

Texas Snake Stories and the Validity of Dolby's 'Personal Narrative' as a Folk Narrative Genre

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For years in folklore studies, folk narrative was divided into three distinct categories: myth, legend, and folktale. William Bascom's 1965 article, "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narrative" had the clear purpose of setting out to classify and define these three categories as they had already come to be used by scholars. He began with the premise that the overall class was prose narrative, with the subcategories of myth, legend, and folktale. Myth was defined as a sacred story, set in the primordial past, with nonhuman or superhuman characters, to explain how the earth came into being. For example, stories about Greek gods are mythical. Legend was a story which was presented as factual, in today's world, in the recent or historical past. Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi later refined this definition to show that: legends are stories set in the real world and might or might not be believed to be true; a remark about the legend's truth or untruth is often inserted at the beginning of the story, signaling a debate about its believability; and nonbelievers and skeptics can transmit the legend as well as believers. A ghost story or a story about King Arthur's knights are examples of legends. The third category, folktale, was defined by Bascom as being a completely fictional story, as people "willingly suspend disbelief" (a phrase coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge) to enjoy something set in total fantasy, as the story of Cinderella with her carriage that is magically created from a pumpkin. Each of these categories has subcategories. For example, some of the subcategories of folktale are Märchen, animal tales, fables, exempla, jokes, humorous anecdotes, schwank, tall tales, shaggy dog stories, and formula tales. For a long time, folklorists simply classified all folk stories into one of the three main categories of myth, legend, and folktale (and their subcategories). However, in her 1975 doctoral dissertation, Sandra Dolby Stahl posited a fourth main category of folk narrative: she called it the "personal narrative." Accordingly, her dissertation was entitled "The Personal

Narrative as A Folklore Genre” (1975). She defined personal narrative as a first-person account about a personal experience, with nontraditional content. At first, Dolby’s idea was roundly rejected by established folklorists. I myself witnessed heated discussions by scholars against her idea: the main argument against her thesis was that nothing generically separates a “personal narrative” from various folktale subcategories such as anecdote. Another argument was that by Dolby’s own admission, the folktale has nontraditional content, so how could it be classified as a folklore genre, since folklore by its very nature is traditional. Tradition is known by its twin laws of repetition and variation: a tradition is repeated, but it has slight variations each time it is repeated. Nevertheless, Dolby insisted that the content of a personal narrative could be nontraditional and yet still be classified as a separate folk narrative genre, joining the ranks of myth, legend, and folktale. In this article, I would like to show how Dolby’s new genre of “personal narrative” has been productive to me in my study of snake stories.

In the mid-1980s, when I set out to collect snake stories at Texas Tech for my master’s thesis entitled “Folklore of the Rattlesnake,” I imposed my scholarly expectations on the stories I collected. I expected the stories to fit into one of the three narrative categories: myth, legend, folktale. At that time, Dolby’s dissertation, though written, had not been published. I had prepared for fieldwork by preparing two extensive bibliographies about rattlesnakes: one listing scholarly articles about snake folklore, and the other listing literary and popular sources of snake stories. To further prepare myself, I actually read all six volumes of Thompson’s motif index (1955), noting any entry having to do with snakes, serpents, dragons, etc. My list of snake motifs multiplied after consulting in like manner Baughman’s type and motif index (1966). I had spent months researching all the well-known snake motifs, e.g., the stories about the fang in the boot, the stories about wagon tongues swelling when struck by a rattlesnake, and all the other well-documented traditional stories about snakes. My idea of a snake story was a story with a traditional theme, i.e., a story that is repeated in time and space and that varies each time it is repeated. Folklorists call this phenomenon “multiple variation.” Thus, when I set out to collect snake stories, I thought I knew what a snake story was, and I had my own patterns of expectation about

what folklore about snakes involved: traditional, identifiable motifs. Thus, I was really surprised at what I found when I went out into the field for several weeks collecting snake stories.

During the six weeks of my collecting, during December 1986 and January 1987, I visited communities in nine Texas counties: Borden, Howard, Glasscock, Mitchell, Fisher, Nolan, Taylor, Callahan, and Coleman. I talked with people in cafes, courthouses, senior citizens centers, beauty shops, schools, and anywhere I could find people willing to talk with me. I followed up leads and visited some people at their homes and at their jobs. Each community has people who are known for handling snakes and keeping snakes at their homes, and I also visited these people. I would approach them and ask them if they could tell me any stories about rattlesnakes. What struck me at the time was that in response to my basic question, "Do you know any stories about snakes?" nearly everyone I approached answered with a story about some personal involvement with a snake. I think it is a cultural requirement for people who live in Texas to have a personal narrative about an encounter with a snake. The people who told these stories had been bitten by a snake, or they had narrowly escaped being bitten, or they had killed a rattlesnake in some exciting encounter, or someone had played a joke on them involving snakes, or they had played a joke on someone involving snakes. If the storyteller were a snake handler, the story involved some unusual circumstance involving snakes, or recounted some incredible instance in which an unwitting person handled snakes without realizing the danger.

Because of my ignorance at that time of the genre of personal narrative, I did not know what to do with all the personal stories I had collected on my trip. The personal narratives far outnumbered any "traditional" stories that I had been expecting to collect; furthermore, in groups of people, such as at a beauty shop, personal narratives were what people were most interested in performing. At the time, in my ignorance, my strategy was to keep the tape recorder running in the hope that people would soon get around to the kinds of snake stories I had been hoping to collect. I even interspersed the conversation with leading questions, such as, "Did you ever hear the story about the fang in the boot?" Sometimes this stimulus would lead people to tell the types of stories I had been trying to

collect, but almost always, people would return as quickly as possible to personal narratives about snakes, i.e., stories about their personal experiences with snakes.

Thus, at the end of six weeks, I had a modest accumulation of stories with traditional motifs; I had two or three stories which I determined were newly circulating and which should be included in a motif index; and I had an overwhelming collection of hundreds of personal experience stories. Although I found the personal stories interesting and exciting, I could not find a place to consider them from a folkloristic point of view. Therefore, for the most part, I did not transcribe them or include a discussion of them in my 247-page thesis at Texas Tech. Now, at a later stage in my studies, I realize that I was like the proverbial green reporter who told his editor that he could not get the story at city hall because the building was on fire. I realize now that what I found was far more exciting than what I had been looking for.

After I finished my master's thesis at Texas Tech, I entered a Ph.D. program for study of folk narrative at the Folklore Institute at Indiana University. I had courses not only in folk theory and fieldwork but also in myth, legend, folktale, and personal narrative. The only positive thing I can say about my methods during my prior Texas snake story research is that I did keep the tape recorder running and I did emerge with a wealth of collected data of personal narratives about snakes. My own patterns of expectation probably tainted my data insofar as the traditional motifs were concerned; I would not now ask so many leading questions nor tell so many stories myself if I were to repeat the trip. Nevertheless, I consider the data containing personal narratives to be relatively uninfluenced by my expectations because indeed, they ran counter to my expectations.

All of the stories fit Sandra Stahl's working definition of personal narrative: "The personal narrative is a prose narrative relating a personal experience; the experience actually happened to the teller" (although it may change in the telling over time); it is usually told in first person, and its content is nontraditional (Stahl 1977: 270.) It often involves everyday occurrences. Furthermore, the personal narrative "represents a segment of the teller's personal system of ethics" (Stahl 1983: 270). In addition, the personal narrative is considered to be the

“private property of the teller” (Stahl 1977: 37).

In regard to this last criteria of personal ownership of a narrative, I well remember talking with two men in front of a grocery store in Roscoe, Texas, who told me about a man who had been working under a house, repairing the plumbing, when he had to lie still when a snake crawled all over him. The man's name was Jimmie Wilson Smith. The men wanted me to get Smith to tell me the story, because it was his story, and they even took me to try to find him, although we never did find him. The men clearly wanted the “owner” of the story to perform the story. The following exchange occurred:

First man: Where is Jimmie Wilson?

Second man: I don't know where he is.

First man: He can tell you the hairiest rattlesnake story—

Second man: That's the worst one I've heard in a long time.

First man: —you ever heard.

Second man: Last summer this boy that was working on their house, puttin' in sewer lines,

First man: —plumbing—

Second man: They was diggin' in there, and one [rattlesnake] crawled in there with them and crawled all over two of them—

First man: —crawled all over his back.

Second man: And they was havin' to lay still because the house was one of those old houses, low down, and they had dug a tunnel back under there. You ought to go hunt him up.

Spetter: Who is he?

Second man: Jimmie Wilson Smith.

Spetter: Where would I find him?

Second man: Down the street. I saw his car. His dad picked him up just a second ago. If you'll follow me, I'll take you down there.

The men clearly wanted the “owner” of the story to perform the story. They went out of their way to take me to him. Unfortunately, we could not find

the owner of the story and I had to leave town without his version. However, in the exchange above we can see that “rattlesnake story” is a recognized genre by the people themselves, that the story was “owned” by a person, and that there are degrees of artfulness by which stories can be judged. “That’s the worst one I’ve heard in a long time” is actually a compliment referring to the degree of danger that the people face (and survive) in the story.

One of the key elements of a personal narrative is that it usually incorporates the teller’s system of values. Jessie Black, an 81-year-old woman in Colorado City, told me about how she had been bitten on the arm by a rattlesnake while she was on the floor straightening carpet. After she was bitten, she pulled off her shoe and beat the snake to death; then she called the hospital and told them that she was coming in; and then she changed into clean clothing before driving herself to the hospital. Through this narrative, which I have summarized, we can recognize values that are important to Jessie Black. She places value on being self-reliant, on being able to take care of herself. She also is concerned with how she presents herself to the public, even when she has been snake-bitten; this explains why she changes into clean clothing before going to the hospital, even though a rattlesnake bite can be fatal if not treated quickly. As I wrote in a previous article,

While most people who hear the story are amazed that she would stop to change her clothing in such a life-threatening situation, the story expresses the value the woman places in maintaining a good public image, being able to stay cool in a crisis, and practicing self-reliance. Most personal narratives will contain some such illustration of the teller’s personal values. (Adams [Spetter] 1990: 27).

Many personal narratives about snakes have to do with encountering an unusually large snake, with finding a snake in a person’s home, or with being bitten and recovering or almost dying. Many stories underscore the person’s bravery by making light of the danger of the experience. An example told by Pete Polk of Colorado at the Dairy Queen in Rotan shows how he would rather face snakes

than stormy weather:

We were in the cellar, one time, with a big rattlesnake in each corner. You talk about somebody being scared, we was scared. They was bug-gers. We was out at Hobbs, me and my first wife. We sat up on the steps under the door. There was two rattlesnakes, one in each back corner. They'd just stick their tongues at us. But we stayed in there with them. Bad cloud.

Another personal narrative which underscores in a humorous manner the person's bravery was told by Pat Porter of Borden County. At the time, he was refereeing a high school basketball game, and he told me the story during intermission while he was preparing snacks for the coaches in the faculty lounge:

I had a little incident with a snake. I cut the end of that finger off. And they spliced it on there, or tried to. And it was healing, and I was over at Mother's house and was in the pickup going up the road, and I saw a snake. Boy, plenty of time, I didn't panic or anything. I stopped the pickup, got out, reached back there, got a long-handled shovel, got all ready. WHAIGA! And said AW, OOH, OOH!!! [gesturing that his finger is hurting]. And he [the snake] is buzzing, and he is mad, and it is hard to kill a snake left-handed with a long-handled shovel and look at your other finger and go Ooooooh! Ooooooh! Ohhhh! [Interviewer says "Golly!"] You're right. That's exactly what I said. Mother of pearl, stars and bars and garters. I was hurt. I wasn't ruined, but I was hurt pretty bad. (Whistle).

As Porter's last line indicates, he was not ruined; he survived. His story about a personal incident that really happened is highly stylized with sound effects, alliteration, repetition, and a pleasurable rhythm.

Stories about people who were victims of jokes are another subcategory of personal narratives about snakes. Tommie Jack Stuart, at that time 48 years old and a county commissioner of Fisher County in Texas, told the following story in

the meeting room of the courthouse at Roby:

I have a friend—we're both pretty good size. And at one time I was state vice president of [a service organization]. I was master of ceremonies at a banquet we held there in Sweetwater. 'Course, being busy, I didn't have time to go to the bathroom.

So pressure was building up, so we pulled up to the station on South Lamar, out there by Interstate 20. And of course, Doyle jumped out of the door before I could get out. And I was standing there thinking about everything in the world, and he was going slow. He was just seeing how long he could hold me up.

So I had a rattlesnake skin belt, and I laid it down across the door. And I crawled back in the car. Well, there was a carload of hippies got there, and they started up there and seen that thing and they jumped back.

Well Doyle opened the door. And as he started out, he seen that snake. Man, he rammed back in there, and he hit that wall, it was a metal building, and he hit it full flash and it sounded like somebody done plowed into the back of that building. Well, Doyle finally came back out—I picked up the snakeskin and put it back on. And the manager ran out—he didn't know but that somebody didn't run into his building, 'cause he hit so hard.

The inverse of victimization about a snake joke is playing a snake joke oneself. Dalton Carr, 65, a well-known snake handler in Big Spring, Texas, told the following story about a big snake he killed:

... I carried that old snake skin for several days on the front of a '42 Ford, and it hung off both sides of the front bumper. ... We'd go to these drive-ins and get the girls to come out and bring us a coke. We didn't really want anything to drink, but we wanted the girls to check our headlights. One little girl, she came up there. We turned the lights on so she never did see us. Finally she waited on us. We got ready to leave, and

when she had the tray, we asked her if she would check my headlights. She stepped right there in front of the car, she looked down and saw that snake, and man she screamed and threw the tray [gestures by throwing arms up in air].

When I was at the Dairy Queen in Rotan, Bill Cornelius, born in 1906, told of an occasion in which he drank whiskey with a snake. His story is based on a personal experience. It might be well to point out that “singing” is a colloquial term in that part of Texas for the buzzing of a rattlesnake’s rattles. After Cornelius told this story to two men and me, he was called over to another table to repeat the story. It is interesting to compare the two stories. The first version follows:

I got drunk out in New Mexico in the hills one time with a rattlesnake. I was building a fence and found a big rattlesnake. There was a Spanish boy there and he wanted to kill him and I said, “No, don’t kill him; don’t kill him.” And I said, “Let’s give him a drink.”

And he taken off; he said, “Mucho loco” [translation of Spanish: he’s very crazy], boy, he didn’t want anything to do with me.

So I’d take a stick and put it right back in his [the rattlesnake’s] head and he’d raise his head back and open his mouth when you do that. And I’d pour a little whiskey in the cap and I’d pour a drop in his mouth. And we had a time. He’d roll over and over and just sang for me, you know. Yeah, and that’s the truth; that’s the truth.

Spetter: I believe you, I believe you. And so y’all got drunk together?

Cornelius: Oh yeah.

Spetter: Did y’all ever get back together again?

Cornelius: Oh no, he went on to a Happy Hunting Ground. I give

him too much. Yeah, he died.

A few minutes later, Mr. Cornelius was called to another table to repeat this story by people who had overheard him talking with me. It is interesting to see how he reframed the story. Since he had a receptive audience of people he knew well, and an audience which had requested that he perform this specific story for them, he expanded the story by adding events at the beginning and at the end. Both of these additions focus on the effects of whiskey.

Some people came in and woke me up and “Bill, get up, get up. Percy and Red had a fight, and Percy’s going to kill Red.”

And I said, “Go on, get some sleep, boy.” And about that time I heard Old Percy had a .22 automatic rifle and a high-powered deer rifle. And I taken them away from him, and I was half asleep, and I went out there and put them under one of them chaparral bushes. I don’t know how many rattlesnakes I pushed out of the way to put them there. Scared me the next morning when I seen where I put them. And I went on back and went to bed.

And the next morning, I got up and got in the pickup. And the foreman, him and his wife and two boys—they lived in a tent down at the next windmill—and I got in this pickup and got them guns and I was going to take them out to the boss. Well, I stepped on a [garble] and out rolled a fifth of whiskey, just about, aw, just about two good drinks taken out of it. And boy, and I looked down there and got that up there and I said, Boy I’ll just keep that, talking to myself. They’ve had too much already.

So I went down there and left them guns, and started driving away and the boss said, “Hey, Bill, here’s that quart of whiskey you wanted.” So that give me a quart and about three-fourths. So that’s when I taken nights, and I had a tractor with a hydraulic pressure in it, and I drilled holes and [garble] shoot dynamite in it so they could come put posts in it.

And I had a feller working with me, Spanish fellow, and he stayed there with me, and he was working with me, and he seen that rattlesnake,

why, he was gonna kill it. And I hollered at him, “Don’t kill it! Don’t kill it! Let’s give him a drink.”

So he taken off. “No, no.” Boy, he didn’t want anything to do with that. And I’d give that old snake a drop of whiskey, and boy he’d just coil up and sing, you know, and stick that ole tail up, and roll over and over and over. And boy we had a time. I’m telling you.

So he left me. It was summer time. And I found a jackrabbit that was almost grown. He was sitting up under a little ole bush there, and I slipped up and caught him. And I taken him and put him in this truck. And this boss, he had two little ole boys there, and they had to sit way up like that to see out the windshield. And he sent ‘em down there after that truck. And I told em, I said, “Well, the keys are in the truck; go ahead and take it.” I’d forgot about that rabbit. And I had given that rabbit some whiskey.

And they went up there and opened the door and when they did, that rabbit jumped on that door and just hit that window with all four feet. And squealed. And they come a’runnin’ back down there and told me, “There’s a crazy rabbit down there in that truck.” Well, I went and turned him loose. And after he taken off he’d go this way and that way, this way and that [gesturing in zigzag motion to indicate drunkenness of rabbit, as his listeners roared with laughter].

The differences in the two versions of the story above can be accounted for by the change in context. In the first context, Mr. Cornelius was talking alone with me in a café, a strange woman in town, as I tape-recorded him. He did not know me and his story, though artfully performed, was short and limited to the essentials of the story. In the second version, performed soon after, he is telling the story to a willing and receptive audience of old men who are his friends, and he adds many details that would appeal to them and lengthens the story for their amusement.

Another personal narrative about a snake was told by Tommie Jack Stuart

of Roby, Texas:

About two years ago, there was some Korean—he wanted a live snake and had no way to carry it. He wanted me to ship it to him, and I told him, I wouldn't ship a live snake like that for an individual to use. And he says, "Why?" And I said, if it bit someone, I'd be liable for it, and I just wouldn't do it. But he wanted the whole snake. Some ritual or something.

Anyhow, I took the snake and put it in a five-gallon bucket and set it in the deep freeze. And as it got colder, well I just took it and mashed him down flat in the bottom of the bucket and went ahead and froze it. I put him in two different one-gallon plastic zip-lock bags. And he was froze just as hard as he could be.

And somebody stole our meat out of the deep freeze. And he got that rattlesnake. And I've always wondered what happened to the guy after the snake thawed.

In this story we can see a demonstration of unstated personal ethics. The implication in the story is that people who steal will get their just desserts. But the teller has left to the listener the responsibility of realizing this ethical statement. I should mention that several people told me stories about snakes coming back to life after having been frozen. William Labov and Joshua Waletzky wrote of the necessity of an evaluation of a narrative as part of its overall structure (1967: 111), while John Robinson argued that such an evaluation could be embedded in the story and not stated explicitly (1981: 66). In some cases, "not only is the point not explicit, but the responsibility for making the point has been delegated to the listeners," Robinson wrote (1981: 68).

What was particularly surprising to me in my Texas field project is that of the more than 200 people I approached, almost everyone had an incident connecting him or her to a snake. Stahl's description of the genre fits these stories perfectly: "a narrative creation of the teller ... [with] predictable form, evidence of cultural and personal stylization, conventional functions" (1983: 268). Rattlesnakes are a high-profile animal in Texas not only because of their high numbers but

because of the rattlesnake roundups which are held each spring. The roundups began more than 50 years ago when farmers and ranchers reacted to the damage that snakes were causing to livestock. Today a roundup such as the one at Sweetwater (Texas) brings in 4,000 to 9,000 snakes per year, attracting 30,000 visitors over a three-day period. Members of the chamber of commerce gleefully anticipate boosts in their town's economies during these events. The two-week period leading up to the weekend is one of festivity and partying. All kinds of curios – including plastic acrylic toilet seats with rattlesnakes embedded within – can be purchased. As I have stated, personal narratives about snakes really are a cultural requirement in this state. It is expected that every person who calls himself or herself a Texan will have a story about a snake, just as it is expected that born-again Christians will have stories about their religious conversions. The stories contribute to group identity. The themes as well as the structure of these snake stories could be summed up as follows: “I am somebody: I encountered a snake and survived.”

Stahl's definition calls for personal narratives to be of “nontraditional” content (1977: 20). This would eliminate from this discussion stories that I collected that illustrate beliefs about snakes. I collected narratives about eyewitness accounts of snakes swallowing their young, snakes traveling in pairs, avenging mates, fascination powers of snakes, cats keeping away snakes, hybrid snakes, protective ropes, and other miscellaneous beliefs. These narratives, although told in first person, combine the personal experience with traditional motifs. They differ in several ways from the stories discussed above: rather than aggrandizing the teller or revealing the teller's ethics, they are used to argue for or against beliefs about snakes. They are almost always serious, rarely containing humor. It is quite easy to separate these stories from the personal narratives discussed in this paper. I have discussed the traditional stories just listed at more length in a separate chapter of my master's thesis (1987: 142-167).

Snake stories are just one subtype of personal narrative. Examples of other types of personal narrative include crime-victim stories, family misfortune stories, courtship stories, meeting-a-famous-person stories, embarrassing-moment stories, stories about miraculous cures, and testimonies of Born-Again Christians

(Clements 1985). One of the most useful aspects of the personal narrative is the ability to use it as a parent heading for previously unclassifiable stories, such as the “snake stories” about personal experiences which I had collected. These stories can be named by the “emic” categories that people themselves label them by (Adams [Spetter] 1997: 215-216. In Texas, a “snake story” is a story about a personal experience with a snake; and having a snake story contributes to one’s group identity as Texan.

At the beginning of this article I mentioned that Dolby’s concept of personal narrative was criticized for its revolutionary plank that the content is nontraditional, that is, its story is based on a personal incident that actually happened to the person, and it is not based on a traditional motif. Even though the content is not traditional, we can see from the fact that stories are repeated again and again by the person who tells them, that they become a kind of *personal tradition*; the teller is recognized as the owner of the story. Furthermore, everyone in the group is expected to have his or her own personal narratives about snakes, which introduces a group-identity element, a criterion of folklore. Traditional folklore is group-oriented. Even if a teller’s group repeats a nontraditional personal story in the owner’s absence, the group will recognize that the individual is the owner of the story. In a way, this *group recognition* of the individual ownership of a nontraditional story is related to group identity, though the focus is on the individual. And as we could see in the example of Jimmie Wilson Smith’s friends above, if the individual is not present, the story is still presented in some form by the group, thus showing another group legitimization. As in Mr. Cornelius’s story of the whiskey-drinking rattlesnake, the story is repeated and is varied each time it is told, a crucial aspect of the definition of folklore, which emphasizes repetition with variation. As a person matures, a story may change over time as the story is seen in a new light. A story of misfortune may turn into a funny story. Furthermore, the nontraditional stories are framed in a traditional folk-telling *style* using all the usual storytelling techniques of oral narrative, such as gestures, onomatopoeia, and beginnings and endings. Thus, a personal narrative has all the criteria required of any specimen of folklore: repetition, variation, an element of group identity, and artistic performance qualities. Thus, folklorists can legitimately refer to four

main genres of folk narrative: myth, legend, folktale, and personal narrative.

As we have seen, personal narratives about snakes are more often recognized by the people themselves as “stories” rather than the so-called “traditional” stories which are identified by recognizable motifs. Once I became aware of the possibility of a genre of “personal narrative,” I realized that my earlier collections had not been in vain. The classification became extremely useful to me. Even though my earlier methods were tainted by my own patterns of expectation of what a snake story should be, the people I talked with began and ended our conversations with stories that fit the current definition of “personal narrative” in every aspect of that definition. Clearly, a study of rattlesnake stories should focus on the rattlesnake stories that people delight in telling in the present day and time. I have several hundred personal snake stories which I tape-recorded only as a strategy to have the tape-recorder already running when people got around to the traditional motifs I had been seeking. Thus, it is only by accident that I have a rich source of data which I hope to analyze in the future, recognizing the “personal narrative” as a valid genre of folk narrative.

Note

Dr. Sandra Dolby Stahl was one of my folk narrative professors at the Folklore Institute of Indiana University at Bloomington, Indiana. In mid-career, she resumed use of her maiden name, Dolby. Readers should note that references to Dolby or Stahl both refer to one person. I am grateful to Dr. Dolby for her teachings.

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