

# TO BE NATIVE AMERICAN— AND MORMON

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*Editor's Note: This essay was previously published in Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought volume 18, number 4, as part of a special issue in 1985 dedicated to Mormon–Native history and interrelationships. The issue especially focused on President Spencer W. Kimball's influence on this topic, who had recently passed. Dora Rose Hartvigsen England and Eugene England Sr. and their children personally funded the publication of this issue. Lacee A. Harris's personal essay "To Be Native American—and Mormon" may be the first known piece written by an Indigenous person published in Dialogue. I include it here not only for its historical significance in Dialogue's history of addressing this topic of indigeneity, but also because of its significance as a historical text itself, capturing a different era of LDS engagement with Native Americans, coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s as the Church was embarking on major missionary, outreach, and assimilation projects.*

"Lamanite! I am not a Lamanite. They are a wicked people. I am not a wicked person."

I can well remember my father, Albert H. Harris, saying this, both in church and to anyone else who would listen. Born on the Northern Ute Reservation in 1920, he was mixed blood. His father, Muse K. Harris, was Ute and my grandmother, Ivy Mae Harris, was anglo, a second-generation Latter-day Saint of pioneer stock. My father's grandmother, Great-grandmother Mary Reed Harris, said her own grandmother had been baptized by Brigham Young (Mildred Miles Dillman, comp. *The Early History of Duchesne County* [Springville, Utah: Art City Publishing Company, 1948]). Thus, the LDS Church had had a seven-generation impact on my family by the time I was born.

Although I remember my father's protest at being classified as a Lamanite, I never inquired about his background or youth, or his other feelings about the Church. He had served as president of the Fort Klamath Branch of the Klamath Falls Oregon Stake, on the high councils in Roosevelt, Utah, and Billings, Montana, and had held other stake positions. Still, by the time I was twenty-eight, he was dead in his Salt Lake City home, just before his fifty-first birthday, of alcohol-related causes. I don't remember what his bishop said at the time of his death. I remember that the Ute elders on the reservation spoke highly of his efforts to keep the traditional ways alive. As I look at the pattern of his life, I wonder if it was the strenuousness of that struggle to live in both worlds that moved him toward his early death.

My parents met when they were students at the Phoenix Indian School before my father entered the Army Air Corp in 1942. My mother, Lucille Davis Harris, is a Northern Paiute from the Reno-Sparks, Nevada, area. She was not a member of the Church at the time. I was the oldest of their five children. My younger siblings were Lucille who died two hours after she was born, Linda, 1949, Suzanne 1952, Jon, 1954, and James, 1956. When I was five, my mother was converted. I remember the excitement of driving to Vernal, Utah, for her baptism. (We went to have ice cream afterwards.) I remember being called up front so I could see the ordinance; but if anyone explained the significance to me, my memory did not retain it.

Three years later at age eight, I was also baptized, but I still recall no explanations. I remember the short pants, the cold floor, the warm water, and the warmer congratulations of many people who seemed very happy for what I was doing. But I had no clear concept of what baptism meant.

My childhood memories of religion are of Sunday meetings, not of home discussions or activities. I remember very long Sundays of getting dressed, sitting in long meetings listening to speakers talk about subjects I didn't understand, watching the big boys passing the sacrament

and wishing I could too. When I was about seven years old, we moved to Roosevelt, only eight miles but a whole world away. I enjoyed being in the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts, but I don't recall any lessons that made an impact. Being an Indian, being a Mormon were never mentioned. My Indianness, like my Mormonness, was just there.

My father was a realty officer for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and we moved relatively often. When I was ten or eleven, we moved to Klamath Agency on the Klamath-Modoc Reservation just north of Klamath Falls, Oregon, lived in agency housing, and went to church in a small branch about twelve miles away. None of the other LDS children were my age so all my friends were non-LDS. After a year, I returned to Roosevelt, Utah, to live with my grandparents.

Soon afterwards, I had my first disappointment at Church functions. At Scout camp where Order of the Arrow candidates were to be chosen, all the other boys assumed that I would be chosen for this "Indian" group. So did I. I was crushed when I wasn't and began losing interest in Scouting, even though I continued going because most of my friends were active.

When I was in the seventh grade, my father's work took him to Window Rock, Arizona, where we lived at the Navajo Agency at Window Rock and attended church sixty miles away in Gallup, New Mexico. It was so far away we attended only Sunday meetings. About seven months later, I went to live with my aunt and uncle, Floyd and Helen Wilkerson.

During ninth grade, I was junior high band vice president, ninth grade seminary class president, and junior high student body vice president. I don't think being either LDS or Indian had anything to do with either position, even though many of my schoolmates were LDS. At the end of the school year, I rejoined my parents who, by now, were in Muskogee, Oklahoma. I attended school there until halfway through my junior year. My main interests in the Muskogee branch were Scouting and MIA. There was only one boy my age and we didn't

have a great deal in common, although we were friends and home teaching companions. The LDS students from Basone Junior College, an Indian junior college, however, were very helpful and so were some of the missionaries in the area. I was called to my first Church teaching position—teaching the Blazer class—at age fourteen. I really enjoyed that.

However, in retrospect, although I met with a great deal of kindness and was included in many activities that were happening, I don't recall any adult leader—teacher, Scout leader, priesthood quorum advisor, or MIA instructor—who seemed interested in establishing a personal relationship with me or who seemed concerned about my personal spirituality. The lessons, as I recall, did not seem aimed toward action.

I was starting to feel different. I knew I wasn't a Lamanite because my father said we weren't. I knew I was an Indian but I didn't know how that fit into the Mormon system of anglos and Lamanites. The more I grew to understand my Indianness, the less I understood how I fit into the Church. In Oklahoma, surrounded by Indians of many tribes and nations, I was conscious of real pride in being an Indian. It was also in Oklahoma that my sense of being Mormon sharpened, thanks to the loving sacrifice of James C. and Delia Watkins. My "foster father"-to-be, James C. Watkins, was a safety engineer for the Corps of Engineers, US Army, stationed briefly at Muskogee. They had two girls, Carol and Sharon, and one boy, James. Carol was two years older than I, Sharon was six months older and James at that time was four years old. I am not really sure why they invited me to live with their family. I am not even sure why my parents agreed. I was fifteen years old. I'm glad that both did agree, for I wonder sometimes where I would be today without the Watkins family and all the help and sacrificing they did for me. This was not a part of the Church's formal placement program. When they moved on to Salina, Kansas, they asked me to go with them.

I accepted on a lark, more or less, as an adventure. My father said, "Take him, if you think you can handle him." My mother said,

“Okay. . . .” It is only in retrospect that I sense my mother’s pain and hurt that I would so casually leave the family.

The experience of living with an anglo family was valuable, however. Not only did I have to adjust to two older foster sisters and a younger brother, I had to fit into a family that did not allow me the same freedom given to an eldest male child in an Indian family. Delia later told me, “Lacey, that first year with you was pure hell.”

James’s work caused him to move a lot too. I attended the last part of my junior year in Salina, Kansas, where the family did a lot of square dancing. The first part of my senior year was in South Dakota. I finally graduated in Anchorage, Alaska. I wasn’t particularly involved in Church, except for social activities and Sunday meetings, although I was elected president of what my memory tells me was the first seminary class in Anchorage, Alaska.

I had never looked farther ahead than being out of high school. I didn’t date much—we were on the move too much and we usually lived out of town or on-base. But fortunately, Carol began attending BYU and mentioned its Indian Education program. The school sent the forms, I filled them out, and meanwhile my family had moved to Palm Springs, California, about the time we moved to Alaska. I had already lived among the Klamath, Modoc, Navajo, Creek, Sioux, Cherokee, and other Oklahoma tribes. Now I added the Agua Caliente Indians of Palm Springs.

I was accepted by BYU and, in 1962, moved into Taylor Hall in Helaman Halls with forty other fellows, all anglos, on my floor. There were only thirty-five Indians on campus that year. While I stayed with my foster parents, my parents helped out by sending money, clothes, and letters which didn’t get answered too often. I am still a poor letter writer. I had been given lots of freedom to make my own choices—given lots of information about the effect of those choices—but was allowed to choose. So when I chose to go to BYU, my parents were happy that I had decided to go to college after high school. The fact that

it was BYU was even better. The fact that it had an Indian Education program made it even better for them.

I ran into some problems at BYU. One was family prayer every night. The idea was to help the floor be more cohesive, give announcements, discuss any school problems, then have a family-style prayer before bed. Usually about 9:30 the floor chaplain would go around and round everybody up for “the event.” Another big concern was the idea of *having* to go to Church Sunday morning. It was not mandatory, just a lot of peer pressure, hammering, kicking, and loud noise to get everybody up for Church. By this time, I figured I was old enough to decide for myself if I wanted to go to Church. I didn’t need someone telling me to go. Since I was the only Indian on the floor and in my dorm building, it was easy to see when I missed. The student ward was made up of one wing of Taylor (120 men), as far as I remember, then two of the women dorms from the Heritage complex.

As a first-semester freshman, I took a mandatory Book of Mormon class and really began to learn about the Lamanites. The more I learned, the more I felt that the Church really had no place for us as “Indians.” We only belonged if we were Lamanites.

I felt that the teachings of the Church were excellent and I did not doubt the teachings of the Book of Mormon about the Lamanites as apostate survivors of great nations, but taking that story personally was too much for me. Were those Lamanites *my* Indian people? My people were good, deeply spiritual, in tune with the rhythms of the earth and with their own needs. How could we be descended from a wicked people? How could I be a descendant of wickedness and still be good without repudiating the heritage that made it possible for me to accept Mormon goodness?

These were difficult questions for a college freshman, and I found myself avoiding more and more the all-anglo ward. I was drawn to the BYU Indian Education Tribe of Many Feathers, the Indian club on campus, with its warmly welcoming activities. Our club advisors

sincerely cared about us but I still felt, uneasily, that they were trying to make us into something we weren't.

My nineteenth birthday had passed. Everyone assumed I would go on a mission, and I routinely sent in my papers, asking for the Southwest Indian Mission, then the only Indian mission in the United States. Six months before I left, in January of 1964, the Southwest Indian mission was divided into the Northern Indian and the Southwest Indian and I was sent to headquarters in Holbrook, Arizona. That meant I had to learn the Navajo language and culture.

I had expected to enjoy my mission experience and I did. I had two mission presidents, J. Edwin Baird and Hal Taylor. In Arizona, I started in Pinon, and went on to Chinle, Many Farms, Lukachukai, Dennehotso, the Gap, Tuba City, Inscription House, and Chichinbitso with a stint in Cortez, Colorado, among the Ute Mountain Utes. We worked hard. No one had quite found the right set of lesson plans for Navajos, and we went through four or five during my two years. Some of the Navajo elders helped translate the lessons into Navajo and we learned to read, write, and speak the language.

Although there are inevitable differences between two people who live together twenty-four hours a day, I liked most of my companions. Six were Anglo and three were Indians, all Navajo. Many of the Anglo elders were fine missionaries, good at the language, and hard working. Some of them loved the area and people, leaving only with deep regret. Others never got over the culture shock, waited out their two years with impatience, and contributed little.

Ironically, it was in the mission field, serving the Lord full time that I first became fully aware in the center of my being of some of the cultural differences between Indian and Anglo Mormons. Some of my Anglo companions left me with bitter memories of patronage, of being left out of decisions, of being told in subtle ways that I wasn't equal in ability or capacity. A pattern of occasional comments and offhand judgments began to take shape about the people we were teaching and

working with: “lack of commitment,” “Indian standard time,” “a reservation Indian.” Some of the anglo elders were disappointed that some of the people didn’t want to hear our stories, as the lessons were called by the people, and never realized that they were communicating “we know what’s best for you” by not listening to what the Indian people were saying. In their eagerness to help, many missionaries unwittingly crossed the line between assistance and taking over.

When I returned to BYU in the fall of 1964, the fifty-eighth Ward, an all-Indian unit, had been organized. We had heard about it in the mission field and were excited about it. I loved the ward but, newly sensitized to paternalism, it bothered me that our bishop was anglo when all the other officers were Indian. One of the events early in that school year of 1964 fall semester was a pre-announced talk by our bishop on interracial dating. It seemed to be an issue for him. A number of us showed up with non-Indian dates and sat on the front row. It was a joke—yet it wasn’t. Something in me was starting to feel pushed around, and I wanted to push back.

Another problem that year was our bishop’s discouragement of our dances and “ceremonies.” Again it seemed to be an issue for the Church, an unwritten issue. Some of us protested. Why would the Church sponsor the Polynesian Center cultural ceremonies and dances, while we couldn’t have our own? Policy, our bishop explained briefly. Could he show us where, we wanted to know? He became vague. We pushed harder for an explanation. Several of us were called before one of the university vice presidents to discuss “code violations.” We were not violating any rules; but I learned in the session that we were questioning the wisdom of the Church leaders by asking “inappropriate” questions. We only wanted to know why we couldn’t be who and what we were—Indians. To us part of being Indian was our dances and ceremonies. They had cultural, not spiritual, significance to us because none of us had the right to practice or conduct any of the real spiritual ceremonies. Many of us went home for those.



We all wanted to graduate, so we stopped taking our questions to our bishop.

In retrospect, the difference between our two situations seems clearer. Polynesian dances have become detached from their philosophy and values. Doing them was harmless entertainment—good exercise. Indian dances, on the other hand, had living connections with our past, our values, our other, non-Mormon identities. They could corrupt us. We didn't know how or where, but somehow they would.

By my junior year, I had changed my major twice and married Alberta Acothley, a Navajo from Tuba City, Arizona, in the Salt Lake Temple on 17 May 1968.

It was interesting that I had known Alberta's family before I knew her.

She was working in Oakland, California, when I was in Tuba City, and the branch president helped to convince her to go to the Y. She lived in the women's dorms of Helaman Halls so we all ate in the common cafeteria. I saw her eating alone and wanted to meet her, so I went over to eat lunch with her. She was kind of shy and quiet, not like her brother Bobby, who I enjoyed knowing very much.

The fall after our marriage, I was asked to serve as second counselor for the BYU fifty-eighth ward. The ninety-second and ninety-seventh Indian wards were founded that first year of our marriage. When the ninety-second ward was formed, I was asked to be first counselor with Kenneth Nabahe as bishop and Lynn Steele as the second counselor. We were the first all-Indian bishopric at BYU.

I still had lots of questions. Most of us did. But the intellectual stimulation of my graduate program (master of public administration), the happiness of our marriage, and the joy of serving others gave me the courage to keep on working. I tried to fit into what the Church seemed to be asking. I tried to belong.

I worked as a sanitation engineer the first three years of our marriage. Our first two children, Brenna and Bron, were born in Provo. In

keeping as much as possible to our Indian ways we picked anglo names that reflected something about the child. The two names are Welch. Brenna, means “raven haired maiden.” When she was born, she had a full head of hair about two inches down her back. My son’s name means “the brown skinned warrior” or “the brown skinned one” depending on what name book one looks at.

In 1970, I graduated with a B.S. in history. I hadn’t completed my master’s but we moved to Riverside, California, where I was director of special services and taught a history class for the community college in Riverside. Our third child, a daughter, was born in Riverside, California. Since her mother didn’t want all “B’s,” her name is La Donna Mae, “the maiden lady.” Each of them also has names given to them from their grandparents. There I also started growing my hair long after years of short-haired dress codes at BYU. I wanted to show my culture and heritage again. I wanted an outward sign of my background. California’s famous climate was too much for me, though, because of the smog; and when an offer came to be the University of Utah’s Indian Education advisor, we came back in February 1973.

We moved into an all-anglo ward. I taught Gospel Doctrine class in Sunday School while Alberta took care of the children. I enjoyed teaching; I tried to help them understand how the gospel related to me and my culture. I could feel myself expanding in some new ways and I felt that the ward members supported me. In 1975 we started to attend the Indian Ward in Salt Lake City, Fifth Ward in Templeview Stake, now in Wells Stake. We felt more at home among the Indian people. I was called to be executive secretary with an all-Indian bishopric. Milton Watts was bishop. We were together for two years.

It was a good life. When people asked if I was Mormon, I would say, “Yes, but I’m Nuchee, Northern Ute, first, then Mormon.” Alberta and I talked about the teachings of our separate tribes and how these values corresponded with those of the Church. Our children were learning to speak Navajo and could tell some of the old stories. We loved each other and were proud of our children.

Then in October 1975, Alberta became ill. It was hard for her to breathe and she complained of chest pains. Neither of us had ever been seriously ill before. We were frightened and confused. In the latter part of October, the pain intensified and I took her to Holy Cross Hospital. I waited for a long time with a friend, Thorn Garrow, a Mohawk from New York, during her examination. When the doctor came out after he had been researching his diagnosis, he blew my world apart with a few short sentences. Alberta had a rare lung disease and would probably die within a year.

The next months are a blur in my mind. In looking back on the experience, I see that Alberta was much more accepting of her death than I was. It's not that she wanted to die but she accepted the fact and lived each day as it came even though the thought of leaving the children was very painful. She asked me to remarry so the children would continue to have a two-parent home.

The doctor thought that washing down the whole house might help Alberta breathe easier, and the whole ward turned out to do it. It didn't help, but the concern and love did. As Alberta was hospitalized at increasingly frequent intervals during that agonizing winter and the following spring, the Relief Society sisters would bring food and try to help out with the children. Bishop Watts and both his counselors were quiet, consistent supports, dropping over, calling, just letting me know they were with me during this time.

While Alberta was hospitalized—permanently in April—my mom helped out with the children. Brenna and Bron were in school so La Donna was the one that needed constant care.

The doctor had taught me some simple exercises to help Alberta breathe more easily, and I would spend many hours each night, trying to help her get enough breath into her tortured body that she could sleep. Brenna and Bron also learned how to do them. We had her name put on prayer rolls in several temples. The home teachers administered to her. As a bishopric, we administered to her. I took her to anglo specialists and brought in both Navajo and Mohawk medicine men. Every pain-free

breath I took was a petition to the Lord to spare her. Nothing worked. She died on our eighth wedding anniversary to the day, 17 May 1976.

We held the funeral in a local funeral home, the Deseret Funeral Home, but I insisted on Indian elements. Blankets, belts, bracelets, beads, and money went into Alberta's casket. I gave away most of Alberta's possessions as was proper, and cut my hair as a sign of mourning. La Donna Mae was two and a half years old. The University of Utah College of Nursing helped me enroll her in a nursery school for half a day and the ward members helped me find a babysitter for the other half day. A traditional Indian family would have had blessings but I didn't. Somehow, I didn't want to acknowledge my grief even when I couldn't deny the pain. I felt very alone; I felt that half of me had died. The ward members had their own lives to lead. My people on the reservation and my own family were too far away.

Since my wife's death, Fifth Ward has had four bishops, and our ward has been moved to two new buildings. The bishops were good men, all very supportive of me. I have not remarried. I quit work to go back to school three years ago.

My faith in Mormonism is still strong. It is important to me that both my Indian people and the Mormons believe that the earth was created spiritually before it was created physically, that the purpose of this life is to gain experience, that our lives are to be lived so that our Creator can be proud of us individually and as a people, that the Son of God came among us to teach us how to live. We have traditions around the numbers three, twelve, and thirteen, that are reminiscent of Mormon ways. Ceremonies allow those who are authorized to bless, marry, and heal. Fasting and prayer are ways to spiritual power in both cultures.

Yet many of my questions are still there, too. When people tell me that my traditions develop from the Book of Mormon, I ask, "Then why do I have to give up those traditions to be a Mormon?" When people say, "You don't have to give up anything good. Mormonism just builds on something that is better," I say, "Why must I abandon the foundations to have the rest of the building?"

A problem for me is that I see the LDS culture as a separate structure from LDS teachings. With all my heart I accept those LDS teachings and want them for my children; but the LDS culture has become more alien, not more familiar, as the years have passed. I think sometimes of that LDS culture—of that first generation of Saints, all of them converted to a shockingly radical new religion, trying in faith to build together a new community. From their efforts, ironically, have come the culture that now tells us that we are not converted unless we accept the culture as well as the teachings—or even seems to urge us to accept the culture, never mind about the teachings. As I have talked to many Indians, they too feel that the culture of the Mormons gets in the way of the teachings.

I may be wrong. I have been wrong before. I know that all people must abandon parts of their culture to accept the gospel. Many of my Indian brothers and sisters have given up their cultures to become Mormon—to be acceptable to their anglo Mormon brothers and sisters. How long do they last? The teachings of the Church allow us to be both Indian and Mormon, but to expect Indians to be anglo Mormons puts an enormous strain on some of the Indian people. Some feel they must choose between being Mormon and being Indian. Yet those who abandon their roots and their heritage altogether, trying to be white except for their skins, do not seem to be either happier or more successful.

It shouldn't be a conflict. We shouldn't have to choose. In both my ward and among my people, I am called "brother." I feel that responsibility in both settings. I feel the potentiality of that reward. And I remember my grandmother, the first Indian member of the Relief Society in the Uintah Basin. After years of faithful service, she went back to the traditional ways. For her, the gap got wider and wider until she had to choose. Surely, four generations later for me and my children, it should be possible to retain the beauty and the blessedness in both ways.