

Who We Are, Where We Come From

Linda Sillitoe

TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT HISTORY is most essentially, I think, knowing who we are and where we come from.

When Mormon historians began to shed additional light on the beginnings of Joseph Smith and the LDS Church, the "new Mormon history" was born, wailing and kicking. Not knowing who we are and where we come from brings a particular pain. In recent decades, this pain has prompted a surge in women's and ethnic histories so that, like adopted children searching for their biological parents, we can more fully know ourselves.

As a writer, I am compelled by unheard, unseen, and untold stories, whether I encounter them in an individual, a culture, or an organization. I offer two examples of how a subtext for the story itself may appear.

I spent 1 December 1979, the Saturday of Sonia Johnson's excommunication trial, in her home. As I researched, I also observed her mother, who had come from Logan, Utah, roasting a turkey for Sunday, even as the family fasted. That evening Sonia's father telephoned from Logan, scolded her, and commanded her to kneel before her bishop and beg forgiveness rather than be thrown out of the Church. These incidents and others told me volumes about who Sonia Johnson was and where she came from.

Salt Lake City writer LINDA SILLITOE co-produced "Native AND American" for KUED-TV. She is a founder of Bridgewalker: Cross-cultural Communications and is completing an ethnobiography, One Voice Rising, with Clifford Duncan for the University of Utah Press. This essay was first presented at the B. H. Roberts Forum, 17 October 1991, part of a panel presentation entitled "Telling the Truth About Our History."

Similarly, during the five weeks in the spring of 1986 that I spent in a courtroom with Mark Hofmann, I observed his father driving Mark to court in Mark's van, pushing Mark's wheelchair, sitting behind Mark's shoulder and taking notes of the testimony, then conferring with Mark during breaks while Mark paid him the scantest attention. All that, added to the complete absence of Mark's mother from the hearing, told me volumes about who Mark Hofmann was and where he came from.

Lying awake as I tried to "sleep on" my decision whether to take part in a discussion of "Telling the Truth About Our History," I recalled some recent readings on spiritual experience. A discussion of "initiatory experiences" had identified the experiences that rock our sense of reality. Within the Mormon context, such experiences might include the difficult encounter with a Church authority whom one knows, trusts, or even loves. An initiatory experience might come through a clinical depression when our own thoughts betray us, when what makes sense is distorted. It might be a near-death experience that reveals death not what we had imagined and life not exactly what we thought it was, either. It might come with the loss of health or loss of a loved one or through viewing or giving birth. An initiatory experience might also come when, after a long inward struggle, we enter our own sacred grove and find a vision.

The movies—which have become a common medium in our time for society's messages and wisdom—often use an initial sexual encounter between two leading characters to signal an initiatory experience. If that is the purpose of scripting the tryst, the lovemaking will transform the relationship or the protagonists' world. As we watch the two characters attract and unite, the experienced viewer decodes the action not as, "Oh yes, this is exactly my experience in real life," but as, "Oh, now nothing will be the same."

However it comes, the initiatory experience leaves us reeling—things are not as we thought they were, and nothing will ever again be the same. These experiences are not limited to one per customer. In Mormon culture, truth-telling—unless it conforms to what has been correlated for group comfort—tends to heighten or trigger initiatory experience for the speaker. However, that experience affects not only the individual who speaks out but widens to touch those who identify with what is said or with what occurs.

Yet when truth-telling elicits prohibitive reactions, these reactions are often viewed as separate, unrelated instances, especially if those centrally involved differ from us in belief, opinion, or culture. When we analyze these experiences, measure them according to severity, or compare them according to type, we are thinking in what is sometimes

called the first perspective—the perspective of objective thought in which everything is separate. This is the perspective most of us have been taught formally and informally. A simple example: you attend your child's school conference and are shown her spelling tests, marked A, and her handwriting samples, also marked A. Then you look at her history report, which is difficult to read and red-penciled with spelling errors. It is marked A also, graded for history content, not for spelling or handwriting.

In more sophisticated settings, we are listened to and praised when we use analytical thinking and distinct categories and sometimes laughed at if we don't. For instance, the business executive who attends a conference despite a migraine headache, a dead car battery, and a snowstorm is considered a minor hero who has overcome separate, coincidental obstacles. The business executive who reads the migraine, the stalled car, and the snowstorm as signs that something is out of kilter related to attending the conference is likely to be laughed out of a job.

We view this analytical perspective as the way we must handle the business of our lives. This perspective is true, as far as it goes, but it is limited. The abused spouse who sees each incident as unrelated will cope and forgive endlessly, engage fully with each battle, and refuse to draw the connections that might alter her strategy.

About the time the "Arrington spring" began to feel hot and sticky, I began to see my own and others' experiences as linked, using the second perspective in which everything is connected. This is the perspective that has prompted environmental consciousness in many communities, when people see that garbage thrown into the air, or onto the earth, or into the river remains in our world—it is not thrown *away*. This second perspective of connection is true, and it is also limited. In connecting events, whether sharing "horror stories" or "delving into the mysteries" of the past, it is easy to become overwhelmed without finding any peace.

Before discussing the other two perspectives, let me pause in the everything-is-connected mode. In considering the truths and consequences of telling our history, who we are and where we come from strongly influences our individual and communal perceptions. The community that supports the symposia and publications confronting these issues may be unaware, in dealing with its own pressures, that another community, at least as large and probably larger, has, in the last few years, also been dealing with a painful, disruptive, and disorienting event. This event has not only affected those centrally involved but has raised religious, cultural, and identity issues for thousands of individuals. Many of them, including those who have talked to me,

have found their worlds shaken. Reality is not what they thought it was, and it will never again be the same.

For the most part, both communities, mostly unaware of one another, have viewed this event, to some degree, in the everything-is-separate perspective. For me, aware of both communities, everything has been connected. Many Church members remember where they were and what they were doing when they first heard that black men would be given the priesthood or when bombs exploded in Salt Lake City. The members of the second community remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard that Elder George P. Lee had been excommunicated.

I remember, too. Since then I have listened as my Native American friends and sometimes brand-new acquaintances have unburdened their thoughts and feelings. I have hoped that someone more credible and qualified in the Native American world, or just less battered in the truth-and-consequences game, would write or say everything I felt. Some things have been written and said, and I hope there will be more.

Nevertheless, I believe that George Lee belongs in a discussion of telling the truth and reaping the consequences. I know that many concerned with this issue will hear. I also see my opportunity and responsibility to place him in that discussion partly because I have a stake in each community, partly because I am a communicator, but mainly because I am indebted.

Much has been made of the opportunities the Church has given Native Americans to gain an education and assimilation skills. My own experience has been somewhat different. Since 1982 when, as a *Deseret News* reporter, I began to research and write about Indian issues in Utah, my world view has been challenged and altered. As I educated myself in American Indian history and learned how the West was lost—and the East, the North, and the South—as I read contemporary Native American literature and cultural myth, as I listened to people of different tribes discuss current issues, reservation and urban life, and eventually native cultures and religions, I found myself encountering numerous small but jarring experiences. In effect, I was leaving my own isolated ethnic reservation and entering an extraordinarily complex world.

Later, when I emerged from investigating a dark corner of my own culture, it was the light in the Native American world that I instinctively sought. I know who I am and where I come from. But I am profoundly grateful that, despite the vigorous efforts of my people, Native Americans have preserved a world in which everything is alive and aware, everything has spirit and meaning, the four perspectives

are all operative, and that, directly and indirectly, Indian people have been and are my teachers.

Before we can understand George P. Lee facing the Council of Twelve and their decision of excommunication, we must know at least a little of his background. In his book, *Silent Courage* (Deseret Book, 1987), he describes how he was born at a tiny clinic some distance from his mesa home near the Four Corners. After resting on the floor for a bit, his mother wrapped him in her shawl and painfully climbed the cliffs to the family hogan.

Like many mystics or spiritual leaders, George was seriously ill several times in his childhood and once was actually placed in his grave. He was healed each time through native ceremony and powerful prayers. His father was a native healer *and* an alcoholic, spiritual power and physical weakness not being mutually exclusive in the Navajo world. George grew up in a world that was both rich and impoverished. Sharing was a virtue that ensured survival, and people who accumulated too much material wealth and did not share with their relatives (meaning an extensive clan) were seen as unnatural and therefore suspect.

George and his many siblings sometimes found their hogan was shared not only by family but by rattlesnakes that slithered in, seeking warmth in the cold desert night. As a young child, George learned how to lift the rattlesnakes on sticks, carry them out of the hogan and down the mesa, then explain to them, as his father had taught him, the need for them to live separately, respectfully, in peace.

As an older child, George Lee learned city ways and became the superstar of the placement program, an experience shared by most of the community leaders I interviewed. I concluded that the placement program and the extensive American Indian program at Brigham Young University had a significant impact on developing the skills that placed Native Americans in the positions where a reporter would encounter them. But I heard many stories of the disorientation and pain experienced by some taken out of their families and taught that who they were, where they came from, and how their families lived were all invalid and inferior. If they would only behave, think, and believe in ways entirely different, they could be accepted in a supposedly superior world. Those young travelers, winter and summer between the cities and the reservations, made adjustments—if they survived psychologically and physically—that few of us can understand.

“Why did they always call us ‘little Lamanites?’” one woman asked me in a long conversation. “It was as if they could only deal with us if we were small.”

I've yet to find any survivors, no matter how acculturated, who did not fiercely honor their tribal heritage and who did not come to appreciate the sacrifice of parents on the reservation, or honor them or grandparents as their first spiritual teachers. George Lee did survive in the Church programs; in fact, he shone. Some of his peers at BYU who protested the temporary discontinuation of powwows thought maybe George trusted the white man a little too much. Nevertheless, as a college graduate, college president, doctoral candidate, and mission president, he became Mormonism's example of its success. He also became a role model for many Native Americans, especially for the eventual tens of thousands of Navajos who were also Mormons.

George Lee and the others had a book of scripture placed in their hands and were told this was the story of their grandfathers. (Unlike their own origin stories, Book of Mormon stories didn't give their grandmothers much press.) They were taught that the day of the Lamanite was coming, that once again the Indian people would lead, that they were its harbingers. George P. Lee was ordained a General Authority to that end.

Years passed, and ultimately George Lee's brethren, virtually all businessmen, decided—as was related to Native Americans who then told me—that the Church was not getting a “good return on its investment” in the Indian programs. For instance, some Navajo bishops and clerks could hardly be constrained to keep all the statistics and fill out all the paperwork required of a branch. They had other things to do. A talented institute teacher would not restrain himself or his family from taking part in powwows and other cultural activities, or even stop wearing turquoise and silver. In fact, and this was especially maddening, many Indian people seemed to feel that religion itself was good; they'd combine Church programs with their own native ceremonies and songs. That tendency might be understandable, to a degree, in Africa or Tonga or South America—but not in the enlightened United States. Some tribes were also beginning to resist and criticize the non-Indian adoption, education, or assimilation of their children.

Before long, some LDS Native Americans began to feel less “special” within the Church. The Christ in the Americas program disappeared from the presentations on Temple Square. The Church's Indian seminary and institute program vanished, and other programs rapidly eroded. For some LDS Native Americans, well grounded in both worlds, these changes presented no problem. For others, whose pride in heritage and expectation of prophecy had melded into a belief system or who viewed the changes as a political downturn, the apparent fall from promise, if not grace, was alarming.

Elder George P. Lee had long been the example, the token, the spokesman for his people. He did not protest the political reasons why these programs were no longer in vogue so much as he insisted that the spiritual issues that he and others had been taught were being ignored. The day of the Lamanite seemed to have passed without ever fully arriving. Also, the racism, materialism, and elitism, strong in both the American and Mormon cultures, were taking a personal toll. Many Native Americans who visited with Lee knew that he was unhappy, that he felt ineffectual, frustrated. As the situation worsened, the businessmen who led the Church concluded, evidently, they were no longer getting a “good return on their investment” in George Lee.

Many of you have read Lee’s statement in *Sunstone* or other media. Some of you have copies of the original paper he read at his hearing, photocopies of which hit the Mormon grapevine very quickly. Those of you who saw a copy know that it is not the sophisticated treatise of a doctor of education, nor is it politically astute, nor was it type-written, edited, or faxed to the media. It is the attempt of a man who sat up half the night with a pen in his hand to express the truth of who he was, where he came from, and what burned in his heart. He pleaded for his brethren’s love, understanding, and approval; but he also told them he could no longer bear the racism and materialism he perceived, nor the “scriptural and spiritual slaughter” of his people.

Perhaps they could have released him from his position or sent him back to the Australia Mission, or put him on emeritus status if they felt discipline was necessary. They didn’t. After the vote of his brethren, George Lee walked a couple of blocks to the *Salt Lake Tribune* office. A reporter, trying to figure out how to find this General Authority he’d just heard of named George P. Lee, looked up to see a weary Indian man leaning on the counter. They went into a room and sat down, and the man told the reporter, “I’m George Lee. I had everything. I just gave it all up.”

I don’t mean to suggest that all Native Americans, all LDS Native Americans, all Navajos, or all LDS Navajos agree on the subject of George P. Lee and his excommunication. As I said earlier, this event has polarized and disrupted that community and has harrowed the feelings of many people. There are many issues it is not my place or any other community’s place to judge.

But what did George Lee do to reap these drastic consequences for himself, his family, and others? Well, some say that his judgment was poor, that he offended people while denouncing materialism. Some say his interpretation of doctrine was unorthodox or even apostate — the reason given for his excommunication. Some say he was extreme —

he went too far in defending and promoting his own concerns, his own people, and criticizing his brethren for their decisions on inspired programs and policies.

For the moment, let's grant that any or even all of these assertions are true, and let's connect this incident within a broader context.

Has there been in recent memory a General Authority who disagreed on a doctrinal issues—the theory of evolution, for instance—and who publicly and repeatedly opposed the view of the Church president and others of his brethren? And was this General Authority excommunicated? No. Joseph Fielding Smith became Church president.

Has there been in recent memory a General Authority whose personal convictions were so strong that he mixed his religious authority with his political life? Who embraced political groups with statements that offended many Church members and that his brethren deemed unwise, untrue, and extreme even to the point of issuing official statements in correction? Was he excommunicated? No. Ezra Taft Benson became president of the Church.

Has there been in recent memory a General Authority who was downright wrong on an issue of ethnicity and destiny? Who wrote, published, and defended the teaching in *Mormon Doctrine* that black men would never in this life hold the priesthood? Was he excommunicated? No. Bruce R. McConkie was simply allowed to change his mind.

Has there been in recent memory a General Authority who erred in judgment—who, with ecclesiastical approval, arranged a large, unsecured bank loan to an insolvent scammer and forger who would soon become a murderer? And was he or were his superiors excommunicated? No. Hugh Pinnock's position was soon elevated.

Has there been in recent memory a General Authority who erred in truth-telling? Paul H. Dunn received unspecified Church discipline, not when his brethren learned of his fabrications, but after numerous and flagrant misrepresentations were exposed by the media. Even then the distributors who propagated Dunn's books and tapes were urged to continue to carry his materials. Both before and after public exposure, Dunn's reputation and his resulting income from royalties and other ventures were protected by the Church. This raises in stark relief the very issue of materialism that so offended George Lee.

We know all this—these separate incidents. We know, too, that General Authorities are human. The truth is they make mistakes. But the rest of that truth is this: George P. Lee is human, and so are others who speak from their innermost selves—of who they are and where they come from—and then meet with unpleasant consequences. People in the Church are not perfect versus imperfect, but protected

versus unprotected. Official action is often met on the stake, ward, neighborhood, business, family, or symposia levels with unofficial silence, shunning, and a general withdrawal of credibility.

One reason these events are so difficult and so painful is that they are sometimes unsolvable within the rational everything-is-separate perspective or even within the everything-is-connected perspective. Each perspective gives a true vision of what has happened but may offer no solution or healing.

The third perspective is the everything-is-symbolic view. This perspective involves ritual, ordinance, covenant, and ceremony; within this perspective we talk about taking our journeys, choosing our battles, following our stars. The secret of operating effectively within this perspective lies in securing the insights gained in this mode and using them to guide our individual encounters and decisions.

One symbol that has stayed with me most of my life came to me when I was a teenager working in my parents' business. I ran a precursor of the computer, which typed a letter, pausing for me to fill in the customer's name, address, and other information. Once when the seasons changed, the office was invaded by ants. I noticed, during an idle moment while the machine typed along, an ant traversing a blank piece of paper. On impulse, I picked up a pen and drew a blue circle around the ant.

To my surprise, the ant stopped short at the line, traced it all the way around, and paused, evidently perplexed by its imprisonment. It began racing from one side of the circle to another and then, quite accidentally, skidded over the line, found itself free, and continued on. That afternoon I was happily occupied playing this game with ants during each typing break. Some would freeze when they saw the circle drawn and not want to leave it. Others paid no heed at all and went on their way.

Since then, whenever I have felt trapped, the image of the ant in the ink circle has returned to me. Truth-tellers are often identified as troublemakers by the drawing of that circle. A decision is necessary then — whether to pay no attention and bolt the circle, whether to travel the perimeter looking for the right path, whether to stay inside the circle or re-enter it if you skid over the edge. The symbol doesn't tell me my decision. But it reminds me that confinement is only a matter of perception.

In order to envision the fourth perspective, we return to another circle, the hogan in which George Lee grew up. This was his home, a home full of children that was sometimes invaded by potentially dangerous or even deadly rattlesnakes. When we find our homes invaded — our innermost selves where we really live — we again have choices. We

can deny that anything alarming has happened and ignore the rattlesnakes. We can become intimate with the rattlesnakes, proving our nice intentions and trusting their natures to change. We can battle the rattlesnakes and see who dies. Or we can realize, as George Lee was taught, that everything is one.

George Lee's parents taught him that the rattlesnakes were co-inhabitants of the earth, his relatives. They had invaded the hogan because that was their nature. Since they didn't belong in the hogan, they could not stay. Because they were relatives, they should not be destroyed. Their nature also allowed them to be lifted and carried from the hogan so that humans and snakes could pursue their related-but-separate lives.

Within this fourth, everything-is-one perspective we can also realize what we too often forget, especially when times are tense. *We* are all one. Communities torn by controversy can, through love, become one. Communities that seem quite separate do experience many of the same struggles and challenges. People who are different are also our brothers and sisters, friends and teachers. People who find their worlds rocking need love and support, not isolation and censure.

What happened to George P. Lee happened earlier, as well. What happened earlier happened even before that. When it happened, it happened to us all. What happens now will happen in the future, as well. I believe that when we can acknowledge that what happens to one happens to all, we will find in our oneness courage, healing, and strength.