

LEARNING FAITH THROUGH EXPERIENCE

Chuck Wall teaches business, management, and human-relations courses at a local college in Bakersfield, California. Perhaps because he is legally blind and has been forced to learn in non-traditional ways, Chuck strongly believes in learning by experience.

A few years ago, Chuck became angry at the constant barrage of negative news stories about random violence. One morning, as his radio greeted him with, "Today we have another random act of senseless violence to report," Chuck got an idea. At the beginning of class that morning, he said: "Students, today I am going to send you out into our community to commit at least one random act of senseless . . . KINDNESS."

The reports that came back were inspiring and in some cases life-changing. One student paid the utility bill for a neighbor who was about to have her electricity cut off. Another found a lost dog and tracked down the grateful owner. Others visited hospitalized children or lonely convalescents.

Since including this activity in his course curriculum, Chuck has received more than 15,000 letters and phone calls and has participated in some 200 media interviews relating to his "random acts of senseless kindness" campaign. He is just one of a growing number of educators who have discovered that experiential learning or integrated

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wholistic education is a much more effective way of teaching than the traditional model.

Psychologist Robert Sternberg of Yale University has found much more correlation between practical intelligence and success in the marketplace than with IQ or academic intelligence. Practical intelligence involves a deep knowledge of the self and human psyche and a broad understanding of one's environment, as well as a practical, competent knowledge of the task at hand.

A number of educational theorists see learning as more than acquisition of facts, and intelligence as more than mastery of language and mathematical skills. All of these voices suggest that apprenticeship learning and character education need to make a comeback in schools. In this age of computer-directed living, the potential to individualize or customize education according to specific student needs and gifts is greater than ever before. The old model of loading up information needs to be replaced by an approach that provides students with resources to excite their interests and passions and empowers them to pursue those interests according to their own gifts and experiences.

At a recent annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Steinar Kvale presented a paper on the need to rehabilitate apprenticeship learning in education. He listed its basic advantages over

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highly abstract learning as greater student motivation; better practical skills; a positive individualized learning environment; fewer problems with discipline and authority; and identification of students who need more theory. The main components of apprenticeship learning include: production, in a community, of common skills and knowledge; professional identity; learning through practice; evaluation through practice; and both formal and informal experiences.

Typically, there is a natural tension between theory and practice in education that seems to be widening. Consider the following types of learning:

1. Concrete learning with little or no behavioral follow-through.
2. Rote authoritarian learning and ex-

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ternal behavior follow-through.

3. Abstract learning with little or no behavioral follow-through.

4. Internalized learning and internalized, behavioral follow-through.

For late high school age up, the fourth option is best, yet educational systems (in-

cluding the Adventist system) seem to produce classrooms that fall into the first three categories.

The Adventism that I grew up in was quite behaviorally oriented, so many young people had a concrete understanding of truth but little or no follow-through. Although the behavioral emphasis has lessened in recent years, the “theory only” kind of religion is still common among our young people. The second type of learning listed above has always been a problem with Adventists, especially with our young people.

Lawrence Kohlberg has described six stages of moral development. He suggests that moral decision-making is motivated by (in ascending order): avoiding punishment (fear), naive egoism (self-centered-

ness), approval seeking (conformity), law and order (obligation), social contracts (reciprocity), and universal principle (altruism).

Derrick Proctor found that Adventist high school students were primarily clustered at stage two of Kohlberg's model, and generally were four to five years behind non-Adventist seniors in the same socioeconomic class. Research by Roger Dudley and the Valuegenesis group confirm this as well. This focus on rules, coupled with our failure to encourage young people to make their own moral decisions based on internalized principles and experiential religion, has been costly.

Abstract learning with little or no behavioral follow-through is also a major problem among Adventist young people and seems to be increasing. This problem is often created by a church and school that *repetitiously* teach religious facts without a corresponding emphasis on experience, service, witness, and other forms of application. What's even more alarming is that these Adventist young people, already burned out on religious head knowledge, get even more religious theory when they come to Adventist colleges. Such an approach leads to a religion of pure abstraction, with little impact on one's behavior, thinking, or relationships.

What we need in our religious education is far more *experience* with religion and far less theory. We need to expose our young people to other religious groups and then debrief what they have experienced. We need to have them operate soup kitchens (something we've done during the past two years at La Sierra Univer-

sity), tutor in our neighborhoods, visit in our prisons and juvenile halls, touch the lives of orphans and convalescents, and commit acts of senseless random kindness—and then, as teachers, debrief these experiences and teach theory in relation to them.

In this regard, we can learn a lot from other religious movements. Let me give two examples: one in Los Angeles, the other in Florida. The Dream Center is a Los Angeles non-denominational youth ministry under the direction of Pastor Tommy Barnett. Having remodeled an old hospital for their headquarters, they feed and clothe the homeless and send out teams of young people to witness to drug addicts, gang members, prostitutes, beach people, and street people about God's healing and the gospel. Hundreds cram into their Wednesday night prayer meetings to praise God and receive healing and guidance.

Young people at the Dream Center are not ministerial students or highly trained volunteers. They are individuals with a passion for Jesus who share their enthusiasm—with amazing results. Many times, they find themselves in dangerous situations, but their response is: "We're Christians; we're crazier than any of those gang members because we have already died—to ourselves and for Christ." Their movement is growing so rapidly that new ministries are springing up every week. When asked how young people with so little training can accomplish so much, they point to Peter. A fisherman with no significant training, formal education, or reli-

gious leadership experience, he hit the streets for Jesus—healing the sick, casting out demons, and changing the world.

Another example of what God can do with radical faith and experiential religion is the recent Brownsville revival. In the past two years, 1.5 million people have visited the Brownsville Assembly of God church on the outskirts of Pensacola, Florida, and more than 100,000 have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour. And once again, young people have played a pivotal role. I recently interviewed Kyle Jernigan, the youth witness trainer/coordinator, and Rhonda Nall, the youth assistant, at this church. With Richard Crisco, the youth pastor, they have seen God work through relatively untrained and theologically uneducated young people to transform their community.

Their rapidly growing church has about 450 youth members, with some 700 to 1,000 youth attending their mid-week prayer and revival meeting. On Friday and Saturday nights, the youth do street witnessing, which can be quite an adventure in their rundown area of town. Because of the danger, chaperones are sent out with each group of 10 or 20 young people as they share their passion for Jesus with gangs, prostitutes, pimps, pushers, drug abusers, homeless people, and runaways. Others witness without chaperones at local malls in groups of two to 20.

Some of the highlights of their street witnessing outreach have included the following: the night a group of 12 young people from the church led an entire

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group of 26 street kids to Christ and brought them all back to the revival meeting to be baptized that same evening. Another night, two Playboy bunnies arrived in town for a media shoot, only to learn that their appointment had been delayed. When they asked a cabby where the action was in town, he told them about the revival meetings. They decided to check it out, and were both converted to Jesus.

In the two years of that revival, the bars in the Brownsville area have lost 40 to 50 percent of their business. Prostitution, drug abuse, and crime in general have significantly decreased, and the blessings of the revival have been taken all over the world by the 1.5 million visitors who have witnessed firsthand what God is doing.

When I asked, "How much training do the young people receive before they hit the streets?" I learned that they have a five-level discipleship program and that young people generally do not engage in street witnessing until the end of the first 10-week course. But they are encouraged to put their theory into practice on the streets by the end of level one (they go through a 50-week program).

The first level of teaching consists of 10 basic biblical principles that focus on Christ-centered methods of witnessing. These principles are:

1. The work of revival comes from the Holy Spirit—not us (Zechariah 4:6; John 5:19).

2. Prayer is our first priority—before we go, while we are there, and after we return (Luke 18:1).

3. Meet people where they are—show interest in where they are coming from (John 4).

4. Win them over with love, not doctrine or argument (John 13:35).

5. Don't condemn them, regardless of how much you may disagree with their lifestyle (Matthew 7:1; Romans 12:21).

6. Respect their turf—on the streets, keep your hands where people can see them, dress casually, don't wear excessive jewelry. In the mall—the same thing—and respect their time if they're in a hurry, etc. (Matthew 10:16).

7. Travel in groups of four, and approach people in groups of two (Mark 6:7).

8. Put yourself in people's place—see

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them with eyes of compassion (Matthew 7:12).

9. Let them see what God has done for you—your life-transforming witness (2 Corinthians 5:17).

10. Share your witness (1 Peter 3:15) from your own experience—carry a small Bible and share your passion for the Word and for Jesus.

When I compare this approach to the Adventist educational system, which often educates students for 16 years in classrooms without ever sending them out to share their faith, it seems safe to say that we have spent so much time at the tree of knowledge that we have lost our appetite for the tree of life. Jesus sent His disciples out on the street two by two, long before they were broken by the cross or empowered by Pentecost. He understood that the experiential dimension of religious education was crucial.

A healthy spirituality must start with the heart if faith is to be a force rather than a farce. In sharing our faith, we must not only experience success but also failure so that we can better sharpen our swords for the next encounter. Experience automatically leads one to pursue more theory, but theory does not necessarily lead one to pursue experience. Wholistic education avoids this trap by ensuring that experience gets its proper role in the educational process. ☞

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During the past 17 years, Steve Daily has served as Campus Chaplain for La Sierra University in Riverside, California. He teaches in the School of Religion and the School of Education,

and is the founder/director of the LSU soup kitchen, the annual LSU Resurrection Pageant, and the annual Riverside Community Service Day. Before joining the university, he worked as a youth pastor, religion teacher, and senior academy pastor.

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