

Personal Revelation Narratives: An Interview with Tom Mould

Note: Shawn Tucker conducted this interview with Tom Mould in April, 2013, in Elon, North Carolina. In 2011, Utah State University Press published Tom's book Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation, and the Mormon Folk Tradition. Shawn is Tom's colleague at Elon University, and Tom interviewed Shawn as part of his field-work. A brief excerpt of the book follows the interview (reprinted with the kind permission of the Utah State University Press).

Tucker: Can you give us a sense of how you got interested in folklore?

Mould: I became interested in Native American narrative, especially in the archetypal figure of the trickster, as an undergraduate student. I studied this figure among the Winnebago with a teacher who was Ponca, and I just couldn't get my mind around it. I couldn't understand a culture that could conceive of a being that was on one side revered as a creator and deity but on the other side was so rude and lascivious. It plagued me to such a degree that I went to graduate school to figure it out. The study of Native American narrative and imagery is in folklore, so that's where I ended up. This study led to years of work among the Choctaw in Mississippi. I wrote a number of things from my work among the Choctaw, which led me to an interest in sacred narrative. I found that these narratives were told over and over again among the Choctaw, and they became the basis for how the Choctaw would think about the present and future. That led me to an interest in sacred narrative and prophecy.

Tucker: How did you encounter Mormonism?

Mould: Growing up as a Catholic in South Carolina, I knew some people who were Mormon but I don't remember there being any-

thing particularly remarkable about them. Then, when I was in Mississippi, one of the Choctaw elders that I worked with told me she was a converted Mormon. Some years later I found myself working on what I hoped would be a comprehensive volume on prophetic narrative. I wanted to add to the fieldwork I had done on the Choctaw, so I was compiling as much material as possible. I noticed that I was getting a lot on Mormon prophetic narrative. This coincided with when you and I were working together, so I started to ask you about it. We had the long van ride from North Carolina to Washington, D.C., where I had questions for you about Mormon apocalyptic narrative. You recommended that examining narratives about the Second Coming would probably prove less useful than narratives of personal prophecy or revelation, and as I started to do the fieldwork it was clear that that was the case.

Tucker: How did your fieldwork start here in North Carolina?

Mould: After we had some initial conversations, you invited me to church, and I remember that you introduced me to the whole ward in Sunday School on that first day. I wasn't quite ready to be thrown into that, but it worked out well. For the next few weeks I would introduce myself until it was pretty clear that everyone knew who I was. Right from the start I wanted everybody to know why I was there. I also spoke with the bishop of the ward, Bishop Doyle. I met quite a few people in the ward from you, but then just being there from week to week I got to know many, many different members of the Burlington Ward. It turned out that all of my real fieldwork was here in North Carolina. When I would travel outside of the state or out of the country, I would attend LDS meetings as often as possible, but the relationships that were most important to the work were formed here. Those visits were helpful for comparing the Burlington Ward with other congregations. Besides this fieldwork, I was also able to do archival work in Utah. This work was also a really important aspect, because it allowed me to bring together the archival work with the fieldwork to create a project that was much more comprehensive than it would have been otherwise. In fact, I would say that the combination of the fieldwork and the archival work is one of the strengths of this study.

Tucker: As you started to look at the narratives that were emerging from your work, what were some of the patterns that you started to see?

Mould: One of the first things I noticed was that people were not particularly interested in prophecies about the Second Coming or the Apocalypse. Once I shifted over to looking at personal revelation, I found that I could sit in meetings and regularly hear those types of narratives. Those narratives were much more in line with everyday practice. One of the next things that I noticed was how pervasive these narratives were. I could hear them during fast and testimony meetings, during Sunday School, and at father-son campouts. There were so many places where these narratives were just an assumption of any given discussion. I would say that I was also surprised to see how open people were, how willing to share such personal accounts they were. It struck me, for example, to see men in priesthood meeting willing to share their spiritual growth and their spiritual obstacles and to even shed tears.

When I started to look at the narratives themselves, I noticed that they tended to show a strong connection between the temporal and spiritual. When people told the stories, they often combined the spiritual and temporal. The questions that people were asking were tinged by theology for issues that ranged from small to very large.

Tucker: By the end, what were some of the larger patterns that you saw?

Mould: This is a group where story is at the forefront of their religious practice. And I would add that story is so important that people are conscious of what they tell and how they tell it. There's a concern about telling stories properly and understanding the social and the persuasive power of the stories. Part of that is an awareness of sharing things that are too private or too sacred, but another part is the concern about how these stories might be compelling or even manipulative. I found that some people were wary of how a story might attempt to emotionally maneuver or compel an audience to a particular conclusion. There was a conscious effort on the part of some people to not do that.

But another part of this concern about storytelling is a concern with self and how one might be seen as a spiritual authority

or great person. In this respect I noticed different rhetorical strategies that people used to make a space to mitigate the claims of social prestige that could come with these narratives in an effort to maintain a sense of humility on the part of the narrator. This effort is important to me, because of the research on *communitas*, or the idea that when one worships one sheds the skin of secular life in such a way that people come together without those trappings. What most scholars have found is that this is really difficult to do. Even within rituals there are hierarchies that are established. These hierarchies make the ideal of *communitas* difficult, if not impossible. In the LDS Church, it is true that you can have a bishop who also works third shift, but there can still be hierarchies within the ward. So it was interesting to see how an individual might navigate the desire to seem credible and genuine on one side against the fear of seeming proud or showy on the other side.

There were also some topical patterns. I noticed that women more often than men would receive personal revelation about the emotional well-being of their children, where men might tell narratives about receiving a prompting to look out for the physical well-being of children. Women's narratives tended to be closer to home, where men's narratives were more often outside or away from the home. I found lots of narratives about marriage and missions and about difficult questions surrounding those decisions. I noticed that it was very rare to have the failed revelation story. Most of those narratives would be about someone's failure to act upon a prompting or about someone's failure to properly understand that prompting. I found it interesting to see how people dealt with revelations that didn't turn out as they expected.

From a wider, anthropological angle, one of the conclusions that also struck me was about the oral versus the written. When I started I would have assumed that the written version would be more accurate, since the oral version could be changed over time and could reflect the needs of the narrator at that particular moment. In fact it was a conversation with someone here in Burlington that helped me see that the opposite is probably true. He said that he would trust the oral over the written, since the written might have some of the more colorful and accurate details elimi-

nated. If you think about the reasons why people write these down and why they write personal histories, those histories are written for posterity versus an audience of one or two in an oral performance or sharing of the story. Elements that could be shared with a few family members may have details that one would not want to share with outsiders or would not want passed down as a family heritage.

And I would add that a final pattern is the difference between descriptive and prescriptive narratives. There are a number of stories that are prescriptive, where the present is clear but the future is unclear. An example is someone getting a prompting to get off of a particular train or turn the car around and go check on a child. The narrator sets up how the presently prescribed activity is more or less clear but the outcome is not. Such narratives often continue with an account of why that action was important. The other type are narratives where the future is more or less clear but the present is not. Someone may see a dream of a particular person who will help out, but cannot, in the present, identify that person. Patriarchal blessings are often part of descriptive revelation narratives.

Tucker: What has the book's reception been like?

Mould: I have been really pleased with how well the book has been received. It's gratifying for me that it is been reviewed more than any of my previous works combined. And frankly these have been the strongest reviews as well. The book has been reviewed by scholars inside the church and outside the church, but most have been inside. I was also really gratified by reviewers who, by their own admission, were ready to dislike the book and were hesitant about a dissection of their spirituality. To see those reviewers find the book helpful is something that really made me happy. I was also pleased with how some of those reviews were by non-academics who founded the book accessible, and that is something that's important to me.

I think my biggest concern was the reception on the part of the community. It's one thing to fail among other folklorists or anthropologists, but it is quite another thing to let down or to feel like you have betrayed the people that you worked with in the field. So I'm really happy with the positive response from the peo-

ple that I worked with here in North Carolina. Beyond that I have been able to give some interviews and talks, and it's great when people have good questions and engage with the material in a thoughtful manner. There was also a panel dedicated to the book at the recent conference of the American Folklore Society, and it was great to be part of that.

Tom Mould, *Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation, and the Mormon Folk Tradition* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2011), 197–201.

from Chapter 4: The Building Blocks
of a Narrative Tradition

[197] Ignoring Initial Promptings

Promptings can be subtle and therefore easily dismissed. They can also be inconvenient to follow and therefore ignored. Stories of ignoring revelation only to realize the harm that followed or the blessing forsaken are common in the narrative tradition. Such stories remind individuals and their audiences of the importance of listening and acting on personal revelation. The experience is common, the message useful, and such stories fit neatly within the narrative tradition (see chapter 3).

Stories where people initially ignore the prompting only to finally listen are also common. This pattern emerges not as a distinct type of experience or story but rather as a motif, a distinct narrative element that recurs frequently. Keith Stanley initially ignores the prompting to take a different route home but finally listens and avoids a car accident (see chapter 2 for complete narrative). Shawn Tucker ignores the Holy Ghost three times before finally pulling over, thereby protecting a mother and child from a runaway trailer (see chapter 3 for complete narrative). Elder Aaron Chavez ignores a prompting to tract in a particular trailer park; when he finally acts on it, he finds a woman eager to learn

more about the church. A young mother working on her parents' farm gets a feeling to stop filling the gas tank and check on her father but dismisses it. The feeling persists and she finally goes and discovers her father trapped under the combine.¹ In a more common experience, the roles are reversed and parents are prompted to save their children: [198]

So there was this woman, and she was in her room doing something, and her little child was having a bath in the other room, and she just heard this voice that said: "Go check on him. Go check on him." And she thought, "No, no, no." And she heard it again and again. And so finally she went into the bathroom, and he had gone and plugged in the hair dryer and he was just about to climb back into the tub and she grabbed it from him and saved his life.²

The choice to include an aspect of the revelatory experience that shows human weakness is not only honest but humble, and humility is vitally important in sharing personal revelation (see chapter 2). The result of being both common to experience and socially useful in performance is that hesitating before acting has become a recognizable motif in personal revelation narratives.

As a motif, such hesitation can shift from a simple element of one's experience to a narrative feature common to a particular genre. While narrators would not include hesitation where there was none in sharing stories of their own experience, they may do so when narrating other people's stories. Without personal memory to fall back on, motifs can emerge as useful narrative resources.

One of the most well-known stories of an unsolicited prompting by the Holy Ghost is the story of Wilford Woodruff, who is prompted to move his wagon just before lightning strikes. Woodruff, president of the church from 1889 to 1898, shared this story often. He published it in the *Millennial Star* newspaper twice, the *Deseret Weekly* newspaper, and in the Faith Promoting Series published by the Juvenile Instructor Office. In 1898, he shared the story orally during general conference. Since then, the story has appeared in church magazines, newspapers, and teaching manuals. LDS authors from both the General Authorities and the lay membership have also picked up the story, publishing it in books intended for faith promotion, historical survey, religious instruction, and scholarly analysis.³

Versions of Woodruff's story are similar but not identical. The most frequently cited version is the one from the *Millennial Star* on October 12, 1891:

After I came to these valleys and returned to Winter Quarters, I was sent to Boston by President Young. He wanted me to take my family there and gather all the Saints of God in New England, in Canada, and in the surrounding regions, and stay there until I gathered them all. I was there about two years. While on the road there, I drove my carriage one evening into the yard of Brother Williams. Brother Orson Hyde drove a wagon by the side of [199] mine.⁴ I had my wife and children in the carriage. After I turned out my team and had my supper, I went to bed in the carriage. I had not been there but a few minutes when the Spirit said to me, "Get up and move that carriage." I told my wife I had to get up and move the carriage.

She said, "What for?" I said, "I don't know."

That is all she asked me on such occasions; when I told her I did not know, that was enough. I got up and moved my carriage four or five rods, and put the off fore wheel against the corner of the house. I then looked around me and went to bed. The same Spirit said, "Go and move your animals from that oak tree." They were two hundred yards from where my carriage was. I went and moved my horses and put them in a little hickory grove. I again went to bed.

In thirty minutes a whirlwind came up and broke that oak tree off within two feet from the ground. It swept over three or four fences and fell square in that dooryard, near Brother Orson Hyde's wagon, and right where mine had stood. What would have been the consequences if I had not listened to that Spirit? Why, myself and wife and children doubtless would have been killed. That was the still, small voice to me— no earthquake, no thunder, no lightning; but the still, small voice of the Spirit of God. It saved my life. It was the spirit of revelation to me.

The second most common version comes straight from Woodruff's journals, published in *Leaves from My Journal*. In this version, only his wife and one child are with him in the wagon; the other children are in Brother Williams's house. Also, he mentions mules rather than horses. The major plot elements and much of the language, however, are the same.

The third version is less common but is the one example of an oral rather than written narrative. Woodruff told this story during general conference and it is recorded in the conference report. Again, the story is virtually identical. However, one addition is noteworthy. After tying up his animals and getting ready for

bed, Woodruff says: “As I laid down, the Spirit of the Lord told me to get up and move my carriage. I did not ask the Lord what He meant. I did as I was told.”

In none of these versions does Woodruff hesitate, and in his one existing oral account, he explicitly points this out. Nor does Woodruff hesitate in the comic strip version of this experience printed in the August 2006 editions of both the *Liahona* (F6– F7) and *The Friend* magazines (28–9) of the church. The version is adapted from the most common one in the *Millennial Star*.

Wilford: I think we should sleep here tonight. I know of some brethren who will let us stay with them.

Wilford, his wife, and one of their children decided to sleep in the carriage.

[200] Wife: It looks like all of the other children are settled down in the house for the night. Good night, Wilford.

Wilford: Good night.

Not long after getting in bed, Wilford heard a voice tell him to move his carriage.

Wilford: I have to move the carriage.

Wife: What for?

Wilford: I do not know. But I do recognize the voice of the Spirit, and it's telling me to move.

Wilford moved the carriage forward. About 30 minutes later a sudden whirlwind blew a nearby oak tree over. The huge tree was snapped into pieces and crushed two fences.

When the Woodruffs' hosts and children came out to look at the damage, they noticed that the tree had landed right where Wilford's carriage was parked before he moved it.

In the morning the Woodruffs were able to safely continue their journey, and they went on their way rejoicing.

Wilford: By obeying the revelation of the Spirit of God to me, I saved my life as well as the lives of my wife and child.

This version had been rewritten to accompany cartoon pictures for the youth but remains faithful to the original in all plot *elements*. As in all the versions, Woodruff tells his wife what he is doing, but he does not delay or wait for further promptings. It was this comic version that Sandy Johnson had read just days before

she retold the story around her kitchen table. She and her husband had been sharing stories of their own personal revelation when we began to talk about the different types of revelation: those that come in answer to prayer and those that come to protect yourself or other people.

Sandy: And there are numerous stories of the protection ones. I mean, I've heard multiple, multiple stories. There was one instance in particular, this lady was driving and she was driving in this one lane of the road, and she got the feeling that she needed to move over. It was a two-lane road, and she needed to move over. And there was a curve coming up. And she didn't know why, because there was nobody there, but she moved over. Well, a few minutes later, this truck comes barreling around the curve and had actually come over into that lane and if she'd have been there, she would have been toast. But because she was over a lane, she was OK. And there's a story about Wilford Woodruff . . . yeah, it was Wilford Woodruff. He had driven his carriage and parked it under this tree, and he was staying with—I'm not sure if it was [201] family or friends, I don't remember that part—but he had parked the wagon carriage under this tree.

And in the middle of the night, this voice comes out in the middle of the night and says, "Get up and move your carriage to the other side of the field."

And he's like, "Unh. It's the middle of the night." And he's just kind of ignoring it, saying, "Unh."

And then it comes again [*thumping the table*]: "Get up and move your carriage to the other side of the field." So he's like, "I guess I'd better go do it" [*laugh*]. So he gets up, moves his carriage to the other side of the field, and then goes back to bed, not knowing why.

Well, some time early in the morning they got a thunderstorm and this lightning bolt comes out of the sky, hit the tree, and knocked it over, right where the carriage had been [*laugh*].

So you *know*, there's another story.

And actually, I think they were sleeping in the wagon.

George: Yeah, they were sleeping in the wagon.

Sandy: Yeah, they stopped at this house, they were staying with friends, but they were sleeping in the wagon, because there wasn't room in the house. And so he got the feeling that he needed to move the wagon. Saved his whole family because of it. But there's all kinds of stories of things like that.⁵

Sandy is not consciously altering the story. Rather, in an effort to recall a story she read a few days earlier, she narrates using pat-

terns common to the genre. The result is that genres self-replicate. Common motifs can be used as a resource for the narration of other people's stories, filling in gaps in memory and ensuring a degree of familiarity, even conformity, to genre norms.

The adoption of patterns common to the *experience* of personal revelation may also reveal ways in which narrators personalize a story by imagining themselves in place of the protagonist. In many of her own experiences, Sandy mentions the difficulty of heeding the Spirit when it runs counter to her own thoughts or desires. For one prompting, she admits that she continues to resist for personal reasons. Recounting the story of Wilford Woodruff's revelation, she places herself in his shoes. She imagines being woken up in the middle of the night to go through the arduous task of moving a wagon and team of horses. The result is a dramatization of a bleary, begrudging, but eventual acquiescence to the voice of the Spirit, a scene reflective more of Sandy's humble character than of Wilford Woodruff's.

Notes

1. This story was collected by USU student Elise Alder from her "adopted Grandma," a woman who served in this role for many of the neighborhood children. Elise prefaced the story by noting: "While I listened to this story, I could feel the deep faith that Opal has carried throughout her life. She stresses to me through this story the importance of being in tune with the spirit, especially when someone else is depending on you. As you read this story, you will also recognize testimony" (1984: 12–13, Wilson Archives). The other stories mentioned are from my own fieldwork.

2. Camille Allen recorded this story from a fellow BYU student, who heard it from her Merrie Miss teacher, the woman in the story. After telling the story, the student added that she believes people do receive promptings, even though she has not received one: "I like stories like that even though I've never had one because it makes me believe that I could have one" (Allen 1996, Wilson Archives).

3. Wilford Woodruff published the story in the *Millennial Star* newspaper twice (first on December 12, 1881, and again on October 12, 1891), in the *Deseret Weekly* (September 5, 1891), and in his journal, parts of which were published by the Juvenile Instructor Office as *Leaves from My Journal* (1881a:89). He also told the story during a general conference in 1898 (*Conference Reports* 1898: 30–31). Since then, other leaders

have retold the story, resulting in its republication in church magazines (see, for example, G. Hinckley 1982) and church newspapers (see “Withstanding Life’s Storms” in *Church News* [Hyde 2001]). Church teaching manuals have also picked up the story for use in their Primary lesson books (“The Holy Ghost Helps Me,” lesson 7 in *Primary 1: I Am a Child of God*, 1994: 19–21) and in the *Teachings of Presidents of the Church* series, a kind of greatest hits of past church presidents, one volume of which is devoted to Wilford Woodruff (2004:46–7). Finally, the story has been reprinted in faith-promoting books such as Preston Nibley’s *Faith Promoting Stories* (1943: 24), the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers’ book *Heart Throbs of the West*, Vol. 3 (1941: 339–40), church histories such as *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff* (Durham 1946:295–6), and church-sponsored books such as General Authority Gerald N. Lund’s *Hearing the Voice of the Lord* (2007:108–9), as well as scholarly works such as Austin and Alta Fife’s *Saints of Sage and Saddle* (1956: 211–212) and Austin Fife’s “Popular Legends of the Mormons” (1942: 111–112).

4. Brother Williams was a local member of the church. Orson Hyde was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve.

5. Sandy Johnson told this story on August 6, 2006, just days after having read the Wilford Woodruff story in the August *Friend* magazine with her children. See chapter 5 for additional discussion of the Wilford Woodruff story as a specific tale type.