On Being Human

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A Brazilian missionary refused to sleep in his temple garments because of hot weather: “When his companion woke in the morning, he found the errant elder pressed into the wall so hard that he could hardly pull him off. The elder was obviously dead from being mashed into the wall.” In Oklahoma, two missionaries, one with a broken arm, attended a fundamentalist revival against mission rules. The preacher healed the missionary’s arm, but as a result, the elder was possessed by an evil spirit. When the mission president cast out the spirit, the elder’s arm broke again. In other stories, missionaries are either killed or tormented for violating a variety of rules: experimenting with spiritualism, playing the Ouija board, swimming, boating, dating a girl, playing rock music, arguing with companions, not staying with companions, or sometimes simply not working hard enough. In actual performance, these stories have an emotional impact I cannot begin to communicate here. I have listened to them, and they have frightened me. Missionaries who participate in the telling or hearing of them will not lightly violate mission rules.

If the missionaries’ God is a wrathful God, he is also a generous God, ample rewarding those who do his will. Stories demonstrating this point are so numerous I cannot begin to survey them here. Three brief examples will have to suffice:

A couple of missionaries in Iceland were coming back from an appointment when their car went off the road into a ditch. They knew that if they stayed in the car they would freeze to death and no one could see them. So they started down the road hoping to find someone on that deserted road. Along came a man in a truck and got them inside just as they began to freeze to death. He dropped them off at the apartment, and before they could thank him, he was gone. And there were no tire tracks in the freshly fallen snow.

There were two elders who were tracting, and one woman invited them into her home and said she was looking for a true church. And she fed them. They made an appointment to come back and teach her some time later. As soon as they came back, and she saw who they were at the door, she invited them in and said, “I want to be baptized,” without even talking to them. And they asked her why, and she said that she had read that the true servants of the Lord could eat poison things and they would not be harmed. And then she told them that what she had fed them last week had been poison.

A missionary and his companion one time decided to take a little bike ride through the countryside, and they just kept going and going and going, and got farther out into the country. And finally they came to this little farm. It was so late that they couldn’t leave, so the couple were very, very, very nice, and in fact, they even
vacated their own bed and gave it to him and his companion, and they slept on the floor. And as it turned out, they were converted—the whole family.

The first two stories deal with the very real dangers missionaries face on the highways and at the hands of the frequently hostile people they must try to convert. The telling of these stories provides some relief from the fear engendered by these circumstances. For example, the teller of the missionaries-in-the-storm narrative said that the story shows how “the Lord really watched out for missionaries.” The teller of the poison story, a mission leader, used it as “a faith-promoting experience of what can happen if elders honor their priesthood and do their jobs properly.” The message of both is clear: do your duty and the Lord will protect you. The third narrative belongs to a category I call last-door stories. In these, missionaries are led to, or are impressed to knock on, just one more door, behind which always lives a future convert. Again the message is clear: no matter how discouraged you are, no matter how many doors have been slammed in your face, if you will trust in the Lord, keep trying, and knock on that last door, you will eventually succeed.

All of the stories we are considering here—whether of punishments or rewards—follow what I call an anxiety-reducing formula. In the performance of such a story, the narrator will “name,” or identify, a recurrent problem (a missionary who seems possessed by an evil force, for example, or a hostile community that threatens the safety of the missionaries); the performer will seek in the traditional stories available to him accounts of similar problems solved in the past; applying the wisdom gleaned from these stories, he will suggest a behavioral resolution to the present difficulty (don’t break mission rules or work hard and trust the Lord). Missionaries who participate in such performances will have their fears allayed, will gain a sense of control over a threatening environment, and will thus be able to work more effectively.

The final use to which missionaries put folklore is one that in some ways subsumes all the others. In this instance, missionaries tell stories to persuade themselves that, in spite of massive evidence to the contrary, they may eventually emerge victorious. The largest number of narratives here are the conversion stories I have just alluded to, stories that tell of missionaries bringing converts into the church and that provide hope to so-far unsuccessful elders. But in many narratives, the missionaries do not win converts; they just win—they get the best of a hostile world that has seemingly conspired against them. For example, a missionary who has been tormented again and again by animals will delight in the following account:

He went to this discussion. The lady’s cat was always bothering him. This cat just kept coming in and would attack everything on the flannel board [the board missionaries use for demonstrations]. He came up close to him and this elder just kinda reached down
and flicked it on the bridge of the nose. Didn’t mean to hurt the cat but it killed it. It dropped on the floor and the lady was out of the room at the same time, so they curled it around the leg of the chair. And he sat and petted it all through the rest of the discussion. The next time they went, the lady mentioned the cat was dead.

Most of these stories have to do with missionaries getting the best of smart alecks they encounter while tracting. For example, when a jokester says, “I hear you guys believe in baptism by immersion,” and throws a bucket of water on the elders, one replies, “Yeah, and we also believe in the laying on of hands,” and then he “cools him.” When a nosy lady snickers, “I hear you Mormons wear secret underwear,” a sharp elder responds, “Well, isn’t your underwear secret?” Or “Ma’am, there’s nothing secret about our underwear. If you’ll show us your underwear, we’ll be willing to show you ours.” When a red-headed Norwegian woman fumes, “I know what you guys do. You come over here to get all the women and you take them back to Salt Lake City and sell them,” the missionary replies, “That’s right. We just sent a shipment off last week. In fact, we had ten with red hair, and lost one dollar a piece on them.” When a woman asks the missionaries at her door if it is true that all Mormons have horns, the new junior companion replies:

“Yeah, as a matter of fact I just had mine clipped in Salt Lake just before I came out here.” And she says, “Really?” and he says, “Yeah, you can feel the little bumps right here on my forehead.” And so she put her hand on his forehead, “Well, I don’t feel anything.” And he said, “Not even a little bit silly?”

In one instance that recalls the story in which missionaries were poisoned as a test of their power, two missionaries called on a Protestant minister.

He said, “Gentlemen, I have here a glass of poison. If you will drink this poison and remain alive, I will join your church, not only myself but my entire congregation.” And he said, “If you won’t drink this poison, well, then I’ll conclude that you are false ministers of the gospel, because surely your Lord won’t let you perish.” And so this put the missionaries in a kind of a bind, so they went off in a corner and got their heads together, and they thought, “What on earth are we going to do?” So finally, after they decided, they went back over and approached the minister and said, “Tell you what—we’ve got a plan.” They said, “You drink the poison, and we’ll raise you from the dead.”

In these stories, the missionaries gain victory over their adversaries through the skillful use of their own wits. In other stories, when the opposition is keener,
they are not equal to the task and are forced to bring the Lord in to fight the battle for them. In these accounts, following biblical example, the elders shake dust from their feet and thereby curse the people who have treated them ill. The Lord responds to the missionaries’ actions in a dreadful manner. In Norway, a city treats missionaries harshly; they shake dust from their feet, and the city is destroyed by German shelling during the war. Throughout the world, other cities that have mistreated missionaries suffer similar fates. Towns are destroyed in South America by wind, in Chile by floods, in Costa Rica by a volcano, in Mexico by an earthquake, in Japan by a tidal wave, in Taiwan and Sweden by fire. In South Africa, a town’s mining industry fails; in Colorado, a town’s land becomes infertile; and in Germany, a town’s fishing industry folds. Individuals who have persecuted missionaries may also feel God’s wrath. An anti-Mormon minister, for instance, loses his job, or breaks his arm, or dies of throat cancer. A woman refuses to give missionaries water, and her well goes dry. A man angrily throws the Book of Mormon into the fire only to have his own house burn down. In one story, widely known, two elders leave their garments at a laundry, and when the proprietor holds them up for ridicule, both he and the laundry burn, the fire so hot in some instances that it melts the bricks.

I do not admire the sentiments expressed in these stories, but as a former missionary who has been spat upon, reviled, and abused in sundry ways by people I only wanted to help, I understand them. I still remember standing on doorsteps after being stung by cruel, biting rejections, and muttering to myself, “Just wait, lady. Comes the judgment, you’ll get yours.” I would not have “dusted my feet” against anyone; few missionaries would. But many savor the victories that are theirs when they participate in performances of these stories, performances that persuade them that God is on their side and will help them carry the day. For a moment at least, the world bent on thwarting their intentions to save it seems conquerable.

In one of our stories, a newly arrived missionary goes into the bathroom each morning, lathers his face richly, and shaves with great care. His companion, growing suspicious, checks the razor and discovers the greenie has been shaving without a blade. In a missionary song, a parody of “I am Sixteen Goin’ on Seventeen,” a senior companion sings to his greenie:

You are nineteen, going on twenty
Now greener than a lime,
And you have learned the twelve discussions
If you are on the dime.

 Totally unprepared are you
To face the world of men,
Timid and scared and shy are you
Of things beyond your ken.
You need someone older and wiser
Telling you what to do.
We are twenty-one, some of us twenty-two.
We'll take care of you.

In studying missionaries, we must keep always in mind that we are dealing with untried, indeed often unshaven, young men—nineteen and twenty—who in their first real encounters with the outside world are placed in circumstances that would try the mettle of the best men. In spite of J. Golden Kimball's quip that the church must be true, otherwise the missionaries would have destroyed it long ago, these young people function remarkably well. Few of them crack under the enormous pressure they face each day.

I am not foolish enough to argue that the missionaries endure only because of their folklore. They endure primarily because they are committed to their gospel and convinced of the importance of their work. But that conviction is constantly bolstered and maintained by the lore they have created. As we have seen, through the performance of this lore they develop a strong esprit de corps; they relieve the pressures imposed by the rulebound nature of the system; they channel behavior down acceptable paths; and, most important, they develop a picture of a world that can be overcome.

That world, of course, is very often the world missionaries want it to be rather than the one it is. A performance of folklore is much like a game. In it missionaries create a world similar to but nevertheless separate from the one in which they live. And in that fictive world they play the roles and face the problems that will be theirs in the real world. If the performance is successful, the fictive world and the real world for a moment become one, and missionaries leave the performance with the belief, or at least the hope, that problems faced and solved there can be faced and solved in similar ways in real life. They are a little like the ballad hero Johnny Armstrong, who, mortally wounded, leaned on his sword and shouted encouragement to his men:

        Saying, fight on, my merry men all.
        And see that none of you be tain;
        For I will stand by and bleed but awhile,
        And then will I come and fight again. (Child 1884, 3: 367–68)

Missionaries bleed. But they come back to fight again. The significance of folklore performance is that it helps them keep up the fight.

In all of this there is nothing unique to Mormon missionaries. The problems faced by missionaries are not just missionary problems; they are human problems. A missionary who tells a new junior companion to save worthless bus ticket stubs is not much different from a boy scout who sends a tenderfoot on a snipe hunt or a logger who crams a greenhorn's lunch bucket full of grasshoppers. The world is full of greenies who, to function adequately, must
first be initiated. Other people besides missionaries, then, must develop a sense of community, must deal with pressures imposed by the systems they live under, must encourage proper behavior, and must come at last to believe they can subdue the world. What missionaries share with others is not so much common stories or practices but rather common reasons for performing them—common means of achieving these ends. From studying the folklore of missionaries, or railroaders, or college professors, we will, to be sure, discover what it means to be a missionary, a railroader, or a college professor. But if we learn to look, we will discover also what it means to be human.

NOTE

1. A full bibliographic survey of the rich sources lying behind the ideas presented here is beyond the compass of this paper. The following authors and their works have helped shape my thinking and will serve as a good beginning for one wishing to pursue the subject further: Roger Abrahams (1966, 1968, 1972, 1976, 1977), Richard Bauman (1975), Dan Ben Amos (1971, 1975), Alan Dundes (1977), Robert A. Georges (1969, 1978, 1979, 1980), Michael Owen Jones (1981), Barre Toelken (1976, 1979). All items of folklore cited in this paper come from the Harris-Wilson Missionary Collection, Utah State University Folklore Archives, Logan, Utah.