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From Other to Brother: The Transformation of Otherness in the LDS Missionary Experience

Michael H. Clifton¹

Most people have at least peripheral knowledge of missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church). In almost every country around the world, they are seen travelling (often by bicycle) two by two, young men or young women dressed in modest, businesslike clothing, with bright smiles and black name tags announcing them as Elder or Sister so-and-so from the Church.

The missionary program of the LDS Church began early in its history and has become more formalized and expansive over the years. Initially, there were no restrictions for service related to age or circumstances. Early LDS Church apostles commonly served missions overseas for several years despite leaving wives and children behind in what were often trying situations. Some were middle-aged; others were very young. Joseph F. Smith, who was later to become the fifth successor to the Church's founder – his uncle and namesake, Joseph Smith, Jr. – famously served a mission to Hawai'i at the age of fifteen. Nowadays, middle-aged men and younger teenaged boys would not be allowed to serve the Church in this capacity.

Today's typical LDS missionary is an unmarried man aged eighteen to twenty-five or an unmarried woman aged nineteen or more. He or she undergoes interviews to assess personal character, moral worthiness, and basic doctrinal understanding, and submits a written application to the Church to become a full-time missionary for a period of eighteen to twenty-four months on a fully volunteer basis (missionaries or their parents, or sometimes other Church members, provide a monthly fee to maintain them with a basic home and necessities). Missionaries wait for a written notice of acceptance from the Church, which also then discloses the country and language in which they will serve.

Note especially this last point: *missionaries do not choose the nations or languages in which they serve*. For the vast majority, such service will take them far from home – it is intentional in the program to do so – regardless of their former experience or education. For example, in 1985 I was sent from Toronto to the Japan Sendai Mission, which then covered all of the Tohoku region of Japan. Yet so ignorant was I of the world at the time this call was received that I announced to my friends and family, “I got called to Shanghai, Japan!”

Such ignorance prior to serving a mission might not be entirely common, but it is not unheard of. More typical, however, is the transformative experience that happens to the missionary during the mission, and the manner in which what once was “other,” strange, and unknown becomes familiar and foundational.

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If you thrust a young person into an environment far from home, into a culture they haven't known, into a place where the language, clothing, customs, and common perspectives on life might differ widely from wherever *home* is, it seems inevitable that this youngster will discover something. Initially, what they most likely find is the strange otherness of their new surroundings, but ultimately they may uncover something more, something *same*, something that brings about a closeness to and unity with what once was strange. While this can't be said to be the experience of every young LDS missionary, it does appear to be the common experience of most of them, and certainly was mine.

Over the past thirty-three years, I have known, observed, and spoken with many missionaries and former missionaries of the Church. Generally speaking, the thoughts and feelings they express indicate a common set of intercultural and interpersonal experiences that help them to begin to “see through the eyes of the other” in ways that are long-lasting and life-changing.

There is also some academic work that supports these observations. For example, Karina Marie Gathu explored this topic in her master's thesis *Exploring LDS Missionary Blogs: How Culture Manifests in Self-Narratives of Foreign Missionaries*.² Although Gathu notes that the impact of the missionary experience is not identical for all of the young people who undertake it, “The majority seemed to come away with a changed, or enlarged identity.” Adapting Margaret J. Pitts's observations of exchange students in similar situations,³ she further notes that most of those for whom the mission experience involved working in entirely foreign lands and cultures “became bicultural or [at least] appreciated the country they were in and the new culture they were exposed to.” Her academic observations and my anecdotal ones indicate that only rarely does an LDS missionary not experience the encounter with the other in a positive, transforming way.

Of course, some have a negative experience of the otherness of the culture and people they are called to serve. Typically, this does not manifest as a rejection of the other – bigotry or bias – but in that state of anxiety or discomfort that could be called “homesickness.”

Homesickness is not an uncommon experience for anyone who is required to live far from family, friends, and familiar surroundings. Shirley Fisher, Keith Murray, and Norman A. Frazer noted that 60 percent of the first-year university students reviewed in their study experienced homesickness.⁴ Even a brief internet search for *homesickness lds missionaries* will produce numerous results that suggest how typical this experience is.

However, for the most part LDS Church missionaries' homesickness appears to be temporary and can actually become an essential stage in the transformative, enlarging experience of the mission. For example, LDS blogger Daren Smith suggests in an entry entitled “Advice for a Homesick Elder” that by applying the Stoic principle of “the obstacle is the way,” the homesick LDS missionary can “lean into” those feelings as a means of developing deeper empathy and understanding for the feelings of others, such as those who

² Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 2015, retrieved from <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/5690>

³ Margaret J. Pitts, “Identity and the Role of Expectations, Stress, and Talk in Short-Term Student Sojourner Adjustment: An Application of the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 33 (2009): 450–62, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.07.002>

⁴ Shirley Fisher, Keith Murray, and Norman A. Frazer. “Homesickness, Health and Efficiency in First Year Students,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 5, no. 2 (1984): 181–95, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944\(85\)80016-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(85)80016-5)

have experienced the loss of a loved one or even just one's fellow missionaries who might be experiencing the same or similar anxieties.⁵

As homesickness was never my experience, I cannot speak personally to Smith's suggestion, but I recognize in it a pattern of thought that is typical within the LDS community at large and among its missionaries. This pattern involves two simple principles. The first is that every negative may become a positive – in a popular quotation from *The Book of Mormon* (a key volume of LDS scripture from which the popular nickname *Mormon* for LDS Church members is derived), the Lord states that he will “make weak things become strong unto them.”⁶ Second, every experience should be assessed through the lens of one's consciously accepted principles or convictions, in order to determine the appropriate reaction to it.

This second principle is probably a significant cause of the usually positive effects on LDS missionaries of their encounters with the other. By and large, the principles that have the greatest influence on the ways they process experiences are those embodied in the fundamental doctrines of the Church that they are required to study and teach, and in which they generally sincerely believe.

One particularly critical doctrine that many missionaries cite as having influence on them is the idea that every human being is an equally loved and equally literal son or daughter of God. The concept that all people are God's children is not unique to the LDS faith, but LDS teachings on this subject may be among the most literal. As observed in the Church's article “Becoming like God,”

Latter-day Saints see all people as children of God in a full and complete sense; they consider every person divine in origin, nature, and potential. Each has an eternal core and is “a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents.” Each possesses seeds of divinity and must choose whether to live in harmony or tension with that divinity. Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, all people may “progress toward perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny.” Just as a child can develop the attributes of his or her parents over time, the divine nature that humans inherit can be developed to become like their Heavenly Father's.⁷

As a young LDS missionary leaves the comfort of familiarity and enters the “mission field” in a foreign land – even if it only as “foreign” as between Pocatello, Idaho, and Albany, New York – his or her notion of what is “normal,” even within the context of Church culture, is challenged. But if he or she maintains a sincere conviction that all people, in whatever place, race, religion, culture, or condition they might be, are loved children of God, that each person has the potential to realize the godly nature within himself or herself, then that missionary is far more likely to look beyond such differences and focus on the core commonalities that all people share.

My wife – a South Korean who first immigrated to Canada with her family and then was called to serve as a missionary in and around Chicago – shared these thoughts with me when I told her about the topic of this essay:

⁵ A surprisingly large number of LDS Church members – both active, faithful ones and disaffected and “anti” types – are active bloggers. Their community, as it were, is sometimes referred to as the “bloggernacle,” a play on the term *tabernacle*. The entry cited can be found at <http://darentsmith.com/homesick/>

⁶ Ether 12:27.

⁷ <https://www.lds.org/topics/becoming-like-god?lang=eng>

Anyone, especially young people, see through the lenses of what you are accustomed to, but then you open your eyes through the gospel, and you really see people as the children of God, that all are precious, all are the same, with the same concerns and joys, the same desires for their children. We all want to be able to find true happiness.⁸

I suggested above that missionaries “maintain” this conviction, but despite likely being taught this doctrinal principle from early childhood (or at least from the time they chose to join the Church), not all LDS missionaries have truly internalized this understanding at the time their missionary service begins. They know the form of the words, but the substantial meaning might never have fully sunk in. It is one of the gifts of the mission experience that when finally forced into real and personal encounters with others in the mission field, most start almost immediately to realize what it means and how it applies.

Familiar and Foreign

As a missionary serving in northern Japan, I was very much thrust into what for me was a new world. There were familiar things – buildings, cars, trains, trees, roads, people – but their familiarity was often like that of Platonic forms, as each was also in some ways different from what I was used to. In addition, there were different customs, rules, etiquette, and other considerations – and of course there was language. I will come back to that one.

Although I was obviously ignorant about the distinctions between Chinese and Japanese city names, I was not entirely without experience of the other, including Japanese people, having grown up in highly multicultural areas of Toronto. In addition to the Indian, Pakistani, Guyanese, Czech, Italian, Greek, and other nationalities represented in my circles of friends growing up, a friend whose home I was at many times during my early childhood was Japanese, as was one of the popular girls in our high school whom everyone liked. Nevertheless, as I look back I recognize that I (unconsciously) carried assumptions or expectations into the mission field that were based not on racial differences but on cultural ones. I expected, and found, Japanese culture to be significantly different from the one in which I had grown up, so that despite my experiences with Japanese people in Canada, my expectations about those who lived in Japan were different.

This unconscious ignorance led me to occasionally experience what was almost a sense of detachment regarding them. I would assess people’s words and conduct on the basis of my unconscious presumptions, and as a result I sometimes incorrectly interpreted what should have been recognizable to me as usual human behaviours and intentions. Thus, I was sometimes relatively blind to kindness, flirtatiousness, humour, and even insults that were directed towards me or other missionaries.

Conversely, there were occasionally behaviours or concepts that were truly so foreign to me that I had neither expectations nor experience to rely on. Interestingly, it was in these situations that my mind or heart would appeal most immediately to my understanding of core or common human nature to assess what was happening and determine how to proceed. One case that I think represents this was a very sensitive and special experience for me. It constituted the first time (there were others) that I was aware of what I believe was divine intervention on my mission.

⁸ Private conversation with Marhee (nee Park) Clifton, March 28, 2018.

I had been in Japan only a short while. My missionary companion and I had been teaching a young woman – although most of the time I was relatively silent, still not having mastered even the bare language skills in which I had received a month’s training in the Missionary Training Center (MTC) in Provo, Utah.⁹ One evening the phone rang. My companion must not have been available and, of course, I had the necessity of being brave. I answered the phone.

Moshi, moshi, I said, *Morumon Kyoukai no senkyoushi desu*. “Hello, you have reached the Mormon Church missionaries” – one of the few sentences securely retained from my MTC training.

The soft, trembling voice on the other end was the young woman we were teaching. I recognized her name and voice, and could tell that she was distraught and needed to talk. Panicking a little, I prayed fervently that I would be able to understand and help her. What I learned as she spoke was shocking to me.

The young woman had been proposed to by a young man. This was not the shocking part. She refused him. This was also not shocking. Then she explained that he had, as a result, killed himself, and now this woman’s friends were persuading her that, because he did, she must do the same.

This was a part of Japanese culture for which I was wholly unprepared. The Wikipedia article “Suicide in Japan” notes, “The general attitude toward suicide [in Japan] has been termed ‘tolerant,’ and in many occasions suicide is seen as a morally responsible action.”¹⁰ While Wikipedia is far from the most reliable of references, this statement is representative of what I began to learn in that moment, and later confirmed through many conversations and studies of Japanese culture, society, and psychology:

At the time, with no reference point for this revelation, I had no knowledge of how to give comfort and guidance to this frightened and emotional young woman. I learned then that sometimes *the other* seems truly *so other* that we have no immediate sense of how to relate or what to do. In this case, I did what any LDS missionary worth his salt would do: I prayed to the God who I knew with conviction was both her father and mine, and who I believed knew how to help her.

I honestly have no idea what I said next. I forgot the words almost as soon as they were said. Some sentences in Japanese poured out of my mouth – recognizably (this much I think I recall) using terminology I had studied and had available in my mind to draw upon. But as to exactly what statements I made, or how in the world, at that very early stage of my learning the Japanese language, I managed to construct them, I can find only one explanation: that old Christian go-to, the gift of tongues.¹¹

Whether or not that is a credible explanation to anyone other than me is irrelevant. The experience affirmed that I was able to witness an expression of the universality of God’s love for His children; that He clearly cared enough about her to use me in that instant to

⁹ The MTC in Utah, which provides training for most missionaries called from the United States and Canada, includes an intensive language training course that is the equivalent of about one month’s study before the missionary departs. The missionary is expected to commit time to language study each day during the balance of the mission, to help improve his or her ability to teach.

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suicide_in_Japan#Cultural_attitude_toward_suicide

¹¹ The contemporary LDS view of the Gift of Tongues is not identical to the view of other Christian groups. Although not a publication by the Church, this blog contains an accurate outline of the contemporary LDS view: <https://ldsblogs.com/9576/mormon-q-and-a-do-mormons-speak-in-tongues>

provide whatever words she needed to save her from the destructive path her friends were encouraging. It also affirmed that, at heart, every human being, regardless of cultural influences and upbringing, wants life, peace, happiness and, ultimately, to do the truly right thing. She was in conflict because of competition between these natural human desires, and was asking what she should do. Whatever I told her, she was calmed, clearly felt happier and brighter, and she bravely continued to live.

This story also illustrates one reason that it can be important for LDS missionaries to study well the languages they have to use: they never know how serious a situation might be and when the ability to express complex and comprehensive thoughts might be critical for the well-being of another person. Over and above that practical purpose, language is also a critically important gateway for obtaining understanding of the other. By this I don't mean merely sharing words and grammar. Having been married now for nearly thirty years, I am assured that the mere fact that two people are using the same words and grammar does not always mean they are saying the same things.

One of the interesting effects of learning Japanese while serving my mission in Japan was noting how my thinking would subtly change, and how sometimes there was an emotion, experience, or idea that only an expression in Japanese could truly capture. I began to realize then (and have found supported through my later studies in philosophy and law) how language doesn't merely express thought but can shape it, giving us tools to *have* thoughts we might not otherwise have, or at least not be able to access and process, let alone articulate. How especially important, therefore, knowing another's language is for understanding his or her mode of thinking.

I noted in my mission, and through observing others, that as LDS missionaries diligently study the language of their mission – which can include diligent study of their native tongue, if serving in a mission where that is spoken – they will become not only more expert communicators but also more excellent listeners, and develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for the thoughts and feelings of the people they have been called to serve.

There is another kind of encounter with otherness that came a surprise for me during my mission, and speaks in some way to Gathu's observations about some missionaries experiencing an "enlarged" or "bicultural" identity. That is, they not only come to appreciate the other, but in a sense *become* the other.

I recall waking up one morning while serving in the city of Izumi (a suburb of Sendai), and upon facing myself in the mirror to shave, feeling a wave of shock at the "discovery" that I was not Japanese. I had begun to so identify with the people, the others, around me, that I had, essentially, "forgotten" for a moment that I was not (based on biology and history) one of them. Another missionary who served in the same mission as me, but many years later, shared a similar story:

My first comp [missionary companion] was American, but every comp after that was Japanese. I'm blonde, and over a year and a half got very used to Japanese people pointing and yelling "Kinpatsu da!" [Hey, you're blonde!] So, one morning toward the end of my mission, I staggered into the bathroom first thing in the morning, and my first thought when I looked in the mirror was "Waaa – kinpatsu da!"¹²

¹² Lee Ann Layton Setzer, in a private message over Facebook, March 24, 2018.

It would not surprise me if this mode of identifying with the other is not an uncommon experience for many in minority immigrant groups. Gathu cites sources that suggest as much. My wife, who has lived in Canada for over thirty years, regularly makes comments along the lines of “I look so Asian,” after looking at herself in the mirror in the mornings, as if this should be some sort of revelation or surprise. (She also sometimes jokingly reminds me that I am white. It is not said with any tone of admiration.)

This sort of re-identification of one’s self might speak to both positive and negative aspects of immigrant and minority experiences. At worst, it might speak to embarrassment about the native culture in favour of the adopted one in order to gain otherwise inaccessible acceptance. However, in the context of the LDS missionary experience, my impression is that this is the result of having positively embraced the new culture and people where one is called to serve, so that the general sense of otherness all but entirely evaporates in favour of primary recognition of our shared humanity.

In *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, Professor Tu Wei-ming writes that, for the Confucian, to be fully human “is to learn to be sensitive to an ever-expanding network of relationships” that define (or, rather, expand) the self. Ultimately, he writes, we must overcome not only egoism but also “nepotism ... parochialism, ethnocentrism, and chauvinistic nationalism,” so that our concept of ourselves should increasingly embrace and include others, admitting no substantive division and no barrier to the full expression of empathy.¹³ While the Confucian ideals Professor Tu expresses might not mean exactly the same thing as the embrace of others that the experiences of some LDS missionaries represents, what he writes is not far removed from fundamental LDS beliefs about the purpose and potential of the human capacity for love.

In a moving scene in *The Pearl of Great Price*, a collection of works compiled, written or translated by Joseph Smith, Jr., and considered scripture by LDS Church members, the prophet Enoch is caught up in a vision in which he converses with God and sees God and the angels weeping over humanity. Enoch asks, “How is it thou canst weep?” The Lord then recounts the wickedness that causes human suffering and declares, “Wherefore, for this shall the heavens weep, yea, and all the workmanship of mine hands.” Then the story continues:

And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto Enoch, and told Enoch all the doings of the children of men; wherefore Enoch knew, and looked upon their wickedness, and their misery, and wept and stretched forth his arms, and his heart swelled wide as eternity; and his bowels yearned; and all eternity shook.¹⁴

The expression “his heart swelled wide as eternity” has always brought to my mind Professor Tu’s image of ever-expanding circles of concern, the ever-expanding notion of self that ultimately incorporates all others and represents for me at least part of what St. Paul means when he speaks of faithful saints being potentially “heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.”¹⁵ The experiences I and other missionaries have had of encountering others and

¹³ Tu Wei-ming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 175–76.

¹⁴ Moses 7:30, 7:40, 7:41 in *The Pearl of Great Price*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, online edition, retrieved from <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/pgp/moses/7.41>

¹⁵ Romans 8:17 (KJV).

learning to embrace others' otherness and even incorporate it into our self-understanding and identity is perhaps a small step on that sacred path.

The Precious Conversion

It is possible that when you started reading this essay – in particular, when you read its title “From Other to Brother” – you might have thought that this would be an essay about conversion, about how LDS missionaries bring *others* into the fold of the Church, causing them to become *brothers* and *sisters* (the terms by which members of the Church call one another, as is the practice in many other Christian churches and faith groups).

In fact, it *is* about conversion, but the conversion in question is that of the missionary himself or herself, from an inexperienced and narrow view of self and others to a more mature, broader and often life-changing understanding of the literal divine kinship of all people, which ultimately overcomes perceptions of more superficial traits such as race, culture, or even religion.

“Religion” might seem anomalous in that list. After all, isn’t the goal of the LDS missionary to bring others into the Church? In fact, although all LDS missionaries hope to help guide any number of individuals towards faith in Christ and membership in the LDS Church, they are frequently told, as the LDS apostle Jeffrey R. Holland once said, “Missionaries are under obligation to come home having had at least one convert, you! There is no excuse in time or eternity for you not to have that one precious conversion.”¹⁶

In other words, most LDS Church members recognize that a young person’s mission is, in addition to being an opportunity to share the gospel we believe in with others, primarily meant to be a maturing experience that deepens the missionary’s own faith, character, and understanding, regardless of how many, or whether any, of the people he or she teaches ultimately joins the Church.

This perspective on missionary work doesn’t ultimately cause missionaries to become either solipsistic or narcissistic about their role or experience. Rather, it seems to free them to see those others whom they encounter as something more than simply the target audience of a religious marketing campaign. As a result, most LDS missionaries appear to return from their missions having developed both respect and deep affection for the nations and people they encountered, regardless of the reception the missionary received.

In my experience, not only do LDS missionaries often develop friendly and meaningful relationships with people who never join the Church, but they also often develop real respect for the religions of other people. During our mission, we visited Shinto Shrines to pray at New Year’s, climbed mountains to watch the sunrise as the Japanese traditionally do, and spent thoughtful times visiting Buddhist monasteries. Although we believe that we have something more to offer them, the LDS Church views other religions not in a derogatory manner but as expressions of people’s natural desire and efforts to discover God and to realize His love and grace in their families and societies. Furthermore, there is no deliberate pressure for anyone joining the LDS Church – definitively an “American religion” in terms of its origin – to become either Americanized or Westernized. The goal of LDS missionary work is not colonization of any culture as such.

¹⁶ R. Scott Lloyd, “Elder Holland Tells Missionaries to ‘Invest’ in the Work,” *Church News*, January 24, 2013, retrieved from <https://www.lds.org/church/news/elder-holland-tells-missionaries-to-invest-in-the-work>

These thoughts are echoed somewhat in comments shared with me by Arnold Stonebrink, another former missionary from the Japan Sendai Mission with whom I was able to communicate while preparing this essay:

During my mission, I thought about how my religion taught that happiness is found through Christ, and how it might reconcile with a people who were largely without Christ, but yet were good, and were happy in general. A wonderful admonition was given by President Gordon B. Hinckley when he stated, “We say to the people, in effect, you bring with you all the good that you have, and then let us see if we can add to it.” Although he stated this well after my mission, that was still my mantra, to offer unto the Japanese people something that would add even more happiness, knowledge, and assurance to their lives.

I loved the people, the culture, the food, the land – virtually everything about Japan. I even loved the language, although its difficulty and my lack of mastery of it led to more than one embarrassing occasion. I was taken by the politeness and the respect of the Japanese people. I would dare say that even as we labored to offer the Japanese something that could add to their lives, we would well be wise to add to our own lives the Japanese values concerning respect and honor.¹⁷

Learning to learn from and learning to love others are two of the most common themes in LDS missionary recollections. I learned, for example, from the kindly generosity and thoughtfulness of an older couple in Izumi who fed us fine meals weekly, and even once, without any request from me and long after I had moved to a new location, sent me a little cash during a particularly difficult time when funds from Canada were not arriving (they had no idea this was going on, but somehow felt inspired to send that gift). I learned about gentleness, patience, and poetry from the ancient-seeming *Tanka* writer Okudera Obaasan, with whom we spent many hours in contemplative conversation. I learned about enthusiasm for history and passion for the deeper aspects of Japanese culture from young Onuma Satoko in Morioka.

None of these people ever joined the Church; yet they are part of the heartbeat of my memories from my time in Japan, and I do feel that I love them and what they represent about the people of Japan generally.

Love and heartbeat are appropriate words here, and deliberately chosen. I mentioned the homesickness some missionaries feel when they first enter into the mission field. I suspect that such anxiety that often arises from childish inexperience might pale compared with the “homesickness” missionaries who have returned home often feel for the places where and people whom they served.

For decades after returning to Canada from Japan, I dreamt of returning to it. I wrote for Japanese Canadian newspapers and attended the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto. I even imagined, for a while, becoming a character like Lafcadio Hearn, who entered, adapted to, and became a critical part of Japanese history and culture, and whose story and writings left an indelible impression on me.¹⁸ Circumstances have never allowed that to happen, and I am by no means disappointed with the eventual path my life has taken. But I

¹⁷ Arnold Stonebrink, in a private conversation over Facebook, March 24, 2018.

¹⁸ A brief but fair introduction to the inimitable Hearn can be found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lafcadio_Hearn

only stopped dreaming regularly about returning to Japan a few years ago; and as the writing of this essay might suggest, my desire to maintain my identification and connection with it and its people hasn't waned.