

ATTITUDE DETERMINES ALTITUDE

By VICTOR S. GRIFFITHS

In recent years the Rev. Jesse Jackson, founder of PUSH—People United for Self-Help—has been crisscrossing the United States urging young people, especially minorities and those who consider themselves dispossessed, to adopt a self-concept that will inspire goals and to work assiduously to achieve them.

As a way of capturing his message of self-concept as a basis for achievement, he has been using the theme “Attitude Determines Altitude.” While I was visiting with Frank Hale, viceprovost for the University of Ohio and former president of Oakwood College, he told me that he was influential, as a member of the advisory that helped to create Operation PUSH, in selecting this pungent truism for success.

Scaling Every Hurdle

Dr. Hale then went on to say that the idea had its genesis in the counsels Frank Peterson had shared during some of his chapel talks as President of Oakwood, when Frank Hale was a student there. Elder Peterson sought to help students realize that while life had its many challenges and a variety of problems that might discourage or lead astray, those who maintain a proper perspective can scale any hurdles they confront and reach the heights of dedicated service to God and humanity.

What Elder Peterson sought to imbed in the consciousness of the future workers for God who would graduate from the halls of Oakwood College is equally applicable to the life and experience of the Seventh-day Adventist teacher today. As teachers, we are the caretakers and nurturers of

*“A teacher affects
eternity; he can
never tell where his
influence stops.”*

unformed human potential entrusted to us by parents who send their children into our classrooms and institutions. As a result, we are especially challenged to develop a basic perspective or cluster of attitudes that can perceive not only the tremendous potential of those students in our halls but also the sublime privilege given to us to be Christ’s agents in producing master-works of Christian servants and workers for God.

Affecting Eternity

As Henry Adams has so well stated, “A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.”¹ Adams’ thoughtful assertion captures the importance of vision and attitude as basic factors in the success of the teacher.

The Spirit of Prophecy has made this church exceedingly conscious of the high calling of the Christian teacher:

Train the youth, mold the character, educate, educate, educate, for the future, immortal life. Pray often. Plead with God to give you a spirit of supplication. Do not feel that your work as teachers is done unless you can lead your scholars to faith in Jesus and love for Him. Let the love of Christ pervade your own souls, and then you will unconsciously teach it to others. When you as instructors commit yourselves unre-

servedly to Jesus, for Him to lead, to guide, to control, you will not fail. Teaching your students to be Christians is the greatest work before you.²

Nobility and Dignity of Our Calling

The nobility and dignity of our gifts are best represented by the fact that the preeminent term of respect by which our Lord was designated was that of *Teacher*. The puzzled yet searching ruler of the Jews in his quest for answers to life’s riddles stated, “‘Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him’” (John 3:2, NIV).³ And Matthew in his first summary statement of the work of Christ commented that “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:23).

Attitude and Effectiveness

Our attitude as Christian teachers will undoubtedly determine how well, how enthusiastically, how effectively we will exercise our teaching ministry as the nurturers of the church. To me, one of the Bible’s most encouraging statements in this regard is Psalm 36:9: “For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.” Christian teachers constantly challenged by social, cultural, and professional concerns need to remind themselves that attitude will determine the significance and satisfaction they obtain from their service.

The prophet Daniel, in sketching endtime events, affirmed that the

teachers of wisdom, those who grant understanding, who guide and lead their charges to choose righteousness, *will shine* as the stars on a clear night. While the primary context refers to the unveiling of the prophetic truth, it is noteworthy that the language used corresponds to that reserved for Israel's sages—the master teachers. When we consider that at its most sublime “the work of education and the work of redemption are one,”⁴ it does not take much imagination for us to understand that our attitude will shape the vision we hold of our potential and that of our students.

We need to be reminded, however, that the sublime is always being challenged by the ridiculous. This danger was well defined by the prophet Jeremiah, who reminded an apostatizing Israel that “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water” (Jeremiah 2:13).

The Seduction of Humanism

The temptation to neglect the Christian vision of teaching and substitute a humanistic approach are constant dangers that we need to be aware of

The preeminent term of respect by which our Lord was designated was that of Teacher.

and seek to avoid. Living as we do in at least three worlds—the natural, the cultural/political, and the spiritual—we are constantly faced with choices that call for careful evaluation of our priorities. Torn by conflicts involving professional, financial, sexist, racial, and status concerns, it is easy to settle for the politic, the convenient, the easy, the lowest common denominator.

However, our task and our challenge demand better than this. As the transmitters of the Seventh-day Adventist Christian culture, as the mediators of knowledge and redemption, as the potent shapers of the personality and character of the church of the future, our attitude will help shape the altitude of the church of today and tomorrow.

Preparation for Eternity

When I consider the matter of attitude and its consequent altitude, I am always inspired by Moses. Chosen by Hatshepsut to be the next Pharaoh, Moses had the benefit of an education that provided supreme privileges in the worlds of government, politics, medicine, and religion. Egypt's education of a future “embodiment of the gods” could encompass no less. Yet history attests to the biblical summary of this God-fearing man. When called upon to make those fateful decisions that give direction to life and destiny, the writer of Hebrews eloquently describes Moses' choice:

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward (Hebrews 11:24-26).

The pharaohs of Egypt thought that their massive pyramids would assure them of opulence and privilege in the afterlife. Little is left of them or their dreams, as their bodies and supposedly impregnable tombs were often desecrated and plundered soon

after their deaths. Today at best, these pharaohs and the elaborate possessions they prepared for the afterlife adorn showcases in museums. The exile and pilgrim Moses, resurrected and redeemed, sits in the courts of eternity awaiting the grand reunion with God's saints.

Rising Above Rejection and Abuse

Rose Marie White was three years old when she lost her father. Her mother, thinking that she was handicapped, then placed her in the Sonoma State Hospital in California, which was equivalent to a mental institution. Although abused by the people of that institution, Rose Marie retained her sweet spirit and consistently exhibited a spirit free from bitterness or resentment toward her superiors. She also showed caring concern for her fellow patients.

Despite having been deserted by her mother and betrayed by those who ran the institution, 27 years later when she was finally recognized as having normal intelligence and released, she did not become bitter, but instead determined to become a professional. She studied very hard and finally earned a master's degree in social welfare. Concerned for the betterment of the people that she had known as patients in that institution, and hoping that she might make their lives better, she returned and dedicated herself to serving them.

Our attitude will shape the vision we hold of our potential and that of our students.

Rose Marie was able to rise above all that rejection, neglect, and abuse because of her attitude. The love she developed and nurtured for people, in spite of her own difficulties, enabled her to rise above bitterness, malice, discouragement, or revenge to develop her life into a noble testament of gracious, magnanimous love and service.

Precious Despite Flaws

A young convert approached a pastor with a question. "How can the holy God forgive a sinner? Isn't God repulsed with all of the hatred and jealousy that fills people?"

The pastor looked warmly at his young, enthusiastic friend and said, "You are the third generation in a family of master furniture makers. Tell me, if a fine table that your grandfather made was scratched would you throw it away?"

"Of course not," the young man exclaimed. "A scratch can hardly alter the character of a fine piece of furniture."

"And," the pastor continued, "if you nicked a well-crafted oak rocker would you toss it away?"

"Throw it away?" the young man exclaimed. "Even with a few scratches quality furniture is sturdy and valuable."

"You have spoken like a true craftsman," the pastor replied. "You share that spirit with our creator God who continues to find his human creation precious and valuable in spite of their obvious flaws."⁵

As Christian teachers we too can share our Creator's spirit and experience the joys and satisfactions that come from seeing the miracles of transformation that are possible when we imbibe the divine perspective. Indeed, in Christian education, attitude determines altitude. □

Dr. Victor S. Griffiths is Editor of THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION and Associate Director of the General Conference Department of Education, with headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Herbert V. Prochnow, *A Treasury of Stories, Illustrations, Epigrams, and Quotations* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1972), p. 101.

² Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948), vol. 5, p. 590.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all texts in this article are from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Copyright © 1978 by the New York International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

⁴ White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), p. 30.

⁵ William R. White, "A Most Precious Possession," *Stories for the Journey* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), p. 56.