

THE MYSTERY OF CONVERSION

By David Knowlton

HOW DOES ONE come to lose a testimony? While walking in a cold but gentle rain down the cobbled streets of the ancient, sacred city of Cuzco, Peru, a Mormon friend and I worried about this issue. According to my thoughtful friend, a testimony is a mysterious but forceful thing that overwhelms one. It is inconceivable that anyone could lose a testimony once they had received it in its spiritual strength. Once people have a real testimony, he asked, how could they lose it? As the drizzle chilled the discussion we ran for cover before I could persuade my friend of the ease with which testimony is lost.

Among the ruins of a great civilization one faces the reality of entropy. Things inevitably move towards greater disorganization. Surrounded by the massive stone foundations of former palaces and temples, the last remains of love, religion, and politics, it is not hard to imagine great loss. The harder question is how the stone walls were ever built, how a civilization came to be.

Even a testimony struggles with entropy. My friend felt it was something you receive as a whole. He envisioned its further growth but insisted there was a great conceptual and existential gulf between having and not having a testimony. But as a human and social reality, a testimony constantly faces the challenge of disorder and disorganization. If, as Alma observed, it is not carefully cultivated, like a delicate seedling it will wither. Therefore, the great question is not how a testimony is lost but rather how it fights off entropy to develop in the first place.

One night I stood in the twilight of the

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central plaza of Tucumán, Argentina, in a circle of street people, listening to a preacher call us to Christ. He eloquently compared the darkness of night with a worldly life of sickness, despair, and sin. He witnessed of how coming to Christ had transformed his life. Once he too had lived on the street, but Christ had removed him and made him whole. He asked if our lives were empty and needed filling, he asked if we were sick and needed healing. He called us into a prayer circle and asked Jesus to give us hope and understanding, to fill our lives and make us well.

I was once a missionary. I knew the techniques he was using to bring people to belief. But the emotions of being there, of being a street person and feeling the loneliness of a strange town where I had no friends and no place to go made me feel his message. When he called us to Christ, asking us to come forward and proclaim Jesus as our saviour, despite my sectarian Mormon distrust, the literalness of his message, the power of his words, and the emotions I felt around me almost made me join the small tearful group which that night came to Jesus.

Several months later I joined a thousand or so people kneeling in emotional prayer on the arid shores of sunlit, azure Lake Titicaca. As all around me people poured out their souls to the Lord with all the feeling of life, I could not help but be moved. I felt lonely and isolated because my religious faith and background would not let me open myself to the powerful and tangible spirit around me.

Kneeling in the dust among those people I felt a strong will to believe as they did and to fully join the strong emotional current unifying the congregation. I came there as an anthropologist to study them. They consider my religion false and almost satanic. Nonetheless, at that moment the barriers separating me from them came down.

The Baptist pastor who had come from the city to shepherd this flock of believing Indians gave a name to what I and the others felt. Using the full rhetorical possibilities of his tradition—his performance differed from Mormon rhetorical style as musical theater differs from a hypnotic chant—he compared us to the blind man on the road to Jericho (Luke 18:35-43). He did what Nephi encourages us to do. He compared the scriptures to our own lives. He made them speak to our own experience. When the blind man said, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me,” all of us were asking the Lord for mercy. When the Lord cured his blindness, He healed ours as well. Jesus became a literal, living force in our lives through the power of ritual and rhetoric. The complexities of our individual lives, from mine as a North American Mormon anthropologist to that of the impoverished Indian farmer as well as that of the middle-class Hispanic preacher, became simplified, unified, and typified by one small verse from the Bible. There, like the blind man, we found the solution to our existential crisis in accepting Jesus, and the preacher showed us how to do it.

Rhetoric and ritual are powerful. In our learned society we acclaim rational discourse and rational worship, denigrating ritual and rhetoric as empty. Despite our words, ritual and rhetoric continue as constructive forces even when disguised as rational, substantive speech. Without ritual to legitimize and connect ideas with emotion and without the established patterns of rhetoric, we could not even categorize one sentence as rational and another as non-rational. Rationality, in its highest sense, depends on ritual and rhetoric for its vigor. Its style of performance merely varies from others that it then maligns.

Social validation enables truth to exist. When I was a missionary I was troubled by questions about the gospel to which I could not find answers. Following our teachings, I spent many frustrating hours on my knees seeking answers. One day while I was bearing my testimony in a routine fashion, following the ritual requirements of the discussions, a flood of emotion overwhelmed me. I still had no answers, but the questions lost their relevance in the face of ritual validation of experience. Of course, I knew the name of what overwhelmed me—the Spirit—and I soon learned to induce it in other people.

I am not arguing against the existence of the Spirit and its importance in our lives. Rather, I am exalting its presence. Nonetheless, I think we should recognize that since we are human

beings, even the supernatural depends on social process to work with us in an intelligible fashion. In this we are no different from any other human group. Unless we understand this we fail to grasp the full message contained in the story of Adam's fall.

The words "lone and dreary world," with their potent existential imagery, nicely express our separation from God and our angst at the hall of mirrors that we live in as social beings. It is easy to get lost among our own twisting reflections. This existential gloominess is one of the dangers of recognizing how the social both enables and constrains our lives, as well as our interactions with the spirit and our fellow mortals. Just as Adam and Eve sought to maintain their link with higher truth through prayer and righteousness, that is through socially established ritual, so too we cannot know the world outside ourselves except through language with motivating rhetoric and communal life with organizing ritual.

When sociologists Lofland and Stark studied the process of conversion to the Unification Church (the "Moonies"), they found that our involvement with the people around us significantly influences our religious beliefs. Faith, testimony, and knowledge are ultimately social; they depend on validation from other people for their coherence and acceptability.

I once "investigated" the Moonies. When there was a lot of publicity about how they supposedly "brainwashed" people into joining their so-called "cult," a zealous Mormon friend and I went to visit them. My friend had met them in the street and wanted to teach them the "true" gospel. She soon gave up going before their insistence on teaching us. I kept going out of curiosity. They assigned a nice young woman to be my "friend" and they overwhelmed me with kindness and warmth. They tried to show me what utopia is like. But I wouldn't convert. After several months, like our missionaries before almost professional investigators, they were frustrated and called in the local Korean leader to convince me. He was an erudite and loving man. For him the coup de grace came when he finished our discussion and asked me if their religion was not "logical." All I could answer was "yes." "Then why do you not join us?" he asked. I replied, "It's perfectly logical if you accept its basic assumptions and I don't accept those."

I loved visiting with the Moonies. They were great people. But because I would not keep up with social process and become one of them, our relationship became too frustrating for both of us. I quit going. Ultimately my relationships with my Mormon friends and family, following Lofland and Stark's discussion, were stronger

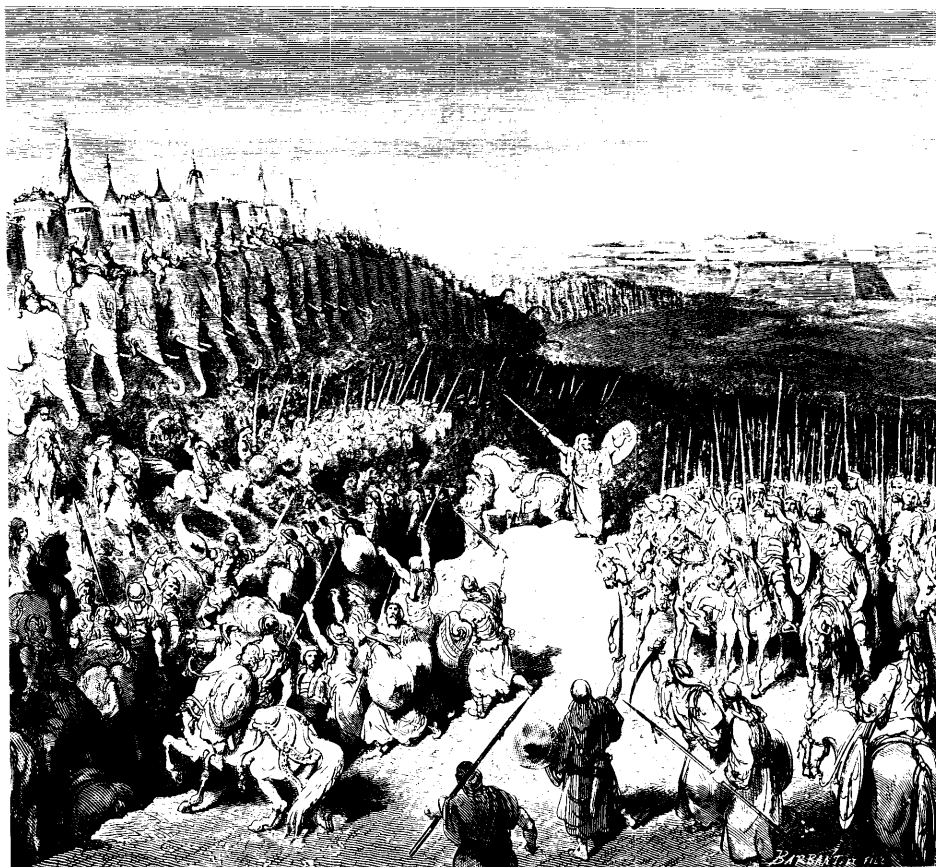
than those I developed with my friends from the Unification Church. My testimony was never challenged.

How do people gain testimonies? Simple answers are unfortunately partial answers. One simple answer focuses on the influence of the supernatural in our lives. For some people another consists of careful thought and decision making. Another stresses the sociological importance of our friends and family. Yet another must recognize how ritual and rhetorical forms enable and induce testimony. The total answer is a Gordian knot tied in a rope of at least these four strands.

The four strands together with others create our testimony and keep it alive. It is fashionable to criticize the emptiness of testimony meeting, when people merely follow the form, just as it is fashionable to criticize the almost somnolent character of Mormon testimony bearing and formal speaking. Perhaps the emptiness, like mine in Tucumán, on Lake Titicaca, and among the Moonies, pertains to the critic rather than to the person undergoing the ritual. It is the

emptiness of an aloofness that keeps us from emphatically comprehending our fellows, be they Mormons with their list of "I know that..." street preachers calling us to repentance, foreigners by an exotic lake, or "cultists" among us.

Our haughtiness exalts our separateness while hiding the basis of our existence which we share in common with all men. It gives us the sad irrelevance of a Peruvian standing among the marvels of a Cuzco built by his Incan ancestors and arguing that only people from outer space could have built such majestic structures. He thinks he is giving more importance to his national patrimony by attributing it to prestigious foreigners. But he is denying the abilities of his people and ultimately making them falsely appear sad and pathetic. He blinds himself to his own great heritage of defying entropy to create fantastic wonders. Similarly, if we do not appreciate the simple, pedestrian way testimonies appear, develop, and even dissipate we risk our own alienation in a rational hall of mirrors drenched by chill rain, a "lone and dreary world" of eternally mixed metaphors, where any kind of testimony ceases to exist.



"This year I'm sure we'll beat the second ward in the road show competition."