

Character Building: A Call to **Action**

Our mission is to offer “an excellent Christ-centered education that prepares students for productive lives of useful human service and uncompromising personal integrity.”¹

My remarks are set against the backdrop of challenges and opportunities in the world. I believe we in Adventist higher education have a continuing commitment to both academic excellence in education and research, and to accessible and affordable learning. My remarks focus on the core of what we must ALSO do; the core of who we are and what we can become as individuals living in a time of unprecedented opportunities and unexpected challenges.

This millennium burst upon the world with globe-encircling celebrations. A cascade of spectacular fireworks lit up the midnight sky. Optimism was ubiquitous. The 20th century Age of Science and Technology, with its unprecedented progress in all areas of our lives, had given way to the Information Age and global connectivity. The human genome had been codified, promising cures for inherited diseases. The Cold War had evaporated under the collaboration and cooperation of international friendships. Peace seemed within reach. Economic prosperity seemed secure.

By B. Lyn Behrens

Today, not long into the new millennium, for so many persons around the globe, a host of dreams lie shattered in a thousand pieces. Reality stands in stark contrast to the hopes of hometown America.

Addicts continue to destroy their own lives, to shatter their families and, all too frequently, to bring tragedy into the lives of innocent bystanders.

Since September 11, 2001, America and her allies have been at war defending freedom against a regime of terror. It is a new war, a war fought against an “invisible army” of terrorists led by well-educated zealots and fanatics.

Picture Removed

Today, Americans are anxious about many things: health care, jobs, and the national deficit. And, elsewhere, famine, natural disasters, and environmental degradation continue to pose enormous challenges.

The corporate world is in economic disarray. Early in this century, the stock market spiraled downward, the economy slowed, and unemployment climbed. Bankruptcies of business giants left investment portfolios in ruins and turned the pension plans of thousands of employees into a heap of ashes. Whistle-blowing publicized scandalous behavior. Well-educated leaders were dismissed under a growing cloud of suspicion. Some CEOs are under indictment for illegal and unethical behavior.

Thought-leaders are questioning the fabric of our society and the core of our personhood. In *Business Week*, Bruce Nussbaum wrote about the corruption in the Enron debacle. He

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said: “It is difficult not to contrast the professionalism of modestly paid firefighters and police doing their duty on September 11 with the secretive and squirrely behavior of six- and seven-figure accountants, lawyers,

CEO’s, bankers, and financial analysts who failed at their duty with Enron.”² Nussbaum calls for us to get back to the basics—to restore “basic integrity to the bottom line” and “ethics to business professionals.”

Academic colleagues, this is a call to accountability and action. It is a call to ensure that our agenda consistently extends beyond the preparation of professionally competent graduates. We are called to intentionally prepare our students to be principled, responsible citizens. This is not a new calling. In 1896, Stanford University defined dual goals for its educational programs. Its students would be qualified for “personal success . . . and . . . to promote the public welfare.” Its graduates would “respect . . . order, morality, personal honor and the rights of others” rather than have self-centered concern for “upward mobility . . . narrow careerism . . . and . . . competitive individualism.”³

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One hundred years ago, Ellen White defined the greatest need of the world to be persons “who will not be bought or sold; . . . who in their inmost souls are true and honest; . . . who do not fear to call sin by its right name; . . . whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole; . . . who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.”⁵

Character is not a mantle to be put on and taken off at will. Character is the fabric of our being. It is the accumulation of a multitude of thoughts and choices. It is manifested in our attitudes and behavior.

It is clear that moral capacity can be built.⁶ Moral conduct flows from the integration of morality with self. Intentionally and explicitly weaving

values into the curriculum builds character. But ultimately, character is shaped and reshaped by the choices each individual makes and by the virtues he or she chooses to practice. Choice develops character, and character determines our choices.⁷

Reframing the words of George Gallup, Jr.: “The *focus* of the 20th Century was on *outer space*,” but for us living and working in the 21st century, the focus “must be on the *inner space* of the human life.”⁸ We are called to action, to help our students build and rebuild their characters.

On September 11, 2001, we witnessed in stark relief cowardice contrasted with courage; the acts of fanatical villains who were determined to annihilate innocent victims con-

trasted with the behavior of self-sacrificing rescue workers who were willing to die, if necessary, in heroic attempts to save the lives of strangers.

September 11 was more than a wake-up call to the vulnerability of America and the world. On that day, the curtain on the cosmic conflict between good and evil was drawn aside. It is a conflict that has raged throughout the millennia. It impacts the whole world—every nation, community, and family. It is a conflict also fought out within the human heart. Each of us is caught in the midst of that conflict.

History records that 2,700 years ago, Hezekiah, a youthful leader stepped onto the stage of life. His nation was under attack from within and without. Time-honored values had been neglected and forgotten. Invading nations of superior strength were steadily advancing, victorious in every encounter. The future looked hopeless.

In the midst of the chaos and con-



fusion of the time came a simple and profound message. It was carried by Micah, a little-known prophet preacher. He crafted a prescription for living in just eight action-packed words—"act justly," "love mercy," "walk humbly with God."

To act justly is a mandate to investigate carefully; to analyze rigorously; to conclude fairly; to take well-reasoned, unbiased action.

To love mercy is a calling to connect with broken humanity; to forgive and restore; to be God's agents of love and compassion.

To walk humbly with God is an invitation to a lifelong journey of dedication, nurture, and renewal; to an intimate journey—the creature with the Creator, the fallible with the Infallible, and the sinner with the Saviour; to an authentic journey that frees us to look inward and face our own brokenness. It is an invitation to joyfully accept God's unconditional love and grace; to walk as Jesus walked in constant communion with His Father.

These eight action-packed words are as relevant in the 21st century as they were millennia ago. They are a call to core virtues. They are a prescription for daily living in the midst of our complex and challenged world. They are values that must guide us as educators and engineers, as musicians and merchants, as business executives and bus-boys, as parents and children, and as accountants, athletes, and administrators.

In the 30 years that followed Hezekiah's coronation, remarkable progress was achieved. He led the nation of Judah to heartfelt revival and sweeping reformation. Prosperity followed.

But Hezekiah was not immune to failure. His greatest point of vulnerability was not when, as a 25-year-old newly crowned king, he faced deplorable apostasy—the legacy of his father's reign. It was not when his royal capital was under siege by Sennacherib and 180,000 fearsome Assyrian warriors. It was not as he lay

critically ill and at the point of death. Hezekiah's greatest point of vulnerability came at a time of marked prosperity. Blind to his dependence upon God, Hezekiah became proud of his accomplishments. Pride eclipsed the reality that he was no longer walking with God. Tragic were the consequences of Hezekiah's failure.

May we learn from the past. May we daily walk with God and testify to the reality that "a life centered in God is a life of completeness."¹⁰

In each of our schools, we must make the focus of our "excellent Christ-centered" education to be both "useful human service" and "uncompromising personal integrity."¹¹

Teachers, you are builders for eternity. Model for your students the highest Christian virtues, which are foundational for competent professionals and responsible persons. Integrate a vibrant faith in God into your teaching so that your alumni will be inspired to integrate faith into personal living and professional ministry. Prepare them for a life which is here and now and stretches into eternity.¹² Inspire them. Help your students choose to live "God-centered lives," "walking humbly" with the Sovereign Lord of the Universe, blending professional competence with personal virtues; turning away from power, prestige, position, possessions, passion, popularity, and pleasure; and courageously plunging into the ocean of need that waits for self-forgetful service.

Members of the governing board, "Preserve the core mission" as you "Stimulate progress"¹³ in your school. Require strict accountability of yourselves and your administration. Always select dedicated, competent servant leaders. Support and nurture your president.

Administrators, seek to demonstrate a "rare blend of personal humility, intense professional will,"¹⁴ and vision. As challenges confront you—

and they will—may you have the persistence of Noah, the foresight of Joseph, the patience of Moses, the steadfastness of Elisha, the wisdom of Solomon, the courage of Nehemiah, the daring of Daniel, and the ardor of Paul. May you daily sense the presence of God and experience His sustaining power in your life.

May God continue to bless each of you as you fulfill your mission and reach out to impact a disordered and hurting world. ✍



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The spoken quality has been retained.

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