Mormons may not have a bound canon of prayer, an approved prayer book from which we read and repeat at our meetings, but we do have an extraordinary, complex, unwritten formality that all of us learn and which we use to evaluate other's testimonies.

BELIEF, METAPHOR, AND RHETORIC: THE MORMON PRACTICE OF TESTIMONY BEARING

By David Knowlton

“Brothers, and Sisters,
I want to bear you my testimony.”

For Mormons, these are very rich words. Like a chocolate truffle, they can inspire delicious anticipation, or, with the dulling of the taste buds that comes from overindulgence, they may strongly turn us off. But in either case, unlike other words we daily throw at each other in our very verbal society, they are never just there. They key us, they prompt us, they require us to respond.

To the non-Mormon, to someone who hasn’t heard them in at times emotional and at times boring contexts, these words in a testimony are almost incomprehensible. To be sure, the words still carry their dictionary definitions, but the non-Mormon hearers lack the context—the living, the folding over and over again of experience and significance, like the butter and dough of a warm, flaky croissant. Mormons have saturated these words with ritual and mystical meaning—as well as with personal, living meaning—to the point that these words have layer upon layer upon layer of references. The most simple of words—“I want to bear you my testimony”—become dense, multi-vocalic, ritual signs. These kinds of words and their relation to the community have been compared to generations of leaves that compose the forest floor. With the annual fall of new leaves they become more compacted. Over time they decompose into the rich soil which nurtures the trees and a host of secondary flowers and shrubs.

Because these words form part of a complex system, comprehending their use and meaning is difficult. Those inside it cannot see all the interrelationships composing the whole, while those outside it do not share in the on-going community, the interlocking of contexts and meanings, the cycles of leaves which sustain the collectivity.

As an anthropologist, I’ll explore in this article the significance of the words in testimony meetings and the practices in which they are embedded. To do so, I’ll utilize the methods of the ethnography of speaking (which analyzes how words are used in a speech community by different kinds of individuals) to understand how Mormon speech is affected by the context of shared understandings and different degrees of verbal competence. The first part of this article will introduce anthropological concepts which then will be applied to Mormon testimony meetings. For some readers, the terms and approach may be new and initially hard to understand and will require a slower and more careful reading than many articles demand; it may be useful to re-read the background sections after having read the application to Mormonism. In addition to the general benefit of learning a new approach to culture, I believe this intellectual discipline is important to our faith. Many of us are not satisfied with the usual LDS testimony meeting and make trenchant criticisms of its frequent “emptiness,” “triviality,” “hollow formalism,” etc. Yet the meeting has evolved as an integral part of Mormonism and has great ritual salience. It is structured the way it is because it responds to important spiritual and mechanical dynamics of the Church, as do our frustrations. We need to carefully analyze the meeting and understand it, lest in our recommendations for change we throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water.

Nevertheless, such analysis is not easy. To do so, we tread on both the pedestrian and the sacred within Mormonism. In some way, our religion depends on these events being seen as immediate manifestations of individual and collective relationships with God. To show them as also being mechanical—products of natural human process—is to seemingly pull...
the curtain off the little man and his levers while he is speaking as the grand wizard of Oz. Analysis seemingly removes the magic and mystery, as well as the immediacy, of our spiritual feelings. As a result, we feel resistance and anxiety. Furthermore, this analysis might seem to open Mormons to the same feelings. As a result, we feel resistance and anxiety. Further, there is a mechanical function by which individuals play out their life stories. Sacrament meeting links the formative myth of Mormonism and presents it as a type through which individuals play out their life stories. Sacrament meeting links the formative myth of Mormonism and the Saints' daily lives.

RITUAL AND RHETORIC

This analysis requires a foray into the philosophy and anthropology of ritual and signs—the mechanics of religious practice. Although I attempt to express the following points in relatively simple and common language, the reasoning may at times seem opaque, because it is built on centuries of careful thought about these issues. Just as a child learning to ride a bicycle or play a violin has to spend time observing and learning before he develops the innate skill to ride or play without thinking, we, too, live in the world and experience God and spirituality because of learning to do so. This implies that there is also a mechanics of the vehicles for religion and our practice in using them. Because most of us have already learned the mechanics, we do not usually think about them. Further, there is almost a taboo forbidding us to do so since in the act we seem to be denying God an immediate relationship with his believers. As a result, in looking at the mechanics we must hold on to our faith, for a while, in order to understand how it works, so that once again we can just live it without having to think first.

As Mormons, we know well the monthly experience of sitting in fast and testimony and listening to speaker after speaker say basically the same thing in almost the same words. With no effort we can produce a list of the common phrases and topics. The repetition of them often gets boring and many wonder why we don't vary our language and subjects. More than we realize, imbued in this tiresome treadmill of language and formality are vital processes which cement individuals and the congregation to the Church and its teachings.

A Mormon "testimony" is simultaneously at least two things. It is a metaphor portraying one's internal commitment to the Church and the community. It is also a ritual practice. For example, when we ask someone about her testimony, we are inquiring about her connection with the body of members and thence with God. This is not the same thing as when we stand, in church or elsewhere, and bear testimony; then, we perform a ritual—a patterned practice of rhetoric, a chaining of words together in socially established ways. In performing this ritual the metaphor is motivated and made real; our internal commitment is given context and purpose within a set of communally validated meanings.

It may surprise some Saints, but our bearing of testimonies is as much a structured ritual as the high Catholic mass with all its pomp and circumstance. It is also a ritual like that of Andeans who ceremoniously combine pieces of sugar, stone, and llama wool in interesting ways and then burn them as an offering to the mountains and the earth to guarantee the cycle of fertility and reproduction or to redress some wrong. Our LDS ritual primarily differs from these in the kinds of signs and symbols we privilege, or sanction. Mormons don't use emblems of sugar, llama hair, or stones; we use words in sequence. Words become our stones, our llama hair, our sugar; our processions, our chantings, our vestments. When we combine
these emblem-words in meaningful ways within ritual settings, they not only create referential meaning (an understanding of the intended message), they also invoke spiritual significance. The ritual process of testimony meeting takes the testimony as metaphor—something which is internal to each of us but that as metaphor is excessively abstract—and makes the related experience real for the individual and the congregation. But for this to happen there must be a collective understanding of the meaning of the speaker’s words; thus, the testimony only acquires meaning in shared, rather than individual, contexts. Therefore, it is the ritual of testimony—the structured, public speaking of shared rhetoric—which makes the metaphor of testimony tangible and immediate.

**RITUAL RHETORIC AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS**

Of course, Mormonism is not unique in its focus on the ritual use of language as something central to its worship and to the self-identity of its believers. In fact, this dynamic is found in very different religious traditions.

The anthropologist Susan Harding describes how ritual rhetoric among fundamentalist Baptists actually creates belief. She argues that the words themselves, when used within ritual contexts (such as motivating sermons or tent meetings), create a crisis within the people which the rhetoric turns around and legitimates by giving it a label, a definition, and a cosmic significance. This process of creating the experience and then defining it connects the individual to the ritual and to the ideological structure of the religion (this process also happens in Mormon testimony meetings, and will be described later).

To elaborate, since fundamentalist Christians give tremendous emphasis to the general abasement and sinfulness of humanity, they preach that this situation can only be changed through the grace of God. Therefore they focus, during the altar call as well as other ritual times, on the public acknowledgment of one’s sinfulness and one’s acceptance of Christ’s saving grace. Their rhetoric repeats this over and over in multitudinous examples. It attempts to create a dissonance in the individual who can now recognize and label his abasement. The solution to this situation—Christ’s grace—is also labeled and repeated over and over in rhetoric and in the ritual form of their worship. This overlapping of rhetoric with ritual makes Christian fundamentalism a powerful and motivating religious form to those who accept its premises.

Another anthropologist, Richard Bauman, explored the ritual use of language within historic Quaker worship. Bauman explained how the Society of Friends valued silence and the contravention of the standard social uses of language to access the Sacred. The egalitarian Quakers rejected the traditional religious rhetorical forms which supported social hierarchy and class difference and argued for plain speech prompted by spiritual movement. Nevertheless, their meetings for worship have a ritual process which proscribes and validates their limited social rhetoric. The ritual form itself enables them to understand the presence of the Spirit. It makes the divine tangible.

In many Protestant groups—including groups not usually classified as such (including Mormons) but which liturgically descend in some degree from the Protestant reaction against Catholic and High Protestant ritual—words form their central worship service and thereby become the major ritual of their congregation. This religious focus on rhetoric makes their religious practice unlike that of the Bolivian Indians and many other societies where worship focuses almost entirely on the mobilization of concrete signs—things like the sugar and the stones and the llama wool. For Mormons, then, speech becomes the meeting. As part of the rebellion against “apostate” Christianity, we generally avoid effective concrete ritual signs (the sacrament and the temple ceremony are two obvious exceptions). As a result, the words we use, the way we put them together, and the tone of voice that is used, have to communicate what would otherwise be communicated by more concrete ritual expressions, such as incense, priestly robes, and the procession led by the cross.

In contrast, an important Bolivian Indian ritual involves the feeding of mountain shrines by preparing a table/mass (the word the Indians use means both the Catholic mass as well as a table) with stamps of sugar carrying various images such as the condor or llama, bits of colored wool, coca leaves, and other concrete symbols. This table/mass is usually burned or buried as an offering to the sacred and living mountains. The spiritual significance comes from the placing of these emblems within the coordinates of a social space saturated with spiritual meaning. Although words occur at times as a prayer over the offering, their significance is limited to being another symbol among many in the complex juxtaposition of the symbols composing the ritual.

**LANGUAGE IN MORMON RITUALS**

In rituals where words have to fill the place of more concrete signs, the weight of ritual meaning is born by even the most simple and seemingly insignificant aspects of language. For example, some have argued that in the Anglican Church the most significant variable differentiating the various portions of the worship service is the timbre and the tone of voice that is actually used. Therefore, ritual language has to be considered somewhat differently from everyday language. Normally, when we think of language we think about its meaning. We treat it as referring relatively transparently to objects and ideas in the external world. We think about the supposed definition of the words and sentences. Linguists call this reference. But reference is only one of the many functions of language. Also important is the pragmatic function: the social meaning of language for the formation, maintenance, or change of social relations. For example, when we ask someone how she is doing we generally are not so much making an enquiry about her health as we are maintaining a social relationship. Most speech does a lot more than simply communicate referential meaning.

Thus in analyzing ritual language, we are better served by focusing on the way words are juxtaposed to one another within the religious context and on the group’s norms used to
produce and interpret the language of worship than by simply focusing on the referential meaning. We also must evaluate how chains of discourse (different parts of the meeting) come to hold symbolic significance, not so much for their content but because, through their location within ritual, they operate as if they were sugar, coca leaves, or llama wool within a symbolically motivated social space.

To evaluate the use of language within the context of testimony meetings, we need to look at the meeting as a ritual performance of words. First we note how the words combine into ritually significant speech styles and genres, such as announcements, prayers, talks, songs, and testimonies. Each mobilizes the relationship between the sacred and the participants in a somewhat different fashion. Together they create movement within the meeting and a unified ritual vision of Mormonism. By examining the flow of words through the course of the meeting we notice that there are relatively bound forms of speech versus relatively unbound forms: There are times and places where you can be more or less spontaneous and free in your expressions and times and places where you can't. Interestingly, the bound forms occur at the beginning, the end, and in the middle, such as prayers and hymns. They mark the progress of the ritual; they serve as punctuation guides that inform us about the motion of the meeting.

This is probably not an earth-shaking observation for members of the Church, but to the anthropologist it indicates form and structure around which ritual significance is constructed. Mormons commonly argue against ritual, seeing it as an empty form indicating the hollowness of an apostate world. Nevertheless, we too have a definite ritual, as indicated by the pre-determined bound and unbound public expressions, and by our uncomfortableness when someone breaches the commonly understood language style of each form. Hence, within this meeting marked by bound verbal forms, we enter a sacred space where language no longer sounds nor operates as it does in everyday life. The way the language is organized keys us to hear and interpret it differently—our structuring of language creates our ritual.

As Mormons, we intuitively know that public prayer is more or less bound, although we don't think of the opening prayer as being as formal as a written prayer, such as the sacrament prayer which must be repeated perfectly. The emphasis on making sure every word is said correctly, indicates the culminating significance of the sacrament prayers as the mid point—the high point—of the worship ritual. In contrast, we understand the opening and closing prayers as relatively free expressions of individual wishes and desires, personal expressions standing for those of the congregation. Nevertheless, opening and closing prayers are very limited syntactically and in content. What is acceptable to say in an opening prayer other than "we ask thee," or "we thank thee"? Even the greetings and the closings by the person conducting are relatively constrained. We don't teach these limits to one another formally, but by social control and social communication we learn the appropriate ways to speak when praying and conducting. They are not free expressions. Here we find a tension between our anti-ritual ideology and the necessity for ritual in order to have a relatively formal structure, such as a sacrament meeting.

In fact, LDS sacrament meetings have a symmetrical structure of bound and unbound sections. We begin with a hymn and invocation followed by relatively unbound speech involving ward business leading to the sacrament. This is followed by the next phase of somewhat free speech involving talks, a section structurally parallel to the business section, followed by the bound hymn and benediction.

For me, the most interesting part of the meeting is the section of talks or testimonies. In some senses, this is really the high ritual of Mormonism. We often refer to the temple services as our high ritual; we may think of the ritualistic ordinances such as baptism as being really important, and in a cosmic sense they are. But in terms of the ritual of day-to-day Mormonism, the religion we all eat, live, and breath, the high ritual occurs at that part of the meeting immediately following the sacrament, when we speak, when we stand up and share talks, when we bear testimony. This is when we actualize and make concrete the abstract metaphors of the endowment and personal testimony, those gifts from God which should motivate our life, leading to the change of heart described by Alma. In the sacrament talks and, especially, in testimonies we either have demonstrated for us or, when speaking, we individually relive the semiogenetic events of Mormonism, those storied events that mythically created and continue to explain Mormon cosmology, doctrine, and ritual.

Paradoxically, this part of the meeting is also the time when
many of us go to sleep, when we tune out of the talks, when we lose track of the meeting. In some ways, this also can be interpreted within the ritual as an indication of people not listening to the whisperings of the Spirit, to the still small voice. This common tendency to boredom and inattentiveness also demonstrates a structural weakness within the ritual about which many of us lament. When we hear a “good” talk or testimony we feel moved and fed. Generally, though, we grumble about the tediousness and poor quality of most talks and testimonies. We see them as hackneyed, repetitive, and ordinary. While this is a weakness, it is also not surprising nor uniquely Mormon. Common ritual does not necessarily give everyone a peak experience all the time. People around the world argue about the spiritual value and effectiveness of their ritual.

Some cultures, however, do not automatically assume that their ritual is always to be treated with reverence or to produce some ecstatic, emotive experience or satisfaction. I was surprised when I first encountered an example of this. In the first Bolivian community where I did field work, there was a monolith named Guillermo Pumakhusi that had tremendous sacred significance. It was a Pre-Incan carved stone pillar with a probably male face on one side and snakes on the other which stood in the middle of the school yard, the center of the community. The town's inhabitants believed that if the monolith were damaged, the social and political climate of the community would be destroyed, totally destroyed. From time to time people would make offerings—burn mesas—to Guillermo to keep the climate functioning or to solicit his good will in preventing family disasters. And yet the kids of the community often played on Guillermo, swinging on him. On most days, he was not granted a lot of ritual deference or respect. People were generally bored around Guillermo. He did not have significance all the time. But at critical moments people would render offerings to Guillermo with great respect, faith, and worship. Guillermo was one of the major ritual items of their lives. He anchored their cosmology, their idea system, their day-to-day practice, their economy and society. If they did not make offerings at the particular times, the people feared their economy would decay because of natural or social disasters. Still, Guillermo Pumakhusi is in some ways weak. The community must make an effort to convince the people of his importance. At some point, as the Bolivian community's worldview changes, his status could easily decline to that of a mere artifact representing their ancient culture, rather than being a living manifestation of the sacred.

I suspect that LDS testimonies and talks are somewhat similar to Guillermo. They often bore us, but at critical times they are also the most stimulating and anchoring moments of our life. Most of us have had the experience of bearing testimony and feeling suddenly moved, touched by the Spirit, feeling that something significant was going on. At these moments, our life experience becomes anchored to the Church, to the Mormon flow of sacred events. Our faith is renewed. We leave the meeting refreshed and excited. That is important. That is what ritual is supposed to do, and it is interesting to understand how such a boring ritual accomplishes something so important and lasting.

The anthropologist Victor Turner indicated that one of the important things about ritual is that it links our intellectual and cognitive sides—our ideological explanations of our lives and the world around us—with our emotions, with the more generative process of life. According to Turner, ritual takes the formative myths of any society—Mormon or Andean Indian—and presents the myths as a type through which individuals play out their own life stories. In a sense, the ritual is the stage, the formative myth the script, and we are the actors. We don't often regard sacrament meeting or the bearing of testimony as a linkage between the formative myths of Mormonism and the way Saints live out their daily lives, but it is. The act of testimony or the process of sacrament meeting is a replaying of our formative myths. By myth, I don't mean a falsehood—the popular definition. Myths are narrative vehicles which convey to the community the values it collectively holds. For the United States, the story of the Revolution is our formative myth, it tells us who we are and what we value; that is why we retell the story over and over again. For Mormons, the Joseph Smith Story is our formative myth, and it is pregnant with most fundamental LDS beliefs—prayer and personal revelation, prophets and authority, truth and apostasy. A formative myth is not only a sacred story, it is a charter, an organizing story, something that is beyond empirical proof or the necessity of empirical truth. It is a type, a classifying event, it provides us a model of and a model for our sacred society. To the degree that Mormon cosmology and ritual remain valid for a Latter-day Saint, he or she is animated by its myths, even if not consciously. We relive our Mormon myth in the moment when we feel moved by the Spirit and anchor our experiences and our selves to the explanatory power of the myth.

HOW BEARING TESTIMONY IS A RITUAL WHICH BINDS THE INDIVIDUAL TO THE CHURCH

Of course, all this reliving of the formative myth operates at a relatively abstract symbolic level. Thus, the myth must be made concrete and tangible so that we can experience it. That is the function of ritual: it binds our personal life with the community's myth. In Mormon ritual, the speech styles, especially of public testimony, do this for us.

On the surface, the LDS testimony may appear to be spontaneous, but in terms of form it is also relatively bound, although not quite to the extent of the opening and closing prayers. We often think that we can stand up and speak our soul or that our soul pours forth when we're speaking in testimony, meaning that we're under the freeing movement of the Spirit. While we may indeed be feeling the Spirit, our expression of it is not so free as we might think. In reality, we've all heard so many testimonies that their pattern has been ingrained in our minds, and we unknowingly follow it. When we bear testimony we operate within a formal structure that can be analyzed in technical terms. The important point is that although the content allowable in a testimony is limited, testimonies are even more limited in terms of how ideas and experiences are
framed rather than the subject matter. In other words, we pick and choose the experiences we mention in compliance with our community’s canons of adequacy. That is, we decide which of all our daily experiences are appropriate to share in a testimony meeting, then we structure those experiences in particular ways, generally in ways that demonstrate the effectiveness of the gospel or of the hand of God in our lives.

A ritually significant prototype for bearing testimony comes from the Joseph Smith story. The missionaries teach this as a model for the witness we should receive about the “truthfulness” of the gospel, and all of us learn the model in Sunday School and other auxiliary classes. The testimony model is contained in the formative myth, in Joseph’s story—it teaches us how to “do” testimony—thereby, when we reproduce that model in our testimony (our personal myth), we’re implicitly living through the same kind of events that Joseph Smith did. Our life becomes a token of the same kind of things that motivated Joseph Smith. Bearing such a testimony manifests the movement of the spirit of the Lord in our lives, and at the same time justifies and legitimizes the Church which Joseph Smith organized. It teaches us the “truthfulness” of the gospel. (In quotes because truthfulness is a very Mormon word, not one which has a strict referential meaning; rather, it is a ritual word, taking its meaning from its use within ritual.) The testimony takes this myth and makes it tangible through the play of referential meaning and ritual form; i.e. by performing the ritual in socially validated ways, we give support and reality to the quite abstract myth. Our experience then becomes anchored within the process of the Church, yet we are unaware of the social process producing this. It seems to be something simply produced by the movement of the Spirit. But, in fact, the Spirit operates within our carefully crafted ritual.

While testimony is the result of a structure which orients the content of ritual toward sustaining the Church, its great strength is that it functions in the mind of members as an unstructured entity. The apparent lack of structure provides the testimony with a pervasive naturalness which is accepted unquestionably by believers. When a member stands to bear testimony, she must reinterpret her individual experience to fit the structure of the form. Since that structure asserts the primacy of the Church in opposition to other institutions, her experience will be structured in ways that demonstrate that...
this way, and because he had been constantly taught the Joseph Smith model, for the young man in Austin, Texas, his immediate experience linked his life with that of Joseph Smith. He became a participant in the cosmic event of the Restoration. It became vivid within his own life. For just a moment, the other parts of his life, schooling, etc., became secondary to the testimony itself, to that nice feeling he had where, "Hey, it can't be any other way!" There was an immediacy of experience that was profound. That is what ritual is supposed to do.

When we are in testimony meetings, many of us hope to hear something profound or insightful. I suspect we want to hear words chained together in a way that would be more typical of a scholarly discourse—the kinds of things I would report to the American Anthropological Association. For anthropologists, however, their professional meetings are similar to testimony meetings for Mormons. The presentations are usually more tedious and boring than any testimony meeting. Scholars are not generally very interesting writers or performers. They may have brilliant ideas, but they bury them in tedious and dully presented prose. Nevertheless, there is a ritual form to that kind of meeting as well. It also stresses, symbolizes, and legitimizes the major events of being an anthropologist. The meeting's form takes the individual experience of being an anthropologist, of doing field work in another culture and trying to bring results back to the scientific community, and connects it with the mythology of the famous anthropologists of the past. It takes the individual experience and ties it to all the other experiences of anthropologists and makes them one. Generally, the playing out of the form is boring, although every once in a while you experience an epiphany.

THE SPEECH OF TESTIMONIES: TIMBRE, RHYTHM, PITCH

An important part of the performance of testimonies concerns what I call spiritual speech. Ideally, a testimony is a manifestation of a spiritual revelation. Mormon ideology says that we receive our testimonies as a gift of the Spirit. Now, the problem with receiving a testimony as the gift of the Spirit is that I may know it, but nobody else does. How do I convince others that I have really communed with the Spirit? This becomes a technical problem of communication. How do I show to people that my witness is for real? That my life really did follow the type of Joseph Smith's life? Although I can simply bear witness of the fact, and I can mold it according to the Joseph Smith model, there are additional ways to indicate to people that I have indeed felt the Spirit. These tools are generally para-linguistic, that is, aspects of speech beyond words such as timbre, rhythm, and pitch.

If you listen to testimonies and try to follow along, you will notice a place where the discourse changes from the common language of speeches to that of being moved by the Spirit. It is here you can hear these para-linguistic cues. The speech becomes slowly and evenly pulsed. Further, the tonal contours become leveled. Most speech has ups and downs which communicate a lot of meaning and purpose. In a testimony the tones flatten. The testimony becomes almost chanted, such as a cantor in a Jewish Synagogue, only here the melody is almost a monotone with a very significant variation: at the key points it generally drops down a third or a fourth and stays flat to the end of the phrase. Back up, level out, drop. Back up, level out, drop, stay flat. When it flattens that's the crucial moment of a talk—the moment when people are telling you the most significant spiritual things. Their speech becomes more like music, but a very monotonous music, chanted, then with a nice little drop and then leveled out. Additionally, the tonal range of the expression drops to the middle low range and the timbre becomes husky, indicating to the congregation the speaker is feeling emotional: that she is feeling the Spirit. This important form keys native Mormons to the presence of the Spirit.

To some of us this speech pattern may often sound quite dull and dry, but it does key people to the movement of the Spirit. I call this "spiritual speech" because the style also typifies how general authorities give talks, in that very same
rhythmic, leveled, toned way, dropping down at the end. Most Mormons can reproduce the style, and probably do when they bear testimony, and usually they are not conscious of doing it. We are native performers, experts, and do it unawares. I am surprised when I discover myself reproducing the style.

These details are important. They are not things we consciously control, but they are consequential because they are patterned socially, and they carry a tremendous amount of meaning for the community. Furthermore, they are learned. These are not natural speech patterns. They are learned within the Church. Mormons may not have a bound canon of prayer, an approved prayer book from which we read and repeat at our meetings. Neither do we have a testimony book from which we read and repeat. But we do have an extraordinary, complex, unwritten formality that all of us learn and which we use to evaluate others' testimonies.

Since not every one performs this ritual with the same skill, the bearing of testimony can also function as a social diacritic. In some ways the skill of bearing testimony helps to separate the weak from the strong. Our ritual performance skill very clearly indicates—indexes—to other members the quality of our belonging, the quality of our personal testimony. If one were to analyze the social hierarchy of almost any ward, she would probably find that the individuals who are best at performing ritual speech are also those who occupy important positions in the hierarchy. They will be the ones in the ward who have tremendous prestige and are recognized for their spirituality. This indexing is necessary among any social group. I imagine that even a utopian egalitarian society has some way of distinguishing among the members even though they dress and speak very plainly. I suspect speech was a significant tool of distinguishing among the members even though they dress and speak very plainly. I suspect speech was a significant tool to distinguish among members in the pioneer community of Orderville. Speech skills are not distributed uniformly among us; they are always held differentially. Some individuals are better performers and some are worse. Performance thereby can index status and spirituality.

Here I am referring to spirituality as a social form, something that must be manifested in socially approved ways to be publicly accepted. This is a radically different, although related, meaning from the more individual and mystical communion with God. It is similar to the term "righteousness." Jesus accused the Pharisees of being "whitened sepulchers" because of their public displays of religion. Nevertheless in any human society, the internal and private have to be made public by such performances in order to be recognizable to others. They must be keyed by socially approved forms. As a result, they may also be performed falsely, opening room for hypocrisy and falsehood as well as integrity. The tension between the private and public is an important dynamic within Christianity and is unavoidable so long as spirituality and righteousness are defined as essentially only judgeable by God, all the while they must be made operative within the congregational societies of Christianity. Performance, like it or not, becomes the critical means of determining whether a given individual is righteous or spiritual.

For example, in Austin we had a high councilor who came frequently to our ward and gave long, beautiful talks. They were well constructed, well presented, and well acted. They were lovely. I recorded some and found their poetic form amazingly complex, much more so than the performances of almost any of the other members. However, the members of the ward were generally dissatisfied with the talks. After meetings I even heard the bishop complain, "he sounds like a Baptist preacher." What the high councilor said was not heretical, but, to be interesting, he had violated the canons of Mormon performance, thereby challenging his own expert status as a member of the high council. He was defeated by his own rhetorical skill. It called attention to itself as performance thereby defeating its utility to index spirituality.

Although performance enables the private to be publicly seen, in the case of testimony, to be successful, it must appear non-performed. It must appear to be a simple, and spontaneous outpouring of one's soul. Otherwise it will be greeted skeptically. This is a problem since it is a performance and can be falsified, and it is also often boring. Yet if we enhance its performative qualities, we call attention to the possibility of faking it and thereby deny its ritual validity for the community as a whole.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, public testimony is first a metaphor and a ritual. Second, its form privileges the gospel in terms of our personal experience. Third, there are ways of making the internal metaphor external through ritual. Fourth, such testimony links emotions—personal and motivating emotions—with the social process, with our daily life, and with the gospel. Fifth, the sacred myths of the Church become seen as a type of our own experience, or, our own experience becomes seen as a personal replaying of the sacred myth. And sixth, testimony is a social diacritic, classifying members.

As a communal ritual and a metaphor of our internal life, the public bearing of testimony depends on an interesting sleight of hand. It takes the semiologically abstract and makes it concrete. We then tie ourselves to it through performance, making the metaphor real. Testimony becomes something that one can possess because he has obtained it appropriately, through accepted ritual. We may not all be satisfied with the ritual or with how it is usually performed, but we should carefully analyze its function before recommending changes, lest we unnecessarily weaken something critical for the everyday ritual functioning of Mormon culture.

NOTES