

# AWAKENING INQUIRY

By Gerald R. Winslow

**T**eachers are seldom invited to reflect publicly on reasons for the way they do their work. I am no exception. Until recently, I had never spoken publicly on how to teach anything. So, when I was assigned to talk about the “transmission of Adventist beliefs and values in higher education,”<sup>1</sup> I found myself wondering: Why, after devoting nearly 30 years to helping

college and university students explore Adventist beliefs, was preparing this talk so daunting? When I had taught well, what had I done? When I had taught poorly, what had I forgotten to do? Was I really engaged in the “transmission” of beliefs and values? Did that make me a “transmitter” and my students “receivers”?

Such questions reminded me that early in my teaching experience, I read an article with a passage from Ellen White’s *Testimonies for the Church*.<sup>2</sup> It impressed me

then and still does. It changed the way I teach. When it comes to helping students with their beliefs and values, I am convinced that the truths in this passage deserve close attention:

*Teachers should lead students to think, and clearly to understand the truth for themselves. It is not enough for the teacher to explain or for the student to believe; inquiry must be awakened, and the student must be drawn out to state the truth in his own language, thus making it evi-*

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dent that he sees its force and makes the application. By painstaking effort the vital truths should thus be impressed upon the mind. This may be a slow process; but it is of more value than rushing over important subjects without due consideration. God expects His institutions to excel those of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Why is it insufficient for teachers to explain truths (even if we are good at it)? And why is it not enough for students to believe, especially if it is *Truth* that we are offering? Beneath the answers to these questions lies a theological foundation for teaching and learning that tells us much about the character of God and about His eternal purpose for human beings. I decided to explore four themes from this passage.

### The Truth

A teacher's primary task is to help students "clearly to understand the truth for themselves." In earlier times, nearly everyone agreed that the process of education should be a search for truth. My Adventist upbringing even included the expression, being "in the truth." The surrounding culture of that time supported the understanding that some things are true, others are not, and it is important to know the difference.

But times have changed. Today, the ideology known as postmodernism expresses skepticism about the human capacity to know enduring or universal truths. Emphasis is given to the social construction of reality and human inability to compare and evaluate truth claims across social or cultural boundaries. We see a widespread loss of nerve about any claims to represent truth, except perhaps the truths asserted by relativism. While such ideology might be expected to inspire humility when confronting dissenting views, this is often not the case. Dogmatism about the relativity of all truth is one of the odd, paradoxical features of what now passes for intellectual discourse.

College and university students are not exempt from this pervasive ethos of relativism. Educator Allan Bloom's comment is probably not much of an overstatement: "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."<sup>4</sup>

## **Why is it insufficient for teachers to explain truths (even if we are good at it)? And why is it not enough for students to believe, especially if it is Truth that we are offering?**

truth can also be painful. Students frequently begin to doubt the possibility of settling *any* claims to truth. One of the most delicate tasks of higher education is to help students develop the capacity to make principled decisions about truth. To do this without reverting to the comforts of dogmatism or submitting to the dominant relativism of the age is work of the finest sort.

This work is aided immeasurably if the entire enterprise is anchored in a personal relationship with Jesus as Lord and Saviour. St. Paul pointed the way when he taught that we are part of a household that is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the

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**S**ome measure of relativism is, of course, a normal part of the intellectual, moral, and spiritual development of young people, who need to evaluate the conventional thinking of their past. I sometimes call this the "college sophomore syndrome" because, by this time, most students have learned enough about human history and cultural differences to know that beliefs tend to change through time and across cultures. Such discoveries can be exhilarating because they open new horizons. They also allow students to use their newfound capacities to engage the diverse beliefs of others without rushing to judgment.

But discovering alternative views of

whole structure is joined together" (Ephesians 2:19, 20, NRSV). All systems of truth must begin somewhere, and for Christian higher education, that place is a Person, not an abstraction. Christian education begins with the redemptive story of Jesus. "In the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one, for in education, as in redemption, 'other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.'"<sup>5</sup>

Maturing faith in Jesus gives students the confidence necessary to explore other truths. It would be a fundamental mistake to view teaching primarily as the transmission of already settled truths. At its best, teaching is much more of an adven-

ture and a collaboration. The adventure comes from knowing that we are pursuing dynamic present truth, which is constantly unfolding. This is especially true of our understanding of God: "If it were possible for us to attain to a full understanding of God and His word, there would be for us no further discovery of truth, no greater knowledge, no further development. God would cease to be supreme, and man would cease to advance."<sup>6</sup> As Seventh-day Adventists, we confirm this commitment in the preface to the statement of our Fundamental Beliefs: "Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God's Holy Word."<sup>7</sup>

We collaborate, first of all, with the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:12, 13, NRSV). The promise and the process of the Spirit's guidance continues. God will teach us many more new things, if we are willing. Believing this, both teachers and students must be prepared to join in the adventure of seeking and understanding the truth. The belief that all truth has already been discovered and needs now only to be transmitted denies the ongoing work of the Spirit. So, too, belief that no enduring truths can be grasped by human beings denies the efficacy of the Spirit's work.

### Explanation

Why is it "not enough for the teacher to explain"? First, because both teachers and students are engaged in a collaborative quest that is guided by the Spirit.

Beyond this, students need to engage in independent inquiry. Without this experience, they are likely to be disengaged and bored. Indeed, "interest" can best be defined as involving one's self in the subject. When students experience the challenges of independent thought, they are far more likely to immerse themselves in many areas of inquiry. And they are more likely to develop the style of mind that should characterize educated people.

Ellen White condemns the kind of

schooling that fails to foster independent thinking:

*"The education that consists in the training of the memory, tending to discourage independent thought, has a moral bearing which is too little appreciated. As the student sacrifices the power to reason and judge for himself, he becomes incapable of discriminating between truth and error, and falls an easy prey to deception. He is easily led to follow tradition and custom."<sup>8</sup>*

**W**ith counsel like this, it is astonishing how much of what passes for higher education does exactly what this passage warns against. Students, sometimes even at the highest levels of graduate and professional education, engage in the hackneyed experience of sitting, listening, taking notes, and then repeating the thoughts of someone else. Based on the passage just quoted, it is not too strong to say that such education is morally suspect because it keeps students from functioning as the persons that God intended them to be.

Some of the best advice I have ever had as a college teacher came from my first department chairman, Gordon Balharrie, who said, "Remember, you are succeeding when they are working." He added that the professor could work at great length, learning nearly everything about the topic, but that none of this would ensure the students' learning. Real learning begins only when the student becomes personally involved in the subject. To borrow from Ellen White again, "True education is not the forcing of instruction

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on an unready and unreceptive mind. The mental powers must be awakened, the interest aroused."

### Inquiry

Creating space where inquiry can be awakened is among the most wonderful challenges of teaching. This must be a safe place where students dare to be "drawn out to state the truth." Teachers would do well to meet regularly in order to share their best strategies for awakening inquiry. Let me list five that have worked for me:

1. *Begin with the students' own questions.* Young children are naturally inquisitive. But years of formal education may squeeze nearly every ounce of curiosity out of them. So I begin my classes by inviting students to share, in writing, information about themselves that will help me serve them better. In particular, I ask them to list at least three questions for which they want to seek answers during the course, and tell why these questions are important to them. This request comes as a shock to some students, who may not have thought they needed to bring any curiosity to the subject. But most students enjoy this assignment, and I usually learn much that helps me to revise my plans for the course.

2. *Engage the imagination.* Good stories help. We dignify these in higher education by calling them "cases," or referring to "problem-based learning." Never mind the labels. Inquiry is awakened by good stories that open new vistas for the imagination. There is hardly a discipline that would not be enlivened by better use of engaging narratives.

## Students need to engage in independent inquiry.

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3. *Allow time for inquiry's gestation.* Good teachers must learn to wait in silence. The common query, "Does anyone have any comments or questions?" is usually followed by a pause of only a few seconds. Only the boldest students and the most superficial responses can come forth so quickly. Giving students time to write their questions and then hand them in permits quieter (and sometimes more thoughtful) students to participate in the inquiry.

4. *Encourage students to listen to the questions and views of others.* One of my favorite strategies for awakening inquiry is to present a case and give students a few minutes to explain their point of view to the person sitting next to them. I explain that when the time is up, I will ask them to present their partner's views. (This method can work well even with very large classes.) This requires students to listen intently to the views of others and then represent those views accurately. The class discussions that follow are usually among the liveliest.

5. *Make time for the unexpected.* How many times have you heard a teacher say: "That's a great question, but we won't have time for it today." Or, "That topic will come up in the lecture next Wednesday." Such responses can send the powerful negative message that students' inquiry is less important than the scheduled sequence of topics. But inquiry does not always keep well. That priceless moment when students' curiosity is aroused should seldom be sacrificed for the schedule.

### Patience

The successful awakening of inquiry may indeed "be a slow process." It may also be messy. The neat class outline may need to give way to a much more dynamic process. Fewer topics may need to be covered in greater depth. The process is not risk free; the outcome never completely guaranteed. And the results of fostering inquiry may not be fully known for years to come.

I was reminded of this by an encounter with a former student in Denver's old Stapleton Airport. I saw her approaching on a moving walkway, traveling in the opposite direction. We only had time to recognize each other, say hello, and wave good-bye. The walkways were long, and I was already late for my connecting flight.

As I headed to the gate, I reminisced about this student. She had struggled in a course I had taught years ago, one that explored the social responsibilities of Christian faith. It was an honors course, with challenging readings and questions. She had found the inquiry distressing because it prompted her to reassess some of her beliefs.

During my brief wait before boarding the plane, I wondered: What turns had life taken for her? What might she say about the course now? Had it helped her to find a more mature faith, as I fervently hoped?

Suddenly, the student called my name. She had turned around and hurried through the airport to find my gate. Nearly breathless, she said that she had undertaken the search because she wanted to tell me something. She had now completed a graduate degree, which had also prompted reappraisal of her beliefs. In that process, she had discovered the value of the kind of inquiry that we had shared years earlier. She returned to say thanks.

My purpose in reciting this story is not to indulge in self-congratulation about an old course. (It's entirely likely that other former students would give an appraisal quite different from this young woman's.) The point is merely to remind us that we should never rush to assess the results of awakening inquiry and inviting students to express their convictions in their own way. Our work is for the long term. "True education means more than the pursuit of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man."<sup>10</sup>

Because I believe this, I am concerned about the "outcomes assessment" fad that is sweeping higher education (and just about everything else) these days. Many forms of assessment are, of course, es-

sential to developing excellent educational programs. But, given the current wave of enthusiasm for measuring most everything, we need to be cautious. Some modes of assessment have the potential for being radically secularizing, especially when applied to students' spiritual development, beliefs, and values. We must beware of the temptation to elicit the responses that we want from students. And we must resist the lure of trying to look good. Jesus had stern words for those who display their righteousness in order to seek the praise of others (Matthew 6).

Most of all, we should remember that the real measure of Christian higher education is not the test scores at the end of each term, or even the conferring of a degree. Nor is it found in any quantitative scales that we can apply. It is, rather, found in the quality of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that endures forever. ☞

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The occasion was the Adventist Higher Education Summit that took place at Loma Linda University in March 1997.
2. L. W. Mauldin, "Dare We Teach Students to Think?" *Journal of True Education* 32:5 (Summer 1970), p. 28.
3. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1947), vol. 6, p. 154.
4. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 25.
5. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 30.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
7. "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Silver Spring, Md.: General Conference of SDA, 1997), p. 5.
8. *Education*, p. 230.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 13.