On Being Human

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Published by Utah State University Press

Wilson, William.
On Being Human: Folklore of Mormon Missionaries.
Utah State University Press, 1981.
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This folklore has evolved over time from day-to-day interactions of missionaries facing similar problems and involved in similar social situations. As they have participated in typical activities (such as door-to-door “tracting” or holding discussions in the homes of investigators), or as they have experienced recurrent events (such as facing hostile crowds or witnessing some people accept their message and join their church), they have developed somewhat similar responses and attitudes to the circumstances of their lives, and they have told stories and participated in activities that embody these attitudes and that give them a sense of control in a world not always friendly. The more they have told these stories and participated in these activities, the more they have formularized them into recognizable patterns. As they have continued to face problems and find themselves in social situations similar to those that have occurred in the past, they have sought resolutions in these now traditional stories and activities—or, in other words, in their folklore.

No matter what form this folklore takes—song, tale, customary practice—the performance of it will almost always be an act of communication, an act through which the performer attempts to persuade the audience, and sometimes him- or herself, to accept a certain point of view or to follow a certain course of action. These performances might be called exercises in behavior modification. They may entertain us, but they also change us.

Obviously, not all communicative acts aimed at persuasion are folklore. We can distinguish those that are by at least three identifying features that “frame” them, or set them off, from the regular flow of communication.

First, folklore is framed by the use of beginning and closing markers. When we hear someone say, “Once upon a time . . .” or “Say, did you hear about . . .,” we know that regular conversation is about to be interrupted by the telling of a tale. When the narrator says, “And they lived happily ever after” or “And that really happened,” we know that the telling has ended and that regular discourse will begin again. The markers that signal the beginnings and endings of other folkloric communications may be subtler, but they nevertheless exist; when we pick up the appropriate signal, we know what will follow.

Second, folklore is framed, as I have already noted, by a recurrent and clearly recognizable structural pattern. For example, the basic structure of Mormon legends of the Three Nephites is this: someone has a problem; a stranger (usually an old man) appears; the stranger solves the problem; the stranger miraculously disappears. A story may have more to it than this—the person visited may be tested by the old man before being helped—but it must have these elements. Any story incorporated into the Nephite cycle will be adjusted to make it conform to this pattern. The process is similar to a writer’s attempt to develop his or her personal experience into a short story. To be successful, the writer must distort the experience to make it fit the requirements of form. Missionaries telling their own experiences do the same thing. The experiences are real enough, but the missionaries must distort, or at least carefully select, the details of these experiences to make them fit the narrative forms traditional in the mission field.
Third, stories are framed by a stylized manner of performance. Stylistic devices include such things as gestures, body language, rhythmical speech, musical sounds, shifts in intonation, and the use of ceremonial language. When someone tells a J. Golden Kimball story and imitates Kimball’s high-pitched nasal voice, the performer is using a stylistic device.

Folkloric communication, then, can be distinguished from other forms of communication by beginning and closing markers, by recognizable structural patterns, and by stylized presentation. These distinguishing features, of course, warrant our calling folklore what literature itself is generally considered to be—an artful rendering of significant human experience. In at least one important way, however, folklore differs from literature. No matter how much advice a poet may get from colleagues and no matter how he or she attempts to shape the lines to communicate effectively with a specific audience, once the poem is completed and committed to print, the exchange between poet and audience ends. Each person may respond differently to the poem and may interpret it differently. But the words themselves, as they appear on the printed page, will ever remain the same.

With folklore, there is no printed page. There is only the performance in which a song is sung, a tale told, a ritual enacted. The song, tale, or ritual are parts of the whole, but they are not the whole itself. The performance is the whole. The markers I have discussed above do not set off a story; they set off the telling of a story, a telling whose form and meaning are shaped by teller and listener alike as each responds to and gives feedback signals to the other. Thus in a very real sense, the telling is the tale, the singing is the song, the enactment is the ritual. The artistic tensions that develop as one reads a poem occur primarily between the reader and the lines on the written page and only indirectly, through these lines, between the reader and the poet. The artistic tensions that develop in a folklore performance occur directly and dynamically between listener and performer. We can record part of the performance and print it in a book as a folklore text, but in doing so we give readers only a mutilated bit of reality. The real art of folklore and the real meaning of folklore lie only in the performance of folklore.

For example, when a group of missionaries is faced with a problem that needs solving—what to do, for instance, with a recalcitrant elder (a male missionary) who will not do his duty or who may have committed an unworthy act—one of the missionaries will assume the role of storyteller, or performer. Looking to the wisdom handed down from the past and therefore considered to be of special value, he will begin to tell of an earlier missionary who behaved in a similar way and suffered the wrath of God as a result. His listeners may not know the particular story being told, but they will know its form and will recognize the values the teller is attempting to uphold. They will expect him both to stay within the narrative bounds dictated by tradition and at the same time to perform well enough to excite their sympathies and persuade, or attempt to persuade, them to accept his point of view. In other words, they will
judge the competency of his performance. As they do so, they will send signals as feedback. He will then adjust his storytelling accordingly, manipulating the form and especially the style of his presentation to make it as artistically powerful, and therefore as persuasive, as possible. If he is successful, he will reform the sinner, or at least he will persuade fence-sitters not to follow the sinner’s example. As we skim rapidly over a number of examples in this essay, we should remember that behind each of them lies this kind of performance.

Clearly, no two missionary folklore performances will ever be the same, even if the same story is told in both. The time and place of telling, the nature of the audience, the skill of the teller, the reason for the telling—all these will combine to make the form and meaning of each performance unique to that performance. Still, while each performance is different from every other one, each is also similar to others. From performance to performance, through time and space, there will be consistencies and continuities in the products of these performances (the stories, songs, customs, and language usages), in the ways missionaries express themselves, and in their reasons for doing so. These are the focus of our study.

To understand the significance of these consistencies and continuities in the lives of missionaries, we must look closely at the circumstances under which missionaries generate folklore and especially at the uses to which they put it. I will look at four of these. Each is different from the others, but in each we find missionaries attempting to maintain a sense of stability in an unstable world.

The first use missionaries make of folklore is to create an esprit de corps, a sense of solidarity among themselves. When a brand-new, nineteen-year-old elder, a “greenie,” arrives in some distant mission field, frightened, feeling very much an outsider, and wondering if he should catch the next plane home, the first folklore he is likely to encounter will probably be directed against him. For example, in Norway, when a new missionary arrived, seasoned elders sat him down in a chair; they fixed a light above him, and they interrogated him about his moral life. When he volunteered the information that he had kissed a girl before, they let him know that he was completely washed up as far as his career goes in the mission. He would always be a junior companion, never be allowed to lead a discussion. And he believed the whole thing.

In London, England, new missionaries were told to save their bus ticket stubs for a halfpenny rebate per ticket. The greenies saved drawers full of these—some, following instruction, even ironed them—only to learn later that they were totally worthless. In Texas, a senior companion instructed his new junior companion how prayers were to be offered in the mission:

“Now, Elder, out here we pray an awful lot. If we had to repeat these prayers all the time we’d spend most of our time on our knees.
and never have time to do the Lord’s work. Instead, we have all the prayers numbered.” With that the two slid to their knees and the senior volunteered to say the prayer. “Number 73,” he prayed, and jumped into bed, leaving the new missionary in a crumpled mass on the floor.

In Norway, a senior companion, after going through essentially this same ritual, prayed, “Lord, number 10 for me and number 35 for the greenie.” In Spain, greenies and senior missionaries prepared to eat a first dinner together:

The zone leader asked one of the older elders to say the blessing on the food. They all bowed their heads, and the elder very seriously said, “Number 9, Amen.” While the poor new missionaries were still recovering from that, the zone leader looked at the elder who had said the prayer and just as seriously retorted, “Elder, you always say the same prayer.”

Sometimes church members, posing as someone else, usually an investigator, have joined the senior missionaries in these pranks. In Norway again, the missionaries asked a greenie:

“Do you have your first discussion?” And he said, “I have it. I’ve been studying it. I learned it when I was down in the mission home.” And they said, “Okay, you’ve got to have it good, ’cause we’re giving it tonight.” So they went—four of them—over to this house to give it—the discussion. And, of course, it wasn’t really an investigator; it was a member. And they said, “This man is very musically inclined, and it gets a little bit mundane talking to him all the time. He likes us to sing him the discussions.” And so they started out singing the first two lines of the first discussion, and then he said, “Hit it!” And so the new elder proceeded to sing the rest of the discussion in Norwegian.

In California, a senior companion offered to demonstrate to his new greenie how he succeeded in placing copies of the Book of Mormon in people’s houses. The two of them knocked on a door. A woman answered, and the senior companion threw a book past her into the house and then ran, leaving the greenie to stammer out an explanation to the irate woman. The woman turned out to be the bishop’s wife “and all worked out right in the end.” In Germany, a senior companion had a married friend who was coming through Germany on his honeymoon. He was just about to get a greenie, so he arranged a party with all the missionaries in the district to welcome him. He also arranged to have his married friend act as
a companion to another missionary at the party. At the party they arranged to have the greenie find the supposed missionary kissing a girl, who in reality was his wife. They didn’t tell the poor greenie that it was a joke until he had been on his knees in fasting and prayer for three days.

I could continue this way for the rest of this paper. The easiest missionary folklore to collect is this kind of prank played by seasoned missionaries, sometimes in collusion with members, on naive, unsuspecting greenies. When we first began to uncover these practices, we seriously wondered about the dedication of “ministers of the gospel” who would participate in such frivolous activity. Then a couple of our informants taught us what we should have known all along. One of them, a fellow who had protested to us that no such pranks had ever been played on him during his mission, later came to Professor Harris’s office, laid his head on the desk, and sobbed, “I was never really a part of the missionaries; now I know that I had no jokes played on me because I was not accepted.” Another young man told me that when he arrived in the Philippines, the first meal he was served in the mission home was made up of all green food served on green dishes on green linen to remind him of his greenness. “I felt like I had been baptized,” he said. And this is exactly what these pranks are—baptisms, or initiation rituals. The missionary who had never been accepted by his fellows had not been initiated. People who must work closely together, who must depend on each other in a common struggle against an alien world, must, if they are to succeed, develop camaraderie and a sense of community. Through the initiation, the new missionary, the outsider, is incorporated into the system. In scriptural terms, he puts off the old man, the greenie, and puts on the new man, the seasoned elder. He now belongs. He is first abused in some way; through the abuse he is humbled; as he recovers from the experience, usually through shared laughter, he becomes one with the group. “I felt kind of dumb at first,” said one greenie, “but it was kind of fun after it was all over.” Another commented, “It took me a while to cool down, but afterward we laughed for days about the whole thing.” Still another, who had been subjected to praying by numbers, said, “It took me a minute to figure it out, but after I did they all laughed and had a [real] prayer. We did it a few weeks later to some new elders.” In this last instance, the new missionary, only just initiated himself, soon began to initiate others and thereby was brought still more tightly into the system. Most missionaries participate in these pranks, then, as a means of establishing and maintaining a sense of community among their members.

Other folklore practices also contribute to this sense of community. A greenie newly arrived in the field will often hear his companions speaking a language he does not understand. A junior companion is not just a junior companion—he is “little brother,” “the young one,” “boy,” “the slave.” The senior companion, on the other hand, is “the boss,” “the pope,” “the chief,” “sir.” The girl back home is “the wife,” “the lady in waiting.” The rejection letter from this
girl is "the Dear John," "suitable for framing," "the acquittal," "the Big X." The mission home is "the zoo," "the Kangaroo court." Investigators are "gators," "our people." Good investigators are "goldies," "dry Mormons." Investigators who are not interested in the message but like to talk to missionaries are "professionals," "gummers," "lunchy," "the punch and cookie route." The Book of Mormon is a "bomb" (BOM). Baptisms are "tisms," "dunks," "splashes," "payday." Tracting is "bonking on doors," "self-torture." The tracting area is "the beat," "the jungle," "the war zone." Good missionaries are "spiritual giants," "rocks," "nails." Aspiring missionaries are "straight-arrow Sams," "cliff climbers," "pharisees." Bad missionaries are "screws," "hurters," "leaks," "liberals." The mission president is "the man," "Big Roy," "the head rhino." A returned missionary is "a reactivated makeout," "an octopus with a testimony." And so on. No missionary, of course, will know all of these terms. But almost all will know some of them or others like them. They have been generated over time as missionaries have characterized the circumstances of their lives in specialized language—in missionary slang or argot. When we asked missionaries why they used this language (and they use it most when they are by themselves—never with investigators and seldom with mission leaders), the most common response was that it creates a feeling of self-identification with other missionaries. It contributes, in other words, to that sense of community the initiation pranks help to establish. Once a greenie learns it, he no longer is a greenie, an outsider. He is now a missionary. He belongs. He speaks the language.

But this is not the only use of this language. The second most common response to our question was that the language was a means of letting off steam, a kind of "silent rebellion." One missionary replied, "It was about the only thing we could say that wasn't programmed." In this unprogrammed language, spoken in casual conversations, missionaries have found a means of dealing at least in part with pressures imposed by the system. A missionary who can laugh at his beat-up bicycle ("the meat grinder"), at his food ("green slop"), at his apartment ("the cave"), and even at chafing rules is likely to be much more effective than one who broods over these circumstances. If he can laughingly call his tracting area "the war zone," he is likely better to survive the battle.

Sometimes, however, the laughter makes nonmissionary Mormons uncomfortable. Many of them do not particularly enjoy hearing the Book of Mormon referred to as a "bomb" ("How many bombs did you place today, Elder?"); nor do they like to hear baptisms called "splashings" or "dunkings." But these people do not have to see their names on a comparative list each month showing the number of books placed, and they do not have to struggle to meet a baptismal quota. The missionaries are simply dealing with pressures in one of the ways open to them—by smiling through language at what might otherwise be their undoing. It is quite clear from our data that most missionaries admire the good elders, "the giants," and dislike the bad ones, "the screws." Yet for the missionary who never quite succeeds as well as he would like, who never leads the mission in baptisms, it is sometimes comforting to view those
who do as “climbers” or “straight-arrow Sams.” Similarly, when a small group of missionaries refer to the mission president as “Big Roy” instead of “President Jones,” they are not setting out to overthrow the authoritarian structure of the mission; they are simply reminding themselves that the authority who presides over them—fearsome as he sometimes appears—is also a man.

The second way missionaries use folklore, then, is to cope with the pressures resulting from submitting to the way of life and to the sometimes nagging rules prescribed by mission authorities. This fact is even more evident in some of the stories missionaries tell. Consider the following:

Two missionaries were stationed in Zambia (formerly northern Rhodesia) and were doing their normal missionary work. After a while, they decided to split and take off into the Congo. Their chapel was only forty miles from the Congo, and Leopoldville, where all the revolutionary excitement was going on, was not much further away. So they devised a plan—to make out their weekly reports to mission headquarters two weeks in advance and give them to their landlady, who in turn would send one in each week at an appointed time. By this means, the missionaries would have two free weeks to venture into the wilds of the Congo. All this would have gone well, except the stupid landlady sent the report for the second week in first and the report for the first week second. That spilled the tomatoes, and the mission president caught them.

This is one of the most widely told stories we have collected. The details can change. The landlady can send all the reports in at once to save money. The place the elders visit will depend on the mission: from Brazil they go to Argentina, from Chile to the Easter Islands, from Italy to Egypt, from Norway to Scotland, from Germany to Yugoslavia, from Okinawa to Hong Kong, and from parts of the United States to other parts of the United States. In all cases, however, the structure is the same: the missionaries prepare activity reports for several weeks in advance and leave them with the landlady; the missionaries take an unauthorized trip; the landlady sends the reports in out of sequence (or all at once); the missionaries are caught.

In somewhat similar stories, missionaries enter a sporting event against mission rules—a surfing contest, an auto race, a ski race, a bronco ride—and win. They are photographed; the pictures are published by the press; and the mission president sees them. In still others, missionaries participate in an event outside mission boundaries, like a World Series game, and somehow manage to appear in front of a TV camera just as their mission president sits down to watch the evening news.

Though many missionaries disapprove of the actions in these stories, most enjoy the stories. One of them said he enjoyed the mixed-up-report narrative “because missionaries don’t do that kind of thing, and these guys did.” That’s
exactly the point. Good missionaries do not do what characters in the stories do. Yet they delight in telling the stories. Why? Again, the missionaries themselves provide answers. One of them, who had been an assistant to his mission president told me, “Those of us who were straight, who kept the rules, had to tell stories like these to survive.” Another assistant to the president said, “You would always like to do something like that yourself, and you kinda admire someone who has the guts to do it.” A third missionary, in what is also a good description of a storytelling performance, commented perceptively:

This [an unauthorized trip story] was told to me as a true story by my first companion while we were out tracting one day. If you spend eight hours a day just walking around knocking on doors, you gotta have something to do, and it’s nice weather, and you wish you weren’t doing it [tracting], and you start telling stories. It’s escapism. It took a long time; he embellished it and dragged it out so we could waste a lot of time with it. Then we’d daydream and think about where we’d like to go if we took a vacation.

In other words, some missionaries tell these stories because the characters in the stories do for them what they cannot do for themselves—take a vacation, at least in fancy, from the rigorous life they must pursue each day of their missions. The characters in the narratives do not, I stress, provide models for the missionaries to emulate. Most missionaries know that to behave in such a way would be destructive to both themselves and the missionary system. The wayward missionaries in the stories, as Roger Abrahams has suggested of other such trickster heroes, are not models for conduct but rather “projections of desires generally thwarted by society” (1966, 321–62). The trickster’s “celebrated deeds function as an approved steam valve for the group; he is allowed to perform in this basically childish way so that the group can vicariously live his adventures without actually acting on his impulses.” In other words, as one of our missionaries said, “The elders told stories like this just to relieve the monotony, so you could just imagine what it would be like without getting in trouble for [doing] it.”

The third way missionaries use folklore is to persuade themselves and their companions to conform to accepted standards of conduct. Through dramatic narrations that tell of God and Satan intervening in their lives, missionaries attempt to show what punishments will befall the erring and what rewards await the righteous. The message of the unauthorized trip stories we have just considered is ambiguous. Since the wayward elders are always caught, the narratives could be told to warn missionaries to stay in line. Sometimes they are. Normally, however, like trickster tales in general, such tales are told as amusing stories, as stories designed to provoke laughter. The accounts of supernatural punishments and rewards, on the other hand, are told in dead seriousness.

For missionaries who dishonor their priesthood and engage in sacrilegious acts, the wrath of God is quick and sure. One widely known story, recounted
throughout the mission system, tells of elders who, as in the following account, are struck dead for testing their priesthood power by attempting to ordain a post or a Coke bottle or an animal: “Two missionaries were messing around, and they decided to confer the priesthood on a dog which they saw on the street. Before they could complete the ordinance, a bolt of lightning came and struck the dog and the two elders, and it zapped them.”

Ironically, it is usually Satan rather than God who punishes the missionaries for their wayward conduct. In one rather terrifying cycle of stories, a missionary attempts to strengthen his testimony of Christ by seeking first a testimony of Satan. In Denmark, much to the horror of his companion, a missionary began one night to pray to the devil.

He proceeded to pray, hour after hour; his companion had gone to bed and left him on his knees praying for a manifestation, or wanting to see the Devil in person. And so, as the story goes, he finally . . . made enough noise so his companion woke and went to the window and saw a black figure on a black horse coming down the road toward their apartment. And they were up at least two stories, and this particular individual, as the story goes, jumped out of the window.

Another telling of the story, this time from Norway, ended this way:

He looks over to the bed where his companion has gone to bed finally, and he’s completely dead from his appearance, and there’s a black figure on a white horse in the room, who is laughing. And then it just kind of fades away, until there’s nothing and the companion’s dead.

In many tellings of the story, the nonpraying companion summons the mission president for help. Usually when they enter the room by breaking down the door, they find the praying elder suspended in the air, his hair sometimes as white as an old man’s. In one account, when they open the door, the suspended elder’s body is slammed against the wall, instant death the result. In another, they find the bed pinned to the ceiling with the missionary dead between bed and ceiling. In still another, the elder is in bed, burned from one end to the other. In some instances, the shell of a body remains, but the insides have been cooked out.

Since not many missionaries are likely to pray to the devil, these stories are probably told and retold because of their evocative and symbolic power. They can be seen as warnings against evil in general. Numerous stories, however, do relate to specific missionary rules and regulations and are told to inspire proper adherence to them. For example, a photograph taken of an elder swimming, against mission rules, showed a black figure hovering near the swimmer.