

A Personal Conversion

David C. Dollahite. *God's Tender Mercies: Sacred Experiences of a Mormon Convert*. Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2018. 324 pp. Paperback: \$12.95. ISBN: 978-0-9986052-6-5.

Reviewed by Doug Gibson

Brigham Young University School of Family Life professor David C. Dollahite's memoir *God's Tender Mercies* primarily focuses on Dollahite's conversion, his mission to the Boston area, and his courtship and marriage to Mary Kimball. One persistent theme throughout is that heavenly messengers, including divine beings, guardian angels, and other helpful spirits, are constantly sending us promptings to do things to both increase our spirituality and lead us to those whom God wants us to meet, whether a future spouse, a potential convert, or a new friend. Conversely, Satan is trying to lead us away from righteousness, warns Dollahite, and a failure to follow spiritual promptings causes us to lose potential blessings.

Dollahite was a teen in Marin County, California in 1977, raised in a low-intensity Episcopalian family. He was estranged from religion and cared mostly about tennis, which he intended to be his career. A prompting to read a copy of the Book of Mormon on a home bookshelf led to late-night reading binges, conversations with members, a spiritual manifestation, and baptism.

Dollahite writes in a highly enthusiastic Mormon tone, somewhat akin to Parley P. Pratt's autobiography in its ferocity of feeling. For example, in one passage he describes his spiritual confirmation while reading Moroni 10:3–5. "I felt the same type of wonderful feelings I had felt since I began reading the Book of Mormon, but at such an intensified level of power and depth that I cannot describe. I had never felt such

power and love before. It was as if a river of pure water rushed through me, washing away all my sins. It was also like a raging fire purged away my old self. I felt completely clean and like an entirely new person. . . . I felt loved at the deepest levels of my soul” (11).

After his baptism, Dollahite spent a year at BYU preparing for what became a successful mission, then back to BYU teaching at the Missionary Training Center, meeting his wife-to-be, and pursuing a career.

Dollahite is a talented storyteller, but the abundance of warmth in his prose and his nearly unceasing positivity initially put me off, as I felt something between envy and skepticism. A healthy faith is one that has experienced doubt, sacrifice, danger, and yearning. Some of the most important moments in our spiritual growth are our reactions to adversity. Yet Dollahite hardly broaches such experiences. One dark moment is quickly resolved with a happy ending. The author is devastated to learn of his beloved grandpa’s death. That night, Grandpa appears to him in a dream, assuring him that all is well and that the plan of salvation is true. Dollahite argues that spiritual communications like these are granted to us based on our faith, but I am not sure if that assessment is consistent or fair. I expect that for most, comfort comes through a longer process.

Dollahite can be overwhelming in his frequent references to divine and spiritual experiences. For example, an assigned BYU roommate suffers appendicitis, opening the door for a non-LDS student to room with Dollahite, whom he helps to convert. While he does not openly claim that this was God’s will, he does describe that he prayed fervently for a roommate to whom he could preach the gospel. Other examples of his close connection with the divine include his rescue from an attempt by the adversary to overwhelm him with darkness at the MTC and later, in the mission field, finding a prepared family because his companion was inspired to keep knocking doors even though Dollahite needed to use the bathroom.

Dollahite does admit to frequent doubts and lack of confidence as a convert, and he confesses to several past errors of judgment, such as an overexuberance in following the Word of Wisdom as an early convert.

The Word of Wisdom anecdote is amusing: Dollahite, preparing to apologize to a young woman for earlier condemning her hot chocolate use, learns that he actually “converted” her on the subject.

One painful recollection happened during his baptism when a missionary, during the break after the baptism, played a cassette tape that derided other religions, including his parents’ Episcopalian faith. The incident deeply offended his family and increased their antipathy to his new faith.

Still, good luck seems to follow him everywhere: a manager feels inspired to grab his application from the back of a thick file of job hopefuls; a prompting to attend his future wife’s concert instead of watching BYU football hastens the young courtship; a combination of forgetfulness and tragic weather in India actually helps make a scholarly trip more convenient for Dollahite and his hosts.

Longtime Latter-day Saints will smile at some observations of the still-new believer regarding church basketball, such as prayer before sports or the use of “fetch” and other squeaky-clean epithets by the players to substitute for profanity. Also, there’s the not-uncommon prolonged player tantrum by a prominent local Church leader. In Dollahite’s account, the frustrated athlete was given a time-out and a blessing.

Despite my reservations, I recommend this book. It is a deeply personal memoir of a spiritual awakening, one that leads a boy into manhood. And a second reading, as well as a perusal of my own father’s religiously-themed memoir and writings, softened my initial skepticism. Dollahite, deeply influenced by Book of Mormon prophets, speaks didactically to his grandchildren and further descendants, focusing on spiritual matters over material interests.

As mentioned, *God’s Tender Mercies* tends to overaccentuate the positive, but like Parley P. Pratt’s autobiography, it gets the reader inside the mind of a man who experienced a deeply emotional conversion. Dollahite goes to great lengths to elucidate the experiences that shaped and nurtured his faith. Spiritual matters are difficult to describe, but Dollahite does so in a compelling, entertaining, and often insightful way.