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GLIMPSES OF HUMAN NATURE: SOME IMPLICATIONS

FOR SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST EDUCATION

by

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INTRODUCTION

Through the centuries the mystery of the nature of man has been debated, and the debates are not just as academic exercises but as vital issues. "Today, more than at any time," Berkouwer stated, "the question 'What is man?' is at the center of theological and philosophical concern."¹ Trueblood, in a very significant statement, asserted that "until we are clear on what man is, we shall not be clear about much else."²

In the statement which undergirds her entire philosophy of Seventh-day Adventist education, Ellen G. White points out that

In order to understand what is comprehended in the work of education, we need to consider both the nature of man and the purpose of God in creating him. We need to consider also the change in man's condition through the coming in of a knowledge of evil, and God's plan for still fulfilling His glorious purpose in the education of the human race.³

Surprisingly, in spite of the accumulated wealth of knowledge from the past on the subject of human nature, scientists still hope for a breakthrough in this field. Dr. J. A. Wheeler, physics professor at Princeton, indicated the state of this problem in an article for American Scientist:

Today no mystery more attracts the minds of distinguished pioneers from the field of molecular biology than the mechanism of brain action. . . Many feel that the decisive step forward is waiting for an idea, an as-yet-undiscovered concept, a central theme and thesis. Whatever it will prove to be, we can believe that it will somehow touch the tie between mind and matter, between observer and observed.⁴

As can be seen in the various approaches in education and every other social endeavor, people are divided on their understanding of human nature and its significance. The entire spectrum on this issue has been dealt with by theological, psychological, and educational literature.

One of the disciplines in which man is studied vigorously today is psychology.⁵ Focusing on human and animal behavior, psychology considers a broad range of theories and practices as well as the latest scientific methods of analysis and treatment. It is extensive enough as a field to gather data from many subdisciplines--from physiological psychology to social psychology. Several major schools of thought have been produced by its breadth of study and method. Many of the key issues about man have been debated by these schools among themselves.

For the purpose of this paper, two basic views espoused by these models which have a direct bearing on education will be considered--one centering on the concept that man's behavior is determined and the other, that man is innately evil or innately good.

TWO BASIC VIEWS

B. F. Skinner, famous Harvard psychologist, has popularized a deterministic model of man's behavior both by his year of experimentation on rats and by two of his books, <u>Walden Two</u>⁶ and Beyond Freedom and Dignity.⁷

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Determinism is a belief that a man's behavior is inevitable, and any sense of freedom is therefore an illusion. All that can be observed in the experience of man are rewards stimulating the occurrence of behaviors. Skinner's views have led him to conclude that man is only a machine controlled by the rewarding and punishing features of his environment.

The second concept has focused on two polar stands concerning man. The first stresses the animalness and evil of human nature. Dostoevsky, a great Russian novelist whose characters are usually portrayed in dramatic situations as they struggle between good and evil, pronounced him as a dilettante whom nature has left as a comparatively incomplete animal. He wrote, "The ant knows the law of the anthill. The bee knows the law of the beehive. . . It is only man that does not know his own law."⁸

Nietzche, a German poet and classical scholar who deeply influenced many philosophers, writers, and psychologists of the 1900s, boasted that he was one of the few philosophers who was also a psychologist. Although he espoused a major psychological theory that all human behavior was basically motivated by the "will to power," he regarded man as a "not yet fixed form of animal."⁹

In his book, <u>Myths in Adventism</u>, Knight¹⁰ enumerates other negative proponents as well as those on the opposite end of the scale. Hobbes, a philosopher, pictured human life as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Morris, a biologist, saw man as "a naked ape" and Edwards, a theologian, described him as a

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"loathsome insect being held over the pit of hell by an angry God."

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On the other hand, man is a "god," or at least developing into one. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment, for instance, had a lot to say about human perfectibility. Views of man's goodness sparked the social reform movement of the nineteenth century. Rousseau, the French philosopher, promoted the theme of man's goodness in his well-known work <u>Emile</u>. Psychologists of today, such as Carl Rogers and his colleagues, proclaim the positiveness and dignity of the human being.

What point of the spectrum do we find Seventh-day Adventists? If indeed, as Ellen White claims, on our understanding of the nature of man depends our comprehension of the educational work, then it is imperative that we know where we stand. Again, Ellen White emphasizes that in order to gain this knowledge, we will need to understand four things about man: (1) his original nature, (2) God's purpose in creating him, (3) the change in the human condition through the coming in of a knowledge of evil, and (4) God's plan for still fulfilling His glorious purpose in the education of the human race.

Put another way, these four items, I believe, would correspond to the four basic questions,¹¹ the answers to which form our ultimate faith commitment setting the contours of our world view. These foundational questions are: (1) Who am I? (2) Where am I? (3) What's wrong? and (4) What's the remedy?

THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST VIEW

Divine revelation presents original man as coming from the Creator's hand.¹² In this state, man was upright and perfect in every way. Next to angels, he was the noblest of God's created beings (Psalm 8:5, 6). His nature was like that of God, because he was made in the image of his Maker and was endowed with powers like His (Gen. 1:26). His mind was well balanced, and his thoughts, pure and holy. A free moral creature, he was in complete harmony with his Creator with whom he held happy face-to-face communion.

In the Garden of Eden where the first human couple, Adam and Eve, were provided their first ideal home, the devil appeared. Manifesting himself in the form of a serpent, he successfully tempted the holy pair. Through their own choice, Adam and Eve disobeyed the Creator and yielded to evil. As a result, they were cast out of Paradise. This fateful chapter in history, referred to as the Fall of man, marked the change in the human condition."¹³

A train of fatal consequences followed in the wake of man's willful disobedience--the eating of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, contrary to God's express command. The mingling of the evil and the good confused his mind, deadening not only his mental reserves but also his spiritual forces. Through transgression his "powers were perverted and selfishness took the place of love. The whole human organism was degraded and impaired, rendering his faculties weak and powerless against evil."¹⁴

By sin man was estranged from God. It would have been eternal alienation and darkness for him except that the Creator, in His all-excelling love, did not give man up to the outcomes of his

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perverse decision. God sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to bridge the chasm between heaven and man. Through Christ's sacrifice some ray of divine light shown on every soul. "Not only intellectual but spiritual power, a perception of right, a desire for goodness, exists in every heart."¹⁵

But over these positive impulses a strong opposite power is persistently struggling for dominance. Left alone in its sinful state, "humanity does not tend upward, toward the divine, but downward, toward the satanic."¹⁶ Furthermore, "temptations from without find an answering chord within the heart, and the feet turn imperceptibly toward evil."¹⁷

Thus, although man was created in God's likeness, his history presents a confusing paradox and a frightening contradiction. The apostle Paul confessed this predicament in his own life: "When I want to do good, I don't; and when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. Now if I am doing what I don't want to, it is plain where the trouble is: sin still has me in its evil grasp. It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong" (Rom. 7:19-21, TLB).

V. Norskov Olsen, a past president of Loma Linda University in highlighting the nature of man in the quintessential setting of the God-man relationship, points out tha man is ingenuously optimistic and hopelessly pessimistic, acting divinely and beastly.¹⁸

The only hope for "escape from the pit of sin in which we are sunken . . . is Christ."¹⁹ He alone can regenerate man's heart and make man victorious over his proclivity to evil. Man's

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situation and only hope are depicted in these words:

Our natural tendencies . . . have in them the seeds of moral death. Unless we become vitally connected with God, we cannot resist the unhallowed effects of self-love, self-indulgence, and temptation to sin. . . All our good works are dependent on a power outside of ourselves; therefore there needs to be a continued reaching out of the heart after God.²⁰

A more forceful presentation of this sole remedy, formed outside of man but always available if he so desires it, is brought out in the following delineation:

Our hearts are evil, and we cannot change them. . . . Education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort, all have their proper sphere, but there they are powerless. They may produce an outward correctness of behavior, but they cannot change the heart; they cannot purify the springs of life. There must be a power working from within, a new life from above, before men can be changed from sin to holiness. That power is Christ.²¹

The transformation of man's heart is, therefore, the initial step in the fulfillment of God's purpose for man's life. When man is restored to harmony with his Maker, he becomes an instrument in drawing his fellow human beings to the Creator. He becomes God's co-laborer in their salvation.²² In this plan of Christian service, man is on the way to becoming all that God has made it possible for him to be. Lofty indeed is the expectation for him: "Higher than the highest human thought can reach is God's ideal for His children. Godliness, Godlikeness, is the goal to be reached."²³

However, God's ultimate goal for man is beyond description. No human eyes have seen it, no mortal ears have heard it, and no sin-weakened heart has ever conceived it (I Cor. 2:9). Those who will bear the reproduction of His character will live with Him

throughout unending time. Then His original plan for man, which has been thwarted by sin, will find full realization. "Eternity alone can reveal the glorious destiny to which man, restored to God's image, may attain."²⁴ A glimpse of this indescribable experience is offered in this paragraph:

There, immortal minds will contemplate with neverfailing delight the wonders of creative power, the mysteries of redeeming love. . . Every faculty will be developed, every capacity increased. The acquirement of knowledge will not weary the mind or exhaust the energies. There the grandest enterprises may be carried forward, the loftiest aspirations reached, the highest ambitions realized; and still there will arise new heights to surmount, new wonders to admire, new truths to comprehend, fresh objects to call forth the powers of mind and soul and body.²⁵

RECAPITULATION

Man, made in the image of his Maker, had perfect physical features and a perfect mind--holy, pure, noble, and God-directed. Although fashioned without blemish by the omnipotent Craftsman, the creature was not simply going to be a robot. So the divine seed was planted in his heart--the power of choice. With man, therefore, was left the decision as to whether he would serve God--which was the original purpose of creating him.

However, the Fall-of-Man story changed the rosy scenario of the creature. Through disobedience, he reaped the consequence of a dimmed, weakened, and confused mind--unable to clearly distinguish between right and wrong. Just like an object rolling on a plane inclined downward, man would have crashed in the abyss. But divine love would not let him go. Rescue was provided and possible.

God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to save humanity. The cross on which Christ died symbolized the change in the nature of man. The vertical plank represented his positive propensities, his desire for goodness, and his ability to discern right and wrong. On the other hand, the horizontal pole cuts across the vertical. The negative aspect of human nature embeds the opposing forces and the bent to evil. Nothing is strong enough to counteract these antagonistic influences. Man's only hope is in Christ.

As long as man is plugged to that Source and the relationship, like electricity, flows through unclogged channels, there is victory over the weakness of human nature. Therefore, man's condition after the fall necessitated a rehabilitation, a restoration of the divine qualities endowed him which were marred by his succumbing to evil. The way by which man can dwell on the Creator's attributes through his thoughts and feelings would be the only path to that restoration. This could appropriately be called character development.

In this perspective, the educational process takes on a significant role. The teaching-learning situation becomes a medium through which values are transmitted to the learner towards the shaping and reinforcement of character.

Character development involves the whole life span in all its facets--physical, mental, and spiritual. As the human being, aided by the power of grace, presses on this upward road of character formation, he is actually drawn closer and closer to his beginning state at creation--his God-imageness. This stage

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finds its consummation with Christ's return when those who are restored to Godlikeness live with Him forever. Thus, the Christian worldview of human nature begins with the order of creation and proceeds to restoration as the goal of salvation.

IMPLICATIONS

Thus, the Seventh-day Adventist view of man is revelational, a disclosure by the Creator to His creation. It also maintains that the ultimate description of human nature embraces man's past, present, and future; his entire being and purpose, his relationship to himself, his fellow humans, and his Creator.

Why is this understanding so essential to the work of Seventhday Adventist education? The answer brings on implications, particularly in the following aspects: teaching behavior, uniqueness of persons, curriculum, discipline, and the teacher's role.

TEACHING BEHAVIOR

The teacher who believes that her students came from the Creator's hand treats her ward with care. She knows that in each heart are two forces struggling for the upper hand, and negative aspects of behavior--incompetence, coldness, harsh words, sarcasm, put-downs, humiliation, or anything which batters the self-concept-fan their bent to evil.

On the other hand, her understanding, support, approachability, competence, trustworthiness, and warmth enhance her students' desire for goodness. Her own life serves as a model of what she wants her students to become. However, she knows that such modeling is

possible only when she is empowered by the Master Teacher. Because she, like her students, has two contradicting forces vying for supremacy in her own life, her constant connection with Christ becomes a necessity and a privilege.

Since thoughts and feelings are the fabric of character, the integrated teacher considers this truth when dealing especially with misbehaving and deviant students. They may tax her patience, but she takes a different view--that they are embattled by evil. Therefore, she understands that their misbehavior is not intended as a personal affront. Instead, she believes the Lord put her there to steady their emotions and to say through her presence and disposition: Here, take my hand and let me help you over the hump.

UNIQUENESS OF PERSONS

Man is related to God in all his creaturely relationships. The Biblical view of man never asks attention for man in himself, but demands our fullest attention for man in his relation to God. This relationship to his Maker, De Graaff and Olthuis contend, "is not something added to his humanness; his humanness depends on this relation."²⁶

What then is so special about you and me? The Biblical answer is the amazing fact that our Creator was prepared to do for us all what Christ did and suffered in His incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. "Our dignity has nothing to do with occupying a geographical hub of the universe, or being the product of a special process," Mackay²⁷ reminds us. Further,

he says that we matter simply because God conceived us in His own image so that He can address us, plead with us, rescue us, and forgive us. "If we only grasp what this means, it makes any selfsatisfied posturing on our part unthinkable."²⁸

As God's creatures, persons have minds and wills and a disposition to gain competence and abilities in a vast variety of endeavors. We educators must consider the unique complexities and multifaceted make-up of our students. We must remember that they are more valuable than things or even the work we do. Beyond these, we must recognize that persons are whole and that each individual is unique, and worthy of our consideration, concern, and care. "To do otherwise is to distort the image of the Creator in each one of us."²⁹

CURRICULUM

Fractured by the Fall in all aspects--physical, mental, and spiritual--God's image in man has to be restored. Seventh-day Adventist education must seek the restoration of that balanced image in each individual life. If education is to be redemptive, every curriculum--formal or informal--must develop the total person in integrated wholeness.

A curriculum embodies values in relation to understandings, attitudes, skills, and behaviors shared with students. Curricular goals and purposes must be based on values consistent with the Christian world view. The worth of individuals as created in the image of God can be affirmed in our adaptation of teaching styles to enable students to learn and apply God's truths in ways

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consistent with their learning styles.

Curricular planning which affirms the creative potential of each person must allow for open-ended responses necessary for creative expression in the classroom. This implies the necessity of enabling students to think Christianly about any area of study, and integrating truth in various areas to God's truth as revealed in Scriptures wherever possible.

Also involved in curricular planning is the need to pursue values in the home, the school, the church, and the community. Values in these institutional orders have to be examined now and then in order to see that they do not run counter to values and purposes in the curriculum.

Change and transformation, evaluation and adaptation are realities to consider and plan for in developing any curriculum. Without a certain degree of flexibility and adaptability, a curriculum may proclaim our preference for things rather than people.

Our best thinking and most earnest efforts are called on as we educators accept the ongoing challenge of producing educational programs that will facilitate, foster, and revitalize the work of restoration.

DISCIPLINE

The Biblical ideal of discipline is self-control. Solomon argued that "he who rules his spirit" is better "than he who takes a city" (Prov. 16:32). The disciplined person does not have others controlling him. He has charge over his life and actions. He is

responsible. Combs ³⁰ underscores that "learning to be responsible requires being allowed to make decisions, to observe results, and to deal with the consequences of those decisions."

In this matter of discipline, every student must be recognized as God's created being, purchased at infinite cost. He is not an object to control or a machine to manipulate, but one endowed with the power of choice and mental ability. "The Fall did not obliterate human rationality; rather it twisted it so that in all our thoughts we are prone to error. . . . But even after the Fall there are more than vestiges of intelligence."³¹

Therefore, mistakes, it should be remembered, are a part of life and learning. Implicit principles in Christian discipline are love and freedom, freedom to choose and fail, which are God's ways of developing character in His creatures.

Another important consideration in discipline is its relation to the emotions. "In many ways," Gaebelein ³² declares, the acid test of a Christian school or college is its handling of discipline." Here, integration centers on love, justice, and responsibility-and the greatest of these is love. Therefore, far more important than all disciplinary techniques is the administration of discipline as an exhibit of acquaintance with Christ's love and direction by the Holy Spirit, patient understanding, willingness to talk a situation out, and above all, time to pray about it. These essentials to the administration of discipline in Christian integrity, Gaebelein further points out, may sometimes result in an action of a drastic kind, "but even then Christian love will do its restoring and healing work."

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ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Our principal function as Seventh-day Adventist teachers is redemption, because "in the highest sense, the work of education and the work of redemption are one."³³ Ever remembering that the students under our care are image-bearers of God, we cannot be just competent professionals in our own line and <u>in loco parentis</u> for them. Our calling demands that we be more than these. Akers³⁴ convincingly suggests that Seventh-day Adventist teachers with a Christian world view are, in addition, pastors, prophets, and priests to their students.

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This image of the SDA teacher implies that the teacher does not present himself as one who is an authority but one who is subject, with his students, to the authority of God through His Word, and who is concerned with showing them how to understand the Word as livable truth.

In order to serve as a model of Scripture's life meaning, a close and personal relationship between the teacher and his students, allowing the latter to come to know the former as a person, should exist. If learning is to be a life-sharing experience, then exposure to the teacher's inner states is of vital importance. Richards ³⁵ maintains that to limit our idea of teaching to that which secular culture has defined is "to emasculate the concept as it is biblically portrayed, and to shut our eyes to the significance of life itself as the principal occasion for a teacher's ministry."

This teacher-student relationship, enhanced as a deep caring for one another develops, exemplifies love as the touchstone of Christlikeness, a great truth Seventh-day Adventist teachers are expected to model. It is in this kind of interaction that the "spark of the divine" present in every heart can shine brighter and brighter.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Our glimpses and understanding of human nature in the Christian world view inevitably opens our eyes to our awesome role as Seventh-day Adventist educators--not formed in the traditional classroom image, but expanded to all settings and occasions where we can mirror how it is to relate to our Creator while leading our students into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

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