The history of folklore collection in Estonia, as in many other countries, is related to the process of national awakening. The first nationwide folklore collection campaign, organised by Jakob Hurt in 1888 and lasting until his death in 1907, aimed to gather a body of knowledge about Estonian culture, history and worldview that would support the national and moral self-awareness of Estonians and serve as a source for research and national high culture. Jakob Hurt’s collection sought to save for the future, and valorise the voice of, that part of the population who were left aside from public life and the governmental structures managed by the German and Russian upper class. Before the national awakening opinions on and knowledge of the language, history, and culture of Estonians were, as a rule, compiled and expressed by outsiders. The folklore collection campaign, for the first time at a nationwide level, gave a voice to Estonians who, by and large, lived in conditions of oral culture, thus supporting the formation of the nation, as well as contributing to the integrity of society. Jakob Hurt’s folklore collection campaign not only served his own scientific interests, but also had a clear and significant impact on societal developments.

Planning everyday work at the Estonian Folklore Archives has led me to ask what the role of the archive is, and in broader terms what the role of folkloristics is in contemporary Estonian
society. The role of archives is not only to create meaningful collections, but also to spread the message. Contemporary society has different needs and means of communication and ideology than those of the 19th century; the aims of folklore collection and research are to be adapted and revised to the historical momentum of the day. Observing the problems and bottlenecks in contemporary society, it seems that folklorists have the skills and qualities required to create more integrity and coherence: (1) to detect, document and analyse important phenomena found in contemporary non-institutional culture; (2) to record and give voice to unheard groups and unaccepted opinions; (3) to observe and record, then to create and spread awareness of our past; (4) to contribute to coherence with the (culturally and historically meaningful) space around us.