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# TOMMY

BY ARLINDA J. COTTON

One year I was blessed with a very special little boy in my classroom. Some might refer to him as slow or retarded, but I prefer the term *special*, because that is what Tommy\* was, and always will be to me. He had little to offer in terms of worldly goods. He and his brother and sister had been shunted from one foster home to another—but his heart overflowed with love.

I met Tommy on registration day. Frustrated with the usual “day before the first day of school” hassles, I was somewhat dismayed when his foster mother entered, trailed by three disheveled, dirty, and misbehaving “brats,” as she so bluntly referred to them. I shuddered a bit when she registered the two boys and a girl for school. The three ran around touching and investigating everything. As I stood back, horrified, my carefully prepared bulletin boards and learning centers received their first onslaught of childish curiosity.

Suddenly Tommy was beside me. I looked down and was initially quite unimpressed. He was a pretty sorry specimen of childhood, with his greasy blonde hair matted and unevenly trimmed. Skinny and dirty, Tommy looked at me through rakishly perched, smudged glasses. I had to stifle the impulse to slip them off his runny nose and clean them. But then he grabbed my hand and lisped, “You’re going to be my teacher!” while his eyes sparkled with a combination of mischievousness, curiosity, and eagerness.

Something stirred in my heart, and I impulsively bent down and hugged him. At that moment his ragged appearance seemed to lose its importance. Tommy’s hand didn’t seem so grubby and his smudged, finger-printed glasses reflected more than just a pair of big blue eyes—they reflected a little boy who needed love—my love, Jesus’ love. Tommy was mine, my student.

I wish I could say that I fell in love

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with Tommy that very moment. I didn’t, but it was a beginning.

After Tommy left that afternoon I sat—reflecting, wondering, anticipating. I tried to picture what the school year would be like, what special needs he might have. Would I be able to fulfill them? And not just his needs, but those of each of my students.

I was suddenly struck with a mixture of inadequacy and excitement. I felt awe at the monumental task that I faced. These kids were making decisions every day that could determine their eternal destiny. And seven of their waking hours would be spent with me. My words, my acts, my every gesture would convey some message to their impressionable minds, either for good or evil.

Suddenly I knew I couldn’t do it. My carefully outlined lesson plans were not enough. Not even my colorful bulletin boards and learning centers would fill the need. I was powerless to face a task that would demand the ultimate in physical, mental, emotional, and most of all spiritual stamina. But at least I knew where to go for help.

I bowed my head as the setting sun glowed through the newly washed windows into a room decked out for a year-long adventure. My clasped hands rested on the open book of untouched lesson plans. The faces of Tommy and the other children I’d just met danced through my head, and tears of inadequacy blurred my vision.

I prayed for strength, strength to handle the stress and demands I must face. I prayed for love for Tommy and the others even when they would tax

my patience to the limit. I prayed for understanding. I asked God to keep ever present in my mind the fact that they were children—prone to childish errors. And I prayed for wisdom to handle each situation that would arise. Wisdom to solve the childish crises that in my eyes would seem so irrelevant but that to them would be so important.

I had no idea, as I sat there watching the sun slip behind the horizon, how taxing Tommy’s needs really would be. I never dreamed how inadequate was my preparation. We spent six weeks struggling with jump rope! Tommy couldn’t get both feet off the floor in unison without landing on his bottom! Yet I was amazed at the good humor and determination of this six-year-old. He would look up from the floor where he’d just landed and laugh, then get up, straighten his glasses, and try again. After weeks of work on his part and weeks of frustration on mine, Tommy was finally able to “jump rope just like the other kids!” Jump rope remained one of his favorite activities all year.

Tommy’s remarkable stamina came forth time and time again. I was constantly astounded at his courage. Everything was so *hard* for him. We worked three weeks on differentiating between the letter forms of “D” and “H.” But, as always, he finally got it. No pair of eyes ever twinkled brighter than Tommy’s when he realized that he’d finally mastered a new skill.

There were times, though, that those eyes reflected more than pride in a hard-earned accomplishment. They often reflected fear or pain and hurt. Many times in his laughter I could hear an echo of bitterness. Often I saw Tommy’s tears make dirty streaks down his pale cheeks and spots of steam on his glasses.

Often it was a stomachache. He hadn’t had anything to eat since the previous day. Other times it was a derisive remark from a thoughtless classmate aimed at his mismatched

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# IS ADVENTIST EDUCATION FOR EVERYONE?

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mentally retarded in their community. Members—including students—could present afternoon programs at institutions or foster homes for the retarded in much the same way as they do for nursing homes.

Because of the linkage of our church and school boards, church-sponsored activities should increase interest in special education in the schools.

*Printed Resources: Guidelines for Working With Exceptional Students in Seventh-day Adventists Schools* was developed by the North American Division Office of Education in 1982. While it could be updated, the manual contains a helpful discussion of approaches for educating various categories of exceptional children in Adventist settings. It also describes programs conducted in the Colorado and Southeastern California Conferences.

Another good resource is *Pastoral Care of the Handicapped*, edited by Roy E. Hartbauer.<sup>6</sup> Both pastors and lay members could benefit from its presentation of theological motivations for becoming involved with the handicapped.

## A Bargain at Twice the Price

Christian education requires a sacrifice, but it would still be a bargain at twice the price. Why draw the line to exclude the children like Angela who want to be a part of it? Our church has much that is unique and precious to offer the world. Adventist education really should be for everyone! □

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*Christian Dupont holds a B.A. degree in Theology from Andrews University. He has just enrolled in a Master of Arts program in theology at the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana. Since 1982 he has been employed full-time in assisting the mentally handicapped.*

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Copies of the complete research project may be obtained from Mrs. Rebecca Twomley, Circulation Services, James White Library, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI 49104-1400, or by calling 616/471-3549. Please send \$6.70 with your request.

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1988*

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***Teachers must be trained to recognize different types of handicaps so they can assist parents in seeking professional help for their children.***

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(Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1988), pp. 15, 121, 135.

<sup>3</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *125th Annual Statistical Report* (Washington, D.C.: 1987), p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> The North American Division Education Code, K-12 (March 1977) includes the following under 020: "The Seventh-day Adventist Church desires to save its youth and prepare them for the service of the gospel by providing for all its children a general education within the framework of the science of salvation." (Italics in original).

<sup>5</sup> See Ronald J. Wylie, "The Handicapped Child and Private Education: A Legal Overview," *The Journal of Adventist Education*, 43:5 (Summer 1981), pp. 9ff.

<sup>6</sup> Published by Andrews University Press, Berrien Springs, Michigan, in 1983.

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and badly-in-need-of-repair clothes.

I tried to satisfy his physical needs as best I could, but I knew that I was merely scratching the surface. I couldn't even touch Tommy's real problems. I couldn't remove the sting of the angry, bitter words his foster mother flung at him as he left for school. I couldn't reach the hurt wonderment that formed in his young mind as he saw how easily younger classmates mastered facts that he'd struggled with for weeks.

And there were times, though I hate to admit it, when I was the cause of those tears. Moments when Tommy wrapped his arms around my waist

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and I was too "busy" to return his affection. Moments when his childish pranks evoked a hasty and overly severe reprimand. Moments when I despaired over his "slowness" and let my irritation show. Many times I would look at the tears I had caused and cry myself. It was too late to retrieve my hasty word or thoughtless action—the best I could do was give him a hug—which he never failed to return. Many times I wished I had his remarkable ability to forgive.

Forgiveness was just one of the lessons Tommy taught me. I spent an entire school year teaching him the fundamentals of reading, writing, and mathematics—yet they seem trivial compared to the lessons he taught me.

Tommy taught me the lesson of determination, even in the face of insurmountable obstacles. He taught me the lesson of cheerfulness, even when tired or discouraged. He taught me the lesson of faith, even when the object of that faith has proved unworthy. And most important, Tommy taught me the lesson of love. Love for the physically unlovely—love in the face of indifference and even rejection. Love "in spite of" instead of love "because of."

Oh, Tommy, I owe you so much. As I witnessed your unswerving love and trust in me, as undeserving as I was, my faith and love for my heavenly Father was strengthened. As I endeavored day by day to meet your varied needs I learned to lean heavily on the arms of the Master Teacher.

But the hardest lesson of all came on the last day of school. I didn't want to leave Tommy in the cruel little world in which he lived. I wanted to erase the pain in his life or at least stay at his side and help him face the obstacles. But I couldn't. I had to let go. I had to leave Tommy in God's care.

As I drove off that last day I could see Tommy in the rear-view mirror, standing on the curb waving, surrounded by the depressing conditions of the tenement in which he lived. I cried and I prayed, committing not only Tommy's life, but also my own, to God. I prayed for strength to go on and meet the challenges He had for me. And I prayed for love, to embrace the future "Tommys" I would face; and then courage—to turn away, leaving them in God's care. □

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*\*Not his real name.*

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*Arlinda J. Cotton teaches grades K-4 at Capital City Adventist School in Saint Paul, Minnesota.*