

I, Eye, Aye: A Personal Essay on Personal Essays

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IN *A BELIEVING PEOPLE*, Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert lament that the essay "has not been as vital a literary force in Mormondom as might be expected." Early Mormons, they note, kept forceful diaries, wrote poetry (much of it didactic), recorded their sermons, eschewed fiction, but what passed for essays "read like editorials" and avoided the revelation of personal feelings and attitudes. "The personal essay with all of its reflection and scrutiny on life, seemed to have little role in Mormon literature, although the personal reminiscence of the pioneer and the General Authority were—and still are—important. As the Church struggled for its corporate life, its members saw more value in writing of those things which fostered group identity than they did in examining those individual characteristics which make each Saint different from his brother."

I don't know why we expected the early Mormons to write essays. I am not surprised that they didn't. They were too busy pushing back frontiers and building monuments. They might have turned parts of their diaries into essays, but essays are usually written in tranquility, and in those early days there was little tranquility in Mormon life—nor is there much today. The busy structure of the modern Church does not lend itself to the rumination required for the birth of that fragile form—the personal essay.

Nor do I think essays can grow from the soil of Mormon life without considerable husbanding. They must be cultivated like the plants that transformed the desert. Both readers and writers must help create the right environment for the growth of this distinctive form which is capable of giving such peculiar and particular pleasure.

"Peculiar and particular"—these are the words to describe the personal essay. I think of Lowell Bennion rubbing his chin as he ponders the possibility of being both rationally and emotionally committed to his faith; I think of Eugene England blessing his Chevrolet; of Laurel Ulrich marching

bravely into priesthood meeting to tell the brethren how it feels to be a woman; I see Ed Geary saying goodbye to his hometown; I see Dean May irrigating his garden; Clifton Jolley watching for his baby's first smile. I see peculiar people setting down their particular observations according to their own slightly eccentric habits, and I celebrate their truthfulness, their willingness to risk themselves for small gain. I celebrate them for their willingness to be vulnerable. For the personal essay is vulnerable. It cannot stand upon its footnotes.

I first became aware of the personal essay in Mormon life through the writings of Parley A. Christensen. He was still teaching at Brigham Young University when I went there as an instructor, more than twenty years ago, and I am glad to have known him in his last years, and to have been introduced to his *All in a Teacher's Day*. His was a calm and witty dedication to the humanities and to the teaching of the humanities.

My real commitment to the form began, however, with the founding of *Dialogue* in 1966. Its editors, especially Gene England, were devoted to the essay as a logical extension of that vital form—the testimony. The first issue carried what I believe to be one of the finest essays ever written by a Mormon—"The Challenge of Honesty" by Frances Menlove.

Who, having read that first issue, can forget the "myth of the unruffled Mormon" and the "malaise among Mormons today" which keeps them from confronting their own "inner reality" and dealing openly with what they do and do not believe? Her warnings to both liberals and conservatives are cogent still:

The religious liberal is generally thought of as one who examines his religious life and his church frankly and openly and recognizes the weaknesses and incongruity where they exist and comments freely on his observations. He is often . . . candid . . . while remaining active in community church organizations and maintaining a respected place in the . . . community. The potential of inner deception here lies in the possibility that he will use his candidness, his frank and often entirely justified criticisms and demands for change as a smoke screen for his more basic religious problems The individual is thus relieved from coming to terms with himself. . . .

Similarly, the religious conservative has his particular pitfalls. In his desire to preserve and protect he may become indiscriminate and fail to make important distinctions between historical accidents and timeless truths. . . . Behind the mask of fanatical preservation may be the real fear that the truth of the Church is too fragile to tamper with, that an honest and open examination may destroy his faith or his way of life. Thus the religious conservative may also be hiding from himself a basic lack of faith.

The mid-sixties also saw published Karl Keller's "Every Soul Has Its South," a moving account of a Mormon's venture into the Civil Rights Movement:

"You leave God behind, you know, when you enter Kentucky," the driver of the car said as we crossed the Ohio River bridges into Louisville. "This is the South, the damned and damning South."

I was a Mormon going civil-rights-ing and that made a difference. . . . Local members advised me not to go. It's not approved. You're needed here; It's beneath you; You can't change things. . . . You're not the

type; But little they know the reasons of the blood.

I went because I was frankly worried: worried that my wife and children should find me slipping after talking intense brotherhood, worried that church members I had led and taught should know where the doctrine but not the action in life is, worried that the students I counseled and read and philosophized with where I taught should reach for meaning for their lives and find no guts, worried in fact that I should somehow, while propagating and preaching the Kingdom of God, miss it, miss it altogether. The rest was nonsense.

When time no longer ties me to certain necessities. . . I will turn again . . . to lose myself among the trapped and degenerate. How else am I to find what I in this world must find—myself? Every soul has its own South. Especially a Mormon's.

Keller suffers more beautifully on paper than almost anyone else, and has followed up that first piece with many other fine essays, incisive and literary.

In 1967 Carlos Whiting wrote his popular conversion essay, "An Honorable Surrender," (followed in 1974 by "Some Thoughts on a Rational Approach to Mormonism"). Conversion came to him "suddenly," he wrote,

There was no voice and no vision. I merely surrendered, as the honest and honorable thing to do. It was a Sunday morning and we were at breakfast. In a few minutes my family and I would leave for Sunday School at a nearby protestant church. There was a notable unwillingness to go (I was an officer and had many responsibilities in the church and it was my duty to attend). I looked around the table at my wife and young children.

"Should we go to Mormon Sunday School?" I surprised us all by asking.

"Yes, let's," they clamored.

I smiled wryly at my wife. "I'm converted at the breakfast table."

Others followed, most notably Carole Hansen's "Death of a Son," an eloquent and painful account of a child dying of cancer, the inability of the elders to heal him and an ensuing renewal of faith. By 1968 such personal essays, under the title "Personal Voices" had become a regular *Dialogue* feature. In this space Victor Cline, whose fine "The Faith of a Psychologist" appeared in *Dialogue's* first issue, regularly contributed his fascinating and, to some readers, maddening opinions; Lowell Bennion shared his thoughtful reflections on the meaning of daily life; Ed Geary perfected his brilliant predeliction for the nostalgic and yet unsentimental that has become a mainstay of the genre.

Happily the fresh pace of the late Sixties accelerated in the Seventies. The "pink" woman's issue of 1971 helped launch the now well-established *Exponent II*, published originally by Claudia Bushman *et al*, and carried on by Nancy Dredge and Grethe Peterson in Boston. In that issue Laurel Ulrich debuted as an essayist in a personal discussion on birth control; Christine Durham in an account of how she and her husband not only raised babies but also put each other through school. Lucybeth Rampton's Mother's Day speech qualifies as a fine personal document. Such essays as Almera Anderson Romney's prize winning account of life as a white teacher in a black school, "All Children are Alike Unto Me," joined Jaroldeen Edwards'

hymn to the earth mother, in "Full House":

I wake up in the morning to the sound of my husband's voice. But it is not really an awakening, rather it is a continuing. For night as we used to know it no longer comes to our home. There is a lull in activity, yes; but in the way of our youth, when night and sleep were a total experience that blocked the chain of days, a precious all-in-one piece of unconsciousness, an ending and a forgetting—in that sense night does not come. . . .

BYU Studies, *Exponent II*, *Sunstone*, the *BYU Alumni paper Today* and *Utah Holiday* have also made lasting contributions to the form. *BYU Studies* published Leonard Arrington's charming autobiographical essay. *Exponent II* has as its stated objective to publish small personal accounts of individual lives that might not otherwise see the light of day. As might be expected, they often discuss the problems of housewifery. Helen Candland Stark cries "When is Enough, Enough?":

Since I was the eldest of nine children, with no sisters until after four brothers, I naturally fell into the role of Mama's little helper. In addition, Mama had a legitimate escape hatch—she liked to work in the garden. So I manned, or rather, womanned the kitchen . . . Was there no end except bed? Something in me cried for some time of my own.

Ardith N. Walker asks "What's a Mother to Do?"

I've been jogging every morning for ten months, three weeks, and two days. I've had to fight off mad dogs, ignore jeering high school students, brave blinding snow storms, endure twelve degree weather. I've tripped through ankle deep chuck holes, inhaled stunning odors on garbage days, and worse of all, had to slog uphill the last half of the way . . . but I was convinced it was worth it. . . . Then yesterday an orthopedic surgeon told my husband there is nothing worse on feet and knees than jogging.

Emma Lou Thayne's personal tribute to tennis is more upbeat. She describes the thrill of playing in a tournament during which the adult she is merges with the girl she was. "It may stay as one of the real recognitions that only now and then is it allowed us—to see the gratuities of eternity—that growing older is the richest kind of blending, for it multiplies as it combines. On the court, in the heart, in the plan, the growing not old, but older is probably the only way of knowing how much right there is in the journey."

Today, in my opinion the best alumni newspaper, is fortunate in having some fine essayists on the *BYU* campus. Laura Wadley, assistant editor of *BYU Studies* contributes to the nostalgic, occasional form. She is good at making lists that stay in the mind. In the school's Centennial commemoration, she recounts its blessings: ". . . The short shaky climb up the stepladder to the telescope to see the moon suddenly sprung close. . . .

. . . The lazy lighthearted sunny afternoon class in Mark Twain in which the teacher can say Pap Finn was a real Adult Aaronic and be *perfectly* understood.

. . . Brigham Young standing silent at the upper edge of the campus. . . .

. . . The long rows of beguilingly bound books, of test tubes, or sewing

machines, typewriters, lathes, paintings and clay pots. The life of the mind, the skill of the hands, all that will take us from where we are to where we most earnestly desire to be. . . .

. . . and finally . . . one man coming to the Center of the darkness of the deep of the Marriott Center, the light gathering around him as he walks. He begins: "My beloved brothers and sisters. . . ."

Clifton Jolley's confessionals also appear in *Today*. He recounts his trips abroad, his former deceptions as an undergraduate, and most delightfully his opinions as a father. In "Food is important, but . . ." he claims to be profoundly concerned about pollution and the rapidly diminishing food supply, but he allows that he has a problem—actually, five problems: three girls and two boys.

You see, I am not particularly fond of children. As a matter of fact I am almost certain to loathe *your* children—wretched little creatures who are more likely to wipe their noses on my trousers' leg than thrill me with their sweetness. So if you were to suggest that *you* were planning to limit your family to one or two children, I would probably be enthusiastic. If, on the other hand you were to suggest that *I* limit the number of *my* children well . . . that's my problem.

He claims his own children as gifts, and his wife agrees:

You see the last baby was absolutely perfect . . . Oh, I know it's horrifying. The idea even horrifies me a little—all those orchards filling up. Los Angeles getting no nicer. But then again, there *is* Sarah. She'll eat rocks, and anyone who'll eat rocks can't be too much of a threat to the environment.

Utah Holiday is making a continuing contribution to the art of the comic essay, and its classic is "I remember Ernie," by Jaron Summers, former BYU newspaper editor. His portrait of the late Ernest Wilkinson is funny, and it will awaken memories in anyone who ever had his hand crunched by "Ernie." But it manages, too, to bring a lump to the throat, as the best comedy can do. Having described Ernie as a "Tasmanian Devil . . . a giant badger . . . a troll" he elaborates in his "compulsion to prove to BYU and the rest of the world that he was as stout as Jimmy Cagney and as rugged as John Wayne." He did this through his handshake. . . . "He was proud how he could out crunch thousands of the frosh and just to make sure no one forgot what he was doing, Ernie had someone standing by with a pocket counter." Years later, Summers writes, he returned to Utah where he saw Ernie coming toward him: He had been sick, and had lost weight; he looked weak. "Time had won." Jaron is touched as he takes "Wilkinson's hand softly in mine . . ." only to be surprised once more by the iron grip:

Instantly the fire blazed in his eyes. He clamped down on my five unsuspecting fingers; and I knew what it would be like to have my hand tangled in an electric flour mill. He gritted his teeth and chortled. . . .

And then he let up, and that awful pressure faded and he shuffled down the corridor to his meeting; and I think if I hadn't loved the old bugger so much I would have body-checked him through the nearest window, or tried to.

II

As an undergraduate at the University of Utah, I amused myself by writing feature articles for the *Utah Chronicle*. They covered such important topics as my phobias, advice on dating, pseudo surveys. One day, the father of one of my good friends, a writer on the *Salt Lake Tribune*, called me into his office. He had been reading my pieces and he wanted to offer a bit of useful advice from an old pro. It was "Never use the first person pronoun." My work was studded with "I's"! Why, there were three or four of them in one paragraph. Such egomania had no place in serious journalism.

I have never forgotten his advice and I have seldom obeyed it.

I am happy that the writers of the Mormon essay do not obey it either. I maintain that the *I's* are what distinguish the personal essay from other forms of literature and that all the best ones combine the best use of three *I's* (*I's*, *eyes*, *ayes*). Like any other pat structural analysis, this can be carried too far, but I like it, not only because I made it up myself, but because it allows me to discuss my personal favorites.

At first glance it seems that women writers use more first person pronouns than other writers do, but I have not documented this. I notice that my favorite among my own attempts, "Mr. Mustard Plaster," has seven *I's* in the first paragraph and that "Counseling the Brethren," by Laurel Ulrich, has three *I's* and several *me's*:

The scent of shaving lotion startled me. It was like finding a "No Trespassing" sign in some familiar patch of woods. I'd walked through that door a hundred times, would teach Sunday School in the same classroom an hour later, yet the spice in the air made me an adventurer.

"Hey, Sister Ulrich, this is a priesthood meeting," an elder teased from the end of the row as I sat down. His good humor made me feel more comfortable, but less exotic. He knew I'd been invited.

Using so many *I's* could mean an overpowering ego at work, or it could represent a refreshing willingness to share oneself. I submit that it is less egotistical in the traditional sense of the word to use the simple *I* than to assume a royal *we*. The *I* takes complete responsibility for its own failings and peccadillos—a nice change from the monumental style of many sermons and articles in our past and present. Nor are these *I's* afraid to make grandiose claims for themselves. Gene England, in what he tells me is his own favorite, begins this way:

The first time I participated in the "Hosanna Shout" I felt the presence of actual beings from another world joining us in that cry of praise and the following "Hosanna Anthem." That was in the Celestial Room of the Oakland Temple in 1964, following President David O. McKay's dedicatory prayer. . . . And I do believe, strange as it perhaps seems for me—a skeptical, rationalistic, university-trained professor of English—to be saying this, that we were joined by spiritual beings—whether former prophets, angelic messengers or repentant sinners—who had similar reasons to our own to rejoice.

His description of the dedication of the Washington D.C. Temple is in a

personal style—some might claim too personal for publication, dropping names of good friends, almost as in a letter home.

Exponent II's editors have claimed that the non-threatening "throw-away" quality of their paper was meant to encourage women to emerge from their cocoons and, if not to fly away, at least to test their wings. Although I sometimes worry that the throw-away paper lacks the permanence researchers and future readers need, I continue to appreciate the diverse voices published there. Its coverage of the IWY conferences in various states illustrates the variety of *I's* attending. Rebecca Cornwall cries out: "I am not comforted by the reality that Mormon women were misinformed and manipulated by radical conservatives . . . I am disturbed that Mormon women were so easily manipulated. . . ." While Belva Ashton says, "As I read some of the negative news reports of the Utah IWY Conference, I could not believe they were reporting the same conference I was attending. I felt in general that it was great. . . ." "What woman isn't unique—one of a kind?" asks Diane McKinney, and the personal essays throughout *Exponent II* answer this question.

The eye is the ability of the writers to see more clearly than ordinary folk, to record what is seen in selective detail and to shape the record to support the other *I's*.

Edward Geary's eye is not bloodshot, though it occasionally holds a tear. Like a camera it records and preserves artifacts of our culture. The eye of his essays is truly conservative, conserving and generously preserving humor, characters and scenes from the past. "Goodbye to Poplarhaven," is the Geary eye at its clearest. "The town of my childhood, Huntington, Utah, is no older than my grandparents and contains nothing that is likely to outlast my grandchildren; yet from it has come whatever sense I have of human continuity." He compares the town to the Lombardy poplar tree which is "not a long-lived tree; its limbs are brittle and its soft wood subject to decay. This pattern of early growth and early decline held true for the town as well as its trees." His brief history of the town is wistful but realistic: "It was into this gradual and gentle decay that I was born, and I grew up in an old town. The people were old because the majority of each new generation left the valley and only a few, like my parents, remained out of nostalgia or hope, to have in their turn children who would grow up to move away."

In "Disorder and Early Joy," the reader shares Geary's finely tuned sense of humor as the eye sees that "to grow up in rural Utah is to inherit a tradition of unpainted outbuildings, tumbled-down fences and superannuated farm implements; a world held together by bailing-wire." He quotes a friend who maintains that a "true Utahan cannot be perfectly happy unless he has an old Buick rusting away in the pasture," or, from Geary's childhood, "an old Dodge with wooden spoked wheels, decaying gently under an apricot tree beside my grandfather's tool shed."

He describes his grandfather's entire stock of rusty tools and the other treasures that enriched his own fantasy life, and ends with his dream: "Some men cherish the secret dream of escaping to a South Sea Island teeming with brown-limbed maidens. . . . But I am looking for an old farmstead somewhere in a forgotten corner of Utah. The house isn't important, but I want a sway-backed barn that has never known a coat of paint . . . an apricot tree and a yellow transparent apple tree . . . a place whose inhabitants never

throw anything away that might come in handy some day."

Samuel Taylor and Wayne Carver are also able to transform their past with the magic wand of the fiction-writer, often using their gifts to turn essay into memoir. Carver's "A Child's Christmas in Utah," a Mormon version of the famous Dylan Thomas story, beautifully recreates the rural atmosphere of a Utah that is past. Taylor's "The Second Coming of Santa Claus: Christmas in a Polygamous Family" is only one of a whole collection of witty essays in which Taylor invokes a particular time and place in Mormon life. His voice is always true to the form, a voice easily recognizable, often endearing, a voice that truly speaks for his selective eye.

The eye of the Mormon essayist is nearly always looking upon the past, applying it to the present with sadness, yet with hope. Even in "Death of a Child," the unsentimental account of an unbearable experience, we are reminded that hopelessness is brief and does not endure.

Late that afternoon . . . he died. His spirit struggled to free itself from that wasted body, and he was free.

Oh, how empty was that room. I wrapped what was left of his little body tenderly in a blanket and held it close in my rocking chair as I had yearned so long to do. He could feel the pain no longer. And when at last I gave him up to the mortician, he received the body with tears on his cheeks.

That body had grown in four months from a child to a wasted old man. And his spirit had grown large enough to fill all our hearts and lives with faith and expectation until we meet again.

If tragedy can be described as ending, as permanent loss, then tragedy is foreign to most Mormon writers. As Maureen Ursenbach Beecher has put it, even in applying the term "martyrdom" to the murder of Joseph Smith is found the "doctrinal assurance that death was not a tragic end to this life but a glorious promise for the next."

Many aye-saying essays are written testimonies. Gene England bears his testimony when he describes the emotional significance of the Temple, as he applies consecrated oil to his car, or, when he launches a new magazine. In fact, most of the essayists I have mentioned bear their testimonies to life itself, its variety, its humor, its pain and to the many lessons it teaches.

Lowell Bennion's personal essays are not life transformed into art, or life transformed by art, as in the works of Jolley and Taylor; they are bits and pieces of himself, collected and presented for inspection. It can almost be said that his life and his work are one, all of a piece created out of whole cloth.

"Brother Bennion" has dedicated his professional and religious life to "carrying water on both shoulders," that is, to helping the student to reconcile the two worlds of university and church, the life of the mind and the life of the spirit. Bennion's students will recognize the voice in this paragraph:

. . . I look upon religion and secular thought as being complementary . . . as well as conflicting. . . . I no longer seek to harmonize them . . . in the sense of expecting them to give me identical views of reality (as I once did). I reject, for example, those well meant efforts of people whom I respect, who try to make a biology or geology text out of

Genesis . . . or who read a theory of physics into D&C 93. For me, the scriptures declare the existence of God and his will and man's obligation to God and fellowman, and they leave me free to explore nature and human nature as I will.

Typically, Bennion declares the inalienable right to free agency in all of his works but accompanies it with a plea for humility: "Religionists have a tendency—based on their faith in revelation—to reduce God and His ways to man's ways of doing and perceiving things. . . . It is becoming to a man of faith to realize that his knowledge of God and His eternal truth is relative to the person's own capacity and experience," or "Our religion is bigger than any one man's conception of it."

Perhaps the best part of the aye-saying essay is its humor. Mormons, usually a jolly people, often seem afraid of humor in print. We may need to be reminded that in the personal essay the writers speak only for themselves, not for anyone else, certainly not for God. They are therefore free to laugh at themselves, and if they find no one else is laughing, that is the chance they must take.

I have already mentioned *Utah Holiday*. It makes a continuing contribution to humor in its regular features, most notably James Kimball's travel columns, and Richard Menzies' "Pure Mendacity," which takes wry jabs at Utah culture. For instance, in the "Swell Names Zones":

The need for new and different given names resulted from the practice of plural marriage. Since the progeny tended to share a common surname, it became necessary to invent ever more original first names. Otherwise, life in the provinces assumed a depressingly monotonous flavor—witness the case of Jens Jensen, born and buried in Jensen, Utah.

Most Mormon humor is gentle. It may be applied to institutions, but it usually pointed inward. I think of Clifton Jolley's descriptions of his children, Taylor's accounts of polygamous family life and Geary's regional portraits, like this brief one of Bert Westover who reputedly fought at San Juan Hill with Teddy Roosevelt:

Except for his own funeral, I don't ever remember seeing him inside the church house. However, he used to declare his intentions of moving away somewhere before the Millennium because his house would be the first place they hit coming over the hill from the cemetery and they'd eat him out of house and home.

Certain characteristic themes recur throughout all the personal essays: loss of old buildings and old towns; the difficulty of living one's religion creatively; the search for authenticity and wholeness; the need to mend fences, to preserve eccentricity. And through them all, there is the desire to reach out without striking out, a striving for the right word, the delicate balance.