fter a busy day of ab-
sorbing lectures and
studying in the library,
I dropped my things at
the front door of our
home and followed my nose directly to
the kitchen. There I greeted my wife,
Bernie, who was busy preparing supper
for the family. A few moments later, we
heard our 3-year-old exclaim excitedly
from the living room, “Look! Look at
me!” Not knowing what to expect,
Bernie and I quickly poked our heads
into the living room. There we saw our
young son shuffling across the carpeted
floor, wearing my pontoon-like shoes
ovetop his tiny ones and dragging my
textbook-laden Samsonite briefcase
along beside him. When he saw us, he
broke into a broad, toothy grin and
proudly declared, “Look, I’m Daddy!
I’m Daddy!”

At that moment, I was struck, in a
simple and yet profound way, by the se-
riousness of the responsibility Bernie
and I had assumed when we chose to
have children. We had created three lit-
tle sensory sponges that were hard-
wired to imitate human beings who
served as role models in their young
lives.¹ And whether or not we fully real-
ized it at that time, during their forma-
tive years, we, along with their teachers,
were their most influential role models.

**By Beholding We Are Transformed**

Social learning theory—alternately
termed observational learning, vicari-
ous learning, or modeling—is histori-
cally associated with Albert Bandura
and continues to be a very influential
theory of learning and development.²
Bandura’s contribution to this theory is
only a half century old, but the princi-
ples of the theory are ancient. Nearly
2,000 years earlier, Paul confirmed,
under the inspiration of the Holy
Spirit, that by beholding the glory of
God—that is, His character—we be-
come transformed into His image (2
Corinthians 3:18). Undoubtedly, the
Holy Spirit has much to do with this
transformation. Still, it seems to me
that the principle that our observation
of others results in our being trans-
formed, at least in part, into their

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BY KEITH J. LEAVITT

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http://jae.adventist.org
image is a divinely ordained mecha-
nism of human development. Children
learn “by internalizing the activities,
habits, vocabulary and ideas of the
members of the community in which
they grow up.”9 Their attitudes and be-
liefs are also formed through this mod-
eling process. How important it is then,
that as adults with an interest in the
growth and development of young people, we carefully consider and mon-
it the “community” in which our
young people participate. Obviously, a
critical component of every
child’s “community” is the
school he or she attends and,
within the walls of that school,
the teachers who interact on a
daily basis with students.

The Christian Teacher’s
Solemn Responsibility

James wrote in his letter to
the early church, “My brothers
and sisters, not many of you
should become teachers, be-
cause you know that we who
teach will be judged more
strictly” (James 3:1, NCV).10
While the context of this pas-
sage was religious teachers in
the fledgling Christian Church,
the principle applies equally
well, I believe, to educators at
all levels in Adventist schools
today. We need to reflect seri-
ously on our responsibility as
teachers because our students are seek-
ing out role models, consciously or
subconsciously, to assist them in defin-
ing who they are and who they will be-
come. It is because of the potential in-
fluence that teachers have over their
students that James declares we will be
judged more strictly. Long-time Ad-
vendist educator George Akers reminds
us not to “ever underestimate the im-
pact of a teacher! These youngsters are
hero-worshippers by nature, and the in-
fuence of godly teachers on their
emerging characters is incalculable.”11
And while Akers’ use of the term
youngsters may imply application to
lower levels of education only, I believe
that college-age young people continue
to look for positive adult role models to
guide them on their journey to becom-
ing mature Christians. Although I had
assumed this for a long time, it became
clearly evident to me recently, coinci-
dentially enough, during the writing of
this article.

A college student sat down beside
me after one of our mid-week commu-
nity worship services and inquired if he
might ask me a personal question. Al-
though I had no idea where this con-
versation was heading, I replied, “Sure,
go ahead!”

“How old are you?” he inquired.
When I told him, he explained that he
was encouraged to see that it was possi-
ble for someone, such as me, to fall in
love with Jesus and to stay in love with
Him over the years (at least to the ripe
old age of 59)! I quickly explained that
my “marriage” to Jesus was not perfect,
and that I was not exempt from the spir-
ital warfare raging around me—how-
ever, I was committed to building my re-
lationship with Christ on a daily basis.

I don’t know this young man very
well—I’ve never had him in any of my
classes at the university—so I don’t
know what he had seen or heard to
make him say what he did. But appar-
etly he had been watching and listen-
ing to whatever I was modeling on
campus day after day, which had had

an impact on him.

Likely, there are a few teachers in
Adventist schools who have no desire
to be anyone’s role model or to be
viewed as an example of what a life
committed to Christ might look like.
They simply want to teach their subject
matter and keep their personal lives to
themselves. But for any teacher, and es-
pecially a Christian teacher, to say, “I
have no interest in being a role model
for my students and, furthermore, I re-
fuse to assume this responsibility”
would be like my saying, after
my children were born, “I
don’t want to be a father, and I
certainly don’t want to assume
the responsibility of being a
parent.” It’s too late at that
point! And for teachers at an
Adventist school, it is too late
the moment they step into the
classroom.

Fortunately, most Adventist
teachers recognize as central
to their calling the impact that they
can have on their stu-
dents’ personal lives. In fact,
when I ask freshman educa-
tion students their reasons for
choosing teaching as a career
path, the majority of them cite
the desire to positively influ-
ence the lives of young people
for Christ. When teachers keep
this lofty goal in mind, they
fulfill the expectations that
most parents, the church, and God
place upon them—as summarized in
the following General Conference pol-
icy statement: “The teacher holds a
central place of importance. Ideally, the
teacher should be both a committed
Adventist Christian and an exemplary
role model of the Christian graces and
professional competencies.”

The Teacher as Role Model

Serving as a role model for students
of all ages is a profoundly important
part of our vocation. It is not merely a
recommended “add on” that we might
accept if we are so inclined. Instead, it
is a fundamental and central compo-
nent of teaching.

Years after studying with a teacher

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who had an important impact on our lives, most of us have forgotten most of his or her subject matter, but we remember the person. Some 25 years after enrolling in her classes, I remember little of the specifics in her graduate lectures, but I do remember Ms. Henderson (not her real name). I recall her pleasant smile and friendly, welcoming ways. I remember how she taught without pretense; how she valued all students as individuals and praised their contributions to the class. I remember wanting to teach like her; to be like her. And most of all, I remember her humble declaration that one day she would like to sit as a student in one of my classes.

Ever since then, from time to time, on days when I think a lecture I’ve presented has gone particularly well—and on those days when I know it has gone horribly wrong—I have asked myself, “I wonder what Ms. Henderson would have thought if she’d attended my classroom today?” A quarter of a century later, she continues to help mold me as a Christian teacher.

Hand to a Higher Standard

As teachers, we share in the responsibility of guiding human beings for good or evil by our actions, our words, and our very looks. This is why “we who teach will be judged more strictly.” People in positions of power over others are held to a higher standard—and rightly so. Whether or not I choose the responsibility, when I stand in front of my class in a church school, I stand in the place of Jesus. And thus the consequences of my teaching extend far beyond whether or not Johnny learns to read or Suzie understands her real name. I recall her pleasant smile and friendly, welcoming ways. I remember how she taught without pretense; how she valued all students as individuals and praised their contributions to the class. I remember wanting to teach like her; to be like her. And most of all, I remember her humble declaration that one day she would like to sit as a student in one of my classes.

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The Teacher’s Mandate

As Christian teachers today, our mandate is similar, to impress the person of Christ upon our students. We may do this in the classroom by seeking ways to effectively integrate our faith into the academic content of our lessons. However, opportunities may just as easily present themselves in the lunchroom or playground, on field trips, in the community, or even in our homes. However, opportunities may just as easily present themselves in the lunchroom or playground, on field trips, in the community, or even in our homes.

Parker J. Palmer points out this vital truth: “teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together.” In light of this, each of us who teach should reflect seriously upon who we are. What is the condition of our soul? Is there harmony between what we’re saying and what we’re teaching; between what we want our students to become and who we really are? The success that Jesus enjoyed as a teacher with His class of 12 students reflects this principle. “The most complete illustration of Christ’s methods as a teacher is found in His training of the first disciples. . . . To them, above all others, He gave the advantage of His own companionship. Through personal association He impressed Himself upon these chosen collaborators.” As a signet ring impresses its seal upon the warm wax, so the Savior impressed His character upon the disciples. Or in Palmer’s words, He projected His soul upon them. While they ate together or walked along the seashore; as they sat on the mountainside reflecting upon eternal truth or went about providing for a needy family; whether worshiping in a synagogue or fellowshipping at a wedding feast, Jesus modeled for His disciples, His students, who He was in His innermost soul and who He wanted them to become.

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trips, and even in the supermarket outside the regular school hours.

The extent to which we are able to impress Christ upon our students, in any situation, will depend upon the condition of our innermost being and how closely it reflects the image of the Savior. Paul encourages us to “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:1, 2, NIV). This is a tall order—to be imitators of God and to live a life of love. How do we even begin to do that? The starting point, I think, is found in that very same verse—recognizing how much God loves us. He refers to us as “dearly loved children.” Christ loved us so much that He was willing to sacrifice His very life for us. That should be our motivation to imitate Him: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19, NIV).

The philosopher of Adventist education, Ellen G. White, explains: “As we meditate upon the perfections of the Savior, we shall desire to be wholly transformed and renewed in the image of His purity. There will be a hungering and thirsting of soul to become like Him whom we adore.”13 “The love that was manifested toward him in the death of Christ, awakens a response of thankful love, and in answer to sincere prayer, the believer is brought from grace to grace, from glory to glory, until by beholding Christ, he is changed into the same image.”14 As an example of this transforming power, White describes the beloved disciple, John, in this way: “In adoration and love he beheld the Savior, until his character reflected the character of his Master.”15 What an illustration of the power of modeling!

**By Beholding, We Are Changed**

Do you desire to reflect Christ in your character, even as John and his fellow disciples did? Do you wish to impress Jesus upon the young people you teach? How can you do this? **Behold the Savior, and you will be changed.** Two factors are important: the amount of time we spend beholding and the quality of that time. Of John it is said he beheld the Savior until the change took place. We aren’t told how long it took, but John continued to behold Jesus until the transformation occurred. If we sense that our characters have not been completely changed, perhaps we haven’t allowed sufficient time to observe His lovely character.

Ellen White suggests “it would be well to spend a thoughtful hour each day reviewing the life of Christ from the manger to Calvary. We should take it point by point and let the imagination vividly grasp each scene, especially the closing ones of His earthly life.”16 What do you suppose would happen if we beheld the Savior for a thoughtful hour each day, allowing Him to model His perfect character to us? Based on research by Bandura or other social learning theorists and the testimony of Scripture, I believe we would begin to reflect the character of our Master. Then, as we model the beauty of Christ to our students, they too will be transformed. “This is the secret of power over your pupils. Reflect Him.”17

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**NOTES AND REFERENCES**

12. Ibid., p. 52. Italics supplied.
15. __________, *True Education*, op. cit., p. 54.