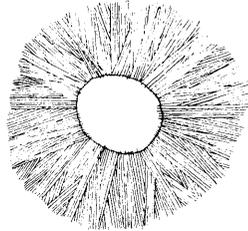

FROM THE EDITOR

CASTING OUT THE SPELL



By *Elbert Eugene Peck*

SOME TIME AGO I attempted to write a short story about missionary life. I planned on submitting it under a pen name to Sunstone's Brookie and D. K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest. I took two powerful real-life experiences, one at the start of my mission and another just before I was released, and combined them into one event in the fictional story. To get the story so that it would describe and evoke the feelings I wanted readers to feel, I worked on it for over a week. For several hours each night I sat at the computer reading and rereading the narrative, changing words, rewriting sentences, then reading it out loud again. In my attempt to elicit the genuine emotions I had felt on my mission, I found myself living the fictional creation in my mind, even when I wasn't working on it, the way you mentally relive and converse with a powerful movie (I even do it with "Star Trek: The Next Generation" T.V. episodes). I eventually produced a story that was authentic for me, but, alas, not for any other reader. I abandoned the project.

Weeks later, while in conversation over dinner with some friends, I commented, "That's just like an experience I had on my mission . . ." and I began to relate, in all honesty, the fictional story I had earlier created. Halfway through the telling, shocked, I suddenly realized that I wasn't telling my real-life experience. Blushing, in the rush of embarrassment and confusion, I said, "No, that's not what happened to me. . . . What did happen? . . ." I queried myself, perplexed. Briefly, my friends looked at me bemused, and perhaps worried. Fortunately, one of them said something and the conversation moved on, leaving me alone to untangle this internal mystery in my mind. It took some time to divorce the married stories and restore them to their proper place in my mission narrative. I vividly remember that discomfiting event (I

hope correctly) because I was stunned by how guilelessly I believed the myth I was vigorously telling. I realized that if I had gotten away with that performance a few more times I may never have been able to reconstruct the "truth," even if I had a good missionary journal (which I don't, so now I am not that confident that the two separate stories are indeed factually accurate, but I'm quite sure that something like them did happen).

I think of that event when the topic of Paul Dunn's "exaggerated" war and baseball stories comes up. In fact, since I first heard of the unsettling revelations about Elder Dunn, I have frequently noticed occasions which demonstrate our human limitations of memory and the mind's ability to recreate events without conscious intention. Correspondingly, I have observed how humans thrive on stories (we chew them up at an enormous rate, from ephemeral T.V. sit-coms to ageless classics), and I better understand how stories are our most effective vehicle to convey certain truths from one person to another, and from generation to generation. Even Jesus, when asked theoretical questions, would respond by telling a story. We model our lives on the stories we hear and choose to prize. I also see how in the retelling of stories individuals and communities sculpt their stories to ensure that the stories tell the things we value, to best make their point.

As has often been noted, even when stories—myths—are factually wrong, their points can be powerfully true and can guide us through chaos—either of overwhelming details or of conflicting principles. For example, the *Washington Post* White House reporter Lou Cannon notes that Ronald Reagan was relentless in telling stories which illustrated his approach to governance to a point where Reagan could not separate the principles from the anecdotes. Even when Reagan was confronted with facts that unequivocally con-

tradicted his *Reader's Digest* clippings, he would not change the story. The values were the important thing; it didn't matter if the facts were a little wrong, and he continued to tell them, much to the embarrassment of his staff. Cannon notes that this Reagan stubbornness to his foundation stories anchored the president and empowered him to persist, undeterred, in his three goals—to reduce government, cut taxes, and enhance defense—sometimes to the national good and sometimes to its harm (because they did not allow him to learn new things). When informed that the World War II hero Martin Treptow was not buried in Arlington Cemetery, as Reagan asserted in the draft of his 1980 inaugural address when he extolled Washington's memorials from his Capitol vista, he didn't want to change the story. "Ronald Reagan has a sense of theater that propels him to tell stories in their most theatrically imposing manner," concluded Reagan speech writer Ken Khachigian. "He knew it would break up the story to say that Treptow was buried in Wisconsin."¹

We all tell and live by stories. Cannon relates an instance where columnist Charles McDowell sat next to Reagan at the annual Gridiron dinner and regaled Reagan with a vivid account of McDowell's boyhood thrills of the filming of *Brother Rat* in Lexington, Virginia, where McDowell grew up. He remembered "as if it were yesterday" how he had walked into McCrum's drugstore and saw Ronald Reagan and Eddie Albert sitting in a booth next to his mother and a friend. "That just to me captures this marvelous moment in a small boy's life," McDowell concluded.

Reagan listened to the story with delight mingled with some apprehension. He laughed appreciatively at its climax, when McDowell related how he had seen Reagan and Albert together in the drugstore booth. Then he leaned forward and put his hand on the columnist's arm in a fatherly gesture. "I have something serious to tell you," Reagan said. . . . Reagan confided that he had never in his life been in Lexington because his role in the movie had not required him to go there. "I remember the others coming back from Lexington and telling me what it was like," Reagan said. "But I simply wasn't there."

McDowell was astonished. "Mr. President, how can that be?" he said. "I've known it all my life. I've told it so many times." Reagan

asked him how many times he had seen the movie. Five or six, said the crestfallen columnist. "That implanted in your head that I was there," Reagan said gently. "You believed it because you wanted to believe it. There's nothing wrong with that. I do it all the time."²

As Ronald Reagan obviously knew, we continually need fresh stories to remind and reinforce our core values; and, as he oddly realized, our memories reshape events in our mind to make them conform to our emotional impressions and interpretations. Undoubtedly, all our stories go through such a refining process in their retelling, whether to our own mind or to an external audience, before they are permanently recorded. No account is unmediated. Also, the telling—and writing—of stories, even historical narratives, requires editing and condensing for brevity, emphasis, interpretation, and, yes, drama. After all, stories must entertain—that is, keep the audience's interest. Filmmaker Frank Capra, the great American moral storyteller, had as a maxim: "There are no rules in filmmaking, only sins. And the cardinal sin is Dullness." Much later when he wrote his autobiography, Capra acknowledged his story-telling biases in the preface: "At times I will telescope conversations—which strung out over weeks and months—into one scene." Yet his account still has an authenticity both in terms of facts and judgments.³ Paul Dunn undoubtedly was one of Mormonism's most skilled storytellers. Perhaps he understood too well Capra's cardinal sin, but that was also the main reason why we sought out his moralistic speeches—they entertained while they reinforced our values; he was not boring.

WELL, myths and stories are indispensable, and we truly live by them. But as Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine point out in their delightful musical "Into the Woods" where, after the happily ever-after story ending in Act I, the Brothers Grimm fairy tale characters have to

deal "in the dark, pathless woods" with the unpleasant consequences of their childish wishes and actions:

Careful before you say,
 "Listen to me."
 Children will listen. . . .
 And learn. . . .
 Careful the spell you cast, . . .
 Sometimes the spell may last
 Past what you can see
 And turn against you. . . .
 Careful the tale you tell.
 That is the spell.

Tales which create a seriously limited view of the world can and do lead us to false and dangerous assumptions and actions. Religion is especially susceptible because its "facts" are experienced internally and are based on a faith in true things which can't be seen or independently verified. Like most, I can cite numerous personal and painful examples to

illustrate the dangers of faulty or at least oversimplistic religious assumptions. As a result, many stories I now tell are much more cautious than they would have been a decade ago (thus, I'm even less interesting than I used to be, which wasn't very). Many of us frequently encounter someone who complains, "We had home evening every week; what happened?" or "I paid my tithing faithfully for years, but my finances only got worse. . . ." or some similar blame-God-or-self account. Did the "faith-promoting" stories which animated these individuals' religious lives, and which were told with the best intentions, ultimately turn against themselves and do more harm than good? With some simple recrafting, some stories could have prevented harm while still instilling faith, albeit a more complicated faith.

As much as we need stories to live, we also need historians and journalists to keep our storytelling in touch with the world of fact and experience, to keep it honest. Still, a story has to be more than factually honest to represent the world in which we live. It must also courageously, dramatically, and maybe heroically, portray belief and the delicate task of balancing values and perspectives. Stories must interpret and even prescribe; they must tell the "higher truths." Even so, simple, moralistic stories often just don't prepare us for the ambiguities of adult religious life. Fortunately, the authors of many Bible stories set a high standard for storytelling; those many-leveled tales have an ambivalence to them which allows questing adults to return again and again for insight and inspiration.

ALL this, of course, has application to Paul Dunn's popular stories and his fabrications. As a general authority, Elder Dunn is one of our community's primary storytellers and thus he should have a magnified concern about the crafting and the effect of his stories. Since we are all guilty of playing fast and loose when telling stories, what exactly



Roger realizes that a cherished childhood memory is actually a scene from an old movie.

is objectionable about Elder Dunn's storytelling methods? In exaggerating the facts, did he violate the community's trust in him? Or was he only highlighting for the community its important values in the black-and-white contrast of good theater? Unlike Reagan's disregard for historicity, is Dunn's appropriating others' stories into his personal story a blatant act of self-aggrandizement? Or, like Capra, was he merely making a necessary dramatic composite of a Mormon leader? Did the importance of entertaining his audience overwhelm his sensitivity to the long-term spiritual impact of his stories? Or, in Reagan fashion, were his stories primarily simple parables to remind, inspire, illustrate, and lead us, as Dunn defensively asserted? Is his foxhole faith story a helpful account of belief for the novice Saint, whether or not it was factually true? Or, because it was unconnected to his real experience, did he create an over-romantic narrative that engenders dysfunctional assumptions? Is Paul Dunn a manipulative opportunist, or is he a well-intentioned pastor?

I agree with one friend who said that, on the whole, he likes Elder Dunn's theology more than most general authorities' and wishes we had more Paul Dunns. In his talks, Dunn strives to give people reasons to hope, to have confidence in themselves and in God, to go easy on each other, to live life humorously, and not to take one's self too seriously. Not bad points of light for our times, or any time. Yet, clearly, his baseless stories crossed over the very broad line of accuracy which the Mormon community will tolerate. In contrast, who really believes that all of President Thomas Monson's stories about widows are strictly accurate? And why do letters to him which he reads over the pulpit sound like he rewrote them? Surely, he takes sentimental liberties with details (even if he is not aware of it) to motivate us to live the Truth; yet we indulge him in doing so. However, the response to Dunn shows that pure, out-right fabrication is unacceptable.

Perhaps Paul Dunn is a tragic figure, a man of great potential brought down by his fatal flaw? If so, what was it? Pride? Fame? Carelessness? Greed? Ah, yes, how much did profit motivate the *successful* telling of dramatic stories? (At a 15 percent royalty on a 10,000 printing of a ten dollar book—that's \$1.50 a book, or \$15,000—maybe it's a good thing that most general authorities are dull.)

Maybe Elder Dunn's tragedy is that he's a nineteenth-century itinerant preacher/storyteller placed out of time—in the twentieth-century analytical age. After all, most biblical scholars agree that the stories in the Old and

New Testaments are products of the same kind of blending, shaping, and, yes, stealing as are Elder Dunn's, and do not hold up to today's professional standards of history. They were written to inspire Israel in their day—to tell Israel, in Tevye's words from *Fiddler on the Roof*, "Who we are, and what God expects of us"—not to record accurate history.

And not only Elder Dunn is in that time warp. Mormonism is. Humanity is. How can general authorities—and Saints—be angry with Elder Dunn for rewriting, or even creating, his history to make it more faithful and inspiring than it really was, when they demand the same kind of reworking of Church history? After all, the four accounts by Joseph Smith of the First Vision show an evolution and recrafting of the event to make dramatically different points at different times in his life. As with all of us, perhaps most general authority addresses inevitably suffer this forgivable "defect" to some degree. Yet the line between common storytelling and lying is quite fuzzy, and the first can easily lead to the second.

MORE seriously, from Joseph Smith to current Church leaders, truth telling about facts has never been one of the Church's bright points (that's an article in itself). One low point, of course, was President Joseph F. Smith's repeated "lying for the Lord" under oath to the Senate confirmation hearings of Apostle Reed Smoot, a very humorous scene if it wasn't so appalling. This is categorically different from telling non-historical stories for their moral teaching. It is consciously bearing false witness to hide and protect. Again and again, our allegiance to Truth has compromised our fidelity to truths.

This happens frequently in Church press statements, where, as one general authority privately said, "Whatever reason they give, the real reason is usually money." I suppose the runner-up reason is image. But the point is that we consciously tell a false reason. What to make of the Church's blatantly false news release about Elder Dunn?: that (1) Elder Dunn was prematurely given emeritus status for health reasons, when shortly afterwards he was traveling and speaking, and recently he took young men around the nation on a baseball tour; and (2) that the Church could not confirm the facts of the allegations in the news accounts, when it had earlier commissioned its own private investigation which revealed the same facts as the news reports.

On the other hand, did Elder Dunn's indifference to truths (with a small "r"), conscious or unconscious, merely repeat what is done in other wards by local and general Church lead-

ers and members? We members need to avoid being too righteous in our indignation, for we condemn ourselves: this episode is not as much a window into Paul Dunn as it is a mirror reflecting our own image. And it is not a flattering portrait; our innocent folktales often become damaging falsehoods. How, then, should we respond? And what should we make of this event?

AS with the events with George P. Lee, my ambivalent feelings are conflicted with more "on the other hands" than I have fingers and toes. It will take us time to sort out this episode. I hope it leads us to increased openness (which checks our dark tendencies) and increased charity, for we can't have the courage to become the first without already possessing the second. And we can't honestly evaluate—judge—this episode without acknowledging the very same truth-telling faults in ourselves. The same faults for which we plead for slack and understanding. In our finger pointing, do we really want an inquisition and subsequent stoning of almost every Saint who speaks over the pulpit or administers in the Church? No. But we mustn't cover our sins either.

As Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* and Juanita Brooks's *Mountain Meadows Massacre* jump-started the Church in its reluctant confrontation with the facts of its own mythical story, I hope the exposé of Paul Dunn will force us to begin to confront our rampant but unacknowledged dishonesty in our Church-related dealings with our fellow men at all levels of Mormonism. From whitewashing the release of a Primary teacher, to equivocating on something so simple as the reasons for renovating the Hotel Utah, to lying about the practice of polygamy, to denying directing a fundraising campaign against gambling in Idaho, we twist truths to gratify our pride and exercise control. Elouise Bell is right, there are times when nice isn't so nice.⁴ Unfortunately, as with Brooks and Brodie, so with Dunn: we label the messengers or their works as individual aberrations, unsymptomatic of the collective Church and therefore needing no further investigation. In a talk on sin and repentance, President Kimball once told of a seemingly healthy tree which split during a rigorous storm because years earlier a wedge had been carelessly left in a fork in its trunk and the growing tree encompassed and hid this fatal fault.⁵ Paul Dunn is not a hidden wedge which has been safely excised, he is only a sliver of the wedge of dishonesty, which is still embedded in our tree with serious future potentials.

Instead of post-facto rationalizing his

falsehoods as simply being “parables” (which only makes his fabrications *conscious* and more troubling than the more likely truth that he got “caught up” in repeatedly telling an effective story), Paul Dunn would do us a greater service by openly confessing his error and apologizing. And we should respond with acceptance and forgiveness, judging as we want to be judged. If that happened, maybe then the Brethren would not fear but trust the Saints in being open about the Church’s finances and other administrative decisions, open even with the big mistakes.

Sadly, this issue of public openness and honesty really is an uncharted forest for Mormonism, and it is scary. But we must confront the dishonesty in the self-serving stories, reasons, and excuses we all regularly tell at Church to cover our sins. In examining why the characters in fairy tales always go into the woods on their journey to grandmother’s house, or wherever they’re bound, Bruno Bettelheim explained that the forest is

the place in which inner darkness is confronted and worked through; where uncertainty is resolved about who one is; and where one begins to understand who one wants to be.⁶

This confronting of one’s inner darkness is also illustrated in our modern movie fairy tales. After a spiritual primer by Yoda, Luke Skywalker enters the forest to confront the dark side of the Force within himself (his potential to become a Darth Vader). It is the most frightening scene in the Star Wars trilogy and absolutely necessary for Skywalker to transcend his evil half. Even in Frank Capra’s intentionally optimistic tales, the protagonists confront their despair and flawed humanity. Think of Jimmy Stewart seriously deliberating suicide in *It’s A Wonderful Life* and his subsequent vision that he never lived. That’s horror; it’s not the cleaned-up Disney fairy tale. Paul Dunn embodies the intertwined good and the bad of Mormon culture, and it is difficult to separate the two. To become pure, Mormons must confront and work through our evils which are alloyed with the good in us if we are going to resolve who we are as God’s people and what we want to be. Continuing the cover-up with saccharine fables avoids the spiritual growth necessary to truly build the kingdom, which must grow to be a wedge-free tree with branches strong enough for eagles (the world’s great souls) to lodge in them.

I hope now is the time in the Mormon story when we begin to confront the harmful tales and patterns in our very human Mormon culture. Have we as a people ever

faced head-on our cultural causes of the Mountain Meadows Massacre?, of our unqualified support of corrupt government actions?, of LDS spouse and child abuse?, of our willingness to abandon friends for obedience? or of our gullibility in fraudulent schemes? Instead, we practice a denial not unsimilar to the German people’s reluctance to confront the cultural faults—hidden wedges—which permitted the holocaust. With our Reagan/Dunn simplistic platitudes, we uncritically assert our amalgamated good/bad values, which will only see us safely to the forest’s edge. Now comes the scary part where we must go into the woods and confront the evil that is us.

To some it may appear that we’ve travelled the Paul Dunn episode rather well. But we’re not out of the woods yet, we’ve barely entered them. ☹

NOTES

1. Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of A Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1991), 99-100.
2. Cannon, 38-39.
3. Frank Capra. *The Name Above the Title* (New York City: Macmillan Company, 1971), xiii, xi.
4. Elouise Bell, “When Nice Ain’t So Nice” in *Only When I Laugh* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 40-46.
5. Spencer W. Kimball, *Hidden Wedges* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1981).
6. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, quoted in the *Into the Woods* compact disc booklet.

CLEAR NOTES

There was a brewery
and across a street
the factory,
abandoned almost
except for pigeons
and my father,
who, here, tuned pianos
or, at least, took them apart;
left spools of wire,
unvarnished frames,
cluttered piles of legs:
this is all I could see
besides the workbench,
a chair, a wastepaper basket,
and, oh, my father,
my father with his desperate grin.

It was thick, stale
hops and yeast air
in the factory, the windows
were frosted, cracked
with the damp weight
and pigeons flew
in drunken circles.
Sometimes one
would weave an escape;
crash stupidly
into thick glass.
Until then I did not know
they were trapped.

My mother asked me to watch;
tell her if I could see him do
anything, anything at all.
Never a whole piano
but I could say
I saw him:
unbend wire gently
and then carefully wind it;
testing with delicate pliers
for resilience, strength.
Play the first
five notes of Beethoven’s fifth
over and over,
with his head cocked
listening, hoping for a pure note.

For his sake, I imagined
heavy pianos, slick with varnish,
tuned crisp,
smelling only of new wood and taut wire;
carefully shipped out
and nothing, nothing breaking,
or pigeons with clean wings
and the sad smell of beer gone
perhaps perched, lazy,
but, really, I only smelled
varnish and the brewery
and neither he nor I
could escape
his desperate grin, swollen eyes.

—PILAR A. STEWART