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GUEST EDITORIAL

In Praise of Impracticality

"Imagination is a contagious disease."—A. N. Whitehead.

THE MOTHER of a student of mine once complained that her son was "so impractical." I think she probably meant that he was not given to fixing things around the house, or that he spent his spare time daydreaming. However, in the years that followed I saw a practical side in him that she was unable to recognize. He had a fertile mind and he enjoyed growing fresh, new ideas in it!

The word *practical* has a long history in Adventist education. Phrases like *practical godliness*, *practical religion*, and *practical lessons* occur in counsels given during the earliest years of Adventist schools and colleges. For most people, "practical" means doing something with one's hands. Cooking, sewing, gardening, auto repair, and the like usually head the list of "practical activities." Could it be that thinking new thoughts is also a practical activity?

To be "practical minded" means that you know how to get things done efficiently, cleverly, making do with whatever is at hand. Apparently my student's mother thought he lacked this essential ingredient. He was of slight build, not particularly athletic, and showed little interest in laboratory apparatus. But he was a whiz with ideas. He could do marvelous things with them!

The best education balances instruction in theory with practical applications. Mathematical theorems must eventually be applied to real-life problems. The rules of grammar, attentively applied, give sentences graceful syntax and assure that meaning is clearly conveyed. But perhaps nowhere in the curriculum is practical application of theory more evident than in science classes. Science labs attest to our commitment to making the study of science more than book learning.

I believe, however, that ideas *themselves* can be practical. Obviously, not all ideas lead to useful ends. But ideas that spring from active involvement with one's study,

ideas that capture one's imagination and promote new insights—these are practical ideas.

It seems unremarkable now, but when Isaac Newton described how gravity operated, the idea was revolutionary, and certainly very heady. But it was also practical. It helped make sense out of the observed motions of planets and moons. It promoted our sense of wonder at the omnipresence of the Creator and our respect for the order of Creation.

"The just shall live by his faith" is perhaps the most dramatic of all Bible doctrines. Its discovery started a Reformation! But it is a doctrine, an abstract idea. Yet it becomes practical for each person who is led to accept his or her dependence on God and who finds ways to grow in grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Even a theorem of geometry is practical. Not just because houses, bridges, and other structures can be built using geometric shapes, but because each theorem leads to new theorems. Together they form a practical whole, an edifice of ideas.

My student treated ideas with joy and respect. He was not dependent upon the technological gadgets of modern science. For him "practicality" was having a good idea, an idea that tied together once-separate thoughts, that opened new horizons of understanding.

Today's technological age bombards our senses with the devices of science. Our efforts to balance theory and practice in science education may in fact lean more toward applied science than toward its foundations. The ideas of science tend to get buried in a mountain of apparatus. As we teach science, however, we must help each student experience the thrill of a practical *idea*.—Edwin A. Karlow. □

Dr. Edwin A. Karlow is Chairman of the Physics Department at Loma Linda University, La Sierra Campus, Riverside, California.