publications.

Two major streams of scholarship appear to have influenced Bert’s interpretation of the traditions presented here. One is a behavioral perspective, which...
embraces a performance studies approach. When he writes about stories being framed with beginning and closing markers and with a stylized manner of performance (including gestures, rhythmical speech, shifts in intonation, and ceremonial language), he draws upon ideas propounded by Roger Abrahams, Richard Bauman, and others who (like Bert himself) contributed to the analysis of verbal art as performance. When he dwells on “the telling of a story” during which the narrator and listener together shape the form and meaning, and on the unique circumstances in which the narrating occurs, he relies largely on the work of Robert A. Georges, who helped develop a behavioral orientation in folkloristics. This perspective eschews the study of “texts” in favor of concentrating on communication and social experience in the context of specific events. A result is the greater understanding of expressive behavior as, in Bert’s words, “an artful rendering of significant human experience.” This is particularly apparent in Bert’s moving examination of his mother’s narrating, which he writes about in “Personal Narratives: The Family Novel,” included at the conclusion of this volume.

Functionalism, too, inspired the present article. This can be seen in the latter part that analyzes four sociocultural and psychological consequences of the lore of Mormon missionaries. In addition to its obvious entertainment value, Bert writes, the lore functions to create a sense of group solidarity, let off steam as a form of coping and silent rebellion, promote conformity to accepted standards of conduct, and develop an image of a world in which the missionaries may succeed (eventually emerging as victorious). William R. Bascom discusses several of these in “Four Functions of Folklore” (1954). He contends that folklore enables people to escape in fantasy from repressions imposed upon them by society, validates culture by justifying its rituals and institutions, inculcates behavioral norms, and applies social pressure in order to maintain conformity to accepted patterns of behavior. A paradox arises according to Bascom: while folklore appears to play a vital role in transmitting and maintaining a culture’s institutions and enforcing individual conformity to behavioral norms, at the same time it provides socially approved outlets (wishful thinking, letting off steam) for the repressions imposed by the institutions. Bert examines this paradox more fully in an essay titled “The Paradox of Mormon Folklore” (1976c).

All of us are influenced by the writings of others. When I penned the introductory essay in a volume that I edited on the Finnish national epic, I drew heavily upon Bert Wilson’s book about folklore and nationalism in Finland (see Jones 1987b). His articles on Mormon traditions evince the intellectual rigor possessed by his study of Finnish nationalism. Each is well written and insightful; all stand as the best that has been published on the subject.

Two other matters should be mentioned. The concept of “folk group” has often been bandied about since Alan Dundes proposed it in the mid-1960s (based on the notion of “a folk” as opposed to “the folk” articulated by Richard M. Dorson in Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers ([1952] 1972). Bert Wilson, in the present essay, is one of the few scholars to have ever pointed out some of the concept’s flaws (for yet others, see Blumenreich 1974).
Second, Bert Wilson is both a devout Mormon and a folklorist specializing in the traditions of Mormons. While his insider status yields important ethnographic insights, it poses challenges. As Bert indicates, the concept of “the folk” is outmoded in folkloristics (although it is still used by some scholars in other fields). To speak of Mormonism as “folk religion,” which some in the past have done, is both inaccurate and offensive. Bert had to clarify for himself the difference between official church teachings and what could be identified as “folklore,” that is, traditions learned informally and engaged in by people in firsthand interaction. When he addresses an audience of Mormons, he takes care to differentiate between the two. This need is even greater when he speaks or writes to non-Mormons lest they view adherents to this religion as somehow “strange,” and as “different” from themselves. As Bert makes apparent in his writings, it is the ability and propensity of all of us to describe something that happened (to “tell a story”), to ritualize, and to experience the sacred in our everyday lives that makes us human, that is, members of a common species regardless of other identities that we might assume or be ascribed. In engaging in folklore, Mormons express their humanity—just as the rest of us do.

—Michael Owen Jones

Not long ago, I was asked to entertain some of my colleagues at a faculty gathering by telling stories about J. Golden Kimball, that crusty old Mormon divine who salted his sermons and public statements with a liberal sprinkling of cuss words and earthy metaphors. Because I know a fair number of these stories and enjoy telling them, I agreed. The event was a tolerable success. At least most people laughed, and no one threw brickbats. Still, as I drove home, I wondered if I had not done more harm than good. I had, I feared, simply strengthened the notion, held by many, that the study of folklore might provide interesting material for after dinner speeches but certainly could not be expected to increase our understanding of the human condition.

I would like to rectify that impression. The night I told J. Golden Kimball stories, I played the role of folklore performer. Now I will play the critic. My argument will be that the performance of folklore—whether it provides us with delight and amusement or causes us to fear and tremble—is one of our most fundamental human activities. The study of folklore, therefore, is not just a pleasant pastime useful primarily for whiling away idle moments. Rather, it is centrally and crucially important in our attempts to understand our own behavior and that of our fellow human beings.

To defend this thesis, I will share with you some of the insights my colleague John B. Harris and I have gained from studying the folklore of Mormon missionaries. Some ten years ago, Professor Harris and I began collecting missionary folklore, mostly from recently returned missionaries attending Brigham Young and Utah State Universities. The results of our efforts now fill eleven volumes—a database large enough, we believe, to at last warrant some
generalizations. I would prefer to move directly to a discussion of this data, but I have learned from past experience that if we hope to arrive at any common agreement tonight, we must first come to some general understanding of what folklorists study.

In brief, folklorists study people, the “folk,” who in face-to-face interactions with other people attempt to control the circumstances of their lives by generating, performing, and transmitting “lore,” by communicating, that is, through traditional forms ranging from the songs they sing and the stories they tell to the ways they celebrate their birthdays and prepare their food.

The people who generate, perform, and transmit this lore are, among others, readers of this essay. When the term folklore was coined in 1846, the “folk” were thought at that time to be unsophisticated, unlettered peasants—the *vulgus in populo*—people living mainly in rural areas, isolated from the more civilized members of society and carrying in their collective memory survivals, or relics, of earlier, primitive customs and usages. This notion held sway throughout the nineteenth century and through much of this one; indeed, it has not yet completely faded. For many, the term *folklore* still conjures up images of European peasants spinning tales of olden times or of Appalachian hillbillies strumming happily away on their banjos.

By midcentury, however, most folklorists had begun to hold a more realistic view. They came gradually to understand that folklore can help us understand not just the past but also the present, that folklore flourishes in urban industrial centers as well as in the agrarian countryside, and that all of us—sophisticated and unsophisticated alike—possess folklore and participate in folklore processes. As a result, they began to speak not of the *folk* but of different *folks*, that is, of different folk groups isolated from the rest of society and bound together by such circumstances as age, occupation, religion, ethnicity, and regional habitat. And they began to study such diverse groups as children and senior citizens, airline hostesses and medical doctors, Amish and Catholics, westerners and southerners—and even such people as Mormon missionaries, who could be defined as an occupational subgroup within the larger Mormon religious group.

Though certainly an advance over the older view of the folk as peasants or quaint rural people, this newer concept, which dominates much of American folklore research today, is not without problems. First, it stereotypes people, failing to take into account differences and assuming that what is true of one group member will be true of them all. Second, it focuses on what is unique to a particular group rather than on what members of the group share in common with other people. As a result, folklore study, which above all else ought to be a humane discipline, fails at times to acknowledge our common humanity and serves, or can serve, as a divisive rather than a uniting force in society.

To counter these problems, some folklorists have begun to speak not of different folk groups but of different social identities. For example, I am a Mormon, but I am also a father, a teacher, a Democrat, an Idahoan, a tennis fan,
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a photography nut, and so on. To assume that one can know me fully simply by identifying me as a Mormon is to assume too much. It seems safer to say that in certain situations my Mormon identity will become dominant and my other identities will be forced into the background, though never fully suppressed—that is, even in my most intense Mormon moments, I will not cease entirely to be a Democrat, and conversely, when I play the role of Democrat, I will not cease to be a Mormon. In those situations in which my Mormon identity becomes dominant, I will think and act in traditionally prescribed ways, in ways somewhat similar to those in which other Mormons will think and act when their Mormon identities are dominant. This being the case, one should be able to observe these Mormon ways of thinking and acting and then say something about the nature of Mormon behavior in general. Generalizations, however, must be used with care; no one individual will ever fit the generalized pattern completely, and this behavior, though it may have taken on a distinctive Mormon coloring—or, in our case, a Mormon missionary hue—may not be peculiar to Mormons or missionaries at all but rather to people everywhere.

From this point of view, Mormon missionaries are not uniquely missionaries. Each elder or sister is a composite of the identities he or she has brought to the field; no two are exactly alike. However, unlike the rest of us, who are constantly changing roles (and therefore identities), missionaries play the same role for the duration of their missions. Occasionally, and often to the displeasure of their leaders, some of the missionaries’ other identities will come to the fore; but for the most part, from the time they are called to the field until they are released one-and-a-half to two years later, these young people are engaged full tilt in missionary activity. Even in those moments when they are not directly involved in proselyting efforts, they must at all times, day and night, be accompanied by at least one other missionary companion, a circumstance that reminds them constantly of their missionary role. They thus afford us an excellent opportunity to observe the behavior of people whose shared identity persists for a sustained period and to discover what is unique and what is universal in that behavior.

Presently, some thirty thousand missionaries, most between the ages of nineteen and twenty-three, serve in all areas of the free world and in some not so free. One could argue that the geographical spread of these missionaries and the cultural differences in the lands in which they serve preclude the development of a folklore widely known to most of them. Such an argument overlooks the nature of missionary work. Though in the past this work was somewhat loosely organized and missionaries, once called to the field, were left pretty much to their own devices, this is not the case today. The work is now tightly structured, highly programmed, and routinized. Missionaries in Japan, Finland, Argentina, and Los Angeles will follow essentially the same schedule, participate in the same activities, and abide by the same rules as missionaries throughout the system. Though regional differences will obviously occur, it is possible to identify a missionary lifestyle that has produced a common folklore.