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CALLED TO SERVE:  
UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE WOMAN'S MISSION DECISION NARRATIVE  
IN LATTER-DAY SAINT CULTURE AND BELIEF

by

Rachel Elizabeth Ross

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

American Studies

Approved:

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Lynne S. McNeill, Folklore  
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Committee Member

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2019

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## ABSTRACT

### Called to Serve: Understanding the Role of the Woman's Mission Decision Narrative in Latter-Day Saint Culture and Belief

by

Elizabeth Rachel Ross, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2019

Major Professor: Dr. Lynne S. McNeill  
Department: English

In this thesis I explore the role of mission decision narratives of women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Before 2012, women could not serve missions until age 21. Once the minimum age was changed to 19 in October of 2012, many more women were able to serve on mission as the opportunity was less likely to disrupt their education or romantic relationships. In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, missions are seen as a priesthood duty for men but a matter of choice for women. This ability to choose and the narrative that follows plays an important role for women and the church overall. The question “How did you decide to serve a mission?” is a relatively frequently asked question of Latter-day Saint women and the story that follows is indicative of the view women have of themselves and their relationship with God. Many women struggle greatly looking for the answer and this very struggle can serve as the genesis of their tangible identity in the church and can come to define their spiritual identity as well.

This thesis discusses the scholarly work that relates to personal revelation narratives and Latter-day Saint folklore in general. I highlighted Tom Mould's pivotal work on this subject matter and discuss the space in which my research fits and creates new understanding of Latter-day Saint women and culture. I then presented my research in which I interviewed seven women who

served missions after October 2012. I analyzed themes and ideas expressed in these interviews, seeking out common patterns and seeming anomalies. Each woman that I interviewed was fairly different in personality and temperament, yet there were common threads between all of them. In my thesis, I identified six main themes and include them as subcategories: The inverse quest, the “wrestle” each woman had with the Lord, misconceptions and preconceived notions about missions and sister missionaries, “prodigal” women who found their faith as they found their answers, the oracular role of friends and family, and ultimately the reclamation that takes place in mission narrative from the trials and trauma of serving a mission.

(57 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

### Called to Serve: Understanding the Role of the Woman's Mission Decision Narrative in Latter-Day Saint Culture and Belief

Rachel Elizabeth Ross

In my thesis I explored the role of mission decision narratives of women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Before 2012, women could not serve missions until age 21. Once the minimum age was changed to 19 in October of 2012, many more women were able to serve on mission as the opportunity was less likely to disrupt their education or romantic relationships. In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, missions are seen as a priesthood duty for men but a matter of choice for women. This ability to choose and the narrative that follows plays an important role for women and the church overall. The question “How did you decide to serve a mission?” is a relatively frequently asked question of Latter-day Saint women and the story that follows is indicative of the view women have of themselves and their relationship with God. Many women struggle greatly looking for the answer and this very struggle can serve as the genesis of their tangible identity in the church and can come to define their spiritual identity.

My thesis discusses the scholarly work that relates to personal revelation narratives and Latter-day Saint folklore in general. I highlighted Tom Mould's pivotal work and discuss the space in which my research fits and creates new understanding of Latter-day Saint women and culture. I then presented my research in which I interviewed seven women who served missions after October 2012. I analyzed themes and ideas expressed in these interviews, seeking out common patterns and seeming anomalies. Each woman that I interviewed was fairly different in personality and temperament, yet there were common threads between all of them. Each struggled to make the decision, many received timely and oracle-like advice from family members or friends. Many went back and forth in their decision for many months or even years before they finally made their choice. In my thesis, I identified six main themes and include them as subcategories: The inverse quest, the “wrestle” each woman had with the Lord, misconceptions and preconceived notions about missions and sister missionaries, “prodigal” women who found their

faith as they found their answers, the oracular role of friends and family, and ultimately the reclamation that takes place in mission narrative from the trials and trauma of serving a mission.

Ultimately, I have found that these stories are an important way to acknowledge a space in which women exist in the church and in which their identities are created and celebrated. It is vital to understand that the decision to go on a mission is not just a momentary experience but a reflection of what a religious community cares about and how religious beliefs are put into action by women who believe them.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank each woman that contributed to my research by allowing me to interview her, and countless other women that have shared their mission stories with me as well. I'm grateful for Lynne McNeill and her cheerful and enthusiastic support and her great confidence in me. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee—Lisa Gabbert and Rebecca Andersen, whose feedback and support I greatly appreciate. I absolutely must thank my mother, sister, brother, and father for all of their feedback and support, for this thesis paper and for everything else, too.

Rachel Elizabeth Ross

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## Introduction

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sends out tens of thousands of missionaries each year. There are currently approximately 71,000 active Latter-day Saint missionaries in the world right now, and that number fluctuates every week, with new missionaries being sent out as others are coming home. Most missionaries are ages 18-25 and serve for a period of eighteen months to two years. For men, going on a mission is considered a commandment of God--part of their priesthood duty. A woman's choice to go on a mission, however, is not connected to following a commandment and is purely up to her own volition. While this may seem from the outside like the better option, the freedom of that choice brings on its own set of complications and internal struggle.

Women in the church have not always served missions but the tradition of sending women on missions started over a century ago. Missionary work for men started from the days of the church's inception in the 1800s. Joseph Smith, prophet and founder of the church, always believed that the gospel was to be preached to the world. Early missionaries were always men, and it wasn't until the late 1890s that mission presidents started to request women missionaries. Latter-day Saint narrative scholar Jessie Embry notes in her article on Mormon women missionaries,

But why did the mission presidents want more women missionaries? There are no records of the specific reasons, but they might have also been trying to combat a popular image of Mormon women. Because of the practice of polygamy, Mormon women were often seen as oppressed, deprived, helpless creatures by non-Mormons. The mission presidents may have wanted to destroy that image by having visible examples of Mormon women working with them. (172)

After these requests, the first female missionaries were sent to England in 1898, with various policy updates within the church changing the nature of missionary work for both women and men missionaries depending on the need and culture. At one point, the age that women could serve a mission was 23 until it changed to 21 in 1964. Advice given to members after this policy

change included the comment from the church headquarters: “It is hoped that normal social opportunities leading to proper marriage will not be interrupted nor disturbed by such recommendations. Those young women who do not have reasonable marriage prospects but who are personable, qualified and worthy may be recommended” (174). Clearly, cultural expectations and norms were fairly large factors in both the official church policy on women serving missions and were advised to be so in personal decisions to make such a choice. Though the focus was not always on marriage as first priority when pertaining to women’s decisions to go on missions, the effects of the original cultural expectations have remained arguably until the present day, as was noted by at least one woman I interviewed (and will be quoted in a later section). In the 1900s, the age that men were able to serve missions was 19 (with a few policy changes here and there) and they served for two years. Women’s missions were a year and half, or eighteen months, in length. On October 6, 2012, then president and prophet of the church, Thomas S. Monson, announced in the semiannual general conference of the church, broadcasted around the world, that the age of missionaries able to serve would change from 19 to 18 for men and from 21 to 19 for women. In a normally respectful and quiet setting, there was an audible collective gasp in the entire conference center when this announcement was made, followed by excited buzzing. It was a moment that changed thousands and thousands of women’s lives.

I was sitting in an apartment in Provo, Utah full of college students watching the conference broadcasted on TV when this announcement was made. I think we all screamed. My friend Gordy went for a jog after that first session and posted later on Facebook that he observed “girls walking outside talking on the phone all over the place.” The Latter-day Saint Facebook world didn’t need further explanation--we knew what these girls were thinking about. One of those girls was my very own roommate, who missed the rest of the actual conference session to have

an emotional conversation with her mom about whether or not she should serve a mission instead of waiting for her boyfriend to come home from his. She didn't end up serving a mission (though she didn't marry the boyfriend either). The age change from 19 -years-old to 18-years-old certainly meant something for the boys in high school who were then able to leave that much earlier and possibly not even have to attend college before leaving on a mission. For girls, it meant an entire cultural paradigm shift. Leaving at age 21 meant disrupting your educational and career plans as 21 is the age at which most women are in their junior or senior year of college, at the very least. Further, culturally and doctrinally, marriage is a priority for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and historically, many young women have been married or in serious relationships at the age of 21. Changing the age to 19 meant that that very few fit into the relationship category that would preclude them from going. Even if there were girls in serious relationships, many of those girls' boyfriends would be serving missions at the same time. Going on a mission would almost seem like a productive way to spend that time that would normally be seen as "waiting for my missionary." After the announcement, suddenly very few excuses a woman could give for not serving a mission seemed viable. While it was and still is maintained that missionary service was a commandment for men and optional for women, because almost all women fit the bill of being in a place where they technically had nothing holding them back, making the decision of whether or not to serve a mission was a task that suddenly no woman could avoid. "The age change," as it has come to be known, shattered previously set cultural expectations, and forced all woman to come out from their hiding place of excuses, and actually figure out if it was something they wanted or needed to do.

Making a decision to go on a mission is not as simple as a "Well what do you *want* to do?" Prominent Latter-day Saint folklore scholars Eric Eliason and Tom Mould discuss the im-

portant religious and cultural rite that serving a mission is for members of the church. Here, they discuss the mission in the context of men (and it should be important to note that before the age change, most missionaries *were* men), but the sentiment applies to both genders:

...It should be pointed out here that missionary work is one of the most important rites of passage for young men in the church, a rite of passage that confers a religious identity that they will maintain for the rest of their lives. . . It is a watershed moment for many, when youth become adults, learners become teachers, and faith becomes knowledge. Of course, these transformations, particularly the last, may continue throughout one's life, but the mission is widely regarded as the moment where the balance shifts. Adult members regularly refer to their missions, whether as a touchstone for a particular religious tenet that they came to understand and know to be true, incorporating it as part of their testimony; as point of shared experience in social bonding; as a wellspring for teaching; or even as a source for humorous narratives (2011, 99).

In fact, they point out that,

Particularly for those young men and women who grow up in the church, the major LDS rites of passage track the life cycle, from baptism to dating to mission work to marriage to parenthood. In Austin and Alta Fife's introduction to their landmark work *Saints of Sage and Saddle* . . . they describe this life cycle, where individual growth coincides with religious responsibility (2011, 96-97).

Women in the church are not oblivious to the symbolic and literal changes serving a mission will have on the rest of their lives. It is not seen as an added bonus, but fully understood to be either an enormous rite of passage they now more easily have the chance to participate in, or a cultural gap that they will knowingly create if they choose not to serve. Either way, women in the church today know their decision is something they will be reminded of for the rest of their lives. Further, they see their decision to serve a mission directly tied into their relationship with God, as will be explored further in this thesis, and hence the decision is, for most, not taken lightly. It is seen as more than just a logical decision, but one that calls upon every ounce of their mental, emotional, and most importantly, spiritual faculties, many aspects of which these women are still in the process of developing--something of which they are aware.

When women do finally make the decision to serve a mission, the question “How did you decide to serve a mission?” is never far from the public’s conversational repertoire for the rest of their foreseeable lives. This question is acceptable to ask maybe in part because, though a very personal process, the experience has concrete and positively perceived results. Conversely, I imagine very few women who do not serve missions are asked, “How did you decide to *not* serve a mission?” though the process is probably very similar, save the end result is different. It’s not that *not* going on a mission is looked down upon (though I’m sure there are many women who may feel that way), but rather not going on a mission may entail a number of factors deemed too personal to discuss in a basic conversation. It may involve mental and physical health challenges, a lack of worthiness (i.e. not following the church standards at the time and not willing to change—not to be confused with “worth” which it is doctrinally believed that everyone has always), and other more gray area life situations. When a woman decides to go on a mission, it is clear that these gray area issues have not gotten in the way or prohibited her decision and hence the answer expected from the question “How did you decide to serve a mission?” is expected to be largely a spiritual one, or at least one with a spiritual triumph. When Tom Mould set out to study the folklore of The Church Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members, he first thought of documenting stereotypical folkloric experiences--the supernatural, end-of-the-world prophecies, etc. As he became more familiar with the people and the culture of the church, he explained,

I began to realize . . . that far more relevant to the people I was meeting, far more interesting to them personally, socially, and culturally, were the personal revelations they received regularly, guiding them in their daily lives. My focus shifted, and with it, the questions that I asked. (2011, 7).

This focus on personal revelation is in part what makes the mission decision question so salient in church culture. As will be discussed later, there are also other roles that this story plays, and is

often asked from one woman to another, either as a way to ask advice or as a way to bond in a missionary or post-missionary situation. The following sections will discuss seven interviews I performed with seven different women who served missions and answered the ever relevant question: How did you decide to serve a mission? In this thesis paper, I will explore the ways in which this mission decision narrative is fundamentally influential to women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I argue that these stories are a key part of Latter-day Saint spiritual identity in an increasing amount of women, thereby influencing the role they play within the church as well as their view of themselves outside of the church as well. Understanding these stories helps us understand the moving force that is the Latter-day Saint woman.

### **Overview of Interviews**

Though I have unofficially heard the stories of many many women who decided to serve a mission, I officially interviewed seven women for this thesis. Six of these women volunteered on a post I made on a Facebook page dedicated to women serving missions. Though the page is largely for those preparing for a mission, many don't leave the group once they come home and hence is filled with women young and old, relatively eager to discuss all things mission related. The group has over 30,000 members though not all are active on the page. In my post, I described my interest in interviewing women for my master's thesis project and many responded, though I limited it to those that were easily accessible and therefore lived in my town of Logan, Utah. The names of those I interviewed are Hillary Place, Natasha Gladney, Emma Hyer, Chelsea Heaton, Maddison Timothy, Valerie Robbins, and one interviewee who preferred not to use her real name who I will call Krista. Hillary, Natasha, and Emma are not from Utah while the others are. Emma was also the one I reached out to rather than heard from via Facebook, who is from my hometown. (I contacted Emma because I had previously been discussing my project

with her mother, a great mentor to me, who told me that I simply must ask Emma about her experience). Emma was the most recently returned missionary, having just returned a few weeks from her mission before the interview. Maddison, Valerie, Krista, and Natasha had all been home from their missions for over a year, and Chelsea and Hillary had both been home for about three or more years, their mission timelines overlapping with my own (we all served around 2014). Though I did not ask their ages, because they were all 19 or younger when the age change happened, they can be no older than 25 and no younger than 20. Hillary, Maddison, Valerie, and Krista have all gotten married since their missions, some of whose stories this information is fairly relevant, or at least tangentially related. Emma served her mission in Colorado, Hillary in Indiana, Chelsea in Washington, Madison in Texas, Krista in Canada, and Natasha served in Germany. All served after the age change and were affected because of it, given that they started their decision process because they were 19 years old or younger, which would have been irrelevant previously. I used an audio recorder for each of my interviews and transcribed them afterwards. The quotes I use for each woman come from my transcriptions of those interviews. I edited out some filler words like “um” if they didn’t pertain to the content or effect of the story, according to my best judgment. I also had some questions in mind as I interviewed but allowed the conversation and questions to flow naturally according to each woman’s story.

### **The Connection to Folklore**

Most mission decision stories can seem fairly uneventful, particularly for someone who isn’t listening to them in order to strengthen their faith or glean wisdom on how to decide to serve a mission themselves. There are rarely supernatural visitations, dramatic rituals, or other behaviors that would clearly identify folkloric elements in the process, and even if there were, these elements probably wouldn’t be shared to a broader audience due to their sacred nature.

William A. Wilson, oft referred to as “The Father of Mormon Folklore,” relayed an experience in which he sent a copy of a lecture for his university’s Humanities department about his faith and folklore to his friend Elaine Lawless, who shared and discussed it with her students in her seminar on Folklore and Religion. In his lecture, he shared two religious narratives that changed his outlook on Latter-day Saint folklore because of the key components they held in conveying his religious faith but also in their nuanced representation of folklore in religion. In one experience, he describes giving a priesthood blessing to a blind woman, Sister Vasenius, in Finland. He explains:

I heard no voices, saw no visions, witnessed no miracle--except the miracle of heart touching heart. When I finished, she stood up, put her arms around me, and thanked me for blessing her with peace. And I realized, perhaps better than I have for a long time, that what I had just experienced was the essence of the gospel. The gospel’s not to be found in intellectual discussions about God’s omniscience. . . . It’s to be found in the homes and hearts of the Sister Vaseniuses throughout the church where people take seriously the Savior’s injunction, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,” and as a result find rest to their souls (1995, 17).

Another experience he recalled was one in which another member had told him of her husband’s conversion to the church, his alcoholism beforehand, and his ultimate triumph in turning his life around based on the teachings of the gospel. Wilson asked himself:

‘If experiences like these are at the heart of what it means to be Mormon...why aren’t they a part of Mormon folklore?’ And then I realized that, of course, they are--they have just not been collected and studied. I have probably told the story of the alcoholic’s conversion a hundred times; and I have heard a hundred stories like it. Yet rarely have I attempted to collect that kind of material (1995, 17).

I attempt to do as Wilson realized and collect and discuss the folklore of the people of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that is important to them and close to their hearts. As I will argue in this paper, there are very few experiences as fundamentally powerful in a woman’s life as her decision to serve a mission, if she so chooses. Furthermore, this commonly accepted form of narrative within the church plays a key role in the conveyal of a spiritual identity

to herself and to others. Thus, this narrative is critical in understanding women and their role in the church.

### **The Emic Perspective**

As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints myself, I am in a unique position as a folklorist studying my own group. I am very sensitive to Elaine Lawless's theory of ethical ethnography and feel that my studying women's mission narratives is about as close to an equal power dynamic as one can achieve in folkloristic studies and took that into account as I considered possible avenues of study for my folklore research. Folklorist Sandra K. D. Stahl believes that "people tell personal narratives to be listened to. . . They expect their listeners to listen because both they and their listeners know that this is one very effective (and acceptable) way to create and enjoy a sense of intimacy" (2008, 37). Certainly whether or not creation of intimacy is the conscious or subconscious desire of the woman who tells the story of her decision to serve a mission, it is the effect. Interestingly though, no previous acquaintance needs to exist, or even proof of future acquaintance needs to play a role, in order for these stories to be told. In my online post, I did include a picture of myself on a mission to firstly make the post a little more catchy, secondly, to create a sense of approachability and prove I was not a weirdo from the internet, and thirdly, to create an immediate rapport--to suggest that I was part of the in group and would understand. Hence, when I started these interviews, the women I met with needed very little explanation about what I was doing and why I was doing it. Introductions took about all of 20 seconds before I was able to jump right in with the pivotal "How did you decide to serve a mission?" They would immediately oblige me with detailed stories of their process and I didn't have to prove my ethos beyond the simple quip, "Hey, thank you for letting me do this, it will really help me with my project!" I believe that spiritual narratives in an emic setting surpass the

basic desire for intimacy. The role these narratives play is complex and multifaceted, and the role they play for their tellers is multifold.

I believe there are many benefits not only to studying this topic with an emic perspective, but performing emic interviews as well. What a religious believer explains to another member of their religion will undoubtedly be fairly different than what they explain to someone not of their beliefs. This in part may be to be polite and not express beliefs they know the other would not believe, in order to not make them feel uncomfortable. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are usually highly aware of the possibility of their non-member counterparts being uncomfortable by their religious beliefs or even forwardly disagreeable in large part due to our heritage of persecution, which resulted in our continual migration and ultimate immigration out of the then continental United States to the western territory in 1849. Tales of persecution are frequently told through pioneer stories in church meetings and lessons, as well as experienced to a lesser degree in real life by members around the world (of course, the level and consistency of this persecution completely depending on the situation of the individual member). Hence, Latter-day Saints are sensitive in describing their personal spiritual experiences to those who might interpret them negatively or skeptically, and therefore, most undoubtedly leave out details of a spiritual nature that may be misunderstood or even offend.

Furthermore, members are taught that we must treat our experiences as sacred, not to be shared with just anyone at any time. These experiences are not to be conversation starters, ice breakers, or seen as general entertainment to shock and awe. This thought process probably leads many members when telling stories to leave out details perceived as personal when speaking to non-members. These members probably also don't want some of their most sacred experiences to be lost on someone who may not be able to comprehend the importance of the experiences. In

my interview with Chelsea Heaton, she disclosed of a detail post-interview that she had purposefully left out because she perceived it as too sacred for a general recording that she knew would be submitted to an archive and be heard by possibly anyone. I was surprised at the detail she gave me afterwards because I didn't find it particularly jaw dropping or supernatural and realized that the sacredness of the matter more had to do with her own personal perception of the experience rather than what others would perceive. Perhaps I was even too broad an audience for her additional description, as I clearly didn't find the detail as sacred as she did, illustrating the very need to keep sacred things personal.

Many church leaders have warned to keep sacred experiences sacred. One could almost conclude that because of this, members would shy away from sharing important spiritual experiences as a whole because almost all important revelatory experiences qualify as fairly sacred, at least to the story teller. Tom Mould says of these admonitions, "...these warnings exist within the context of thousands of talks by church leaders in which they stress the importance of revelation and share their own spiritual experiences to anyone listening to general conference, reading church magazines, or visiting the church website." He concludes that the general feel is that "spiritual memorates should not be broadcast without thought, but in religious contexts, among an audience dominated by fellow Mormons. One must be careful but not close lipped" (2011, 71). While there is no spoken rule about member versus non-member audiences in the sharing of experiences within the church, Mould's assumption is not wrong in that it follows the logic as explained above. When telling these stories to members, there is trust that these stories will be understood, and more so, that there is simply a greater ability to explain the context of these experiences due to shared cultural and religious norms.

This emic perspective surely limits my ability to be objective with my own folklore group, though I would contest that there is no such thing as objectivity in a religious context. I believe that some folklorists of the etic perspective who have studied personal revelation narratives within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have sometimes missed the full richness and nuance of certain narrative traditions simply because of their lack of understanding of what the narrative described *felt like* beyond what was describable for human understanding. Part of the misunderstanding may be due to--though not on purpose--the storyteller them self because, as previously discussed, members are not as likely to disclose a lot of details in their personal spiritual experiences. Hence, the etic interviewer may only receive what the storyteller perceives as the big reveal, or the biggest, most important details of the story, thereby missing the nuances of the personal revelation. Margaret Brady was one such cultural outsider who studied women's vision narratives within the church. These narratives described visions that helped the women to decide to have another child. Brady concluded of these visions:

The visionary experience delivers a woman from the throes of guilt, uncertainty, and the necessity of constantly justifying her decision both to herself and to others. She no longer has to decide; Heavenly Father has so clearly spoken the decision for her--through the voice of her own child. At the same time, He has touched her personally, marked her as spiritually worthy--and all this at a time when she most questions her own spirituality because of the guilt of the former decision not to bear children. For most, the intensity of this visionary experience is simply too much to resist--no matter what the reasons for the previous decision (1987, 466).

It is evident here that Brady views the vision narrative as a subconscious form of avoidance of blame or responsibility for life-altering choices. While most decisions to serve a mission do not involve receiving visions in the way that Brady's study describes, the revelatory process is not dissimilar. In contrast to Brady's analysis, mission confirmations do not at all alleviate actual worry or consequences of actions. In fact, they incite the consequences of having to go on an actual mission--and fairly immediately. Rather than lighten the consequences of the decision made,

the revelation that women profess to receive gives a feeling of peace about the turmoil that will surely ensue when the woman actually goes on a mission. I would also argue, however, that this applies to the women of Brady's study as well, and that having another child is not simply a woman's remedy to her worries of acceptance or feeling constrained by patriarchal limitations, and I find Brady's analysis, though very possibly accurate in some situations, fairly reductive of Latter-day Saint women.

Again, Brady's limited perspective may have been a result in part as her best interpretation of what she had been given by those she talked with. The women probably didn't reveal every inward struggle and personal feeling of agony that lead up to their visions and hence Brady had to work with what she heard from her perspective, which seemed like a standalone experience of a vision that worked as an all-too-convenient answer to prayers and alleviation of having to make a decision. George Schoemaker, who also studied Latter-day Saint decision making, this time in the context of their decision to marry, felt that "marriage confirmation narratives facilitate relinquishing the burden of freedom and surrender it to a leader, to an institution, or to God. By so doing a person is able to clear the conscience of responsibility, thus alleviating the anxiety of having to choose." He continues to say,

For other Mormon couples, however, it is possible that they suffer from 'decidephobia' and would rather relegate the onus of a poor decision to another person, rather than having to take responsibility and suffer the consequences of their choices. . . . In some instances, decisions between two viable alternatives, one having more of a cultural imperative than the other, are left to the 'gods' so to speak (1989, 124).

This description seems based on a limited view of these decision making stories. Certainly, though the end result of most religious decision making experiences may follow along the lines of a profession something like, "And I felt that I was doing what God wanted me to do," to simply attribute the final decision as avoidant of responsibility or based on members' fears of hege-

monic structures is, again, reductive to their processes, which usually include a sincere and intense searching for truth and reason in light of their nuanced and personal spiritual beliefs. To attribute a member's decision to fear or avoidance is to ignore the entire folkloric process that went into their search for how to make that decision--a process that will be described further in this paper but that will illustrate a thoughtful and delicate balance with the decision maker's relationship and understanding of God, the Holy Spirit, and their own desires and understanding of what is right or desirable.

An etic scholar who has been, in my opinion, successful in writing on Latter-day Saint Folklore is Tom Mould. In his book *Still, the Small Voice*, he sought to trace the various narrative patterns that members used in contexts of "feeling the spirit." For his research, Mould attended church meetings frequently, as well as participated in other meetings and activities, so much so that he essentially made himself a part of the ward [congregation] he was observing. He also took great efforts to understand every nuance of the doctrines of personal revelation as expressed in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and was able to contextualize the stories he heard within this framework. In this way, Mould had the chance to truly not only hear the stories but know the people behind them and the context for their beliefs on a fairly extensive level. He made sure his viewpoint was as emic as it could be for a non-member, and his ethical principles behind this decision show themselves in his treatment of spiritual and sacred narrative. Those he interviewed must have viewed the sincerity in his long-term investment and felt more comfortable sharing sacred experiences with someone they had seen repeatedly and knew was willing to make extended efforts to get not only the story but the context correctly.

The privilege of knowing that I am the "right" audience for the stories of the women with whom I spoke--in regards to an implied understanding of context, appreciation of spiritual con-

tent, and even closeness in age (and therefore cultural experience)--has not been lost on me. During the interviews, I felt it was silently understood that they were willing to speak with me and share the things they did--even though they knew my writing was for academic purposes and for a non-specifically Latter-day Saint audience--because they trusted that I would treat their stories with what they would perceive as a fair viewpoint, and with a general sense of care. This is a trust I hold with great importance and with a great sense of awareness. However, *my* perception is that my thinking is not unaligned with their thinking and, for better or for worse, my interpretations would not disrupt any of our shared beliefs. Mould explains that “Ideally, the decision to share personal revelation is explicitly sanctioned by God” or in colloquial church language, you share “when you feel so prompted” (2011, 76). One of my interviewees, Madison Timothy, even expressed of my query for interviews on a Facebook post:

...I saw this post and I was like, ‘Ok do I want to do it or do I not?’ And usually I wouldn’t jump on that opportunity to do it. . . I just felt like I needed to, and I didn’t know why but it was something like, ‘Ok, obviously I’m inspired to do this’ and I don’t know, God leading, somehow, someway, it was just like, it needed to happen...(2019).

This comment by Madison alone shows how important and sacred these women find their stories. She believed that God would and in fact did direct her to share her story with me, for my personal research project. These stories are more than tales of adventure or hardship. They transcend the decision making of everyday life as they are seen as a way to create a ripple effect on eternity.

### **The Foundational Work of Tom Mould**

Any discussion of personal revelation narratives in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints must address Tom Mould’s foundational scholarly theory for personal revelation narratives within the church. His book *Still, the Small Voice* lays out a comprehensive view of personal revelation narratives with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, including the

various structures, themes, and patterns within those narratives, the roles they play within the church, and many other facets. In his work, Mould importantly distinguishes two main types of revelation: prescriptive and descriptive. Prescriptive revelation “prescribes a course of action, providing information on what should be done, but not why. Human action is prescribed. The present is outlined, but the future is ambiguous” (140). Descriptive revelation, on the other hand, “reveals what is going to happen but not what to do about it. The future is provided; the present is implied. The question, how and when could it happen? Drives the narrative action” (159). The question that follows for this thesis would then be: where does the woman’s mission decision narrative fit within Mould’s categorization? The answer is that it doesn’t. While Mould’s two categories are a helpful starting place from which to analyze personal revelation narrative, they don’t quite cover the experiences described when women decide to serve missions. In fact, the church has already created a category for this type of spiritual experience that would lend itself to the narrative form as well, and it is called continuing revelation. James E. Faust, former member of the presidency of the church, described continuing revelation as, “a special dimension of the gospel: the necessity for constant communication with God through the process known as divine revelation.” He continues, “This principle is basic to our belief.” The idea of continuing revelation is just as it sounds--that revelation about a certain concept, choice, experience, etc. keeps coming as the seeker of revelation lives out their life. Mould’s categories signify fairly discrete experiences that, while they affect the receiver’s overall beliefs and testimony, pertain to fairly specific instances. Mission decision narratives very frequently include a variety of specific revelatory experiences, including both prescriptive and descriptive revelation, and other experiences that combine together to create a unique personal revelatory experience that cannot be defined as largely one category or the other.

One category that Mould describes that applies to mission decision narratives as well is that of retroactive revelation, in which he describes, “there are times when the recognition of revelation follows much later, after initial interpretation. This reinterpretation transforms the mundane into the spiritual, the coincidence or strange feeling into revelation” (227). As will be discussed further in this paper, some experiences for the women that may have seemed vaguely spiritual at the time took on even greater meaning afterwards in light of greater knowledge they received about direction on deciding to serve a mission. Mission decision experiences and narratives often incorporate nuanced versions of all three of the described categories. This makes studying these mission decision narratives an even more important academic endeavor, and further emphasizes the importance of Mould’s work in establishing these categories in the first place. His theory serves as the groundwork from which to frame these narratives and to see where it departs from that framework—enabling us to see the space created by the in between place and its importance on our understanding of narrative forms. Women’s mission decision narratives indicate a new genre of personal revelation narrative not yet described by Mould or any other theorists, and thus my thesis work will introduce this important genre into the body of existing theory on personal revelation narrative.

### **Moving Forward**

In the following sections I will discuss the roles these narratives play in Latter-day Saint culture and belief. Rather than present each full interview, I will incorporate sections of these interviews as they exemplify and highlight common themes I found throughout my fieldwork. I start off by arguing that the mission decision narrative is a form of origin story for the Latter-day Saint woman beyond the typically accepted and respected conversion story. I will then go on to describe how the narrative and experience plays out like an inverse quest—one in which the

woman is the champion and pioneer of her own story. I discuss in the next section how these women who tell their stories engage in a “wrestle” with the Lord and view themselves as equal to the task. Further, I explore how preconceived notions and misconceptions kept many of these women from desiring to go on a mission and how those misconceptions reflect on church culture. In the next section, I discuss the idea of “the prodigal daughter,” or those who were not active in the church and what their seemingly “outlier” stories mean as a reflection of doctrinal beliefs. After that, I point out the important role of oracle both family and non-family played in helping these women make their decision. In the final section, I address the way in which these stories are told as a way to reframe and reinterpret trauma and hardship. Ultimately, I conclude with a reflection on the validity and importance of these stories as key to understanding women in the church and church culture overall.

### **An Origin Story for Women Beyond Conversion**

I believe that an important role the mission decision story serves is as a sort of origin story, particularly for women. Eliason and Mould argue that “No formative custom can possibly compete with the conversion experience for truly ‘making Mormons’” (2013, 94) but I believe that in this, they are wrong. Mission decisions are one of the first significant actions women take in the church, particularly as adults. Typically, a basic origin story for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may involve the moment, experience, or key series of events that helped them know the church was “true,” as is the typical terminology. This process is not unlike the mission decision in that it could involve anything having to do with spiritual revelation--prayer, fasting, reading of scriptures, inspirational words from an oracle figure, etc. Once one receives this inspiration, however, if one is already a member of the church, baptized at age 8 as is the doctrinal belief, then once one has a major revelation or series of revelations indicat-

ing that the church is true (or anything that contributes to their conversion process), the only action to take moving forward is simply to stay faithful in their beliefs and to keep those feelings of belief. For actual converts, who were not members of the church previously, the first step is baptism, followed swiftly by receiving the Gift of the Holy Ghost. While this step usually requires somewhat of a lifestyle change, for lifelong members, the conversion process is usually more subtle. The decision to go on a mission, however, requires the same elements of personal revelation and, for those who have already been members, a huge change in lifestyle as well that cements one's conviction in deeply with a corroborated lifestyle change. For recent converts, the change is even larger. Deciding to serve a mission is the kick starter for dedicating at least a year and a half to more or less literally talking about Jesus every waking hour of the day and committing to a lifestyle that reflects that (with very specific and strict rules--to be followed by using one's own agency, of course, but pretty much committed to when agreeing to serve a mission). Even very dedicated members will never follow such a strict lifestyle unless on a mission. Sometimes the decision to serve a mission even overlaps with or *becomes* a conversion story. For example, my mother, born and raised Italian Catholic in a small town in Ohio, would always explain to me that she knew she need to be a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints before she even knew she needed to join the church itself. Though one action logically pre-necessitates the other, she nevertheless somehow knew this mission decision truth before she had logically accepted the other decision to join the church. She did choose to be baptized at age 17, and then at age 21, she served a mission to Costa Rica. Mission decision narratives are akin to conversion stories because they serve as a way to physically identify one's self spiritually--it's a story that can put into words intangible feelings and an intangible identity into more

concrete terms. The story of how a woman decides to serve a mission is a physical representation of her spiritual identity.

When Eliason and Mould argue that “No formative custom can possibly compete with the conversion experience for truly ‘making Mormons’” (2013, 94), I would contest that this assertion ignores the space in which women in the church are situated. When a woman makes the decision to go on a mission, this may be one of, if not *the*, first tangibly life changing decisions she has made in regards to her faith. While the gospel of Jesus Christ affirms that one’s life is made up of small decisions that create a tradition of faith and love, the mission decision is admittedly a decision that launches those who end up choosing to serve on a very dedicated path that makes it harder to stray from later on--a fact that every member of the church is highly aware of, for both men and women. Eliason describes the role conversion stories play in the church, “Conversion stories... increasingly share the same function as nineteenth century Mormon pioneer narratives they form an inspirational and faith promoting popular historical consciousness for Latter-day Saints” (1999, 144). This sentiment can easily be applied to women’s “conversions” so to speak to the idea of serving a mission and effectually committing their life wholly to God for a year and a half. These stories may not describe the initial moment of conversion, but surely a measurable moment in time in which the woman has decided to commit to God more fully. Hence the mission decision story serves as a woman’s personal pioneer story or as discussed in the next section, her own sort of quest. It is the experience in which she actively chose to blaze her own trail and forge her own path.

### **The Inverse Quest**

In her work on narratives of adoption families and their struggles, Patricia Sawin, referencing Amy Shuman's *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy*, explains,

Shuman notes that small world stories often function as 'a quest story backward, with the quest concealed from the seeker [and with] coincidence substituted for fate and the trivial for the mythical.' In these adoption stories, the parents were on a quest, just not for what (or whom) they ended up finding. Joy mostly but not entirely displaces regret (2017, 404).

Similarly, women who end up deciding to serve missions do not realize during the decision making process that this is necessarily their end goal, per se. In fact, it is this lack of understanding in the nature of their quest that causes the friction necessary for these stories to maintain staying power in these women's lives, and cause them to have the effect they do.

Nearly every woman I talked with described deciding to go on a mission as a struggle. The only person who didn't clearly describe a struggle initially was Krista, though when further questioned, signs of struggle did appear as she admitted to some of her preconceived notions being wrong. What is the cause of this struggle? Perhaps that is why all these women volunteered to speak with me. Surely, if the decision was obvious, there wouldn't be much of a story to tell.

Why *is* the decision to go on a mission such a struggle? Why isn't it simply perceived as another cool opportunity or possibility that one may or may not take advantage of, like an extended study abroad, or even a yearlong teaching position away from home? Surely, those opportunities are also met with at least a little trepidation and not engaged in without thought. Still, the importance with which these women took making this decision points at the greater role and weight this decision is given in the collective cultural mindset. Douglas Davies's work *The Holy Spirit in Mormonism* gives us a greater understanding of why this may be. He explains,

LDS culture is strong on seeing and on testifying to what it has seen, which is why the very idea of witnesses was so important at its outset. This visual capacity, fostered in

Temple ritual, has fostered the importance of pictorial narratives, constructs we may explore through the concept of the paradigmatic scene, a narrative picture that becomes typical for a group, enshrining prime values and sentiments and often becoming constitutive for understanding a tradition (2009, 35).

The mission decision narrative serves as a sort of visual witness to one's spirituality, and to one's overall faith. Missions themselves also serve that role, and hence the possibility to have such an experience that could prove as a visual witness that attests to one's beliefs and spirituality for the rest of one's life provides a powerful motivation to find out if the path is right for that individual and allows "the mission" to take on an iconic role in the culture and doctrinal practices of members of the church.

Understandably, though not choosing to serve a mission has repeatedly been expressed to women as an acceptable decision, the intensity and propensity that women are aware of for the mission experience to change their identity in the church and their overall spiritual identity is not lost on them. Hence, women struggle so greatly to figure out not just what they want, but what they feel God wants them to do; they are on the crux of a possible identity change not just within the church but in every part of their life. They are on their quest for an unknown answer. This was evident in my interview with Chelsea, who wavered and waffled back and forth in a fair amount of agony, trying to make her decision. She explained,

So it'd been about a year and I kept getting these feelings and promptings that I needed to look into [serving a mission] again and I kind of shrugged it off for a little because I knew what that meant and I didn't want to deal with it right then. And so I decided, like I just kept thinking about it and every time that I would open up to a quote or something, like a spiritual quote or something, it always seemed to emphasize missionary work and then it would just hit me--I was like, 'Ok, whoa, we're going to back up a little bit, like I don't know about this,' but then finally I decided to go to this devotional thing and listen, I think it was Elaine S. Dalton talking to the institute. So I decided to go listen to that and she just talked about how there was something she knew she needed to do but she didn't want to but she knew that God had given her an answer or something like that. So it kind of hit me like, 'Ok, I'm just going to start this and we're going to see what happens, we're just going to see what happens. We don't know but we're going to see' (2019).

In her description, Chelsea notes her lack of knowing exactly what she was looking for--even as she was aware in the back of her mind of the looming option of a mission. Though it may be hard to understand how Chelsea could not have seen the metaphorical writing on the wall from a present perspective, it is clear from her describing her feelings at the time that the answer was anything but obvious. In a mission decision narrative, the mission is the focal point of the topic, but during the storyteller's actual experience, the mission does not necessarily emerge as the evident choice at hand until afterwards. In fact, it is usually as the woman realizes that the seemingly random signs have all along pointed to the mission that the decision becomes clearer. In this way, the mission is the (inverse) quest, and the storyteller is the triumphant victor. Almost all mission decision stories that I have heard have some element of not simply if the mission is right or wrong for that woman, but a deeper question of what is right for her overall. Even as she is maintaining a mission as a possible option, she is considering limitless other options as well. It is often only after she makes the decision to serve a mission that she realizes that that was the truth God was leading her towards the whole time.

### **To Wrestle with the Lord**

More than absolutely any other specific detail that these women shared was an overwhelming sense of desire to want to receive revelation and know the path they should follow. This desire for revelation became a need. It loomed over them like a sort of burden or unidentifiable task. In the Bible, there is a well-known story in which the prophet Jacob wrestles--physically--with the Lord. (Gen 32:24). In this wrestling, Jacob thinks he is simply fighting a man but later exclaims "I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." It is in this same interaction with God that God tells Jacob his name will be Israel, starting the legacy of the Israelites. This wrestling also appears distinctly in metaphorical terms in the Book of Mormon more

than once--the famous Enos who went into the forest to hunt beasts and ended up praying all day and all night, and the prophet Alma who was praying over his people for their salvation both speak of a “wrestle with God.” Thus, while none of the women I interviewed spoke of their decision in such poetic scriptural terms, they did describe in more specific terms a very complex back and forth experience with God that the term “wrestle” fits very well. Previously, I have discussed their decision in the context of a quest, which fits in line with the role the narrative plays in the overall church culture and in the woman’s long term sense of the story once it has passed. When she has found the answer that she needs to go on a mission, she has discovered that she was on a quest she might not have fully realized she was on. The “wrestle,” however, speaks more directly to the woman’s relationship not with the mission decision but with God. Eliason says of the revelation described in conversion stories, and thus applicable to mission decision stories,

Perhaps the most important observation to be made about conversion stories is that they convey, in narrative form, fundamental Latter-day Saint epistemological and metaphysical propositions. The body of LDS conversion stories provides countless personal witnesses to the idea that anyone through humble study and prayer...can receive direct revelation of the truths that God lives and loves us so much that he sent his Son, established a church, and provided scriptures to teach us the principles of salvation. The heavens remain open and light pours out into the souls of those who seek it. The Restoration continues to unfold, penetrating more and more lives through the same principles employed by Joseph Smith and the ancients (1999, 145-146).

In this way, as the prophets of old went literally or figuratively head to head with God in a struggle for understanding or peace or redemption through prayer, fasting, and other forms of searching, so too these women express their engagement with God in a similar manner, never questioning that they wouldn’t have the right or ability to do so. In every facet of speech, these women stated an implied sense of expectation in their relationship with God and placed themselves on

the same level with equal ability to access God as esteemed church and spiritual leaders of past and present. A specific moment of wrestling occurred for Valerie Robbins when she explained:

When President Monson made the age change announcement...I was so excited, because I was like, “Oh my goodness”--because I was one of the oldest in my grade--because I could leave right after high school and it would be super easy. Like I wouldn't have to worry about college and it would just work out really well. And so like I got really excited, I was like, ‘I'm going to serve a mission, start preparing and like reading Preach my Gospel and everything.’ And then it got to senior year when I actually had to make college decisions and real life decisions and I was like, all excited about serving a mission but then I wasn't sure if it was my will or God's will. Like if it was something I wanted to do or just something that ...God actually wanted me to do. And so I was like praying and praying and praying and praying and fasting and praying and I wasn't getting an answer and I was like super super stressed and I was crying (2019).

She describes that later, after she spoke with her mother who gave her helpful advice and also after she read scripture, she was comforted in the idea of going on a mission and again felt it was right. Though in some ways this self-doubting and second guessing seems superfluous and anxiety-based (and surely by some measure it is), it represents a deeply held desire by many members not simply to “follow” what they think God wants, but to commune with him as well, and an expectation of that possibility as a reality. This experience of personal striving and wrestling to know God's will and make a decision was not Valerie's alone but literally came up in a variety of ways with every single woman except Krista. This may be an unfair representation of all Latter-day Saint women who decide to serve missions, as those who responded to me certainly felt they had a story to tell, which involved some adversity, as compared to those who possibly just always wanted to go, or those who received an answer very quickly, and therefore possibly felt they had less of a story to tell. Nevertheless, it appears that when there is a question to be answered or path not clearly lit to walk down, the woman in question always brings in her relationship with deity to play.

To fully convey the amount of wrestling with God involved in these women's stories would involve including most of their interviews and thus exceeds the scope of this thesis. Chelsea Heaton's experience was particularly up and down and back and forth, but not abnormally so. To express her story fully is not possible here. She spoke nonstop for the first ten minutes of the interview with only the prompting of the question "How did you decide to serve a mission?" to get her started, talking without pause or further questioning by myself (and I must mention that though warm and friendly, Chelsea doesn't strike me as a specifically chatty person willing to go off about just anything). Admittedly, Chelsea did deal with some anxiety problems as well, which would speak to her tumultuous experience. Nevertheless, if most women did not openly admit having anxiety about their mission decision situation, the evidences of that sentiment were blatantly present. Chelsea noted that her entire decision making process--in which she prayed, fasted, read scriptures, and sought out spiritual guidance from various friends, family, and leaders--lasted around two years, from "The Age Change" in October of 2012 to when she finally left on her mission in July of 2014. In reflection, Chelsea said,

I think there were all these things that kind of lined up and connected that allowed me to see that yes, God is aware and he is giving you an answer. But I think it really came down to the feeling that I received because I could have had all of those things happen--and I've had all of those things happen before and I'm like 'But maybe it's not, maybe it is.' But when you feel that in your heart and you know that it's true, you kind of feel this need to, um I don't know, you have a greater desire to follow it because you feel God's love and you feel like he knows who you are and he's given you a specific answer in a specific way, in a way that you would receive it (2019).

Here Chelsea speaks not only to her belief in the answer she received, but the cause of the answer and to the entire process as well. She affirms the sentiment that her wrestle with this decision and with God was all for a reason, and specifically to help her spiritual growth. Further, she speaks to a sense of personalization in the process. Others use familiarity in their description of

dealing with God as well. Hillary described in her experience in asking God what she should do with her life:

So I was in my bedroom, which I was sharing with my sister, who was out doing something, I can't remember. It was like, it was pretty dark, it was like 8:30 and I was just surrounded by mountains of cardboard boxes and like, laundry that had to be washed and all of this stuff, and it was just pure chaos, and I remember like kneeling down, and I was like, "I don't know what the hell you want from me"--I remember swearing [laughs], very clearly, um, I was like, "I don't know what the hell you want from me but this is not what I had thought I wanted in my life." I was like, "What do you want me to do, [changes to a tone of realization] do you want me to serve a mission?" And it was like I had been hit by like a truck, and I was like, "Oh my gosh!" and I had this moment of clarity and like I felt like I was on fire, like head to toe, just like, it was like I had been struck by lightning. Not literally thankfully, I probably would have died (2019).

Everything in Hillary's description, down to the details of a crowded and messy room having to be shared with her sister to the ultimate expletive blurted out in frustration mid-prayer, speak of a sense of understanding of God's position in relation to her as one nearby rather than in some distant cloud or heavenly space scene. She believes and even expects, despite her dramatic (self-aware) sense of imperfection, that God will answer her prayer. We can see the use of the familiar in Emma's language as well. She explains: "It kind of took me humbling myself honestly [laughs] to realize that I needed to turn to my Father in heaven in prayer and see if that's what He wanted me to do. Um, yeah, that's kind of how it started and how it finished really." These women express their relationship with the divine as if it's a sort of complicated yet refined dance with a partner that they fully expect to be there when they leap. To them, it is not a matter of *if* God will be there when they leap, but knowing *when* God wants them to leap. It is a sort of choreographed wrestle in which the woman learns the moves as she goes.

The language of familiarity and the description of struggle in these women's stories reflect an important relational belief in God and his presence in their lives--which for them is almost constant at least in thought if not in feeling. This belief in a caring and close God, as is im-

plied by the commonly used title “Heavenly Father,” is professed to be understood and believed by all members of the church. However these narratives play an important role in illustrating exactly what that looks like in the lives of individual members, even women relatively young in their life and gospel experience. The fact that they express a readiness to engage in a wrestle with God and believe that he is actually participating with them in such a wrestle is a revolutionary thought in disrupting religious hegemonies, real or perceived. The ability to decide to serve a mission allows women a special space in which to interact with God and claim an important divine relationship of their own.

### **Pride, Prejudice, and Preconceived Notions**

One thing that held several women back from serving missions were preconceived notions about “sister missionaries.” Though “missionary” is technically a genderless term, many for various reasons call female missionaries “sister missionaries” even though male missionaries are not called “elder missionaries” (“Elder” being their title) or any other additional title indicating gender. I would hypothesize that this is in large part due to the previous scarcity of women missionaries. (Another reason may be that, as with many other aspects of society, male is the given or assumed gender). As this special title indicates, sister missionaries are seen differently. They have a unique place in Latter-day Saint culture, some of which may be positive or negative depending on each member’s previous experiences with the ever ethereal sister missionary. As aforementioned, before the age change, women missionaries weren’t able to serve until the age of 21, which meant that--particularly based on the marriage-focused Latter-day Saint doctrine and culture--many women were already married or had specific plans to be married by this age. Because of this, women who decided to serve missions were sometimes seen as girls who had nothing better to do or who were somehow spinster-y in nature.

Church culture also views missionaries as a standard above regular church members in certain aspects. Missionaries are literally set apart right before they leave on their missions, or given a blessing by their bishop that in a sense makes them official missionaries. The understanding is of course that missionaries also have to *choose* to be set apart--a blessing doesn't *make* them suddenly holier. But the year and a half to two years they serve a mission are specifically dedicated to the Lord and every waking hour is essentially devoted to him. Women in and outside of any particular religion are often placed on a pedestal and the sense that missionaries are somehow different makes sister missionaries that much more so. Again, this could possibly lead to perceptions of them being unnaturally righteous either in a positive or negative way--nobody loves a goody goody. And in that sense, possibly seen even a little bit as outcasts that don't fit the mold of normal women.

Before Emma Hyer decided to serve a mission, she did *not* want to serve a mission. The fact that she made the decision was fairly shocking, even or especially to herself. After discussing with Emma the somewhat sudden nature of her decision, she described why she initially didn't think a mission was a relevant choice in her life:

My sister and my mom didn't serve--they got married at 19 you know, and I was like, ok, well that's probably like what's going to happen to me cause that's what happened to them, and I'll go up to school and I'll do that and there you go. And I, honestly I really just felt like the mission, like sister missionaries were just people that like didn't know what else to do with their lives. They were like, 'Well, I don't really want to go to school' or, 'I went to school for a little bit and I guess I'll go on a mission' and you know I didn't realize that there was like divine intervention with serving a mission really. I thought it was just like, 'Ok, I guess I'll serve a mission.' And so I just figured well I don't need to do that, like I have my life planned, I know what's gonna happen, I don't...not necessarily have time for a mission but it's not fitting into my life plan. So that was kind of like, the main...And I also felt like I wasn't worthy to serve a mission. I was like, 'I'm not a good teacher. I know the gospel but not like a missionary should...' and so I just felt like I wouldn't be a good missionary or would be inadequate (2019).

Emma's reaction is telling in that it both describes the negative stereotypes of sister missionaries and perceived motivations for women serving missions and it also gets at something deeper.

Though her first reaction to the idea of women serving a mission had to do with negative stereotypes, she was able to admit that underneath those stereotypes was a feeling of inadequacy. Even in her conversation with me when she initially fell back into the standard ideas about sister missionaries, in talking through those concepts, she was able to admit ultimately it came down to feelings of not measuring up to the sister missionary ideal. This points back to both the church culture idealization of missionaries and idealization of women. The sister missionary is the combination of both and therefore in some ways, a pinnacle of spirituality and holiness. As more women serve missions, the bubble sister missionaries are held in will surely pop, and this understanding of the realities of who missionaries are and what they are actually capable of will undoubtedly spread more greatly to wider church culture and understanding to all members and not just returned missionaries.

Conversely, the other two women who discussed their preconceived notions of missionaries didn't relegate their negative connotations to just sister missionaries but to missionaries altogether. Both Hillary Place and Natasha Gladney discussed a sort of previous disdain for people who decided to serve a mission and notably, both Hillary and Natasha had been less active, or not very participatory in church services and spiritual practices, prior to serving missions. In fact, in Natasha's story, her conceptions of missionaries and her less active status are the first things she mentions. These seem to go in conjunction with her lesser spiritual status, which was present in Hillary's narrative as well. In this transcript of Natasha's interview, she explains her thoughts about missionaries pre-mission when I asked how she decided to serve a mission. She

said, “My family are converts--we weren’t super active in the church so I was never going to serve a mission. I thought that missionaries were kind of dumb for choosing that.”

She continued to tell her story and after she finished describing the initial process, I wanted to go back and ask her about that first statement. I asked, “When you were saying that before you had thought like, ‘People who want to serve missions are dumb.’ What was your thought process before about missions and missionaries?” And she explained,

Like, giving up so much of your life that you could be doing something else to better yourself I guess, I don’t know, I mean my thinking is totally different now and I understand it. But I don’t know, to give up on the learning and the progress that you could be making in school or in work or um with friends. Um, seemed kind of a crazy decision to me. And then also, going around and like talking to people and like bothering people who didn’t want to listen and kind of annoying people, I was like, “Yeah, I don’t really want to do that.” And I’ve always been very open about my beliefs with my friends and stuff, and so I was like, “I’m doing good missionary work where I am, I don’t really need to give up anything to do it.” So yeah, that was my naive thinking (2019).

Natasha’s conceptions about missionary work focused on the negative social, financial, and educational consequences of being a missionary, comparing it on an equivalent scale to the life of non-missionaries. She also noted the discomfort of being a missionary and the uncomfortable perceived social interactions missionaries have (in which she was not wrong).

One element of those who have served missions discussing their previous notions of missionaries is the ability of understanding. Natasha is able to tell her story with the authority of one who has served and who has changed. When Natasha discusses her past self, she is describing a different person, a “mythic” version of herself. Mould and Eliason describe this concept of conversion narratives, which can aptly be applied to mission decision narratives as well:

Examination of conversion narratives can reveal not only an understanding of an experience fundamental to many religious people around the world but also a glimpse of the individual struggling to find coherence at a time of great transition. Conversion experiences pose a particular challenge to narrative by demanding discontinuity, a break between the

past self and the present self. Such a break risks undermining the ‘characterological coherence’ of most autobiographical narratives. By attending to the ‘mythic self’ constructed in narrative performance, folklore scholarship can attend not only to the text of the narrative but also to the individual at the heart of the tradition (2013, 95).

Natasha did not shy away from expressing what she now views as faulty notions, but she also made specific note of how she felt she was wrong. She is able to laugh at her past self as a way to lovingly yet obviously dismiss her former, mythic self. Hillary also describes a version of her past self but in her story telling, attempts to bridge both her past and present self together. She also discusses her conceptions of certain Latter-day Saint women as more righteous and therefore in many ways, untouchable or unreachable. She described:

I had this friend who had just come home for like the fall break or something and she was like the stalwart of the two of us, you know, she was just that, I don’t know how you would say, I don’t want to say “Molly Mormon” because she wasn’t like oblivious and naive. But she was just such a good person that I was like, “Oh my gosh, I wanna be just like you but I can’t because I suck [laughs].” And so-- Rene is her name--she comes up to me and she’s like, “Hey are you ok” and I’m like, “No, not really” and I started to cry and it was just a big mess and I was like a big blubbering idiot and she--I think I can’t remember if she had come back from her mission or not, I can’t remember when she left and then when I left--but she had been called to serve in a mission in the Donetsk, Ukraine mission and she was like, “You know, when I, I don’t know why I feel so strongly about this, but I just need to tell you, when I was watching General Conference and they announced the age change, the first name that popped into my head was yours--not mine, it was yours.” And I was like, “No...” [laughs] because I have always been that girl in Young Women’s and in Primary who was like ‘I’m not serving a mission, it’s stupid, missions are stupid, like I’m not gonna go, I’m not going to waste a year, 18 months of my life talking to people I don’t know. I hate people! I hate the unwashed masses!’--I still do--[laughs] (2019).

Hillary’s narrative was interesting in that she was continually sympathetic to her former, more “sinful” self by acknowledging the relatability of her past feelings. She never tried to overtly point out any wrongness of her feelings or behavior in her past despite the changes that had to have happened in her mentality because of her turn of behavior. Instead, her laughter and ac-

ceptance of past *and* present self allow for her to carve out an existence in a sort of in between space in her spiritual identity. This was evident in her conversation with me after the interview in which she expressed not fully fitting in with the members of the church in Logan, Utah where she lives, to which I related. She separates her beliefs from perceived local religious culture and in keeping her full narrative self intact without a mythic past or present, she maintains her existence in the in between areas rather than the black and white areas she feels she is pressured into.

Overall, the admission of negative stereotypes and holier-than-thou missionary perceptions plays a multifold role for the storyteller. First, in its acknowledgement of the discrepancy between reality and idealism, it gives the storyteller a way to fit in the middle ground as is seen through Hillary. Though the storyteller has served a mission and achieved that cultural spiritual status symbol, she will be the first to tell you she isn't perfect through the talking about the extra-spiritual person she never was but bringing up the prejudiced and *not* spiritually oriented person she perceived herself to be. She has obviously gone on a mission and casted off the prideful person who judged missionaries as misguided, self-righteous, desperate, etc. Nevertheless, she did not become that self-righteous missionary, and is currently not person who has become so holy that they are not aware of the stereotypes out there. Instead, this admission in her story is a way to grapple with the middle ground in which she currently lies, and realistically, in which almost all members of the church lie.

The admission of the preconceived stereotypes of missionaries in mission decision narratives also plays the role of relieving the past sins of ignorance through light-hearted speech and public admission to the audience. It's a way to laugh at oneself or marvel in one's own ignorance without the weight of guilt. Acknowledging that these factors were stumbling blocks for the storyteller but also that the storyteller was still able to do the right thing despite them comforts both

the storyteller and the audience. It is a way of visualizing the idea that perfection was not necessary then and therefore must not be necessary now for wherever the storyteller and audience might be their life cycle. This is particularly poignant given that sister missionaries are in fact put on pedestals at times, whether by others or the women contemplating taking on that role herself. This admission of contradiction in the mission decision narrative knocks down the pedestal of perfection without condemning the teller to metaphorical (or literal) hell.

In the case of Emma, it also is a way to acknowledge and attempt to better understand negative and even hurtful stereotypes of women in the church and one's own accidental participation in that culture. While two of the closest women in her life--her mother and her only sister--married at a young age, her way of discussing her stereotype of the sister missionary as having nothing better to do helps her break from the idea that women need to follow a certain path to be correct or normal. Talking about that stereotype plays the role of confession of sins, of misguided thinking. It places her past mythic self's idea of the mythic woman as a testament to change, both of the individual and the larger culture.

### **The Prodigal Daughter and Other Relatives**

In line with these stories functioning as a way for the teller to express her imperfections, the stories also function in what I would call the fifth function of folklore. William Bascom famously laid out four basic functions folklore fulfilled. In particular, he described that:

In the fourth place, folklore fulfills the important but often overlooked function of maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behavior. Although related to the last two functions, it deserves to be distinguished from them. More than simply serving to validate or justify institutions, beliefs and attitudes, some forms of folklore are important means of applying social pressure and exercising social control... it is also to be distinguished from the function of education, not simply because it continues throughout adult life, but because it is employed against individuals who attempt to deviate from social conventions with which they are fully familiar (1954, 346).

I believe that not only do mission decision stories not fit in with this fourth function of folklore, but they play an almost opposite role. They serve to showcase the woman's *nonconformity*, her uniqueness. Women tell these stories as a way to explain their place in a culture that could otherwise be seen as conforming. The telling of these stories is a way to stand out and be different. Rather than people just knowing that the woman served a mission, she chooses to tell *how* she decided as a way to say, "I didn't go on a mission just because. And here's my experience to show you I cared and that I thought about it." Then, within each woman's story, she can express her unique path to get to a conclusion that many others came to as well. The sharing of these stories is also a way to comfortably express differences of spiritual practice/differences in spiritual perception between women. The women don't have to justify their spiritual beliefs or testimonies in the church because of the proof of their having served a mission, and so the process to get to that decision becomes free reign in the way that it's told and the way that the individual made her choice. Nobody will doubt her commitment because the proof is in the action thereby allowing women to discuss differences in spiritual processes in a safe and non-confrontational way.

Tom Mould might disagree with my assessment that these stories play a fifth function of nonconformity as he expresses:

All LDS members are expected to receive personal revelation. Sharing one's experiences helps to confirm this membership. Further, receiving regular or continuous personal revelation can establish some degree of authority for the individual as a worthy member in the church. While anyone can receive personal revelation, only righteous members can expect to receive it regularly (2011, 62).

While I would agree that sharing revelatory experiences helps to confirm one's spiritual standing in the church, I would question the assumptions behind the second half of Mould's statement that says that "only righteous members" can receive revelation regularly. What of situations such as Hillary's or Natasha's, in which they were specifically not active in the church, and fairly aware

of their contradictory behavior with gospel teachings? (Or even of Emma who believed she wasn't "good enough" to be a sister missionary?) These stories serve a different purpose. The odds of two out of the seven women I interviewed starting off their journey as "less active" are fairly low, one would think. Perhaps that is what motivated these women in the first place to share their stories--they actually had a fairly climactic story to share. Certainly the difference from not participating in the church to deciding to serve a mission is a fairly dramatic one.

These "prodigal daughter" stories speak to an unspoken understanding of God's mercy. Though neither of the women specifically expressed this sentiment, their description of receiving revelation--without even a slight qualification based on their behavior or supposed mentality at the time--stands as a testament to the belief that God is "no respecter of persons." As surely as "being worthy" (again, not to be confused with inherent worth) is a precursor to the receiving of revelation is an accepted gospel doctrine, these stories go against this doctrine, and yet would not be rejected by members as somehow not possible or "non-doctrinal" (and I assure you that there are personal revelation narratives out there that *are* rejected by the majority as not doctrinal). It is narratives such as these that don't fit the mold and yet simultaneously do fit into a larger doctrinal scheme. Still further, when hearing these stories, members may take into account that this is the exception and not the norm. However, though Emma and Madison seemed to fit the mold of active and righteous church member even as they were trying to receive revelation about serving a mission, both still expressed that a great hindrance for them was the idea that they weren't good enough, didn't fit the mold of the sister missionary, or as Madison put it, thought at the time, "That would be so hard! I don't want to do that. That's way too hard and I don't know if I can do that!" and then later explained, "I feel like I didn't have enough confidence in myself that I could do it." These expressions of personal weakness and doubt are an important part of what

the mission decision narrative creates room for. And it isn't the revelation that changes these women into saints, or at the least women "worthy" of the missionary title. None of them truly addressed their change of behavior unless I specifically asked about it. Rather, it is simply having the mission experience that gives the women permission to both admit past flaws, and grapple with those flaws as they exist in the women's present lives. Emma admitted as much when she said, "Heavenly Father knows me super well because if he tells me what to do...it's a lot longer a process than if I just decide to do something." As the women tell these stories, they acknowledge their general disposition in receiving answers from God, and recognize and point out patterns for their lives rather than acknowledging some sort of core change in their personality that creates a different receptivity to God. Painting themselves as a prodigal daughter--one who used to have pride and then returned to their father (in this case their Heavenly Father)--puts them in an interesting position of humility. They have served missions and yet they seem to understand what it is like to have a rebellious or untamed attitude--towards God and even towards the church. I believe that the function this aspect of the mission decision story depends on the audience and context. In front of a larger group at church or to a younger boy or girl, it could serve as an example of conformity, as a way to express that rebellious attitudes are ok if you still serve a mission. Yet, that doesn't cover the entire function. These women told their stories just to me, a returned missionary as well who, for all intents and purposes as far as they knew, is extremely enthusiastic about missions (they knew it was the topic of my thesis, after all). Further, often these mission decision stories are told during the mission to fellow missionaries or afterwards among groups of returned missionaries comparing attitudes and experiences, or just to fellow adult members of the church in offhand conversations where trying to prove oneself spiritually can border on obnoxious. In these contexts, the stories serve as a way to find individuality

within an overall common narrative. Even more, they can serve as a way to *search out* differences. I believe this is particularly true when these stories are told in groups among women in the church. It serves as a way to create a distinct identity and also seek out nuanced forms of spiritual behavior.

### **The Many Oracles**

At some point during my interviews, I asked every woman about the reaction of her family to her decision. The importance of family is a key doctrine in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and plays an equally important role in the culture as well. Many mentioned the key role some of their family members played before I even asked. I was surprised to hear from two of the women the role deceased grandparents played in their decision making process. Chelsea's experience particularly involved the literal interaction with spiritual beings. Once she had the initial realization of needing to serve a mission, she describes:

After that I was kind of in shock because it was not really what I wanted to do but I knew that I needed to do it and that I needed to follow what I was being told, and so I left and went and parked by the temple and just, you know, pondered about it. And I had a really powerful experience and I just kind of knew and could feel those on the other side, like angels with me and encouraging me.... 'We're going to go with you and we're going to do this process with you' and so it was, it was a really neat experience and it kind of confirmed it again (2019).

Madison also received influence from grandparents. I asked, "How do you feel like you were guided [throughout] this situation? Like, it all worked out. How do you feel like you were able to see that and recognize that?" Madison responded saying,

I think I was guided not by me, cause that was a really hard thing to decide. It was others that influenced me, particularly grandparents were a big one that had already passed. So I believe that it was ancestors that really guided, that was a big guiding factor. I think my parents were super supportive and they were excited for me and I think just, it wasn't particularly all myself but it was other people that helped with that process. I think that was a big one.

I think asked her if she would mind sharing how she felt like her grandparents or ancestors helped her and she described,

Both of my grandparents, let's see, it was on my mom's side. They had served three missions so they served in all three missions they served in Africa so they served in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe--those were the main places that they served. And they were all about missionary work. Whether it be on their missions or off their missions, they were big advocates of it. And so I think that's what was a big factor also. Another thing also was my grandpa, he served in the same mission I did, in the 1940s and so I think he was a big influential factor in that, of where I got called. But also that he knew that there was other people that I needed to touch there. And I think that was just very defining moment.

She then clarified for me that these were grandparents that had passed away and that though she had known about their missions in Africa as senior missionaries, she didn't know about their missions before their marriage as single individuals. She told of another special experience involving her grandparents when she received her mission call to the Texas Houston mission.

So my grandma served in Tennessee, my grandpa served in Texas Houston, it was bigger then. But I didn't know about that. So my aunt, as soon as I said where I was going, she just immediately burst into tears and was like, "Wow, that's your grandpa's mission!" I said, "What?!" So I didn't know about that legacy but I knew about their previous, their African missions that they did (2019).

Both of these stories speak to the idea that serving a mission plays a role in the greater scheme of eternity. This grounds the mission decision story as key in the context of not just a part of the storyteller's life, but as a key aspect of their whole life and--as is implied--the lives of untold others. This creates the understandable amount of pressure that women feel about serving missions, as they believe it as not simply a decision of how to spend their time for 18 months, but as something that has reverberating effects. This also gives them a fair amount of power to create that lasting spiritual legacy in their family on an eternal scale. The decision to serve a mission then allows women power in ways that other situations do not allow them. Even other decisions

viewed as eternally impactful such as marriage and if and when to have children are more out of their control than the choice to go on a mission.

Being able to interact with non-living relatives also makes these women a sort of medium, and the ability to spiritually internalize the words and sentiments of family members and friends both living and dead is a sort of act of spiritual power. The women don't simply hear the words and accept. Some words affect them more strongly than others and this allows the women to give power to the people in their lives, creating spiritual oracles out of some and others simply giving words of wisdom.

This symbol of oracle continues the imagery of the mission decision as inverse quest. Patricia Sawin in her studies on adoption stories notes the importance of individuals whose words lead the way for others. She explained, "A particularly effective and distinctive feature of these adoption stories is the prominence of remarks that turn out to be oracular, that is, highly significant, unexpected statements that require the parent-in-waiting to tune in to what is truly important or that even accomplish a ritual transformation" (2017, 404). Both these descriptions apply greatly to women trying to decide if they should serve missions. In some cases, these women were desperately seeking advice and one of their family members or influential leaders was able to fill the role of wisdom-giver. However, interestingly sometimes these women were not consciously seeking new direction when the oracular wisdom suddenly called attention to a new path they could take.

Interestingly, in many of the stories, it was non-family members that played the role of oracle, or person whose almost prophetic words helped lead the young woman on the right path.

Hillary Place described:

I had this friend who had just come home for like the fall break or something and she was like the stalwart of the two of us, you know she was just that, I don't know how you

would say, I don't want to say "Molly Mormon" because she wasn't like oblivious and naive. But she was just such a good person that I was like, "oh my gosh, I wanna be just like you but I can't because I suck [laughs]." And so Rene is her name, she comes up to me and she's like, "hey are you ok" and I'm like, "no, not really" and I like started to cry and it was just a big mess and I was like a big blubbering idiot and she, I think I can't remember if she had come back from her mission or not, I can't remember when she left and then when I left, but she had been called to serve in a mission in the Donetsk, Ukraine mission and she was like, "You know, when I, I don't know why I feel so strongly about this, but I just need to tell you, when I was watching General Conference and they announced the age change, the first name that popped into my head was yours--not mine, it was yours." And I was like, "No..." [laughs] because I have always been that girl in Young Women's and in primary who was like "I'm not serving a mission, it's stupid, missions are stupid, like I'm not gonna go, I'm not going to waste a year, 18 months of my life talking to people I don't know. I hate people! I hate the unwashed masses!"--I still do--[laughs] and I was like "Fine whatever!" so I was like, "Thanks Renee, that didn't really help" (2019).

Hillary's story of her friend was the most pointed non-family influence of the interviews, but Emma, Natasha, and Chelsea also spoke of non-family members that played fairly key roles in their stories'. For Emma, it was a roommate who she would never had thought would have decided to serve a mission but did, which led Emma to thinking about the possibility for herself. For Natasha, she was first asked by her bishop about serving a mission, which sent off sirens in her mind, alerting her to the possibility. Later, she received approval from her commanding naval officer--also a member of the church but who had never given her support about anything in the past. This made her choice easier and clearer. Chelsea also discussed the role of her bishop and a blessing he gave her that helped her feel in her heart that it was time for her to serve a mission. As the women reflected on who had helped them in their journey to make this eternally important decision, they exalted others as key oracles but simultaneously exalted themselves to a higher position because of the interconnectedness that necessitated this connection. These figures were not one or two time appearance makers that came to give words of wisdom and then vanish literally or figuratively from their lives. Rather each of these oracles--even the bishops, other leaders, and wise ancestral family members--were considered friends by these women. They

viewed them not as above but as next to as they fit into the narrative structure. Their use of these figures was in pointing out the interconnectedness of their personal spiritual existence, in revealing in wonder and appreciation that someone so *normal* in their life could have such an effect. If these regular people could have such a lasting and important spiritual role in these women's lives, the implication is then that they can play that role in return in someone else's life. Interconnectivity cannot exist without a sense of equality and reciprocity. Though through speech the women exalt others, they also speak to their own power, even as it exists in future possibilities.

### **Trial, Trauma, and Reclamation**

A less obvious use of telling the mission decision story is as a way to deal with and reframe trauma, hardship, and unmet expectations. Missions, being the enigma that they are, are hard to describe and even harder to understand. Madison described it well when I asked, "Do you feel like you knew before your mission like you had any idea of what was to come?" She replied,

No [laughs]. No way! You can't describe it. You can tell people about things in your mission or you can give them advice before they go but you honestly can't say what it's really like. Cause it's so different for each and every person. I would say no, I had no idea what was coming at me for sure (2019).

Even in my desire to help my academic audience understand why trauma and hardship would be such a relevant element in a mission experience and therefore in any narrative thereafter, I find myself wanting to avoid giving possible explanations that may be off base for a large amount of missionaries and their experiences, similarly to how life experiences and tragedies can differ so greatly from person to person, as Madison notes as well. Shuman talks of collective suffering and tragedy in a way that might shed light on the reason for similar patterns in returned missionaries' descriptions of adversity. She says:

Kai Erikson's *Everything in Its Path* (1976) and his later discussions of that work (in Caruth, 1995 ) provide an example of a collective narrative in which the similarity of tellers' stories prompted outsiders to question the tellers' credibility. Erikson was hired by an

insurance company to find out why all of the people who were victims of a flood in West Virginia seemed to be telling the same story about what happened to them. Surely, thought the insurance company, they couldn't have all had the exact same experience, suffered in the exact same way (2010, 56).

When returned missionaries tell their stories, they almost always speak of hardship, usually in fairly generic terms. It is not usually much more than, as Krista described, "I mean, every missionary, every returned missionary will tell you that the mission was hard, and it is in its own ways." To explain this seeming enigmatic simplification, Shuman continues, "In their efforts to create a coherent picture that makes sense of the fragments of experience, narrators sometimes overlay their experiences on a familiar or available structure" (2010, 56). I believe that not only is this true, but that returned missionaries, in order to avoid straying from their original mission decision narrative's purpose, avoid going into personalized details about these hardships unless they specifically relate to their decision making experience, such as when Emma described that her decision, and the poignancy of that experience of knowing her decision was right, helped her overcome these hardships. In this way, though mission decision narratives could arguably be seen as a way to overlook or push hardship and trauma under the rug, I believe they are also a way for their tellers to claim triumph over these difficulties. The teller is able to see and acknowledge their past hardships but is able to allow those experiences to not play a main role in what the teller feels is a positive story. The mission decision narrative is a positive story and a way to reconfigure past negative experiences to fit into a faith affirming narrative. Though the individual may not be fully recovered from the residue left by the difficulties of their mission, being able to look at deciding to go on a mission as a guided and enlightened experience helps to frame all other resulting experiences in a better light.

Emma expressed that her mission decision narrative was what helped her live through hard experiences at the time. Emma described that the ultimate way she knew she was supposed

to serve a mission was through answer to a specific prayer. When I asked her about it further, she said:

Well I think that without that prayer, I wouldn't have gone on a mission. I mean, that specific prayer led me to that confirmation to go and if I didn't have that confirmation, I would not have gone. And...there's like, a reason you go on a mission and there's a reason you stay. And that confirmation was honestly both for me because it got me on my mission because I knew I needed to go but it also kept me on my mission during those hard times because I knew I needed to be there. And no matter what was going on at home, good or bad, I knew that there was no other place that Heavenly Father rather wanted me to be. He needed me on that mission and I knew that, and so that was like the biggest role. Just that one prayer. And I never doubted that confirmation. I mean, sometimes you get revelation and then you think, 'Oh, *was* that revelation?' but then in reality, it always is. But for that confirmation I never doubted, I always knew.

I then asked, "Did you...did that come up a lot on your mission? Like, how often did you think about, 'I made this decision'?" [both laugh]" And Emma quickly rejoined,

Almost every day. [laughs] Because seriously, you know, you'd be tracking or like an appointment would fall through and it's like, man, why am I here? Or you'd get sick and it be like, 'Man, if were home, I could just lay in my bed...' But almost like every day, I'd think about how it was *my* choice to serve and Heavenly Father consecrated that choice and he consecrated my efforts on being there. And it also came up with other missionaries as well caused they ask, you know, 'Oh how'd you decide to serve?' and some people would have an answer and others would be like, 'Oh I just wanted to' and I would think about my own confirmation and think about how, man, if I didn't have that confirmation, I couldn't do it. Like, I don't know how these other missionaries are doing it! Um, but it was definitely key to my mission for sure (2019).

We can see here that Emma used her experience in making her decision to reaffirm that decision on a frequent basis. Emma also points out how prevalent the role of the mission decision story plays in mission culture--to reaffirm one's own decision and to unite others in narrative form despite differences of process. The missionaries can bond over the understanding that they are where they are supposed to be even as they are unsure of what they are doing. At the very least, the mission decision story can serve as a reminder of one's faith and if discussed in more detailed terms, can be a way of re-examining one's origin story through a positive and safe lens.

Instead of either brushing the emotional trauma and negative experiences from the mission under the rug or conversely facing them head on through speaking of them directly, when women talk about how they decided to serve a mission, it is a way to bring them self to terms with their pre-mission innocence and their current, more experienced self. The women I spoke with still had a belief that their decision to serve a mission was the right choice and was guided by God but they also understood the difficulties they went through because of that decision and so describing the positive elements of their decision making process was not done in a vacuum, without knowledge of the realities of their choices. Though it is beyond the description of this thesis, I believe it would be worthy of academic research to see the ways in which the mission decision narrative changes over time as these women become more distanced from their missions and their original experiences and as they see their past through changing lenses.

### **Conclusion**

After William Wilson shared with Elaine Lawless's students his conference paper based on his personal discovery about the importance of the smaller, meaningful everyday Latter-day Saint experiences such as giving Sister Vasenius a blessing and hearing the healing conversion story of a former alcoholic man, he received to some what may have seemed like fairly innocuous feedback. Wilson describes an interesting picture of the students' comments, however. He describes:

Lawless's summary of student comments on my narrative continued: 'Basically, what you had was a warm fuzzy feeling which told you you were comfortable with being a Mormon--and that warm fuzzy feeling, they thought is personal religious internal but not folklore.' Now there's a novel idea--that religion might actually make someone feel good. I wonder if the seminar ever thought of setting its preconceptions aside for a moment and considered that achieving that warm fuzzy feeling might be a central cultural imperative for Mormons and that narratives about the acts of love and compassion necessary to bring this feeling to pass, however dull and uneventful they seem to outsiders, might be infinitely more memorable to Mormons than dramatic tales of the supernatural and might indeed endure long after the supernatural stories have faded from memory. (1995, 18-19)

It is in this spirit of passion about the fairly normal revelation-seeking processes that consume the Latter-day Saint heart and mind, and embody what it means for them to belong to this group on which I wish to end my thesis. Truly, these mission decision narratives are a “central cultural imperative” for women and men. They are a way in which women exercise their agency and engage in the wrestle that will very likely define their revelation seeking patterns from thereafter, their relationship with deity, their identity within the church, and their entire lives in unforeseeable ways.

We currently live in a fairly patriarchal world, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints fits within this paradigm. However, understanding the stories that women who identify themselves with this group tell both within and outside of church contexts can better help us to see who these women say they are and who these women feel they are inside and outside of formal church structures. What processes do women follow when they have no official process to follow? Who do they talk to and what do they speak of when there is no official prescription for how to be correctly spiritual? There is still an endless library of stories to be collected from women within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but this collection of stories that play a most vital role in not only their lives but in affecting church culture is a place to start. As I’ve worked on this project, I’ve told many women in the church about my plans and ideas and it has sparked all of their interest and excitement--even (and sometimes especially) those who did not serve missions, whose time was before the age change, who have seen church culture change and develop as more women missionaries enter the mission field. As I spoke with one woman named Heidi about the way this age change is affecting women and the church, she said, “In fifty years, we’ll have a totally different church.” In the context she was speaking, I knew she wasn’t talking about a doctrinally different church, but rather one in which the spiritual identity of

women in the church as completely changed and therefore the culture and leadership of the church has completely changed. Though this threatens to leave an even greater gap for women who choose not to serve missions, I believe the empowerment women gain by serving missions will spread to all women, as we see women taking for themselves leadership roles they didn't know they could have previously.

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