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Toward the Folkloristic Study of Latter-day Saint Conversion Narratives

Eric A. Eliason

Frequently told among Latter-day Saints, conversion stories—both one's own or those of one's ancestors—constitute an important and overlooked genre at the core of Mormon narrative folklore.

My mother smoked her last cigarette in the car on the way to her baptismal interview. When the bishop asked her if she had stopped smoking, she replied quite truthfully that she had. She never smoked again.

This anecdote is only one of several that make up my mother's larger conversion story, and hers is only one among millions of conversion stories that constitute an overlooked genre at the core of Mormon narrative folklore.¹ This essay is a preliminary exploration of the place of these stories in Mormon culture. It is a declaration of scholarly opportunity that sketches the outlines of what I hope will become a much larger project utilizing the approach of folkloristics (which studies, among other things, face-to-face oral narratives particular to certain cultural groups) in order to illuminate the practice of telling conversion stories among Latter-day Saints.

The Study of Folklore in a Religious Context

The term *folklore* has an unfortunate popular pejorative connotation that can make people nervous in religious contexts. So I should make clear that to approach conversion narratives from a scholarly folkloristic perspective is not to question their veracity, but rather to analyze their contexts, histories, structures, functions, meanings, and performative and aesthetic features. In fact, approaching this topic as folklore does not cancel its religious nature; rather, acknowledging these stories' sacredness allows one to come to an even richer understanding of their meanings for those who tell them.

The importance of conversion stories to Latter-day Saints and the lack of scholarly research about the stories suggest that it is time to take a serious look at such narratives. The field of folklore studies is today particularly ripe for the study of conversion narratives due to several developments: LDS folklorists such as Wayland Hand, Austin and Alta Fife, and

William A. Wilson as well as non-LDS scholars who have written about Mormon folklore such as Richard Dorson and Barre Toelken have significantly shaped the field of folklore.² Today Mormon studies enjoys a prominent place in folkloristics, perhaps more than it does in any other discipline except American religious history.

The “big three” genre classifications of traditional folkloristics—myth, legend, and folktale—for many years had been used to describe oral-narrative traditions throughout the world. However, in the 1960s, scholars determined these classifications were extrapolated from, and thus perhaps best suited to, older European oral traditions.³ Following this lead, a wave of folklorists have augmented these “universal” generic categories with culture-specific “native” genre systems.⁴ Conversion narratives, overlooked in traditional generic taxonomies, emerge as a central “native Mormon” oral-narrative genre along with other forms of Mormon narratives, such as prayers, talks, blessings, testimonies, pioneer stories, missionary discussions, and faith-promoting experiences and rumors.

In the 1970s, scholars widened the focus of folklore to include not only third-person oral narratives, but first-person narratives as well.⁵ Of these first-person narratives, the “personal experience narrative” (PEN) has attracted attention in part because this genre remains vibrant in the face of new media technologies that have severely eroded the prevalence of traditional oral genres such as ballads, folktales, and epic legends. Also, PENs have been discovered to be not merely idiosyncratic, but also as grounded in the tradition of a culture’s verbal arts as are third-person narratives. PENs relate individual experience, but they nevertheless bear deep imprints from the larger social and ideological contexts in which the individual storytellers live.

Further, a subcategory of PEN called *memorates*, which are individuals’ accounts of religious and supernatural happenings, have enjoyed renewed attention since the 1980s.⁶ Today’s memorate analysis is a radically empirical “experience-centered” phenomenology.⁷ In other words, rather than attempting to explain away memorate experiences using preconceived naturalistic assumptions, as was done in the past, contemporary folklorists seek to better understand the human condition through close examination and comparison of memorate accounts in the context of ideologies of the narrators.⁸ Experience-centered studies show memorate occurrence to be much more widespread among mentally healthy people from a broad cross section of society than was ever before thought by secular scholars. However, many people still hesitate to discuss their memorate experiences in most settings because of the false assumption that only the deranged and culturally backward have such experiences.⁹

These studies are unlikely to surprise committed Latter-day Saints and are one evidence of an important paradigm shift taking place, not without controversy, in all scholarly disciplines that study religion.¹⁰ That religious experience is increasingly thought by scholars to be best examined respectfully in context greatly facilitates meaningful analysis of conversion narratives.

Even as this shift takes place, yet another obstacle to the fruitful study of conversion stories—folklorists' long infatuation with only the most sensationalistic of religious lore—shows signs of weakening. In the past, everyday accounts of divine assistance, as well as nonspectacular conversion stories, have been overlooked in favor of dramatic subjects such as snake handling, angelic and demonic apparitions, stigmata, possession, and glossolalia. In a recent *Western Folklore* special issue, William Wilson called on scholars to cease ignoring religious folkgroups' common central narrative types simply because they do not fit with preconceived scholarly notions about what religious folklore *should* be.¹¹ Only by looking at what religious groups themselves consider important will we come to a richer ethnographic understanding of the values and beliefs forming the inner dynamics of religious folkgroups.

Because of these recent developments, folkloristics can now contribute to a serious discussion of LDS conversion narratives. Likewise conversion-story studies potentially have much to offer folklore at a time when the field is open to new approaches.

Conversion Narratives

Conversion stories are frequently long—too long to allow for a transcription of many here. However, the following two stories from my own family history display some key features that my students and I have observed in transcribing conversion narratives from many sources. These stories are not exemplary or outstanding in any particular way. I use them simply because their social and cultural contexts are familiar to me—thus allowing me to make a more meaningful preliminary analysis of this complex and important topic. In so doing, I employ generic conventions from both the traditional scholarly monograph as well as the personal essay. This particular blending of genres seemed to me the best way to articulate both the critical importance and deeply personal sentiment this subject holds for others who have experienced it.

The Conversion of Ivar Sandberg. Like Per Hanse, the heroic Scandinavian homesteader in O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*,¹² Ivar Sandberg came to the United States with a sense that immigration would require a transformation of his whole person. On his farm in Gettysburg, South Dakota, Ivar approached this transformation with gusto, consciously

refashioning himself from a fisherman into a farmer, from a Swede into an American, and from a cultural Lutheran into a . . . he didn't know what. For some time, he was a frustrated seeker. He acquired a reputation as the village intellectual from his vigorous questioning of his pastor and from his frequent forays into the town library's religious book section.

In 1932, Ivar asked the librarian for a copy of the Koran. The librarian did not have one but offered him another "heathen" book instead—the Book of Mormon. He thanked her but grumbled that he was only interested in major heathen religions. Ivar was just about to leave empty-handed when he took the book on a whim, figuring he would have to get to it eventually if his search for the truth were to be thorough.

Having read Mark Twain's *Roughing It*,¹³ he did not have high expectations for the Book of Mormon. To his surprise, by his own account, "I had not read many pages before . . . tears started to run down my cheeks and the most sweet spirit seemed to be present."¹⁴ He removed his cap as he read—an act of reverence he had previously reserved only for the Bible.

He found the address for a Salt Lake City Deseret Book Store and ordered all of the LDS books he could. He tried several times to contact missionaries in South Dakota but failed. (He once saw a newspaper photo of the LDS mission president and wondered why the man did not get a priesthood blessing to heal him of his need to wear glasses.)

In 1934, Ivar decided to drive to Salt Lake City to present himself for baptism. He was somewhat shaken by his first experience with a flesh-and-blood Latter-day Saint—a smoking, jack-Mormon gas-station attendant in Coalville who only wanted to talk about deer hunting. Ivar followed a tour group through Temple Square, barely keeping his emotions contained. Assuming this was the standard procedure for joining the Church, he told the startled man at the information kiosk that he was ready to be baptized. After an interview with the temple president, he was baptized in the Tabernacle font in front of a group of tourists to whom he bore his testimony.

In those days, confirmations happened a day or so after baptism. In this liminal time, a sense of doom seized Ivar as he pondered his last chance to escape before an eternity of having to be wary of "sinning against the Holy Ghost." In retrospect he realized Satan had been trickily trying to dissuade him from his decision.

Ivar stayed in Salt Lake City until spring, when he was ordained an elder and sent back to his farm in Gettysburg. There he established one of the first branches in South Dakota. Among his first converts were his wife-to-be and my father's mother and father. Ivar's wife was my grandmother's sister. Ivar's daughter Kathleen, my father's cousin, may have been the first child born under the covenant of eternal marriage in South Dakota. Today, hundreds of Latter-day Saints trace their membership to Ivar's conversion.

Some readers may recognize this story from Deseret Book's edited collection *Converted to Christ through the Book of Mormon*.¹⁵ I know it from my "family novel" passed down orally with help from a much-photocopied, four-page account written by my great-uncle Ivar.¹⁶ The style and tone of Ivar's written narrative suggests that he had polished his oral version into a humorous, self-deprecating performance. Ivar's making fun of his own lack of theological sophistication underscores the purity and innocence of the early days of his conversion.

The Conversion of LeAnn Eliason. My mother's conversion story is quite different from Uncle Ivar's. She left rural Indiana to live the glamorous life in Manhattan Beach, California. As a TWA stewardess, she met a dashing young Corvette-driving South Dakotan fighter pilot at a party in Montana. Sparks flew between these two adventure-seeking refugees from midwestern farm life, and a protracted long-distance relationship ensued.

My father was more committed to his denomination than she was to hers. After studying with several sets of missionaries, she decided she didn't mind switching religions if it was going to be a prerequisite to marriage. After her last cigarette and her baptism, LeAnn Shafer married Dan Eliason on July 18, 1965, at Frank Lloyd Wright's Wayfarers' Chapel, just off the Pacific Coast Highway. One year later, they married again and made it eternal in the St. George Temple. Mom says she cannot quite put her finger on the time when her conversion of convenience led to a real testimony. She says, "Had Dan died after a few years of marriage, I might have drifted away," but she has always been an active, participating member and for decades has known herself to be a committed, true believer.

Conversion Stories as Folklore Narratives

Family members usually relate both Ivar's and LeAnn's conversion stories without reference to written documents. In fact, there is no written version of my mother's story—only various oral ones. Rather than transcriptions of others' oral versions of these narratives, both of these accounts are my own written renditions based on my own oral versions of the stories. I chose to present them this way to acknowledge the living nature of these stories and my position as a member of the family folk-groups in which they are found. For me to excise myself from the process through which these stories circulate and by which they are shaped would be artificial. Telling these stories in my own words seemed the best way to capture the flavor of how they might be told in a natural setting.

These two stories give a taste of the range of narrative possibilities that emerge from LDS conversion experiences. Approaching them analytically, we can begin to look at conversion stories in the ways folklorists examine narratives—for their contexts, histories, structures, functions, performance qualities, and meanings.

Contexts. LDS culture is rife with conversion-storytelling occasions. The Church's missionary force may relate the Joseph Smith story and personal conversion stories upwards of a hundred thousand times a day to people all over the world.¹⁷ The children of converts learn their parents' stories around the dinner table or at family home evening. People moving into a ward are routinely interrogated by the friendly question, "So, did you grow up in the Church or are you a convert? . . . Oh really! So tell us your conversion story."¹⁸ In "mission field" wards in particular, conversion stories are a familiar part of testimony meeting. Given our interest in telling and hearing conversion stories, it is not surprising that several LDS conversion-story websites have emerged on the internet. Being blessed with a particularly interesting conversion has put several Latter-day Saints on the fireside-youth conference speaker circuit.

The way in which these various contexts might affect how a conversion story is told is an issue to explore in the future: To what degree do storytellers adapt their narratives based on such factors as whether their audience is LDS, if they have a lot or a little time, if the occasion is serious or light, if they are engaged in conversation geared toward proselytizing the hearer, and if they are with familiar people in a comfortable setting?

Histories. In tracing the history of particular story types, folklorists have largely given up the search for *ur-narratives* (prototypes) as highly speculative and oblivious to a story's likely multiple ancestry. However, in the case of LDS conversion stories, the canonized version of Joseph Smith's 1820 vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ may be the great prototype that many Latter-day Saint conversions recapitulate. Mormon literary scholars Neal Lambert and Richard Cracroft say the First Vision marks the "center" of Mormonism because of its place in LDS self-conception.¹⁹ This apt evaluation reflects the historical development of the First Vision's place in LDS thought.²⁰

As is well known, Joseph Smith related several different versions of the First Vision for different audiences and purposes,²¹ and the event's place in members' conception of Church history grew from obscurity to surpass even the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in its significance to Mormons.²² As in studies of First Vision narratives, historicizing Latter-day Saint conversion stories collectively and individually may uncover the patterns and meanings of their variation through time and in different narrative contexts.

Structures. Oral narratives do not occur in random arrangements but follow patterns particular to their genres. Many LDS conversion narratives, including Ivar Sandberg's, share with the canonized account of Joseph Smith's First Vision the following main motifs or building blocks:²³

1. Individual finds self in a situation that raises concern about a lack of correct religious knowledge—a revival for Joseph Smith; immigration for Ivar.

2. Individual encounters a long, frustrating search for true religion—both Joseph Smith and Ivar had run-ins with local clergy and underwent great soul searching.
3. Individual experiences an epiphany that suggests that the seeker is on the right track—reading James 1:6 for Joseph Smith; reading the Book of Mormon for Ivar.
4. Adversary attempts dissuasive intervention—Satan’s assault at the Sacred Grove; Ivar’s fear of sinning against the Holy Ghost.
5. Individual receives the gift of true religious knowledge and a connection with God—Joseph Smith’s vision; Ivar’s baptism at Temple Square.

Amy Ward, a folklore student at BYU, conducted a fieldwork project comparing the conversion stories of converts from outside the Church to the stories of those who grew up in the Church but decided at a certain point to find their own testimonies. In her limited sample, she found that the stories of the people who were already Church members closely followed the Joseph Smith pattern. Those who were converts from outside the Church were more likely to describe their conversion as the result of being “surprised by the truth” or as a long process in which they did not realize that they were actually searching for something, rather than as the result of a quest such as Ivar’s. She also found that converts from within the Church were much less likely to have ever been asked to relate their conversion experiences and were surprised and delighted to be asked by her.²⁴

While many conversion stories of converts from outside the Church do not fit the canonical structure of the Joseph Smith narrative, perhaps the ones most likely to elicit retellings by the community are those, like Ivar’s, that do show a familiar structural pattern. My mother’s story follows Amy Ward’s observations in that it shares nothing but the last motif in the Joseph Smith sequence above. However, I imagine my mother’s experience is not an uncommon one even if it is not a commonly related story type. Stories left untold relate cultural information as well as stories told, though “untold stories” present a definite interpretive challenge to folklorists.

A bright student in my American folklore class mentioned that the tellings of stories like my mother’s should mention the subjects’ continuously held Church callings. Otherwise, by the expectations of the genre, her story might be judged as lacking experiential authenticity. I think he is right. Still, I suspect that as conversion stories are collected and compared, multiple structural patterns will turn up. Parley P. Pratt’s Ivar-Sandberg-like experience and Brigham Young’s two years of mulling before conversion provide widely different models from impeccably orthodox early Saints.

Functions. The proselytizing function of conversion narratives should interest scholars seeking to understand the dynamics of folkgroup formation and cohesion. Telling one's own conversion story maintains one's position within a culture's center by commemorating a boundary-crossing movement from liminality to *communitas* and, in some circumstances, encourages others to make the same commitment. I am convinced that Ivar's story, told from the heart, was a crucial instrument in bringing my ancestors and many others to the gospel.

Conversion stories also increasingly share the same function as nineteenth-century Mormon pioneer narratives. They form an inspirational and faith-promoting popular historical consciousness for Latter-day Saints. For many Saints, family history *is* pioneer history. However, an increasing percentage of Church members are neither descendants of plains-crossing pioneers, nor first generation LDS. Rather they are descended from twentieth-century converts. The westering epic can be accessible to them as Church history but not as family history. "Family Church history" for these Latter-day Saints begins with parents' or grandparents' conversion stories. Elder L. Tom Perry recently suggested that it is Latter-day Saints' duty to record their conversion stories for posterity. By so doing, the descendants of the convert are connected to the community.²⁵

My family's Church history proved useful as I was courting my wife. Her Smith-family, veterinarian grandfather places a high value on pedigree, not only in animal husbandry, but also in predicting the religious stalwartness of human beings. So one can imagine my relief when he said of Ivar Sandberg, "Why, your family were Church pioneers in South Dakota!" My experience concurs with performance-studies theorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's emphasis on narrative's role as a personal resource.²⁶ Her work shows how an individual's properly deployed repertoire of lore can smooth interpersonal relationships and integrate extended family units.

Performance Qualities. The dominant theoretical paradigm in folkloristics since the 1970s evaluates folklore as discrete artistic activity produced by creative performers in the situational context of specific events.²⁷ Various audiences evaluate performances for their adherence to, or innovative transcendence of, community-situated aesthetic and moral principles that emerge and are maintained through performer-receptor interaction. Performers adjust their repertoire, content, and style for varying audiences, who are in turn transformed through their reception of the performers' lore. As more attention is given to conversion stories, we can begin to ask questions such as, What are Mormon folklore's aesthetic and artistic principles? How are these principles conveyed, maintained, and shaped by telling conversion stories?

Some preliminary observations can be made using Ivar's account. His seemingly odd use of humor in such a profoundly religious topic—the quips about the “heathen” Book of Mormon and the bespectacled mission president that came directly from his account—may be a more common performative aspect of conversion stories than one might expect, especially in settings where the audience is not LDS. Effective humor makes stories more listenable. When of a self-deprecating variety as is Ivar's, a light-hearted telling also helps protect a conversion-story narrator against audience accusations of self-righteousness and self-aggrandizement. As a means of acknowledging how incredible elements of his or her conversion experiences might sound to one who has not had any such experiences, humor also protects the narrator against ridicule and rejection. Humor allows stories to succeed on levels other than the conversion of the hearer. In situations where the audience is comprised of fellow Saints likely to believe, humor seems to be less prevalent.²⁸

These performative features might seem akin to what sociologist Erving Goffman has called strategies of face preservation.²⁹ Perhaps those face-saving elements are sometimes present in LDS conversion-narrative telling events, but these features can also be understood as emerging from central LDS values such as seeking to share the gospel in the most effective way possible, avoiding pride (also a strong Scandinavian ethic of Ivar's generation), and protecting sacred things from ridicule by the teller retaining effective, friendly control over the humor of the story.

It should be noted, too, that Latter-day Saints often evaluate conversion narratives and testimonies based on an antiperformance aesthetic. Stories that seem contrived, melodramatic, self-centered, or manipulative can be deemed in violation of the principles of this genre's *raison d'être*.³⁰ Undoubtedly, some conversion-narrative tellers may attempt to affect “unaffected” speech patterns, thus making nonperformance into a kind of performance. However, regarding the performance-centered approach as an explanatory panacea runs the risk of incorrectly casting simple, sincere religious narrations as contrived performances of nonperformance. LeAnn's story, for example, is a definite nonperformance. Because it is almost an anticonversion story with no hint of affected spirituality or retrospective dramatics, it carries a sense of simple honesty.

Meanings. Perhaps the most important observation to be made about conversion stories is that they convey, in narrative form, fundamental Latter-day Saint epistemological and metaphysical propositions. The body of LDS conversion stories provides countless personal witnesses to the idea that anyone, through humble study and prayer (Ivar before baptism and LeAnn after) can receive direct revelation of the truths that God lives and loves us so much that he sent his Son, established a Church, and provided scriptures to teach us the principles of salvation. The heavens remain open and

light pours out into the souls of those who seek it. The Restoration continues to unfold, penetrating more and more lives through the same principles employed by Joseph Smith and the ancients.

This corpus of down-to-earth personal experience narratives told by those who have found the gospel lays out and vivifies Latter-day Saint religiosity better than any systematic abstract theological treatise ever could.³¹ Non-LDS scholars Harold Bloom and Nathan Hatch suggest that LDS belief in the centrality of personal revelation in conversion and ongoing religious life is the genius of Latter-day Saint success and its most significant “ground level” difference from other streams of Christianity.³²

Future Directions

Currently, the BYU folklore archive contains only a smattering of conversion narratives, but it is prepared to receive many more for scholarly and public use as collectors learn to regard conversion stories as a key Mormon narrative genre. These observations are a call to begin a more vigorous collecting and examining of conversion narratives. Questions to pursue as more data come in might include the following:

- ◆ How, if at all, are women’s conversion narratives different from men’s? South Americans’ from Africans’ or Pacific islanders’? Missionaries returning from Haiti tell me that dreams and angelic visitations are almost a standard element there, while such occurrences are uncommon and rarely shared in the United States. BYU graduate student Amy Nelson’s research suggests that in Taiwan, and perhaps Asian culture in general, converts prefer not to relate their conversion experiences in terms of a personal narrative. Rather, they favor nonnarrative allegories that illustrate the benefits and general principles of religious enlightenment while only obliquely, if at all, referring to their own experiences. Nelson suggests that differing Chinese and American notions about the nature and importance of the self seem to be at the root of these different evaluations of “self”-centered discourse.³³
- ◆ How do “I grew up in the Church but found my own testimony” and reactivation conversion stories compare with those of converts from outside the Church?
- ◆ Will written personal narratives become the literary genre through which Mormons most contribute to world literature, as some have suggested?³⁴ Since personal narratives have their roots not only in the especially significant LDS practice of journal writing, but also in the oral traditions of bearing testimony and relating conversion narratives, what kind of role might conversion narratives play in the development of written Mormon literature?

- ◆ How do Mormon conversion stories illuminate the process of religious change generally?³⁵ In 1990 the most sophisticated survey of American religiosity in decades suggested that one-fourth to one-third of all Americans have converted to a new religion, switched denominations, lost faith, gained faith, or otherwise undergone a transformation of their world view.³⁶
- ◆ Some questions of applied folklore that BYU is especially equipped to handle are, How might fostering the telling of conversion stories in faith-affirming contexts aid in convert retention and long-term testimony growth? In what ways can a better understanding of conversion-narrative functions and processes contribute to the worldwide missionary program? While few tellings of a conversion story directly result in a convert baptism, what was the effect of conversion stories on those who did decide to join the Church? How do investigators respond to personal-experience conversion stories versus third-person conversion stories versus simple, declarative testimonies in nonnarrative form? Preliminary research suggests that telling conversion stories almost *always* has a powerful effect on the *teller*—recalling the same emotions and spirit present at the time of the events described.

We will not know the answers to such questions until more stories begin rolling into the archives. Brigham Young University is well poised to undertake this task. Those interested in submitting conversion stories to the BYU Folklore Archive can contact archivist Kristi Bell for submission information at 1-801-378-6041 or send a letter of inquiry to BYU Folklore Archive, Box 44, HBLL, Provo, UT 84602.

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1. This study is based on my own research and that of students in my folklore classes at Brigham Young University. All living people whose conversion stories or whose reaction to conversion stories appear in this essay have read this manuscript prior to its publication. Some suggested minor changes that I have incorporated. All agreed to let me use their names and stories.

2. For bibliographic information concerning Mormon contributions to folkloristics as well as the study of Mormons by folklorists, see Jill Terry, "Exploring Belief and Custom: The Study of Mormon Folklore," *Utah Folklife Newsletter* 23 (winter 1989): 1–4; William A. Wilson, "A Bibliography of Studies in Mormon Folklore," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 44 (fall 1976): 389–94.

3. Dan Ben-Amos, ed., *Folklore Genres* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969); Dell Hymes, "Introduction toward Ethnographics of Communication," *American Anthropologist* 66, no. 6, part 2 (1964).

4. A fine collection of this kind of scholarship can be found in Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer, eds., *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

5. Sandra K. D. Stahl, "Personal Experience Stories," in *Handbook of American Folklore*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983): 268–76; Barbara Allen, "Personal Experience Narratives: Use and Meaning in Interaction," *Folklore and Mythology Studies* 2 (1978): 5–7.

6. For a comparative description of various religious-narrative genres including memorates, see Juha Pentikäinen, "The Pre-Literate Stages of Religious Tradition," in *Shamanism and Culture: Essays by Juha Pentikäinen* (Helsinki: Etnika, 1997): 14–16.

7. For a collection of research on memorates, see Barbara Walker, ed., *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1995).

8. For a classic example of naturalistically "explaining" away memorates, see Lauri Honko, "Memorates and the Study of Folk Beliefs," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 1 (1964): 5–19.

9. For a lengthy discussion of this issue, see David J. Hufford, *The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

10. For an impressive scholarly challenge to the traditional forces that argue against the validity of religious experience, see Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

11. William A. Wilson, "Folklore, a Mirror for What? Reflections of a Mormon Folklorist," *Western Folklore* 54 (January 1995): 13–21.

12. O. E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1929).

13. "The book [of Mormon] is a curiosity to me, it is such a pretentious affair, and yet so 'slow,' so sleepy. . . . It is chloroform in print." Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: Penguin Book, 1962), 102.

14. Karl Ivar Sandberg, "My Conversion to the Mormon Church," unpublished manuscript in author's possession, n.d., unpaginated.

15. Eugene England, ed., *Converted to Christ through the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 65–70.

16. William A. Wilson, "In Praise of Ourselves: Stories to Tell," *BYU Studies* 30, no. 1 (1990): 21; Sandberg, "My Conversion."

17. This estimate is based on 50,000 missionaries multiplied by an estimated two first discussions given per day. This may seem high, but recently returned missionaries tell me that the imperative of sharing a "five-minute first discussion" at every contact is being increasingly stressed.

18. With the rapid growth of the LDS Church, particularly in the last few decades, the likelihood that any given member of the Church is a convert is very high—perhaps over two-thirds of Church membership. For the worldwide Church, approximately three converts are baptized for every one eight-year-old Mormon child baptized. In the western United States, this ratio is about one to one. See Tim B. Heaton "Vital Statistics," in *Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and Its Members*, ed. James T. Duke (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 117, 118.

19. Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, "Literary Form and Historical Understanding: Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 31–42.

20. James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 43–61.

21. See Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 275.

22. Jan Shipps suggests that the First Vision rose to prominence in Latter-day Saint consciousness as a way of keeping the martyred prophet-founder at the center of Mormon sacred history during the time "those who knew Joseph" passed away. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 32–33.

23. This necessary sequential motif structure is similar to what Russian folklorist Vladímir Propp calls "functions" in his studies of Russian folktales. Vladímir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2d ed., trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 25–65.

24. Amy Ward, "The Performance of Conversion Narratives in the Mormon Community," student fieldwork project, Brigham Young University, December 1997, BYU Folklore Archives, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

25. Michael Smart, "Good Family Name Can Influence Generations, Apostle Says," *Salt Lake Tribune*, February 15, 1997, sec. D.

26. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "A Parable in Context: A Social Interactional Analysis of Storytelling Performance," in *Folklore: Performance and Communication*, ed. Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), 105–30.

27. Essays on the history and various aspects of the "performance-centered approach" to folklore can be found in Richard Bauman, ed., *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-Centered Handbook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

28. Amy Ward found that her informants did not use humor in their interviews with her. Rather they told the stories in a solemn manner that often resulted in tears and manifestation of deep emotions. This fervent approach is very different from Ivar's tellings. A possible reason may be that Ivar's story took shape during his life as a member-missionary in contexts where the story might not be believed. In their interviews with Amy, the conversion-narrative tellers were in a one-on-one setting with a friendly, believing Latter-day Saint as their only audience.

29. Erving Goffman, "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction," *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes* 18 (1955): 213–31. See also Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).

30. This observation was first brought to my attention by Mormon anthropologist Richard Bounforte, who has completed unpublished research on the sociolinguistics of LDS testimony bearing.

31. An excellent illustration of the importance of conversion stories to understanding the Mormon experience can be found in Gary Browning, *Russia and the Restored Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997). Browning is a professor of Russian at Brigham Young University and former mission president of the Helsinki East and Russia Moscow Missions. His book uses conversion-story accounts written by Russian converts to the Church as the basis for telling the history of the first years of Mormonism in post-Soviet Russia. See review in this issue, 203–6.

32. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 79–128; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 113–22.

33. Amy Nelson, "Cross-Cultural Conversion Narratives: Telling the Story My Way" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, in progress).

34. Eugene England, conversation with author, Provo, Utah, 1995; Steven Walker, conversation with author, Provo, Utah, 1998.

35. Studies of the conversion narratives and the conversion processes undergone by Scientologists and by Evangelical Protestants have been undertaken in Harriet Whitehead, *Renunciation and Reformulation: A Study of Conversion in an American Sect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); and Peter G. Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

36. Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman, *One Nation under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society* (New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1993), 1, 239.