

Going Home; or Why I Am a Seventh-day Adventist Teacher

One of my earliest recollections as a new Seventh-day Adventist at 16 years of age was listening with rapt attention to H. M. S. Richards, Sr., on the radio. And I remember Del Delker singing a song about being homesick for heaven, an Earth-weary pilgrim longing for eternal rest.

My perspective on human history with its play and counter-play of human events, the studied conclusions I have come to, everything I teach, everything I am and do, has been impacted by my heavenly perspective; my sense of being a “pilgrim” here, with a future that is literally “out of this world.”

“Going home” expresses an other-world perspective that will inevitably put us out of sync with much in the world around us. It conveys a perspective that, if consistently put into practice, will skew every aspect of our lives—toward heaven. While many may ridicule such a pie-in-the-sky orientation, we as Seventh-day Adventists hold it to be the bedrock of our belief system. If Jesus is not the living, returning, triumphant Lord, then there is *no* hope for us as sinners. And the anticipation of an eternity without pain or death, the prospect of being able to grasp the secrets of the universe and continue learning forever are only a cruel illusion, and we are the worst of deceivers to teach our students and church members to look forward to spending eternity with Him.

But the same Jesus who inspired the sobering yet reassuring words “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10) was declared by the angels at His ascension to be coming again in the same way the disciples saw Him go—literally

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By Warren S. Ashworth

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and visibly. So by faith in the truth of His promise, we declare that “going home” is a reality about to be realized.

I have learned some lessons in my years of college teaching that are worth mentioning:

It’s Wise to Be Humble

1. *I have learned that it is wise to be humble* because there are so many answers I don’t have. While I try to foster in my students a longing for heaven, it is also true that “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard... the things that God has prepared for us there” (1 Corinthians 2:9, NKJV). No one can fully describe it. And while I try to both foster honest

inquiry and offer reasoned and plausible answers, I am continually conscious of the need for humility since I, too, am a seeker for truth. I remind my students often of Ellen White’s assurance that “No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation. . . .we should be teachable, meek, and lowly of heart.”¹

The Blessing of Gratitude

2. *I have also learned that it’s an enormous blessing to maintain an attitude of gratitude.* Every day, every situation has positives and negatives. If I choose to dwell on the positive, this will keep the endorphins flowing, put a smile on my face and a song in my heart. When I

think of the next world—“the home of the pure and blest” as the songwriter called it—I am filled with joy. While the present situation in which we find ourselves is filled with cruelty and global chaos, the Bible assures me that God is still in control and will one day resolve the problems and take us home. So I try to encourage my students, by my example, to cultivate an attitude of gratitude.

God’s Biddings Are Enablings

3. I’ve also discovered that *God’s biddings are always enablings.* He has not called us to follow Him, then abandoned us to make it on our own. He

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has promised, “I am with you always.” What an enormous source of encouragement and strength in a lonely and perplexing world! He is not only the Author, but also the Finisher of my faith.² He will complete the good work He has begun in us.

The Gift of Prayer

4. I continue to discover the wonderful gift of prayer—prayers of praise as well as of intercession. While some may say that prayer only changes the one praying, the great men and women of the Bible were great pray-ers on behalf of others—Daniel for his exiled people (Daniel 9) and Christ for His disciples (John 17).

Hypocrisy Wounds the Heart of God

5. I’ve also come to realize that *hypocrisy is the sin that most wounds the heart of God*. My students have a right to see in me, in every time, place, and circumstance, a faithful reflection of Christ. To do otherwise is to run the certain risk of hearing the Lord say to me one day, “I never knew you.”³ I keep in mind Jesus’ warning that if I am duplicitous—professing one thing but teaching or living another—I would be better off having a millstone tied around my neck and being thrown into the depths of the sea.⁴ I ask God to keep my profession and my practice in harmony.

Don’t Offend a Weaker Brother

6. I have also found that, for me, the most compelling counsel for Christian living is Paul’s admonition to *do nothing that might offend a “weaker brother.”*

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When I think of the “weaker,” uncertain, trusting, and less-prepared young people who each year come under my influence, it strengthens my commitment to be faithful because I want them to go home to heaven with me.

A few years ago at Andrews University, Chaplain Pat Morrison asked students what would change in their lives if they knew that Christ was coming and they could go home in the next year. One responded, “If I knew Jesus was coming soon, a lot of things would have to change in my life. I am not living my life for Christ right now, and I know it. I would start acting like a Christian because knowing that He is coming within a year would make Jesus real in my life again. Of course, if I were smart, I’d start living that way now.”⁶

Many students in our colleges and universities feel they are in a similar condition. As born-again Seventh-day

Adventist faculty members, what a privilege and responsibility is ours to let biblical principles and our other-world perspective inform everything we do—from the choice of books we require students to read, to the teaching of history in the framework of the Great Controversy being fought, to the teaching of science informed not only by the field evidence but also by the Word of God, to urging a lifestyle in harmony with biblical ideals.

As Chuck Scriven points out in his thoughtful article, “Conviction and Truth in Adventist Education,”⁷ Western society is increasingly afraid of anything that smacks of “conviction”—especially religious conviction. And any who are so bold as to embrace it are labeled “fundamentalists.” Jacques Barzun, professor at Columbia University, wrote in 1991 that trying to inculcate “any set of personal, social, or political virtues” in the classroom is “either indoctrination or foolery.”⁸ And John Mearscheimer, a political scientist at the University of Chicago, stated in an address to

his colleagues in 1997 that one of the strengths of his institution was that it is “a fundamentally amoral institution.”⁹

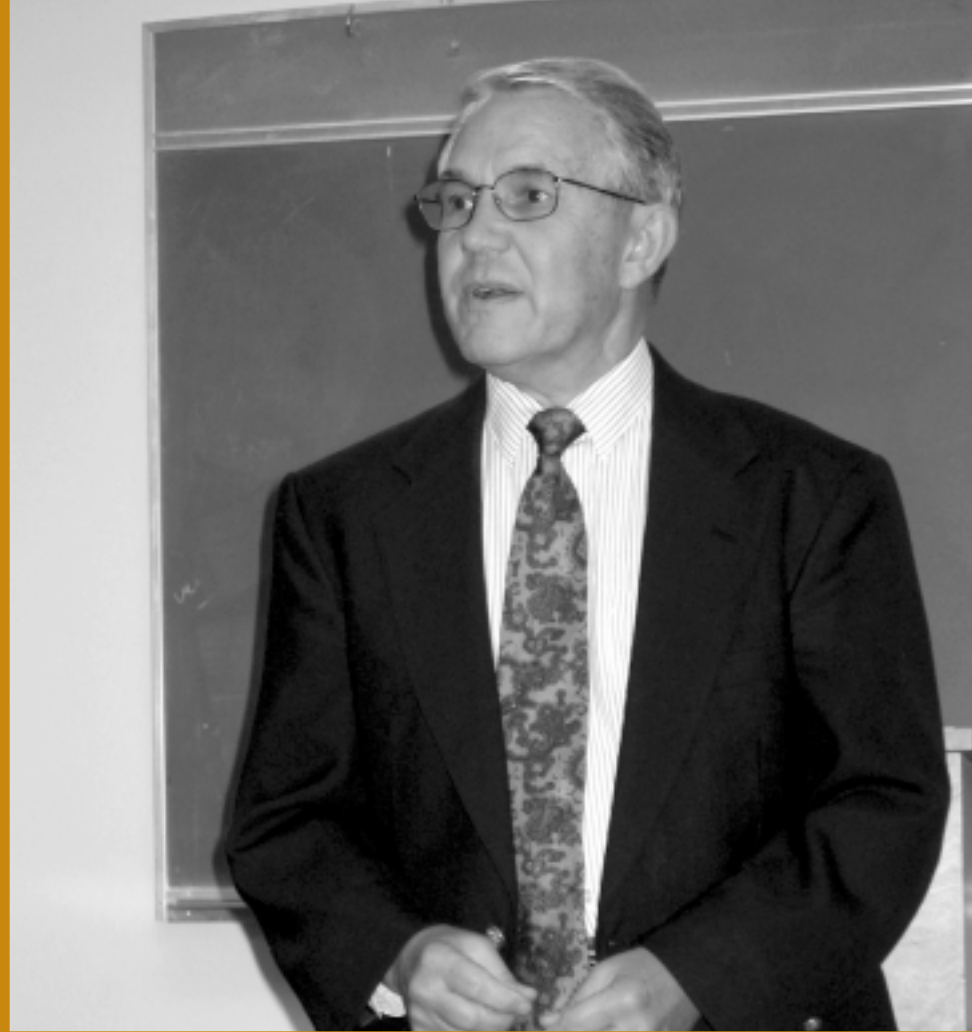
The Dangers of Knowledge Without Wisdom

However, knowledge without wisdom is a dangerous thing. It can lead to aberrant, even abhorrent behavior. Solomon declared that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” (I like to think of wisdom as that God-given ability to rightly use knowledge.) That is why I often remind my students that the higher people go in their education, the more time they should spend in God’s Word and maintaining a living relationship with Christ, or they will inevitably lose their spiritual equilibrium and be incapable of rightly applying their acquired knowledge. As Scriven puts it: “unless education builds conviction, students (and at the end, societies) drift to the path of least resistance. You stay with what you think and feel already, or move toward what the dominant surrounding culture thinks and feels.”¹⁰

In an article entitled “When Learned Men Murder: Essays on the Essence of Higher Education,” David Patterson recounts in *Phi Delta Kappan* that on January 20, 1942, 14 men, all Nazi officials, gathered for what history remembers as the Wannsee Conference. These men completed a Holocaust strategy, a plan for eliminating the Jews from Europe. Not only did they agree to murder Jews, but they also agreed that their mouths would be mined for gold, their hair for textiles, their fat for soap, their bones for fertilizer! And of these 14 monsters, eight had doctoral degrees!¹¹ Amoral knowledge owns no barrier against immoral application.

The First Object of Education

So “the first object of education,” as defined by Ellen White, “is to direct our minds to His own revelation of Himself.” And since God’s greatest revelation of Himself is to be found in the Bible, she declares a few sentences later, “The Holy Scriptures are the perfect



Article author Warren Ashworth enjoys interacting with students in one of the classes he teaches at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California.

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standard of truth, and as such should be given the highest place in education.”¹² As Dick Osborn stated in a worship presentation at a conference on science and faith, “we are a community centered around intentionality toward the faith development of our students.”¹³

But therein lies an exquisitely delicate challenge. How are we to help our students to become “thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other people’s thought,”¹⁴ while at the same time consciously seeking to develop in them a deepening faith in God and His re-

vealed Word?

I doubt that any teacher in our schools has ever set out to undermine the faith of a student, yet I have known several young people who have lost their faith in both God and the church as a result of their perception of things taught in the classroom. Thus, as Ellen White admonishes us, we must foster in the students an investigation of truth “for themselves” because the alternative, she warns, is that “they will become superficial in their life and acquisitions.”¹⁵ But as teachers with a “redemptive mind-set,” with an awareness that we are preparing these young people for a home in eternity, we will, to quote Osborn again, sometimes “hold in public abeyance [our] personal exploration of truth that might differ from the church’s position.”¹⁶

In an editorial entitled “What Makes a School Adventist?” which appeared in the 2000 General Conference

edition of the JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION, Humberto Rasi listed the factors that will “help us focus on the primary and unique features of our approach to education”—that God exists and is the source of all true knowledge; that the Bible is the revealed and authoritative Word of God; that God came to our rescue through the incarnation of Jesus Christ; that God created human beings as integrated units of mind, spirit, and body; that God created us to live in a loving relationship with Him and our fellow humans; that Adventist education conveys to our students a sense of eternity—a sense of “anticipation” for going home. And perhaps most significantly, he asserted that “At Creation, God endowed human beings with His divine image, which includes the power of choice. We exercise this freedom within a cosmic controversy between good and evil, truth and falsehood. True education teaches students to make decisions based on informed moral principles and permanent values, regardless of the circumstances.”¹⁷

Bringing the Distinctives to Life

Those *are* the distinctives of Adventist education. But to make an educational institution truly Adventist, those values and beliefs must be lifted off the written page and transplanted into the students’ hearts. That requires the most delicate surgery. A well-organized administration with a clear vision of what we ought to be about is vital to our educational enterprise. A well-trained and committed staff is critical as well. However, the role of the faculty is, it seems to me, the most indispensable in performing the actual “operation.” God has entrusted to us as teachers the ongoing challenge of building religious conviction while we also open students’ minds up to growth. Then those explorations will ultimately lead the students to be like the wise man of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount who, when the rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, did not lose his house because it “had its foundation on the rock.”¹⁸

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A Ministry Both Heartfelt and Genuine

How is this most effectively achieved? In her first testimony for the church, Ellen White wrote in 1855 an article called “Thy Brother’s Keeper.” Since it is directed to “the servants of the Lord,” it no doubt includes us as teachers. She urges us to “have the truth in our souls.” We must get it “warm from glory,” carry it in our hearts, and pour it out with “warmth and earnestness.”¹⁹ I understand that to mean that *what I teach must parallel what I am*. I must believe it heart and soul in order to effectively communicate it. To help lay a “foundation on the rock” that will successfully sustain the superstructure of intellectual inquiry, I must be a caring, loving teacher whose ministry is heartfelt and genuine, both in and out of the classroom.

In his paper “The Pursuit of Truth and Faith in Adventist Higher Education,” Dick Osborn alludes to Barbara Carson, an English professor at Rollins College, who wrote to students who had graduated 29 to 31 years before, asking what they remembered about their most effective professors. She found that “while expressing appreciation for demanding teachers,” the students used metaphors of “religion and love rather than information exchange to recall their favorite professors three decades later.” It was the “attitude, relationship, and accessibility of the teacher rather than the content being taught that they most remembered.” Then she made this provocative statement: “Given all this, even a per-

son as secular as I am should probably be surprised to step into a classroom and not hear a voice from a burning blackboard telling me to take off my shoes. That ground—with all its mysterious potential for changing lives—may be as holy as it gets these days.”²⁰

Truth Is Personal

Osborn also cites Parker Palmer, whom he identifies as “one of the nation’s leading proponents of the need

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for spirituality in education,” as having stated: “We will find truth not in the fine points of our theology or in our organizational allegiances but in the quality of our relationships—with each other and with the whole created world. . . . Truth—wherever it may be found and in whatever form—is personal, to be known in personal relationships. . . . Relationships—not facts and reasons—are the key to reality.”²¹ I would modify that slightly but significantly to say—we find truth not *only* in the fine points of our theology. . . but in the quality of our relationships. . . And

I would add—relationships, not *only* facts and reasons—are the key to reality.

Recently, at the end of one of my classes, a young woman came up to tell me of her growing excitement about what she was learning about the Bible and of her decision to be baptized. I asked if she had taken Bible studies. She said that one of her teachers, an art professor, had been studying with her. That to me epitomizes the meaning of having the “truth in the soul,” letting truth impel us to care enough, to take time outside the classroom to lead a young person to growing joy in Christ through the study of the Word.

In the Gospel account of Christ driving the demons out of the two men on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, as Jesus was about to leave, the ex-demoniacs begged to be allowed to go with Him. He told them instead to return home and tell what great things Jesus had done for them. And Luke tells us (8:40) that when Christ returned, everyone was eager to hear Him.

We would do well as faculty members and staff to be far more open about sharing with our students what a difference Christ has made in our lives so that they may grow in their eagerness to know Him. I remember one of my sons telling me, when he returned from attending a small Methodist college in southern Illinois for a year, that he would never forget the first chapel service there. The college president addressed the students and with deep and evident emotion shared how God’s amazing grace had transformed him and enriched his life’s journey.

I find in the words taken from the book, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* a compelling summary of what is of paramount importance—“Teachers are to do more for their students than to impart a knowledge of books. Their position as guide and instructor of the youth is most responsible, for to them is given the work of molding mind and character. . . . The teacher should be himself what he wishes his students to become. . . . The teacher may under-

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stand many things in regard to the physical universe; he may know about the structure of animal life, the discoveries of natural science, the inventions of mechanical art; but he cannot be called educated, he is not fitted for his work as an instructor of the youth, unless he has in his own soul a knowledge of God and of Christ. He cannot be a true educator until he is himself a learner in the school of Christ, receiving an education from the divine Instructor.”²² May God help us to be “true educators.”

Warren S. Ashworth, Ph.D., *Professor Emeritus of Religion at Pacific Union College (PUC) in Angwin, California, retired from full-time teaching in June 2003. A member of the PUC Department of Religion since 1984, Dr. Ashworth’s specialty has been Adventist studies and mission, and he has taught a variety of courses in those areas over the past 19 years. Early in his career, he served as a jungle pastor, Bible and English teacher, and mission departmental secretary in Ecuador, a departmental secretary in the Patagonia Conference, and a teacher of theology at River Plate College in Argentina. On his return to the United States, he taught at Andrews University for seven years prior to going to PUC. During his years at PUC, he has led mission trips to Ecuador, Thailand, Honduras,*



Ghana, Russia, and Ukraine and in the summer of 2003, conducted revival meetings in Russia and Ukraine. Dr. Ashworth recently agreed to be the director of Gospel Outreach for the Philippines. This article is adapted from his response to being named Educator of the Year at PUC in 2000. The spoken quality of his presentation has been retained.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. Matthew 7:23, NIV.
4. Matthew 18:6, NIV.
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8. Jacques Barzun, *Begin Here: The Forgotten Condition of Teaching and Learning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 53.
9. John J. Mearsheimer, “The Aims of Education Address,” *The University of Chicago Record* (October 23, 1997), p. 7.
10. Scriven, p. 21.
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12. Ellen G. White, *True Education* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 2000), p. 11.
13. Richard Osborn, “The Pursuit of Truth and Faith in Adventist Higher Education,” *Conference on Science and Faith: Symposia and Workshops for Higher Education*, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, July 24, 1998, p. 4.
14. White, *True Education*, p. 12.
15. _____, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1938), p. 33.
16. Osborn, “The Pursuit of Truth and Faith in Adventist Higher Education,” p. 8.
17. Humberto M. Rasi, “What Makes a School Adventist?” *Journal of Adventist Education* (Summer 2000), pp. 4, 5.
18. Matthew 7:24, 25, NIV.
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20. Osborn, “The Pursuit of Truth and Faith in Adventist Higher Education,” pp. 1, 2.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
22. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1943), p. 65.