

*Into the wardrobe . . .*

# I LOOKED OUT THE WINDOW AND WHAT DID I SEE?

## A NARRATOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF LDS RITUAL EXPERIENCE

*By Rebecca Stevenson*

EVERY TIME SOMEBODY READS FROM A PIONEER journal in church, I'm affected. I'm transported to the plains, the cold, the hunger, the foreign land, the leap of faith, the abandonment of home to follow a charismatic young prophet. I imagine the hope of the women for their children and feel their grief at losing them. I can envision their experience: the storm clouds sweeping in across the open landscape, the shallow, rocky graves. Even my senses give themselves over to the experience: I shudder in the cold, my heart feels heavy for the many deaths, I may cry, I might even resolve to find more about my own ancestors and work on my genealogy.

Isn't it astounding that just hearing a story could have such effects on my physical sensations, my feelings, and my behavior? Religious stories, historically, mythically, or simply faith-promotingly true, are particularly potent. Religious stories present big dilemmas and answer big questions. They give our lives meaning. And if we feel that our lives have meaning (meaning we parse through stories), then we can bear up against even the most oppressive circumstances. The Mormon pioneers crossed the plains because they had a strong story pushing them along: young Joseph Smith's moving story about prayer, humility, and his conversations with God. The story of a promised land. The story of rewards in heaven.

Humans are unique among animals in that we are a story-telling species. We invent, revise, exaggerate, and deceive. We use our powerful gift of gab to transport, terrify, teach, nurture,



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advise, and amuse each other. Red Riding Hood's story warns us to not stray from the path—there are dangers in the jungle. Urban legends warn us to keep a wary eye out on the world and not hire crack-addicted babysitters. But how is it, exactly, that these stories, fables, and legends are able to influence our actions?

A narratologist's explanation will tell you that engaging with a story can shuttle you into another world—a shadow world of symbol and archetype that gives our physical world meaning. It's a world that can incite strong emotions within us or even move us to action for good or ill.<sup>1</sup> This world, called the Taleworld by Katherine Young, is part of every storytelling experience, including religious ones, and plays a central, if unexamined, part in our religious experience as Mormons.

How are we propelled into the Taleworld? Why does it have such power to guide our actions? I hope to describe what narratologists have to say about it, and invite further examination of the Mormon experience with story and, more particularly, with ritual.

### RITUAL

WHEN LUCY FIRST stumbles into Narnia, she experiences the magic of a winter woodland, complete with anachronistic lamppost, hidden within a spare wardrobe. But she doesn't yet see the scope of the entire Narnian world. She and other children in subsequent adventures must find different portals into Narnia to give the readers a complete picture of the world C.S. Lewis has created.

Ritual serves the same purpose the empty wardrobe serves. Like stories, rituals are entryways into another world. But however magical the view may be from the safety of the wardrobe, we cannot grasp the largeness of the world ritual re-



EDWARD BERGERT

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JEANNETTE ATWOOD

veals if we linger among the fur coats. We have to venture beyond the ritual frame.

But where do rituals lead us?

According to Young, they lead us to the “Storyrealm” and the “Taleworld.”<sup>2</sup>

### STORYREALM

I HAVE FOND memories of being a teenager at my stake’s girls’ camp: staying up late, shivering around the summer camp fires, and listening to and telling stories. I loved the stories that built up slowly, like the Taily-po—a huge man-eating swamp creature—advancing from the woods . . . into the house . . . into the room . . . at the foot of the bed and then . . . “Gotcha!” The storyteller grabs the girl next to her, who jumps and screams and giggles. I enjoyed the delicious fear the stories projected onto the shadowed nighttime branches and trees.

Later, whispering in the tent, one girl told stories of her romantic exploits to a rapt audience of tent-mates. She was only thirteen years old, and yet not only had she kissed a boy, she had done it under water! This kissing business was just as shocking and thrilling as the Taily-Po’s advance.

The storyrealm is the event of the storytelling: the immediate locale, the physical people, the tellers and listeners broadcasting and receiving their intent and negotiating their communications. It’s the firelight, the logs, the kerosene lanterns, the tents and sleeping bags. It’s the light on girls’ faces, the sounds of the cicadas, and the lisp of the teller.

In Mormon contexts, the Storyrealm is often the speaker at

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the pulpit and the audience (ignoring, note-taking, nursing, snoring, thumbing through the hymnal, or actually listening). The Storyrealm is the setting where our Mormon stories are told. It can be formal such as sacrament meeting, or as informal as a chaotic family home evening, with audience and teller in a jumble on the couch.

There are clear gateways into the Storyrealm. Storytellers announce the passage into that realm with phrases like: “You’ll never guess what just happened!” or, “Once upon a time,” or, “I would indeed be ungrateful if I did not stand up and bear my testimony.” And the exit is similarly clear: “The end” or, “Can you believe that?” or, “In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.” Using these signals, we can easily discern the difference between the ordinary world of talk and the Storyrealm.

## TALEWORLD

WHEN YOU FOLLOW a storyteller's "Once upon a time," you're in the Taleworld, an alternate reality produced through the telling of the story. The Taleworld is the shadow of the Taily-Po across the quilt, the shimmer of the cute boy in the pool, a pioneer ancestor's exploits, or a lone Nephite in the wilderness. It can be an imagining of something that actually happened in the ordinary world, or fantasy and fabrication.

If you read a storytelling situation using the Storyrealm and Taleworld, it is clear that the two worlds are coexistent, that multiple realities are simultaneously at play. But we humans are well practiced at interacting with multiple worlds simultaneously. For example, we easily suspend our involvement and belief in a movie-made world to attend to a world of theatre seats and dwindling popcorn. We banish the reality of our hot breakfast tea as we read and imagine the events described in a newspaper. The chapel disappears as we sink deeper into meditation during the sacrament. Our imaginations are engaging and disengaging from a thousand different scenarios. To experience a teeming infinity of imaginative realities, I simply have to briefly attend to the poltergeist-style rattling of my anxieties and worries: the maybes and what-ifs.

I bring up these examples just to show that the reality we experience is flexible and that we can brush many worlds at once. And that we are adept at navigating the myriad realities we interact with all the time.

However, the Taleworld is much more than just the world of the story being told from the pulpit or around the fire. In fact, it is a potentially infinite realm. The fact that narrators can choose where to begin and end their stories suggests that the Taleworld could stretch beyond the horizons of the told story. In other words, the story forms only a window into the Taleworld and thus the story is necessarily limited. Just as a window has a frame, a story must have horizons: beginnings and endings, limitations and closures. Part of being a competent storyteller is knowing how to bracket the Taleworld with the story performance.

Before the storyteller at girls' camp fatefully kissed that boy underwater, perhaps she did her English homework and perhaps afterwards she dried her hair. But as she expertly brackets her narrative, she chooses to represent only the elements of the Taleworld that are momentarily relevant in the storytelling setting: the actual getting underwater, the momentous kiss, and perhaps the tragic but delicious farewell. The rest of the story remains untold in the Taleworld. I find that image very appealing: untold scraps of stories remain floating on the ether, uninvited into the storyrealm, but continuous and extant, somewhere. What did Samuel the

Lamanite do after he survived the arrows? Perhaps his story is out there in the Taleworld, inaccessible, untold, but existing.

In contrast, Marie-Laure Ryan has proposed that the whole story pops in and out of existence with each presentation.<sup>3</sup> The story of Samuel the Lamanite is over; there is no more to be told. Stories are told in the moment and then disappear without a trace. Even if the story is told over and over, the Storyrealm context makes it different each time. For example, eventually our young storyteller may come to be embarrassed about the pool boy, and the story may become a cautionary tale, a confession, or a self-deprecating joke. Or even if her version or interpretation of the events stays constant, the imaginations of different listeners in different contexts will create divergent pictures through her telling.

This conception of the storytelling experience is also useful. It explains why the temple endowment can convey a different meaning to you every time you attend the temple. Although the story remains basically constant, the Storyrealm you bring to it is always changing. Your beloved mission stories get dull, or the New Testament gains power—the stories didn't change. You did.

Whether the Taleworld is "out there" always, or pops into existence when we tell stories, the temporariness and even fragility of the Taleworld is obvious when you are sitting around the campfire. No matter how complete your imaginative engagement in the Taleworld may be, you can be recalled to your physical embodiment around the campfire by a mosquito buzzing in your ear, or to your church pew by a hungry toddler. The Taleworld, which was a unique fingerprint of one moment's telling and hearing, pops out of existence, never to be exactly captured again. You are recalled to the Storyrealm by your body.

The body! Our wonderful sense organs, deceptive but es-



sential. Your body can distract you away from the story or ritual—aching knees, watery eyes, heavy head. But your body can also connect you to the story: you may jump when the storyteller shouts “gotcha,” get chicken skin at a particularly exciting moment, become titillated by the kissing story, or feel warmly meditative hearing a testimony. Thus while the tellers are creating the alternate reality, the hearers can abandon their stake in physical embodiment in the “ordinary world” and surrender their physical as well as their imaginative selves to the alternate reality created in the Taleworld. Both our imaginations and our bodies can be simultaneous participants in multiple realities.

However, this “clap-on, clap-off” view of the Taleworld may strike us as uncomfortably relative when we apply it to the gospel story. Does the story of the gospel exist only as we tell it and disappear when we finish? Does the context of the telling make the gospel valid? Or is the reality of the gospel out there, continuous, permanent, and real, even if the story isn’t told?

#### MORMONIZING NARRATIVE THEORY

STORYREALM AND TALEWORLD are concepts developed to describe storytelling and storyhearing. They are a metaphor for the internal experiences we have with storytelling—the Taleworld is essentially somewhere “in” the hearer and teller. In that way, these two terms may be inadequate to describe our religious experience. Mormons are generally not being metaphorical when they tell religious stories over the pulpit or at family home evening. Most of us probably believe, or feel we should believe, that the celestial kingdom literally exists, or that Nephi really killed Laban. I’ve never heard someone stand up in testimony meeting and say, “I know the Church is mythically and archetypically true.” We take our myths literally.

We are involved in a life-long project of narrating the story of the gospel to ourselves. We retell it in sacrament meetings, in testimony bearing, through family home evenings, through scripture study, in private conversations, by baptisms, and most dramatically through the temple rituals. We can vividly imagine the premortality, where our future grandchildren might be peeking down at us through their cherubic pre-fingers, or the spirit world where our departed loved ones are guiding and protecting us, or the celestial kingdom, where we



want to end up. The gospel is the good news, the Great Story. We use rituals to frame and parse this grand narrative into manageable symbolic fragments and to state by our performance, “This is real; this is true.”

We need terms that are more suited to our situation, that more precisely articulate the difference between telling religiously true stories and regular storytelling. I will here give in to the temptation to coin capital-

ized terms: I propose that we call the physical context in which we interact with the gospel, as well as our physical interaction itself, the “Ritualworld.”

#### RITUALWORLD

LIKE THE STORYREALM, the Ritualworld is where we reside bodily while we are performing rituals. The Ritualworld is the podium, the water in the blue-tiled font, the endowment room. It’s also the black missionary badge, the temple garments, the white temple dress, the callings that dog us. All of these create contexts for rituals that get us in touch with the Ritualworld. A missionary badge is a tangible mark that sets us apart from regular people and motivates us to preach; the white temple garments are a chafing reminder to be pure, to be Mormon from the inside out. The Ritualworld is also carrying the scripture case to church, opening the hymnal to the right page, and writing the tithing check. It is the physical, the actual, the tangible.

You can do all these things even without any faith or imaginative engagement and still be in the Ritualworld. The Ritualworld merely provides a context where our bodies are moving in relationship to God.

But we need one more capitalized term, one that can take the metaphorical Taleworld and transform it into something more literal. Let’s call it the Promiserealm.

#### PROMISEREALM

THE PROMISEREALM IS the world we are imaginatively experiencing and striving for through all of our ritual acts. It is the portal through which worlds without end come into contact with our physical, ritual world. When we are believing in something, that is the Promiserealm. When we are imagining

the light at the end of the tunnel, that's the Promiserealm too. When we are praying and feeling the Spirit, or hoping our fast offering will help someone, we are in contact with the Promiserealm.

The Promiserealm, like Young's Taleworld, stretches beyond the acts of our narrating or ritualizing it. The Promiserealm does not exist because we perform the ritual; rather we perform the ritual in order to access the Promiserealm. Rituals summon only horizoned, or limited, pieces of the Promiserealm. We are not blasted with the full reality of that realm but rather given only constrained whiffs of it as we go. Ritual is a window or a keyhole we can use to peek through into the world beyond: the world of faith and the unseen.

What our bodies do has a lot of influence over how we make contact with the Promiserealm. Perhaps this is the reason Screwtape, a senior devil, gives a novice devil this advice in C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*: "At the very least, [humans] can be persuaded that the bodily position makes no difference to their prayers; for they constantly forget, what you must always remember, that they are animals and that whatever their bodies do affects their souls."<sup>4</sup>

In the Mormon worldview, even a poorly imagined or half-attentive foray into the Ritualworld can be transformed into a real invitation for God to exert influence over our tangible lives. Each reiteration of ritual can make the Promiserealm more real to us. If you bear your testimony, you gain a stronger testimony, which will make you want to bear it more, which will make it stronger. You get both the chicken *and* the egg.

But we are still deeply rooted in our bodies, and so we can't transcend our Ritualworld completely. The baby will demand Cheerios during the sacrament, your eyebrow will itch during the endowment, you will fall asleep or get the giggles mid-prayer. But as with all things, the ritual act doesn't have to be perfect to be worthwhile. Just as Storyrealm brings us into the Taleworld, spiritual and physical engagement in ritual can help us come closer to the Promiserealm than we could if we never ventured near the Ritualworld's threshold. Through sheer repetition of the physical acts of worship, we can practice approaching the divine and improve our ability to imaginatively engage with God, like a blurry gray picture coming into colored clarity. And that is the point of ritual enactments: to bring our world into overlap with the Promiserealm—God's reality.

In Young's model of narrative engagement, the Storyrealm creates the Taleworld, and the Taleworld cannot intrude upon the Storyrealm without invitation. In other words, in spite of nightmares and horror flicks, a ghost will not actually jump out from under the bed or ooze out of the TV screen. We must tell the story to make it a part of the world we're in. We can turn off the tap, so to speak, of narrative engagement with the Taleworld. If the Taily-Po is too scary, we can shout "Ridiculous!" and make him innocuous and polite and send him on his way. The Storyrealm is in charge of the Taleworld and can send it packing.

But how much control do we have over the Promiserealm? Are we as able to stop and revise the gospel story we're telling when it becomes uncomfortable? Or when our engagement

becomes too real and frightening, can we disengage from it? In the Mormon worldview, the beyond is capable of reaching out and grabbing us even when we're not invoking it: "the still small voice" gently suggesting a different route to work, or insisting we check on the baby once more, guiding us through frightening near-misses, even if we don't deserve or even resent the help.

Through our lifelong experience with the Ritualworld (praying, taking the sacrament, going on missions, going to the temple) and the Promiserealm (the unseen and the Spirit, the experience of faith), our engagement with the Promiserealm becomes more and more real. And soon the enactments of ritual become less tiresome, less "acted." And the Promiserealm becomes less an Other place and more a concrete reality. Praying, wrangling the choir into tune, scrambling to get to church and sit in your favorite pew, doing visiting teaching—we perform these rituals with varying degrees of willingness and success.

But the point is not perfection; the point is imagination. A tiny, desperate, open-eyed, in-your-heart prayer does more to reify God's influence in your life than sleeping through an endowment session. Our weak imaginations are bolstered as our knowledge is shaped by divine realities. It takes less work of faith to happily engage with God. Through ritual enactments, we develop faith, which strengthens the connection between the Here and the There. It is not the nature of the ritual that makes it more or less godlike but the nature of our investment in it. 

## NOTES

1. For more reading on this subject, see: Nelson H. H. Graburn, "Secular Ritual: General Theory of Tourism," in *Hosts and Guests Revisited: Tourism Issues of the 21st Century*. Valene L. Smith and Maryann Brent, ed. (New York: Cognizant Communication, 2001); Mary Hufford, *Chaseworld: Foxhunting and Storytelling in New Jersey's Pine Barrens*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992); Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

2. Katherine Young, *Taleworlds and Storyrealms: The Phenomenology of Narrative* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987).

3. Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

4. C.S. Lewis, *The Complete C. S. Lewis* (New York, Harper Collins, 2002), 133.

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## THE UNEXPECTED

Redbird blooming  
in winter woodbine—  
a scarlet shock  
on sepia vine—  
plucks the breath  
of passersby.

—NANCY COMPTON WILLIAMS