





In the early days of the Church, members not only expected to have a personal testimony of its truthfulness, they also expected that miracles would accompany their belief. “Early converts came to expect dramatic miraculous occurrences.”¹ Women regularly spoke in tongues, received visions and dreams, and healed the sick.² In contrast to the 20th-century practicality that infuses the Church today, Claudia L. Bushman describes a “spiritual enthusiasm” not evident in the way we practice today. The causes of such a change are multiple. Partly to blame was the skepticism

|| by tessa meyer santiago

illustrations by dilleen marsh

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of the world regarding such spiritual experiences. Also to blame was the fact that the Saints came to feel that the manifestations were “a fire that could burn as well as bless.”³ For example, when some would experience the gift of tongues, they found themselves unable to control their emotional outbursts. One hostile observer described the young participants of an early 1830s meeting as “[rolling] upon the floor . . . [and] taken with a fit of jabbering that which they neither understood themselves nor any body else, and this they call speaking foreign languages by divine inspiration.”⁴ Official reactions to such emotional outbursts were also severe. Parley P. Pratt found the actions deplorable. At his request Joseph Smith counseled with the Lord and received the revelation we know now as Section 50, stating, “That which doth not edify is not of God, and is darkness.”⁵ Members who had spiritual manifestations during meetings were censured. “Restrained behavior” was officially encouraged and spiritual manifestations went underground.⁶

I’ve noticed a similar trend in our congregations to package the spiritual declarations shared as testimony. The trend defines our witnessing as declarative statements: I know, I know, I know. Stories and narratives are actively discouraged. I am troubled by this. It encourages a uniformity of form but a lack of substance. Such an approach robs us of another way of knowing and removes the requirement of active listening and deciphering. From a legal perspective, without narrative our testimony is incomplete; consequently, our worship communities lack dimension and wholeness.

When first approached to comment on the topic of conversion narratives, I responded with the idea that perhaps narrative is not the best form in which to embody the story of our conversions, taking into account that conversions are ever-present, that we change from day to day, and that my knowledge and certainty about principles and programs morphs as I experience the gospel and the Church from different vantage points. My desire was, then, to strip away the dross and to reduce what I do know to the few nuggets that I have currently in my arsenal. A haiku, I suggested, was perhaps the best form.

I wasn’t thinking very clearly. I repent of my earlier notions, embroiled as I was in the aftermath of decisions made without me. I

just didn’t want my story to be their story. I’ve thought better and deeper since then, not quite so instinctively, and come to the decision that narrative is the only way to bear witness of conversion—written or oral. For our own sakes, and for the sake of our faith community, testimonies must contain narrative. It is the telling of the stories that allows any competent witness to testify, that allows us to identify with a community, that forces us to accept stories other than our own and to give them—both the stories and the witnesses—real space and time in our midst.

1 narrative allows every competent witness and every relevant story to be told

The American legal system, contrary to popular opinion, is based upon a set of rules—rules for filing civil suits, rules for prosecuting criminals, and rules for introducing evidence at trial. The Federal Rules of Evidence guide the introduction of all evidence into a judicial proceeding. These rules are, surprisingly, inclusive. We would do well to consider these rules in our official and unofficial censure of both the form and the person of our spiritual witnesses. (As we discuss these rules, think of the woman in your congregation who, without fail, shuffles to the pulpit and proceeds to bear what the Parley P. in us would consider “excessive, offensive” testimony, replete with the meeting of the Savior in the parking lot of Circle K.)

In court and in the Church, our “first responsibility is to tell the story, to say very simply what happened, so that knowledge of these events can do its work.”⁷ In a court of law, testimony is judged according to two main characteristics: (1) the witness must be competent, and (2) the evidence must be relevant. Rule 601 states that “every person is competent to be a witness.” Case law interprets that rule to mean that a witness is competent to testify if he is capable of communicating relevant material and understands he has an obligation to do so.⁸ This definition allows the blind, the deaf, the speakers of foreign languages (with interpreters), children, and the mentally disabled and mentally ill to testify. Any person may take the stand, as long as he has personal knowledge of a relevant fact.⁹ A witness is not prevented from testifying if he has a less-than-savory past or present, or even if he is known to have lied

before.¹⁰ A witness may still take the stand and testify even though what she says is obviously self-serving.¹¹

There are so many other things that could be discussed here to cast doubt on the witness: the inherent instability of the remembered experiences, clothed as it is in language that is based on memory; the editorial slant of the speaker, driven by the desire to create a consistent, autobiographical figure, one who acts consistently with the experience and with the meaning of the experience;¹² and the reason that the witness is given in the first place, imbued as it might be with flavor from all the other selves that we inhabit—“the vain aspirer . . . , the intellectual . . . , the would-be dominant male.”¹³ As problematic as these issues are, they go, as the opinions say, to the weight of the matter, i.e., to how much credibility the jury will give to the actual testimony. Whether testimony is allowed at all, whether it is admissible, is entirely another question.

What is relevant testimony? *Relevancy* is defined as having “any tendency to make the existence of any fact that is of consequence to the determination of an action more probable or less probable than it would without the evidence.”¹⁴ These rules and practice favor the admission of evidence rather than its exclusion if it has any probative value at all.¹⁵ If what a person knows (has experienced through their senses or their perceptions) goes to the proving or disproving of a material fact, their testimony is relevant. They are allowed to testify in a court of law.

What is “legally” relevant to us in our religious arena? Any personal knowledge gained through the senses or through perception that helps the juror/congregation/reader determine whether a fact is more likely than not—thus any testimony gained through personal experience that, for example, God lives, that he cares, that he has an opinion about a particular organization; that Jesus lived and lives; that repentance is vital, necessary, and effective; that prayer is a proven method of communication; that prophets speak; and that women matter (that’s my particular, personal question). Because I cannot say for your “action” what the necessary questions are is precisely why we need an inclusive, broad definition of religious relevancy that allows any



witness capable of communicating their knowledge gained through personal experience to testify. Their story may fill in the gaps in our own—self-serving, mixed motives, prior bad acts notwithstanding.

We are shortsighted in our censoring personal and collective assumptions that God or His Church does not need all witnesses or needs only certain kinds of testimony. I have noted the official censoring or shaping of our public tales. There are other ways we censor: personally, we censor ourselves, determining—as judge, jury, and witness rolled into one—that our narrative falls short of the standard or differs too much in shape and form. A collective censoring occurs when through our reaction or absolute nonresponse to others’ narratives, we broadcast a judicial determination that their testimony is irrelevant and that they are incompetent. In reality, that we can witness with any truthfulness at all bears testimony to our inherent competency in the eyes of the Divine. That He interacts

with us, in even the slightest way, creates an underlying relevance to the story we tell.

2 narrative allows the audience to test the witness and provides a way for the audience to decide whether the witness is telling a truth

While the Spirit can testify of truth, we are cemented in the rationalistic tradition.¹⁶ While we can feel in our hearts, it helps to know in both our minds and in our hearts.¹⁷ The current tendency in worship meetings is to caution the attendants to keep their testimonies brief, to declare and sit down. We are admonished to reduce our statements to bare declarations of knowing.¹⁸ Practically, this provides more time for people to witness. However, how will my children know to whom they must look, and recognize Him when He comes, if we do not tell what He has done?¹⁹

The great, pure testimonies of our faith contain narrative portions that anchor the spiritual declaration to this physical sphere.

Joseph Smith's witness, considered "pure testimony,"²⁰ provides the personal experience to support the spiritual declaration.

And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!

*For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father.*²¹

Imagine this testimony without narrative, without the physical context. "And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!" How does Joseph know that He lives? Because he saw, and he heard, and he watched, and he listened. The physical details—the narrative—cement and give weight to the knowledge.

John's testimony of the Savior also satisfies the listener's need to ground the spiritual declaration in the physical:

*And I, John, bear record, and lo, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Ghost descended upon him in the form of a dove, and sat upon him, and there came a voice out of heaven saying, This is my beloved Son.*²²

John testifies that he knows of the Savior's mission. How does he know? He saw His glory, manifested in a dove, and he heard the voice of the Father.

While a testimony may be a statement, the bearing of it is a communal act done before an audience grounded in both a rationalistic and a spiritual tradition. Like a juror listening to a witness on the stand in a court of law, narrative satisfies the congregant's need to know how a truth is knowable as well as what truth is knowable.

3 narrative creates and maintains a community identity

The requirements of testimony define us as a community of believers, of seekers. Telling our story to each other allows us to "coauthor a story" for our faith communities. Together, we form a communal story that "has coherence and fidelity for the life [we] would lead."²³ This story is both oral and written.²⁴ All share a similar form. In Puritan times the common story was the conversion

narrative. A conversion narrative is originally "the oral confession of sins by ordinary men and women, usually delivered before a church congregation, a confession heard and recorded by a minister and which, if the candidate were judged worthy, resulted in 'conversion' and church membership."²⁵ Mormon spiritual narratives share these same characteristics: an unawareness, a descent into darkness, a light, a recognition of the light, and a commitment to be a better person. While

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not required for official membership in the Church, I contend that the telling of our conversions (I use this term loosely to denote the spiritual interactions with the Divine that cause us to contemplate, assess, and recommit) fully inducts into the faith community. We self-identify in a powerful, binding ritual of narrative-based testimony. "There is a certain power in sharing certain personal experiences and discoveries, either as the [audience] or the [teller]."²⁶ Telling creates belonging.

We belong to a community of believers and seekers. That is how we define ourselves. We tell about what we know. Everybody knows at least one relevant divine fact. Thus everybody has a story to tell. That story does

not depend on rank, education, connection, or wealth. Thus testimony is, potentially, the great equalizer. The only requirement is that the declarant has a personal experience with the Divine. Since "all are equal in the sight of God," and He promises that "he stands at the door" awaiting our response, this requirement is easily satisfied. Walter Fisher describes narrative as possessing an "intrinsic egalitarian bias."²⁷ Politically, at some deep level, "Americans have always understood: equality among citizens is essential to the community of meaning that defines the American nation."²⁸ Fittingly, we construct our spiritual communities on these same egalitarian principles.

Related to this idea that our actions define us as a body of believers is the legal principle that we cannot testify about what we do not know.²⁹ The core requirement for any competent testimony is that the declarant has personal knowledge of the event. While it satisfies the cynic in us to speak passionately, even movingly, about what we do not know or what we have doubts about, that is not testimony and would be excluded in a court of law. The law considers those statements irrelevant to the determination at hand. Spiritually, the requirement to speak from knowledge may restrict many of our theological ruminations. I don't stand often in my congregation. Whether I should get up to talk about what I do not know as a preface to what I do know is a question I often ask myself. I never have, held back by a reticence that is unreasoned but persistent. I understand more clearly now the reason for the reticence. My personal doubts, my cynicism, i.e., what I do not know, is not testimony. In this setting it is irrelevant. My time in that setting would be better spent determining exactly what I do know—to which part of the Divine story may I authentically and truthfully testify. Our narratives might become briefer, shorter, and more circumspect, but perhaps they'll be *more* essentially, i.e., relevant, and in keeping with our definition of a community of believers.

4 narrative expands our view, allowing us to experience ambiguity, different aspects of the same god

We are confronted with what is, what should be, with the power of God's grace, and the human predicament in the face of it.

The challenge is, what do we do with the aftermath? In our haste we should not cast out the form altogether.

Do people lie under oath? Yes. Do we testify of things we know nothing about? Certainly. The oath taken before testifying in court is supposed “to awaken the conscience” and aid the witness in testifying truthfully.³⁰ Similarly, the context in which we testify (a prayer, an ordinance, or the knowledge that posterity is reading) should awaken in us a desire to speak truthfully or at the very least consistently. But when the form morphs into something we cannot recognize, it goes to the weight of the evidence. When the witness turns out to be weak and sinful or the changed being changes back,³¹ does that destroy his conversion narrative? No.

I like Wendell Berry’s thoughts on form in poetry and marriage, and I believe they have application to this question of testimony and its form and shortcomings: In a devoted, communal, religious life, just as

in marriage . . . , the given word implies the acceptance of a form that is never entirely of one’s own making.

[The first aspect to these forms] is the way of making or acting or doing, which is to some extent technical. That is to say that definitions—settings of limits—are involved. When understood seriously enough, a form is a way of accepting and of living within the limits of the creaturely life. . . .

The second aspect of these forms is an opening, a generosity, toward possibility. The forms acknowledge that good is possible; they hope for it, await it, and prepare its welcome—though they dare not require it. These two aspects are inseparable. To forsake the way is to forsake the possibility. To give up the form is to abandon the hope. . . .

Arbitrary in the choosing, these forms, once chosen and kept, are not arbitrary, but become inseparable from our definition as human beings.³²

While the structure of the meeting in which we bear witness may be arbitrary, chosen without our input, we, by virtue of our words and actions, have chosen the form. This practice becomes “inseparable” from our definition as Mormons. Just as Quakers inhabit their silence, Mormons live with and within testimony. The form and forum denote we are a group of believers. We believe that God will speak to us and intersect with our lives. We speak of these knowable things.

The substance might surprise us: witnesses deconvert; the narrative changes on us; the witness lies or bears witness of things outside of her personal experience. That’s the risk we run. The form has inherent weaknesses: narrative artificially designates a beginning and an end, while the underlying life that it presupposes to represent continues.³³

But testimony, like marriage, is in its “set form . . . an invocation to unknown possibility. . . . One puts down the first line of the pattern in trust that life and language [and grace] are abundant enough to complete it.”³⁴ Because God works with us, our stories change. In the retelling we add to the common body our increased knowledge of the Divine. Our spiritual lives and our faith community become, quite literally, open-ended creative narrative processes.

conclusion

We are, essentially, storytellers. Our first responsibility is to tell the story as simply as we can. This narration operates on many levels to satisfy our needs: it satisfies our need to have a voice and our need to bear witness, to attest to a personal God. The spiritual narratives of our lives attest that there is, in knowable fact, one who knows us and who is, in turn, knowable. Testimony provides evidence that God still operates on the earth, if not in our lives then in the lives of others. When we hear the stories others tell of a God who seems to know them personally, it creates in us a hunger to have that closeness or a skepticism that what was said could not possibly have happened the way purported. Either way, we are engaged, spurred on to become—if we are not already—competent witnesses with relevant stories to tell.

NOTES

- ① See Claudia Lauper Bushman, “Mystics and Healers,” *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah*, ed. Claudia L. Bushman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Emmeline Press, 1976), 3.
- ② *Id.* at 4–11.
- ③ *Id.* at 11.
- ④ *Id.* at 12.
- ⑤ Doctrine and Covenants 50:23.
- ⑥ Claudia Bushman, “Mystics and Healers,” at 12.
- ⑦ Richard Bushman, “My Belief,” *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed

Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 28.

- ⑧ See *U.S. v. Villalta*, 662 F.2d 1205 (5th Cir. 1981).
- ⑨ Rule 602: “A witness may not testify to a matter unless evidence is introduced sufficient to support a finding that the witness has personal knowledge of the matter.”
- ⑩ *U.S. v. Bedouire*, 913 F.2d 782 (10th Cir. 1990).
- ⑪ *Fiedler v. McKee Corp.*, 605 F.2d 542 (10 Cir. 1979).
- ⑫ See Charles J. G. Griffin, “The Rhetoric of Form in Conversion Narratives,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76 (1990): 152.
- ⑬ See Richard Bushman, “My Belief,” at 28.
- ⑭ Rule 401.
- ⑮ See *U.S. v. Carranco*, 551 F.2d 1197 (10th Cir. 1977).
- ⑯ See Bushman, “My Belief” at 26–27.
- ⑰ See D&C 8: 2.
- ⑱ See, for example, Jay E. Jensen, “Testimony,” *Ensign*, November 2004, 22–24.
- ⑲ See 2 Nephi 25: 23, 26–27.
- ⑳ Jay E. Jensen, “Testimony,” *Ensign*, November 2004, 22–24.
- ㉑ D&C 76: 22–24.
- ㉒ D&C 93:15.
- ㉓ Walter R. Fisher, “Narration, Reason and Community,” 214.
- ㉔ All tellers, both oral and written, tell of a “conversion.” Our stories have in common “a recognition and confession of the writer’s own sins and the announced need for redemption. . . . [All] share a need to tell one’s story [and] the changed lives that these narrative relate. The impulse is the same—to witness, to testify. Indeed, the writing of a conversion narrative is, to a great extent, the final proof of that conversion—the equivalent of testifying.” Fred Hobson, *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 4.
- ㉕ Hobson, “But Now I See,” at 1.
- ㉖ Valerie Holladay, “The Path of the Wanderer: Autobiographical Theory and the Personal Essay,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 89.
- ㉗ Fisher at 209.
- ㉘ Kenneth Karst, quoted in Fisher at 213.
- ㉙ Rule 602.
- ㉚ Rule 603.
- ㉛ Hobson, “But Now I See,” at 3.
- ㉜ Wendell Berry, *Standing by Words* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), 201, 203.
- ㉝ Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 37–38.
- ㉞ *Id.* at 204–5.

Tessa Meyer Santiago, ’01, is part of the Rex E. Lee Advocacy Program faculty and teaches legal writing at the J. Reuben Clark Law School at Brigham Young University.