Give Me My Myths

Lynne Larson

I am a lover of legends, a spinner of tales. Pepper your preaching with anecdotes if you want my attention. Punctuate your sermons with parables, your homilies with flesh and blood, your lessons with people who breathe. Do this for veracity's sake, for as Neal Chandler once so astutely reminded us in Dialogue, "Story truths are mostly truer than the truths of exhortation." But great stories are also subjective, ambiguous, multi-faceted, and complex, not conducive to ten-minute talks or Gospel Essentials lessons, and they seem to be fading in importance, even as the need for thoughtful faith increases in this complicated world. In these days of "sound bite" journalism, and discourse reduced to a twitter, brevity is now in vogue. And the trend is sadly reflected at church. The 2010-11 priesthood/Relief Society study guide, Gospel Principles, was decidedly long on very basic doctrine and decidedly short on contextual examples. Most auxiliary lesson material is similarly standardized, as if programmed by a computer. The warmth of human experience, which well-written narrative provides, is conspicuously absent from our Sunday curriculum. Telling stories, really great stories, has fallen out of favor. And we are all the poorer for it.

Those among us of a certain age will readily remember the storytellers in our lives: our mothers at our bedside, the Scoutmaster at the campfire, the school teacher who knew how to tell a tale, or dramatically read one, the General Authority who could personalize any theme at conference time with stirring narratives from Church history or the scriptures. Even if the story was familiar, its fresh presentation, and our own maturing point of view, made it new again and meaningful in ways we never would have guessed upon first hearing it. Now we remember most of the old

tales with nostalgia, and cringe sometimes at their limp replacements if, indeed, we ever hear them at all.

There are reasons for the decline in the use of what was once such a rich staple of our religious education. Perhaps we are intimidated by the modern commandment, constantly reiterated and strictly enforced (at least in Relief Society), about not straying from the lesson, and the lesson contains no stories. Perhaps the "assigned topic" of our sacrament meeting sermons leaves room for little else, other than our testimonies and several bulleted General Authority quotations to bolster them. And often the bolstering "quotations" become the entire speech, as some wards and stakes now dictate that all sacrament meeting speakers use General Authority sermons from the most recent conference issue of the *Ensign* for their talks. The fact that some stories and some great storytellers survive at the pulpit, in spite of this micro-management, speaks to the power of narrative and individual voice. But even this tradition may fade, as the next generation is encouraged to trade thoughtful parables for the easy efficiency of downloaded exhortation. The trend away from the "layered" message in favor of the pedantic statement is already fully evident. It's as if we're afraid to tell good stories, for lack of time or direction. Even in our Old Testament teaching year, when classic tales make up much of the curriculum, we seem at a loss as to how to use the material. We have forgotten, perhaps, how great stories can change lives. Maybe we don't read or hear enough of them anymore to know.

There may be another problem. Embarrassed by the Paul Dunn drama of several years ago, when the revered former General Authority was found to be disingenuous in his storytelling, the Church has grown wary, shying away from promoting anything in the curriculum that is hard to control. Elder Dunn, who died in 1998, was famous for the "real life" experiences that peppered his speeches, books, and cassette recordings. His dramatic war adventures and sports stories were particularly appealing to young audiences, and he earned a reputation as a popular speaker at conferences and firesides. When an investigation proved that his first-person stories were often extremely embellished and sometimes outright fabrications, he was "censured" by the Brethren. He felt obliged to issue a letter of apology in the *Church News*

in 1991, admitting that he had "not always been accurate in my public talks and writings."²

Since then, Church leaders have undoubtedly become more careful in their storytelling, justifiably concerned about their personal narratives being misused, misquoted, or misinterpreted, especially on the internet. In 2004, the First Presidency issued a statement officially requesting members not to distribute notes taken from the speeches of General Authorities or other Church officers at regional or stake conferences or at other meetings, "without the consent of the speaker." In the wake of all this caution, good old-fashioned storytelling may be getting a bad rap, and perhaps will soon be going the way of real letter-writing, in-depth reading, and the land-line telephone.

I have no quarrel with eliminating much that passes for story-telling in our Church curriculum. Even outside of Primary, most of the cautionary tales and "story examples" that remain in our lesson books are simplistic and one-dimensional, provoking no thought or contemplation, exciting no joy over a tale well told and well applied. And *in* Primary, the temptation to completely fabricate for the sake of instilling faith sometimes simply runs amok. I remember once being genuinely surprised when I turned to a Primary counselor who had just presented the children with a miraculous tale of healing. "That's quite a story," I whispered. "Where did you get it?"

"I made it up," she replied without flinching. "It worked for what I needed, and the kids don't know the difference."

While I admired her resourcefulness, I was put off by how she had manipulated us, fecklessly passing off as true a story she knew to be completely false. The kids didn't know the difference then, but someday they may question "real" truth when they find they've been jerked around by its shadow. Paul Dunn's problem was not so much that his stories were false, and he knew it, but that they were presented as true, first-person experiences, and he never corrected the misperception. A story does not have to be true to teach truth, but total fabrications designed to merely push our emotional buttons are not the worthy myths and legends for which I yearn. Great stories, fact or fiction, must rise with authenticity from the human condition and earn their place in our

canon through the integrity of their art and the enduring quality of their message.

But skeptics who look askance at the efforts of gospel writers and speakers to "connect" with their audiences through narrative, should remember that editing, embellishing, and even exaggerating "true" stories to make a point or teach a lesson is nothing new. The technique is ageless. From Genesis to Revelations, from the First Vision to the Last Wagon, poets and minstrels have laced the cold, hard facts of life with their own insight and the eloquence of their pens, artfully controlling their presentation and turning dry doctrine into savored vicarious experience for the benefit of us all.

One of my favorite pioneer stories, for example, is the stirring account of the three teen-aged boys who, as members of the rescue party, stepped forward to carry weakened survivors of the ill-fated Willie-Martin handcart trek through the floating ice of the Sweetwater River in 1856. This incident was conspicuously left out of the recent film, *17 Miracles*, which focused on the plight of the pioneers *before* they were rescued, but it comes quickly to the minds of most of us who are familiar with the entire event. The tale is indeed heroic, and it becomes even more effectively poignant in the hands of a great storyteller, as when President Gordon B. Hinckley related it. His narration backs the images of the Saints trudging through a blizzard on a current Church history DVD titled "*Tried in All Things*."

I should like to tell you of three eighteen-year-old boys, [President Hinckley begins, his voice breaking]. In 1856 more than a thousand of our people, some of them perhaps your forebears, found themselves in serious trouble while crossing the plains to this valley. Because of a series of unfortunate circumstances, they were late getting started. They ran into snow and bitter cold in the highlands of Wyoming. Their situation was desperate, with deaths occurring every day.

President Young learned of their condition as the October general conference was about to begin. He immediately called for teams, wagons, drivers, and supplies to leave to rescue the bereft Saints. When the first rescue team reached the Martin company, there were too few wagons to carry the suffering people. The rescuers had to insist that the carts keep moving.

When they reached the Sweetwater River on November 3,

chunks of ice were floating in the freezing water. After all these people had been through, and in their weakened condition, that river seemed impossible to cross. It looked like stepping into death itself to move into that freezing stream. Men who had once been strong sat on the frozen ground and wept, as did the women and children. Many simply could not face the ordeal.

And now I quote from the record [Hinckley continues]: "Three eighteen-year-old boys belonging to the relief party came to the rescue, and to the astonishment of all who saw, carried nearly every member of the ill-fated handcart company across the snowbound stream. The strain was so terrible, and the exposure so great, that in later years all the boys died from the effects of it."

Caught with emotion, President Hinckley concludes the tale with these final sentences: "When President Brigham Young heard of this heroic act, he wept like a child, and later declared publicly: 'That act alone will ensure C. Allen Huntington, George W. Grant, and David P. Kimball an everlasting salvation in the Celestial Kingdom of God, worlds without end.' Great was their heroism, sacred the sacrifice they made of health and eventually of life itself to save the lives of those they helped."⁵

It's a wonderful story, and I have often felt a thrill of emotion upon hearing it repeated, due in part to President Hinckley's tone and timing, with his eloquent sense of the importance of name, place, and prophetic declaration. It's a powerful story, one that has certainly moved and inspired countless young men to a greater commitment and faithfulness. It will always be one of my favorite narratives from Church history, but, according to modern scholars, it's a story that isn't quite true.

"It didn't happen," David Roberts claims in his compelling 2008 book, *Devil's Gate*, in which he cites LDS historian Chad M. Orton's *BYU Studies* article, "The Martin Handcart Company at the Sweetwater: Another Look." According to Orton, the rescue story departs from reality in several ways: none of the "boys" was eighteen years old; a number of men helped the people across the river, although many pioneers waded without assistance; and the three boys lived long after the rescue, one of them for forty years. Roberts attributes the more colorful and legendary details to David Kimball's younger brother, Solomon Kimball, who created the version we know and love for the *Improvement Era* in 1914. The family connection to one of the heroes of the rescue, could ei-

ther mean that Solomon made honest and wonderful use of his primary source, or that, as Roberts believes, he was an opportunist whose brother's name lives on because of his hyperbolic pen. Whichever is true, the story is suspect. But if this lack of credibility diminishes its place in our tradition, I regret the loss.

As a lover of factual history as well myths and legends, I can fault neither Roberts nor Orton for uncovering the reality surrounding the handcart saga. Simple factual truth can, and often does, stand on its own, unembroidered and unembellished, to teach us with the very starkness of its image any lesson to be learned. Thus, the striking photographs of Ken Burns's documentaries on the Civil War, or baseball, or jazz, stir our interest and emotion with only a minimum of understated narrative. A straightforward look at the building of the Brooklyn Bridge or of the Panama Canal needs no adorning in David McCullough's fine collection of histories. Reality, well described, is all we may require to be thoroughly impressed. I have long believed, for example, that a straightforward, honest, first-person narrative about polygamy would stir our souls at church, as we learned to more fully appreciate the faith and sacrifices of our ancestors.

Still, with all of my high regard for absolute fact, I love poetic license, that understood the permission that writers have been given to make things beautiful, memorable, and more accessible for those of us who are touched as much by beauty as by truth. "If it didn't happen that way, it should have!" a favorite literature professor of mine once declared, only half in jest. We seekers of truth and beauty have to occasionally decide if truth is what is, or if truth is what should be. Realist or Romantic? Perhaps there is room in most of us for both personas, if we can recognize and accept the unique contributions each of them offers.

During my teaching career in the secondary schools of rural Idaho, I remember presenting an excerpt from Longfellow's epic poem "The Song of Hiawatha" to a group of students and feeling obliged to explain why we were reading this impractical and somewhat antiquated piece of literature. The excerpt was an origin story, a myth, that explained how Hiawatha, through fasting, prayer, and struggle, obtained food for his hungry nation in the form of corn, a plant previously unknown. In the poem, Hiawatha, in a scene reminiscent of Jacob's wrestling with the Lord in

Genesis, is called upon to battle for three days with a powerful golden-haired angel. The supernatural personage is dressed in "garments green and yellow" with "plumes of green bent o'er his forehead," and Hiawatha is promised a blessing if he prevails. Before the final match, the angel tells Hiawatha that through honest struggle he has proven himself and that, after he has won the battle, he must bury his heavenly opponent carefully:

Make a bed for me to lie in,
Where the rain may fall upon me,
Where the sun may come and warm me;
Strip these garments, green and yellow,
Strip this nodding plumage from me,
Lay me in the earth and make it
Soft and loose and light above me.
Let no hand disturb my slumber,
Let no weed or worm molest me . . .
Only come yourself to watch me,
Till I wake and start and quicken,
Till I leap into the sunshine.

Hiawatha obeys all of these instructions once he has defeated the angel. He buries his emerald-clad opponent as instructed and

at length a small green feather from the earth shot slowly upward, Then another and another, And before the Summer ended Stood the maize in all its beauty, With its shining robes about it, And its long, soft, yellow tresses; And in rapture Hiawatha Cried aloud [in grateful joy] [For] this new gift of the Great Spirit. 10

A gift earned, Hiawatha knew, through his own supplication and obedience.

The poem was included in our anthology to teach the students about American myths and origin stories, about metamorphosis

in literature and in life. It presented the image of a great spiritual leader, willing to pray and fast and fight for his people and their needs. We discussed all of these things, as well as the power of certain myths on people and nations. "How do you think the future generations of Hiawatha's tribe felt about the gifts of the earth, the spiritual power of their leaders, the necessity of hard work to meet their goals, and the expectation of divine intervention in their lives?" I asked these questions, along with others designed to at least introduce the power of myth. I concluded with the reminder that the story wasn't true, of course. We don't get corn from angels dressed in green plumes. But I promised the students that, the next time they saw a ripe cornfield, they would remember Hiawatha and the beauty of the lessons Longfellow taught, perhaps far longer than the actual science involved in agriculture.

As it was with Hiawatha, so it is with many gospel stories, some which border on myth but are filled with "story truths," as well as the artistry that makes them memorable. The Old Testament is replete with stirring examples: the serpent in the garden, God and Satan wagering on high over the fate of Job, the three faithful Israelites in the fiery furnace, and, in another great origin story, the promise of the rainbow, symbolic of our Father's pledge that He will never flood the earth again. Like figurative language, these stories, literally true or not, can bring a vivid aspect to our discourse if they are used judiciously and with honesty and understanding, and if we are brave enough to introduce them as they surely are, myths that teach us truths through their beauty and their universal application.

But many of these colorful stories in the scriptures are eliminated altogether from our gospel study because they are so obviously mythological that we shy away from them as mistranslations or perhaps as mysteries into which we should never delve. A dramatic incident in the tragic story of King Saul comes to mind. Because of his disobedience, Saul has lost the companionship of the Lord. David has displaced him, earning the acclaim and loyalty of the people and the armies of Israel. The blessings of heaven that Saul once enjoyed now belong to a servant-shepherd boy. The Philistines are gathering against Saul now, and he is a desperate man, described pitifully as he "enquired of the Lord, and the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by

the prophets" (1 Sam. 28:6). Saul, once a chosen leader of the Lord's people, has lost his family, his title, and his divine approbation. The Prophet Samuel, his mentor and advocate with God, has died, leaving the king desolate and without hope, "and his heart greatly trembled" (v. 5).

Ashamed of what he is about to do, Saul disguises himself and seeks out a witch, "a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I might go to her and enquire of her" (v. 7). At Saul's pleading, the woman conjures up Samuel from the grave. "An old man cometh up," she cries, "and he is covered with a mantle" (v. 14). Out of the earth, the hoary old prophet rises at the witch's bidding, and there must have been fire in his eyes, for Saul falls face down in fear upon recognizing him. This scene is so dramatic it might have inspired Shakespeare's evil sisters in *Macbeth*, but its horror is never mentioned in Gospel Doctrine class. We don't believe in witches, at least not the kind that can bring prophets from their graves, and so the opportunity is lost to vividly and memorably demonstrate the desperation of a king, once favored by God, who has fallen so far from grace that he must seek out an evil medium and beg for mercy from a ghost.

Saul pleads his case, but the phantom-like Samuel offers no consolation. "Why hast thou disquieted me to bring me up?" he growls, standing angrily before the king he once loved (v. 15). He tells Saul that it is too late to repent, that "the Lord hath rent the kingdom out of thine hand and hath given it to thy neighbor, even to David" (v. 17). Moreover the Lord will also deliver Israel with thee into the hand of the Philistines, and tomorrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me [in the grave] (v. 19). Then Saul fell straightway all along the earth, and was sore afraid, because of the words of Samuel, and there was no strength in him" (v. 20). It is a terrible scene, vivid and frightening. It is certainly a myth; but in its imagery, it carries a message far more compelling than the usual Sunday school exhortation, "Brothers and sisters, we should always follow the prophets."

And the same can be said for tales that are "based on real events." Good film editors know how to take a thousand hours of celluloid, shot out of sequence, and condense them into a logical, well-plotted visual experience, beautiful in its scope and in its intimate moments, artistically capturing the heart of a message that might have been lost in days and months and years of reality.

Pondering the difference between "true stories" and "story truths," I have usually found that both are valid and should be recognized and appreciated. Perhaps that's why I still regard the handcart tale as worthy of my praise, even as its precise facts are questioned. Does it really matter that the three boys named in the story may not have been the day's only heroes? Does it matter that they were not eighteen, or that they did not die soon after the ordeal? It matters only in this regard: Even if these details are merely the product of poetic or dramatic license, they have enriched and humanized an event that might otherwise have been forgotten in the mists of time, in spite of the very real lessons in sacrifice—story truths—it graphically provides.

As mentioned, Neal Chandler compellingly discussed the importance of "story truths" in his iconic *Dialogue* essay in 1991, "Book of Mormon Stories That My Teacher Kept from Me." Chandler's thesis concerned the difficulty we face in teaching and connecting to the Book of Mormon because it has so few "human" stories to tell: "no tales of love or seduction. No long-smitten Jacob at the well. No Samson and Delilah. No desperate eunuch's wife with Joseph. No terrible passions like Amnon's for his sister nor David's for Bathsheba. No song for Solomon." In the Book of Mormon, Chandler asserts, even war is boring because it is so impersonal. We have no frightened Henry Fleming with whom to identify, no waiting bride with whom to suffer, no bereaved family with whom to mourn. And such characters are conspicuous in their absence.

"When Jesus of Nazareth was asked," wrote Chandler, "as he often was, some question turning on what everyone around him thought to be high, implacable principle, he did not quote from *Mormon Doctrine* nor from *Answers to Gospel Questions*. Instead he told a story." And we must imagine that those stories Jesus told had more to do with human truths than with factual events.

And so the question arises: When do we cross the line in our use of myth and fable? If we honestly present our stories, true or not, for the sake of the greater good, suggesting up-front to our listeners that a given tale may be embellished, mythologized, or simply changed, what about reality? What about absolute truth? With

all this allowing of poetic license, will our students and fellow ward members be confused and unable to recognize the "real" truth when they hear it? If the handcart rescue story is not quite factual, there are certainly other staples in our gospel library which also could be questioned. What about the gold plates? What about Moroni? What about the visions in the Kirtland Temple when the Lord stood "upon the breastwork of the pulpit, before us; and under his feet was a paved work of pure gold, in color like amber" (D&C 110:2)? What about the First Vision, that seminal event upon which all our theology is based? Truth or fiction? If a dozen other sacred stories are suddenly presented as myths and mixed in with factual truth, how are we to know the difference?

For me, the answer to that question is found in yet another story, a splendid piece of fiction written by Thom Duncan, called "The Glowing." In the story, a Latter-day Saint scientist builds a time machine and travels back to the spring of 1820 in Palmyra, New York. There he meets people who know the Smith family and the boy, Joseph. In great anticipation, Orkney, the scientist, stations himself near the Sacred Grove for several days, hoping to catch a glimpse of the fourteen-year-old future prophet as he makes his way into the trees for that special prayer, that worldchanging audience with God the Father and His Son. The time traveler plans to follow Joseph into the grove and discover once and for all if what the young man said was true, if the glorious vision did indeed take place. At some point, Joseph appears across the field, headed for the grove; and Orkney follows at a distance, until he can find a proper hiding place from which to observe the sacred visitation. But in the end, he resists intruding into Joseph's hallowed sanctuary, ashamed that he has used the wonder of time travel to "shore up the nicks in his own leaky faith," realizing that "his testimony had never been a spiritual one," and that now, "faced with the possibility of totally destroying his basis for belief, he couldn't take the chance of finding out for certain." ¹³

Orkney waits for Joseph to come out of the grove, feeling good about his decision not to "spy" but perhaps a little disappointed that he has come so far for nothing. He could have witnessed the reality of the First Vision! He could have seen it with his own eyes and never doubted or wondered or questioned

again. But he has missed the chance, the golden chance to replace faith with firm and irrefutable fact. Lamenting this forever-lost opportunity, Orkney waits respectfully and curiously for Joseph to emerge from the trees. And then a stunning thing happens. Joseph does appear, walking past the scientist's hiding place. As Orkney's eyes follow him, the boy suddenly looks back, contemplating where he's been, and Orkney sees his face. He sees it "glowing" with a radiance that takes the man's breath away. Orkney is filled with a glowing of his own that "was all encompassing . . . that "seemed to burst beyond its physical boundaries to envelop his body in an aura of fire. He no longer felt supported by the ground, but had the sensation of floating in the air, curiously detached from all things terrestrial. . . . [S]uch exquisite joy accompanied this experience that he felt incapable of supporting it." ¹⁴

The marvelous sensation recedes in Orkney as Joseph moves farther away, going home to farm and family and a prophetic future. But our time traveler realizes, of course, that he has been touched by the power of God. Its reality was reflected in Joseph's face. And Orkney knows without a doubt just what the boy saw in the trees.

Like Brother Orkney, all of us of necessity must stop short of actually witnessing with our eyes the scenes that gird our testimonies. We, too, must depend on faith. The radiance Orkney saw reflected in Joseph's face glows for us, as believers, in the glorious Restoration that came *after* the Prophet emerged from the grove. We learn most things in life indirectly. And, because we are human, great stories, well told, may offer us our best chance at feeling the power, that "aura of fire" that Orkney experienced, as we are touched by their beauty and their truth, whether we can know them as "absolute fact" or not. The question, "Is that true?" perhaps should be answered, "Is it true for you?" And the difference between "true stories" and "story truths" will not matter so much any more.

I long to hear great myths and legends, poems and parables used more assiduously in the classroom and over the pulpit. The beauty of the scriptures is often overlooked in our effort to always be didactic, to always look for the literal and prosaic in our lessons and our gospel study. In the end, we are cheating ourselves.

The writer Joseph Bruchak once described a world I never want to experience: "Long ago, the people had no stories to tell. It was hard for them to live without stories, especially during the long winter nights when the snow was deep outside the lodge and the people longed for something to give meaning to their lives. 'If only there was something we could listen to,' the people would say. But there were no storytellers and no stories to be told." ¹⁵

Fortunately, we still have great stories and wonderful storytellers, both inside the Church and out. If I were teaching young men about chastity, I would not let many lessons go by without reading with them "Greg," Douglas Thayer's wonderful cautionary tale. ¹⁶ If I were faced with teaching the principle of faith to a group of sci-fi infected teenagers, I would use "The Glowing" by Thom Duncan to demonstrate its importance. I would like to feel free some day to use episodes from Thomas Hardy, Jane Austen, or even John Steinbeck in my Relief Society lessons, where the richness of their language and the power of their insight humanize some of the very gospel principles we try so hard to teach.

Some lessons call for exhortation. Some call for concise lists arranged on a blackboard. The most memorable lessons, the ones we internalize, are learned through experience. We can, and we usually do, gain most of that experience vicariously, even while standing far apart and years removed from the Sacred Grove or the Sweetwater River or anywhere reality is taking place, because we feel the fire of its reflection in our stories, and, if we have the courage, in our story-truths.

Notes

- 1. Neal Chandler, "Book of Mormon Stories That My Teacher Kept from Me," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 24, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 30.
- 2. Paul H. Dunn, "An Open Letter to Members of the Church," *Church News*, October 26, 1991.
- 3. "First Presidency Issues Statement," *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 29, 2004, C2.
- 4. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Four B's for Boys," *Ensign*, November 1981, 40.
 - 5. Ibid.
- 6. David Roberts, Devil's Gate: Brigham Young and the Great Mormon Handcart Tragedy (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2008),

- 242–43, quoting Chad M. Orton, "The Martin Handcart Company at the Sweetwater: Another Look," *BYU Studies* 45, no. 3 (2006): 5–37.
- 7. Solomon F. Kimball, "Belated Emigrants of 1856," *Improvement Era*, February 1914.
 - 8. Roberts, Devil's Gate, 242.
- 9. Henry W. Longfellow, "From the Song of Hiawatha," *Elements of Literature, Second Course* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1989), 511.
 - 10. Ibid., 514.
- 11. Chandler, "Book of Mormon Stories That My Teacher Kept from Me," 26.
 - 12. Ibid., 15.
- 13. Thom Duncan, "The Glowing," *Irreantum* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2000–2001) 25.
 - 14. Ibid., 26.
- 15. Joseph Bruchak, Return of the Sun: Native American Stories from the Northeast Woodlands (N.p.: Joseph Bruchak, 1990), 35.
- 16. Douglas H. Thayer, *Under the Cottonwoods* (Provo, Utah: Frankson Books, 1977), 109.