

Picture
Removed

What is the role of the school in character development?

Character Education

By Ralph M. Coupland

T

wo vivid images from the 1994 Winter Olympic Games in Norway illustrate the potential and power of a life of integrity and character.

In the first, Dan Jansen is gliding around the Olympic ice rink in a memorable victory pass, holding his baby daughter, Jane, in his arms. He had just smashed the 1,000-meter speed-skating record and won the gold medal. Despite earlier defeats and frustrations, he pressed on toward his dream of Olympic gold. This powerful and vivid image communicated volumes about his commitment to values of family, hard work, perseverance, and integrity. Commenting on this experience, he said, “. . . if there’s one lesson I could pass on to Jane, it’s that winning is not the most important thing. Giving 100 percent of yourself is what counts. It doesn’t have to apply only to skating, or to sports. Even now that I’ve retired

from competition, I try to give my all to whatever I do. For me, it’s a way of life. Of course, it’s wonderful that I won the gold medal. But if I hadn’t, my life wouldn’t be over. No deep depression or turning to the bottle. So many things are more important. Like Robin [his wife] and Jane. They’re far more precious to me than any sporting event.”¹

The second image from Norway stands in contrast to that of Dan Jansen. In this scene, Tonya Harding lifts up one skate for the judges (and the world) to see. She is pleading for a second chance. Hers is a tragic tale. She started skating at age 3, suffered abuse from a hard-driving mother and finally dropped out of high school. She enjoyed some success by winning the U.S. women’s national figure skating title in 1991. However, her Olympic failure and the accompanying charges of greed, conspiracy, falsehood, and violence that surrounded her appearance illustrated her lack of integrity as she faced competition and her lack of enough courage to accept defeat.²

*The greatest want of the world is the want of men [and women] who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.*³ The qualities of character depicted in this statement do not just happen, just as those qualities portrayed by Dan Jansen and Tonya Harding were no accident. Character results from a complex, dynamic, and purposeful process of development within the context of meaning and integrity.

Current Concerns and Character Education

Adventist schools have always seen character education as important. Today, however, some are expressing concern about maintaining our commitment to this historical tradition and vision, while others are questioning its viability and value for today's students in Adventist schools.

As we address these concerns, a number of important questions arise. What is character? How is it developed? What is the role of the school in character development? How do we discover and develop principles and practices of character education to share with our students? Will returning to the philosophical roots of Adventist education and the vision that this philosophy inspired provide adequate answers for today's schools? And finally, how does character education relate to the broader context of educational processes?

A Biblical Perspective of Human Nature

For the Christian educator, the principles of character development are founded upon the biblical view of human nature and constitute education with integrity. This view asserts that in the beginning, God formed a perfect world and created in His image perfect human beings, endowed with the freedom and power of choice to live, learn, love, and worship. This perfection, however, was marred by disobedience and sin, which separated creature from Creator. The effects of this relational disruption have been profound. Life, development, and

harmony have been affected by death, atrophy, and conflict. However, a divinely instituted restoration plan has been set in motion to re-establish God's ideals for His children. The Bible records the major features of this narrative, in which God acts and humanity responds to His initiatives. For the Christian, ultimate meaning and an understanding of the dimensions of human nature will be realized only within the context of this transcendent biblical narrative.

The biblical perspective describes human nature as wholistic, but fallen and in need of redemption and restoration. "To restore in man the image of his Maker, to bring him back to the perfection in which he was created, to promote the development of *body, mind, and soul*, that the divine purpose in his creation might be realized—this was to be the work of redemption. This is the object of education, the great object of life. Love, the basis of creation and of redemption, is the basis of true education."⁴

Like human nature, the supreme Christian ethic of love is wholistic and has three dimensions (Matthew 22:37-40). Ellen White describes true education as the harmonious development of the *physical, mental, and spiritual powers*.⁵ The educational process likewise has as its goal the harmonious development of the three dimensions of human nature and the three aspects of love—the supreme Christian ethic. These processes include the development of (1) *physical strength and skill* to demonstrate in concrete ways a love for God and humanity with all of one's *heart*; (2) *mental acuity and understanding* that comprehends in more abstract ways a love for God and humanity with all of one's *mind*; and (3) a *spiritual and moral commitment* and love for God and humanity with all of one's *soul*. The transcendent biblical narrative gives these understandings and definitions a meaningful context.

What Is Character?

Defined from a biblical perspective, character includes those individual and unique personal qualities, traits, or attributes that influence thinking and knowing, purpose and motivation, personality and behavior. This view of character suggests

How do we discover and develop principles and practices of character education to share with our students?

that it reflects or represents the whole person, yet is manifest in the *physical, mental, and spiritual* dimensions or powers. This implies that character involves *doing, knowing, and desiring*. To *desire the right or good* engages the *spiritual* (heart/soul) or moral dimension in an evaluative and purposeful process of faith commitment. To *know what is right or good* engages the *mental* dimension in the cognitive processes of learning and understanding. To *do the right or good* actively engages the *physical* (hand/body) dimension in a behavioral and active process that may become habitual and life-long.

Character is about *doing, knowing, and desiring* the right or good in a wholistic, balanced, and harmonious way. It is not enough to *know* and *desire* the good, yet not do it. This would indicate character imbalance. A knowledgeable and committed person may know what is right and be motivated by a strong *desire* or worthy purpose but lack the strength of will to follow through and do the right or good. The reverse is also true. Actions (*doing*) that are grounded in inadequate knowledge (*knowing*) and an inadequate moral or spiritual purpose (*desiring*) will not represent a balanced character.

Another way to understand character is to examine the "*fruits*" of *desiring, knowing, and doing*. Do they reflect a commitment to internalized purposes of spiritual, moral, and aesthetic values, spiritual desiring, knowledge of abstract patterns and ideas of truth (*mental knowing*), and demonstrated concrete products (*physical doing*)? Some of these character indicators may include a commitment to

charity, courtesy, empathy, honesty, humility, loyalty, responsibility, courage, fairness, faith, gratitude, perseverance, respect, reverence, moral strength, self-discipline, spirituality, aesthetical and ethical worth, unconditional love, truth, beauty, goodness, and justice. Such indicators can exist only if character has been intentionally developed and nurtured in a wholistic way.

A Biblical View of Character

Character development is a complex process that spans the entire lifetime. The Bible asserts that humans, though sinful, are not without hope. God has made it possible for them to develop physically, mentally, and spiritually. This development requires: intentional nurture in a supportive environment, exercise of the individual's freedom of choice and power of the will, acceptance of the gift of salvation through Jesus, and the influence and power of the Holy Spirit's work in this process. The integrative process of developing the body, mind, and soul and the restoration of God's image in human nature are identified as the primary objectives of character development, redemption, and education.⁶ Linking character development with redemption gives meaning and purpose to Christian education and endows it with power.

The Power of a Transcendent Narrative

Every human being needs to find pur-

pose in his or her life within the context of a meaningful narrative. Such a narrative tells humans who they are, where they came from, why they are here, how they should pattern their lives, and where they might be going. If a person fails to find a meaningful place within the story, then he or she will reject it, replacing it with another narrative. Only a transcendent narrative can provide ultimate meaning and purpose for life.

Neil Postman suggests that many of the challenges facing public education in America today result from society's having lost its commitment to a worthy narrative.⁷ He cites a number of "thin and crass" narratives such as consumerism, materialism, tribalism, and technology that have replaced more transcendent narratives like democracy and the American dream. He warns that unless American schools are founded upon one or more transcendent narratives, public education as we know it will end.

The suggestion that a transcendent narrative can serve as a basis for Adventist education and character is a compelling one. This is not a new idea, but perhaps its power and potential have not been fully recognized. The transcendent biblical narrative has the capability to revitalize and empower Adventist education. This narrative provides attitudes, purposes, and motives (*desiring*); patterns of

truth (*knowing*); and concrete examples of what constitutes real Christian conduct (*doing*). Studying the Bible to find out what to believe or do is necessary but insufficient. The Bible also reveals what it means to live in harmony with its transcendent narrative and why one should desire to do so. The connection between moral and spiritual judgment and commitment (*desiring*), vigorous and responsible thinking (*knowing*), and faithful and good action (*doing*), is complex and not easily reached. However, the transcendent biblical narrative provides the context and meaning for this connection to occur.

The transcendent biblical narrative furnishes both the essential context and a powerful and meaningful *purpose* for every aspect of education, including character education. Within this narrative, students will find a reason and purpose for life and for education, and schools will discover guidelines for dynamic curriculum standards, selection of teachers and teaching methods, student learning, and assessment.

Furthermore, this transcendent narrative will provide an integrative focus to character education, redemption, and restoration. The reason for doing, knowing, and desiring takes on an altogether different purpose where the physical, mental, and spiritual powers are developed harmoniously. ✍

REFERENCES

1. Dan Jansen, *USA Weekend* (July 15-17, 1994), p. 5.
2. *Walla Walla Union Bulletin* (July 17, 1994), pp. 9, 14.
3. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 57.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 13. Italics supplied.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16.
7. Video lecture by Neil Postman, *The End of Education* (Northampton, Mass.: Into the Classroom Video, 1996).

Dr. Ralph M. Coupland is Associate Professor and Chair of Education and Psychology at Walla Walla College in College Place, Washington.

Picture
Removed

The transcendent biblical narrative opens with the account of God creating the heaven and earth (Genesis 1). It describes the origin and entrance of evil, which disrupted all aspects of human life. The story then introduces a divine plan of restoration and redemption that calls on humans to respond to God's initiative through a journey of faith and love. The journey involves God's covenants and commands. The Sabbath takes on a special meaning (Exodus 20:8-11) of liberty and peace (Deuteronomy 5:15).

Across the broad sweep of this biblical narrative, the central event rises: the coming of Jesus, the Incarnate Saviour. His life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promised return provides assurance of total restoration and redemption (the Gospels).

The story concludes dramatically with a restored and recreated new earth where sin and sinners will be no more. There with the Creator, in the earth made new, the redeemed will live a life of joyous harmony, love, worship, and service.

Within this powerful transcendent narrative, Adventist education can develop a basis on which to develop its character education mission.