



## MEMOIR CONSTRUCTION

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*Gordon Shepherd*

As a graduate student at SUNY Stony Brook in the 1970s, I had a Ph. D advisor who was a junior faculty member by the name of Erich Goode. Erich's primary area of specialization, both then and subsequently, has been the sociology of deviance as understood from a constructionist perspective. Recently, however, he has developed an interest in Memoir writing. As a sociologist, Erich is interested in the ways memoirs are constructed. He is especially interested in how memoirists are influenced by their relationships with other people and the subsequent reactions of others to memoirists' recollections and interpretations of the past. We hadn't communicated for a number of years when I unexpectedly received an email from Erich asking me to participate as a respondent to a survey he was undertaking. "Hi Gordie," he wrote (Erich is the only person who calls me Gordie, but I don't mind):

It's been years since we communicated. How are you doing? I have retired from teaching—from Stony Brook in 2000 and from the University of Maryland in 2007. One of the things I've gotten interested in recently is the writing of memoirs. I'm doing a piece on memoir writers—from beginners to authors of full-length books. In making up a list of authors who have published full-length memoirs, I thought of you as a possible respondent because of [you and your brother's] book *Mormon Passage*. If you're willing to re-

spond to a brief “questionnaire,” I’d very much like to send it to you. I’d like to ask you a few questions about your [writing] experience. Thanks very much, Gordie. I look forward to your response. Best and warmest wishes, Erich

Naturally, I agreed to participate in Erich’s survey, and forthwith he sent me an interview schedule consisting of 19 open-ended questions—not so brief after all! In his introduction to the questionnaire, Erich explained, “I’m mainly interested in you discussing your relationship to writing memoir—why you wrote your memoir, how you began doing it, how you did it, the social life you have around it, who influences it, what inspired and influenced it, both in terms of past biographical influences and in terms of your life today, the social circles in which you interact and with whom you’re engaged that read and shape your work, provide feedback, suggestions, and so on, that caused you to write certain things in a certain way. I do have a schedule or list of topics, but I want you to talk as much as you want and feel free to say anything you feel inspired to talk about.” After reading over the subsequent 19 questions, I decided I would take to heart Erich’s invitation to be “inspired” and compose an essay structured around his leading questions rather than write categorical answers to each one separately.

In responding back to Erich I wrote, “For better or worse I’ve taken some liberties with the interview format. Rather than write numbered responses to all 19 interview questions I’ve written a kind of personal essay that in fact addresses most if not all of your questions. I hope this will work satisfactorily for your purposes. I decided to organize what I had to say in two parts. Part I deals with your specific questions concerning the writing and publishing of *Mormon Passage* and the reactions Gary and I subsequently received. Part II contains my reactions to all of your questions concerning memoir writing in general.”

## I. “Autobiography” of Mormon Passage

Upon our return from Mexico as youthful LDS missionaries in 1966, both Gary and I were drawn to the sociology of religion as undergraduate students at the University of Utah. (LDS is an abbreviation for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, more popularly known as the Mormon Church). Our main influence was an LDS scholar-educator by the name of Lowell Bennion. In 1933 Bennion had earned a Ph.D in sociology at the University of Strasbourg under the tutelage of Alfred Weber, writing his dissertation on the methodology of Max Weber. When we attended the U of U, Bennion was Dean of Students, but he also taught occasional classes in sociology. The text he used in his sociology of religion course was Thomas O’Dea’s cogent little Prentice-Hall volume, *The Sociology of Religion* (1966). O’Dea’s book plus Bennion’s classroom teaching hooked both of us. Through Bennion’s class we also were introduced to O’Dea’s landmark study in the sociology of Mormonism entitled *The Mormons* (U of Chicago Press, 1957). O’Dea’s two books had a major impact on our emerging interest in the sociology of religion in general and the possibilities of applying a sociological perspective to Mormon studies in particular. Gary and I both wrote term papers for Bennion’s sociology of religion course on Mormon topics. Gary’s paper was a comparison of the leadership styles of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, and mine was on secularization and Mormon accommodation to the normative demands of contemporary American society.

Gary and I parted ways when we went to graduate school (Gary attended Michigan State). Since neither of our programs offered courses in the sociology of religion, we put our undergraduate interest in Mormon studies on the backburner and concentrated on the required graduate curriculum at our respective schools. Gary ended up finding a faculty member at Michigan State willing to direct a dissertation on LDS versus Catholic modes of moral socialization. I, on the other hand, fell under the influence of a junior faculty member at SUNY

Stony Brook whose social constructionist approach to the study of deviance intrigued me, and I ended up writing a dissertation on the interconnection between science and the mass media in the public debate about marijuana use.

After graduate school, Gary and I both focused on getting some publications out of our dissertations; but I also had in the back of my mind a project that would get us back together again on a Mormon topic, namely a content analysis of LDS conference reports as a way to study the salience and change of thematic religious concerns over time. As a result of my dissertation work, I had developed confidence in my ability to employ content analysis methods to extract quantifiable data from published documents. This, in conjunction with Gary's superior familiarity with Mormon history sources, seemed like a good combination. We wanted to move beyond our dissertation topics and already knew we were effective together as a team, a realization reinforced since early childhood. (We probably underrate the influence of our twin-genetics in shaping our inclination to collaborate but, as we see it, the major influence was our villainous older brother Don, whom we quickly learned could be foiled in his depredatory efforts against us by sticking together in all things.) In any event, what resulted from our first scholarly collaboration was *A Kingdom Transformed: Themes in the Development of Mormonism* (University of Utah Press, 1984).

What to do next? At that point we were contemplating the possibility of *two* more books on Mormon culture. Having researched and written about the historical adjustment of LDS teachings and institutions in contemporary society, we decided we were well positioned to continue writing on 1) Mormon growth through missionary recruitment and 2) problems of member retention and types of defection from the faith. *Mormon Passage* was the end result of project number one and, for better or worse, project number two never got past the talking stage.

Our original plan for a book on the Mormon missionary system was quite different from the memoir approach we even-

tually pursued. What we first had in mind was a conventional scholarly treatment that would be anchored in historical and statistical data obtained from the LDS Church, direct observation of missionary training on the campus of Brigham Young University, and interviews with missionaries, mission presidents, and missionary training staff. I was awarded a sabbatical leave to pursue this project, and spent 4–5 months in the Salt Lake City/ Provo, Utah, area to acquire the data we wanted. It was discouraging. Church authorities whom we contacted were not overly enthusiastic about our project. They had their own institutional research division and were not interested in independent scholars investigating their programs. I learned to practice conniving methods in order to obtain a few random interviews, and surreptitiously gained access to the Missionary Training Center a couple of times for observational purposes, but I repeatedly ran into bureaucratic stonewalls and found it difficult to get any statistical data from official church sources. LDS ecclesiastical officials were (and are) highly sensitive to the church's public image and are loath to lose control over institutional information. I slowly came to the conclusion that we probably weren't going to get enough of the kind of data I had envisioned for our proposed book. I began to think nostalgically of my earlier research based on content analysis of public documents that didn't require official permission or impose institutional obstacles and limitations on accessing needed information.

One of the former instructors at the Missionary Training Center whom I tracked down in Salt Lake City had files of correspondence with various missionaries from the field over the years of his tenure at the MTC. He said we could copy and use his documents if we wanted, but I began thinking to myself, "hmmm, our own missionary journals and correspondence read a lot better than most of this stuff, and we're not beholden to anyone else but ourselves if we want to think of them as primary source materials." Providentially, as it were, Gary had already been word-processing our hand-written correspondence and his missionary journal entries as a self-indul-

gent hobby project. Eureka! Why not dump our frustrated plans for a conventional scholarly analysis of the Mormon missionary system in favor of a case-study narrative based on our own mission field documents?

Both of us had read Oscar Lewis' *Children of Sanchez*, and were impressed by the reiterative, multiple narrative he constructed in his informants' own words as a way of drawing readers inside the life-world of Mexican urban poverty. We had also read *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell* and liked his correspondence with various 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century notables attached at the end of each chapter as much or more than his preceding chapter narratives. These two books shaped our thinking about how to structure a case study of Mormon missionary life using personal documents in a narrative format to convey to readers the missionary experience from an insider perspective.

The original draft manuscript of *Mormon Passage* was a massive 800 pages plus, and it wasn't called "Passage"; it was initially entitled, "Brothers in Mexico." The length was a problem for prospective publishers and so was the title—too confusing as to the actual subject matter of the book. We sent queries to several big name academic publishers, who showed little interest, and also to the University of Utah Press, which had published *Kingdom Transformed*. But under new management, they turned us down because they didn't want to be type-cast as an outlet for Mormon studies. We even offered the manuscript to an independent Salt Lake City publisher (Signature Press) that specializes in Mormon-related academic books, but were flat-out rejected. That hurt. They didn't even give us a reason for turning us down. We thought our material was intrinsically interesting but realized we needed an objective, experienced editor to give us some advice. We consulted with Lavina Anderson in Salt Lake City, who had years of experience writing for and editing scholarly journals in Mormon studies. She simultaneously provided encouragement and gave us good critical advice. She liked very much the writing in the personal documents but admonished us to beef up the scholarly context for

our narrative accounts by writing a solid introductory chapter as an overview of the LDS missionary enterprise. “Be a *resource* to your readers,” she admonished us to our chagrin. “Give them updated information in sparkling prose about missionary training and practices that they don’t already know about.” So—in sparkling prose or not—we wrote an introduction replete with references and footnotes on the contemporary LDS missionary enterprise (my sabbatical leave efforts came in handy here).

We then began to focus on The University of Illinois Press as an outlet for our manuscript. In part because Utah Press had put a moratorium on publishing Mormon related topics and in part for reasons of their own, by 1990 Illinois had become the major academic outlet for scholarship in Mormon studies. Illinois was good to us. They had a sympathetic editor who saw promise in our work, outsourced the manuscript to competent reviewers, and provided good feedback. The main problem with the manuscript was its length. We had to put it on a crash diet to lose approximately 300 pages. This required radical editing. We were committed to a multiple narrative account and resisted the idea of eliminating length by simply focusing on one of our stories while leaving the other out. That led to the idea of switching from one of our journal narratives to the other without back-tracking in time, while using our correspondence to keep the reader updated on what was happening simultaneously to the other brother in his mission area. This allowed us to eliminate roughly half of our journal entries while integrating both of our narratives.

At this point we began thinking of our manuscript as an overly long *film* for which we had to pare down all the footage we had accumulated to a standard commercial length by identifying what we thought were the best scenes and cutting out the rest. We even used film-splicing techniques to bolster our correspondence when occasionally it was thin or left out too much essential information by grafting otherwise deleted journal segments into some of our letters so they appeared to be part of our correspondence. I would estimate that about 20

percent of our published letters were supplemented in this way. Misleading? Yeah, technically, but they were still our own words, and this practice made it possible for us to shorten the “film” about our missionary days while simultaneously fleshing out the narrative and preserving what we thought were some of our more significant vignettes.

As for the title, Gary came up with “Mormon Passage” after reflecting on the dual meaning of our missionary experience: First, as a rite of passage which we had shared with other LDS youth, and second, with reference to our eventual personal passage out of the faith once we resumed our educational careers. We thought this title worked well for both us and readers of the book.

We were disappointed that the editorial staff at the University of Illinois Press wouldn’t budget in any photographs we had snapped as missionaries in Mexico to illustrate some of our journal vignettes, but were very pleased with the final cover and overall appearance of the book when it was published. We thought Illinois did an *adequate* job publicizing the book (although they failed to send a sales representative to the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion the year it came out), but we were admittedly disappointed with sales, especially in Utah. Copies were available in major Salt Lake City bookstores after publication, as well as at the BYU bookstore in Provo, Utah, but the book was not prominently featured anywhere. There was no run on available supplies to purchase as gifts for Christmas or to inspire newly-called missionaries, and the great majority of sales were to academic libraries.

Actually, we never anticipated that the book would sell especially well among faithful Latter-day Saints in the pews (who primarily are interested in unadulterated faith-promoting stories, and certainly not in accounts that mix religious certitude with doubts or replace triumphal endings with reflexive ambiguity and loss of faith). But we were hoping for brisker sales than we got from the Mormon intelligentsia, which is largely situated in the Salt Lake City area. We participated in an

“authors meet critics” session at the annual “Sunstone Symposium” in Salt Lake City attended by 40–50 people, and another one at the SSSR meeting the following year, but we never got on the lecture circuit, nor were we asked to speak at any Mormon gatherings.

In general, reaction to our missionary memoir in both the Mormon and academic communities seemed ho-hum. At the same time, over the years we have been surprised occasionally to hear from people who have come across *Mormon Passage* and reported that they thought highly of it. A couple of weeks ago at the SSSR meeting in Louisville, for example, we were approached separately by two readers who wanted us to autograph their old copies. One was a woman Ph. D candidate in anthropology at the University of Florida who claimed it was the first scholarly book on Mormonism she had ever read and that it helped to focus her dissertation topic on the subject of LDS retention rates in Latin America. The other was a lawyer from Tucson, Arizona, who had actually served an LDS mission in the Veracruz area ten years after I had left and knew all the places and some of the people described in my parts of *Passage*. I was pleased to hear from him that the verisimilitude of our portrayal of the missionary experience in Mexico resonated very much with his own. Here, finally, after a decade had gone by, were some of the readers we initially thought we were writing for but had never heard from!

LDS Church officials, who are obligated to reinforce members’ idealized conceptions of their religious duties—including lay missionary service—may be a little put-off by some of the descriptions of minor deviance or normal imperfections in our missionary accounts; but we have never been contacted or reprimanded by anybody in LDS ecclesiastical ranks. Most of the people who talk to us about the book and who actually have served LDS missions say, “Yeah, that sounds about right,” including my daughters Lynne and Natalie (who served LDS missions in Costa Rica and Guatemala, respectively) and my son Robert who went to Mexico City. I supported my kids on their missions even though I had abandoned my faith before

they grew up. It was important to their mother, who remained very staunch in her LDS commitments, and I saw no good reason to make a divisive issue of my agnosticism. In addition, my time in Mexico proved to be a very positive learning experience, which I have never regretted, and I thought it would be good for my kids too. At any rate, they all seemed to think the book was a more or less authentic reflection of their own missionary experiences a generation later in time.

The most negative reactions to the book came from a few of our former missionary companions whom we had self-righteously singled out in letters and journal entries for criticism and moral condemnation. None of the latter had been in contact with us since our missions, and their communications with us after the publication of *Passage* were from out of the blue. One of my former missionary companions emailed me to say that he had discovered a reference to *Passage* and was anxious to order a copy. I emailed him right back to apologize for some of the unkind things he was going to read about himself; he never responded back. Another former companion (Elder “Heber”) contacted me with great gusto to say he had heard about the book and was going to check a copy out of his local library. I wrote right back to him, too, in order to prepare him for the critical reflections on his character recorded in *Passage*. After reading the book, he responded with a long, indignant email, saying that what I had written was dishonest, that it was a betrayal of him and the Lord’s work, but that he would pray for me and hoped that he could yet be a blessing in my life.

Gary also got several responses from former missionary companions—one in particular whom he had thoroughly trashed in his journal entries and letters to me, which we subsequently printed verbatim in *Passage* (verbatim that is, except for a pseudonym, which we used liberally throughout the text for companions whom, in retrospect, we had maligned in any way). Unlike my angry ex-companion, this guy didn’t repudiate Gary’s youthful assessment of him, but wanted to dialogue further about the missionary experience and perhaps get Gary to appreciate that he wasn’t as bad as he had been made out to be.

There have been a few other old missionary companions—not many—who have written or spoken with us about the book and, if they were portrayed positively by us, seemed fine with our accounts of missionary life, though few if any have been effusive in their praise. The academic, analytical chapters in the book are virtually never mentioned to us by former missionaries.

Perhaps the strongest reaction to *Mormon Passage*, however, came from our old boyhood friend “Chuck Radlow,” whose occasional letters from home we periodically inserted into our journal narratives. We had been out of contact with Chuck for a number of years. Gary finally tracked him down in California and sent him a copy of the book. Shortly afterward, Gary was in Chuck’s vicinity visiting relatives and looked him up. Chuck was not cordial. He threw the book on the floor and said it made him sick, that in it he had been deployed and exploited as a negative foil to our good-guy personas. Incidentally, several other readers told us that Chuck was their *favorite* character in the book, but this did not console Chuck. He, like my ex-companion Elder Heber, felt terribly betrayed, especially the revelation in one of his letters that he flunked his own missionary interview because of his masturbation “problem.” He had always been highly sensitive about his sexual identity and was humiliated. (As an adult, Chuck came out of the closet and, in fact, was living with his gay partner when Gary located him to talk about the book.)

These kinds of reactions have caused me to have a few regrets, and I think the same is true for Gary. We naively failed to anticipate adequately how hurtful or damaging our characterization and judgments would actually be for some individuals whom we portrayed, even though we identified them with pseudonyms. We intended for our published account to be a realistic representation of missionary life—blemishes and all—not just a white-wash job. That meant if we were including a chapter that featured a companion assignment with a slacker-missionary, it was going to stay in the book from our perspectives as young missionaries. So too was the reporting of particular events that we retrospectively believed were symptomatic

or typical or insightful in some way, even if they cast specific missionaries (including ourselves occasionally) in a bad light. And, regardless of Chuck's feelings, we could not leave out his letters. They were too good, too articulate; they illustrated too clearly the anguish that LDS missionary expectations can generate for certain Mormon youth. But I do regret leaving in gratuitous comments that could easily have been deleted when we were trying to reduce the overall length of the manuscript. As kids, both Gary and I had a tendency (we probably still do) to make smart-ass comments about people for sheer entertainment, and sometimes our self-indulgent delight in making fun naturally overrides fairness. There was a fair amount of this in our missionary writings. We could and should have been more sensitive and judicious about these self-indulgences when editing the manuscript. If a smart-ass, denigrating comment was made in a letter or journal entry about a missionary who played a very minor role in our narratives, why leave it in the book for that person to encounter as an adult with grown children and an idealized memory of his missionary service? What good purpose does that serve? There are a dozen or so of these little gratuitous remarks that could have been culled and taken out without changing the overall themes or tenor of the book. If I had it to do over again, I would search them out and clip them from the manuscript.

## *II. Confessions of a "Memoirist"*

Although I've always liked to read biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs, I never aspired to be a memoirist nor do I really think of myself as one now. *Mormon Passage* was hatched only after our conventional book-project on the Mormon missionary enterprise failed to gestate satisfactorily and was aborted. I didn't want to see a couple of years of effort go down the drain without producing something on the subject. It *so happened* that Gary and I had preserved a sizeable number of documentary materials from our missionary days, especially

journals and letters—not only letters to one another, but also letters to and from our parents and numerous friends with whom we corresponded, including Chuck and several girl friends. Since high school, we had fancied ourselves as good letter writers and when we started our missions we were given journals as gifts from our parents to write in (this is supposed to be normative for Mormon missionaries and, indeed, both of our parents had kept missionary journals, which we had seen growing up). So we perceived writing in one’s missionary journal as a kind of religious duty. Unlike us, few of our missionary companions were faithful journalists. It became something of a point of pride for us to maintain regular journals while most other missionaries did not. What we soon learned was that you didn’t have to write a lot, just a little bit every day. But if you were consistent at it the pages grew and eventually you had accumulated a good deal of documentary material about your missionary experiences.

While we were dutiful journalists as missionaries (neither one of us has kept a journal since), when we started organizing our materials for *Passage* we became *editors*, not memoirists. Reading through all of our documents ignited a good deal of memory, including keen recollections of particular events and specific conversations. But we did not begin writing a memoir as one presumably writes a novel—as an organized, articulated stream of consciousness about the past from the point of view of an omnipotent narrator in the present. Rather, we assembled already written journal and letter vignettes and tried to figure out how to best organize and splice them together to produce a more or less smoothly-flowing narrative. As editors, we were far more focused on straightening out syntax and correcting grammatical errors in the original documents than we were in recreating or rewriting history from our contemporary points of view. Not that we didn’t do a little of the latter. There were occasional gaps in our foundational journal records—days here and there when we failed to record something important or anything at all in our journals, even though something significant might have happened in the interim. As

editors we recognized that the story line we were piecing together required a certain degree of continuity; that occasional gaps had to be filled in. For this we turned to our other letters not published in *Passage* to see if missing information or references could be found that were not in the journals or our missionary letters to one another, and, when necessary, relied on memory to round out what had transpired. But for the most part, *Passage* is less a memoir than an edited collection of personal documents—for which we happened to be the editors. The latter stipulation means, of course, that we were the ultimate arbiters of the book's form and content, but for us, the recollections of memory played a smaller role than presumably they do for most memoirists. In the actual construction of our story, we largely limited ourselves to the documentary material already at hand.

Having confessed my lack of personal identification with memoir-writing, let me respond to your questions about writing memoirs anyway. In the last year I've read two memoirs and am currently reading another. The two I've read include Bob Dylan's *Chronicles, Volume One* and a short New Yorker piece by John Adams entitled "Sonic Youth: A Composer Finds His Voice in San Francisco." The one I'm reading currently is called *Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back*, by Frank Schaeffer.

My selection of memoirs for personal reading pleasure is pretty eclectic. In bookstores I invariably gravitate to the history/biography sections and randomly start thumbing through whatever is on the shelves. Occasionally, I'll see a review of a book about someone I'm particularly interested in (like Dylan) and order it, but most of the time it's just something I stumble across and subsequently get interested in. For example, my wife and I were in Barnes and Noble the other night and I saw a copy of a memoir by Tony Curtis near the check-out line and started skimming through it. Faye had to tug on my arm when she was ready to go. I'll probably pick it up again the next time we're in the store. I like the historical

context in which memoirs unfold, even if it's lightweight *persona* like Tony Curtis telling his story in the context of Hollywood movie-making during the 1950s.

Probably my favorite memoir is Ulysses S. Grant's *Personal Memoirs*. Years ago I found this classic on the bargain table at a local bookstore and decided to invest a couple of bucks. I took it home and couldn't stop reading. It stimulated an amateur interest in the Civil War, and I've read dozens of books on the topic since, including several Grant biographies. Previously I had the impression that Grant was someone mediocre who somehow managed to grind out military victories by sheer dint of the overwhelming man-power advantage of the Union army. When I read his memoir, however, I was surprised by his simple, eloquent prose. I liked his clarity, his lack of pomposity and self-aggrandizement, his precise recall and attention to detail, as well as his ability to capture and summarize the big picture of the war. I was impressed by his capacity for objective, strategic thinking under pressure, and the modesty with which he narrated his truly great achievements as a military commander. What I liked most, I guess, was Grant's combination of fluid writing and the unassuming quality of his personal character that shines on every page of his memoir.

In general, I appreciate memoir writers who are insightful and generous in their assessment of other people's strengths and weaknesses, including their competitors or enemies as well as their friends. I assume that memoirists are biased in their own favor, but I like to see a capacity for ironic detachment and modest humor. I don't like whining, preaching, or incessant chest-beating. I like memoirs that instruct me about the writer's time and place and cultural surroundings so that I learn something more about the world than the writer's mere moral judgments of it. It would be difficult for me to isolate particular topics or themes that most interest me. I'm interested in history. I very much like American history but am also interested in other societies and their histories. I like Mexican history and wish I knew more about it. Through memoirs or biographies, I've read a lot about sports, politics, and war.

But I also like intellectual histories, and histories/biographies about musicians, artists, scientists, and pop culture icons. I have an academic interest in religion, but for personal reading enjoyment I tend to shy away from religious memoirs unless they are written humanely without excessive self-righteousness and triumphalism.

I tend to be a very private person. In casual conversations I'm good at listening and getting other people to talk about themselves. In contrast, I tend to shift conversations away from myself. I'm parsimonious about self-revelations and monitor my words in preference to blurting my personal feelings or opinions. I have no expectations of writing a future memoir, but if I did there are lots of things I would leave out. I would not criticize family members or people who are close to me, even though they all have various shortcomings. I would not talk about the details of my sex life. I would certainly not talk about the details of my bowel movements (a la Allen Ginsberg in *Death and Fame* or Norman Mailer ruminations in *On God*). As I mentioned earlier, I have regrets about publishing what I retrospectively consider to be occasional insulting comments in *Mormon Passage* that were largely gratuitous and would edit them out if I had it to do over again. So, yes, if I were to author another memoir of some kind I undoubtedly would inhibit, or at least soften, potentially damaging observations in certain instances. I would not be brutally honest or totally transparent in writing of others or myself in a personal memoir. This doesn't mean that I think memoirists should not strive for this sort of openness or truthfulness. Maybe that's what proper memoir writing requires. Maybe total honesty, introspectively expressed with careful and compelling analysis, is what makes great memoir writing. But that's not me. I can reveal some things about myself, my feelings, and my opinions of others, but not everything. I have too many inhibitions, too much compunction, too much self-pride in my Boy Scout values of modesty and loyalty for those who mean something to me to write a naked memoir.

My compunction and self-pride are linked to the issue of

veracity in memoir writing. In part, memoir veracity depends on accurate memory. I've always had a good memory for detail. I like to narrate detailed events as stories. I see mundane exchanges as potentially interesting if they involve some degree of human quirkiness, irony, humor, or contention. When I experience something or somebody I think is interesting, I make mental notes; I focus attention on those aspects of the "story" that make it interesting to me. I rehearse my observations mentally so I can report them to my wife or my kids when they phone, and trust that they too will share my interest or enjoyment. Storytelling unites us. My kids are all good at it too and so is my wife. We make a practice of selectively interpreting the facts and events of daily life that can be constructed into narratives for sharing in conversations with one another. Doesn't everybody do this? It turns out that not everybody does, or at least not quite to the same extent that my family and I routinely do.

I guess my point about memory and the veracity of recall is that memory has to be practiced; it becomes a skill. And the skill of memory cannot be separated from particular interests, selective perception, and interpretations that are articulated through storytelling. I've practiced my memory skills like this since I was a kid. Gary and I used to wake up together every morning and ask, "What did you dream about?" and then we would listen to narrations of one another's dreams. After school we would mutually rehearse the events of the day, or, on family trips, engage in marathon recollection sessions in the back seat of the family car in order to make the time pass by more quickly. You can't report every single thing that is said or that happens. Even if you had perfect recall, it would be boring to report all of it. You have to be selective. For the purposes of memory you have to focus on those bits and pieces of experience that are potentially interesting or compelling elements of a story. The recall I have of the details of events that occurred years ago, including those in Mexico as a Mormon missionary, is in part a consequence of regular story sharing over the years. If people don't formulate and share stories about

their experiences, I don't think they end up remembering very much. To put it another way, the fewer the stories you share about yourself, the less you remember about yourself. As I say, Gary and I have shared stories about ourselves since childhood and still do. The nature and circumstances of our twin brother relationship has always been conducive to shared recollection.

But how accurate is the recall on which memoirs or autobiographical narratives depend? How much is fact, and how much is fictionalized in the effort to write both a self-serving and interesting memoir? I appreciate the temptations of fictionalization. I struggled with this issue when editing our missionary documents for *Mormon Passage*. One LDS practice I felt very uncomfortable with as a missionary was the church's antiquated policy of denying lay priesthood ordination to males with any African ancestry. There were one or two references to this issue in our journals and correspondence, but in retrospect they didn't seem emphatic enough. The LDS Church no longer practices this form of discrimination, but as adults editing our missionary documents for publication, we wanted readers to understand our personal opposition to racial discrimination and our support for the 1950s–60s civil rights movement. So I added some lines that were not in our original documents. In one case I inserted a line concerning a news story about civil rights violations in the South that had disgusted me, and in another I inserted a line saying how wrong I thought it was that we were required to tell potential converts in Veracruz who had African ancestry that they would be denied the lay priesthood because of their race. The attitudes conveyed were accurate, but those lines of protest were not in our original missionary documents. They were inserted later to “fill gaps” in the documentary record. There were a few other places in the manuscript where we felt it necessary to rely on memory to fill in gaps rather than adhere strictly to what we had preserved in letters and journal entries. We felt justified in doing this on the grounds that these relatively few inserts were an accurate representation of our attitudes at the time and of events that had actually occurred, and that including them

enhanced the coherence and readability of the narrative. Perhaps this is just another way of saying that we saw the “need” to dramatize our narratives by occasionally formulating statements that retrospectively we believed were typical or revelatory of our missionary attitudes at the time. Was this also self-serving? Of course it was. I assume that few if any memoirists intentionally want to represent themselves in an ultimately bad light. We certainly didn’t.

With regard to the reconstruction of dialogue reported in a memoir, the great majority of conversations recorded in our missionary documents were based on recall of what was said and not on exact words. This is fine. I don’t expect to read a memoir in which it is claimed or insinuated that the dialogues being narrated are verbatim reports. It sometimes annoys me if memoir dialogues are recited *as if* they were verbatim, word for word accounts—especially if it suggests that the author is capable of reading other people’s minds in addition to ostensibly recording their exact words—without any disclaimers concerning the use of paraphrasing based on recollection. If somebody’s exact words have been recalled and reported as such (usually a phrase or a sentence or two, not an entire book), they can be indicated in quotations or through other forms of punctuation. Otherwise dialogue can be reported in such a way that readers understand it is the author’s paraphrasing of remembered conversations or verbal events and not a virtual audio recording.

Other ways of fictionalizing memoirs seem a little more dubious to me. I know there may be a fine line between fact and fiction, especially when one is searching for or attempting to portray “truth,” but when I read a memoir I want it to be a reasonably accurate representation of actual people and actual events. For whatever truth I might find in fiction, I would prefer to know I’m reading fiction, and not fiction dressed up as memoir. It’s certainly possible for one’s truth goals to be realized by collapsing several actual events into a single dramatic episode, or creating a composite character that’s a blend of several different people. Screenwriters, constrained by the

economy of time, money, and audience attention spans, must do this when they are adapting a lengthy novel or memoir for the screen. Solzhenitsyn memorably did this in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. What gave *One Day* its power and authenticity was the fact that Solzhenitsyn was drawing on the reality of his own experience as a prison camp survivor but, of course, his story was written as a piece of fiction and not as a memoir.

If one chooses to write a memoir, by all means exclude boring, inconsequential events and focus on the most pertinent or dramatic life-events that you're reporting. But if it seems necessary for a memoirist to collapse several events into a single dramatic episode in order to make something *appear* important and dramatic, or to create a composite character in order to sustain a certain version of truth, then I have a problem with that. As a reader of memoirs, I would say that if you have to manufacture drama and characterizations in this fashion, then maybe your life simply isn't worth writing (or reading) about. Try your hand at writing fiction, but don't solicit my interest, sympathy, or respect by making up stuff. This goes double for deliberately creating a scene or an event in your memoir that didn't actually *happen* on the grounds that it conveys or substantiates an important "truth." If it's some larger truth that transcends the mundane reality of your personal life that you want to explore and certify, write philosophy, theology, or fiction, but don't graft it into your memoir as though it were factually true.

Perhaps I'm hypocritically splitting hairs here with my ranting about maintaining essential facticity in memoir writing in light of my earlier justification of Gary's and my occasional inserts in *Mormon Passage*. It's a gray area. I would grant memoirists some license in constructing their narratives, but I have to draw the line against out and out fabrications.

For me, the most important aspect of memoir writing is an authentic framework of historical facts enlivened and made meaningful by cogent dialogue that—while largely paraphrased—is a reasonably accurate representation of what

people say and, which in turn, can be accepted as a reasonably accurate representation of their true attitudes and intentions. Characterization of the key actors in one's memoir emerges and is sharpened through authentic dialogue. Concise, accurate descriptions of places and personalities involved in one's memoir are, of course, also crucial to a reader's comprehension and appreciation of historical context. Grant excelled at this. On the other hand, I tend to be annoyed when memoirists wax poetic in scenic descriptions of the events they narrate. Most are not lyrical poets, and I don't expect them to be. Plot in memoirs is achieved primarily through the judicious selection and organization of the biographical materials of one's life. As indicated earlier, I see this primarily as an important editing task. And, to repeat myself, I don't think considerations of memoir plot lines should produce fictionalization that supersedes consideration of the actual facts of one's experience.

I must conclude by reiterating that I don't really regard myself as a memoirist. What I'm proudest about my contribution to *Passage* is the organization and formatting of our missionary documents, especially after we were forced to cut out several hundred pages of material. This involved having to make hundreds of decisions about what to cut and what to leave in, and how to arrange the materials that survived the cut. I am very pleased with the chronological flow of the narrative, as we switch back and forth between our two stories. I also am pleased with the little overviews that we included at the beginning of each chapter to retrospectively identify major missionary and developmental themes. Again, I would call these editing skills. I think I've become a good editor of raw materials and manuscript drafts. Other aspects of memoir writing (dialogue, description, plot, characterization, utilization of historical facts, etc.) are all talents that I associate with good fiction writing. I think Gary and I are decent writers, and I think we're both pretty good at perceiving and interpreting life-events with a certain kind of curiosity and detached amusement. In so far as these qualities might be

important to good memoir writing, I would call them strengths. But as I confessed earlier, I privatize my personal life and am reluctant to reveal too much about my inner self to the world at large. And I would leave out or fudge information about people I love or care about if I thought it would hurt or offend them. If these are serious shortcomings in memoir writing, I plead guilty.