

# FACE VALUES: Liberal Education's Imperative

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hat is the role of values in higher education? After decades of debate, a consensus is emerging:

- Colleges and universities inevitably transmit values.
- College students expect their schooling to solidify their values and beliefs.
- Higher education and its context of values give society its best hope of recovering a sense of purpose and direction.

Every educational institution—public, private, secular, or religious—must strengthen the values that propelled it into existence and continue to keep it alive.

Of late, demands for a re-emphasis on values are coming from many sectors. A recent one is the Wingspread Group on Higher Education, a working group of 16 well-known American public and private educators and corporate executives who spent part of 1993 answering the question, "What does society need from higher education?" Their answer, spelled out in detail in a recent report, covers three basic areas: taking values seriously, putting student learning first, and creating a nation of learners.<sup>1</sup> In many ways, the last two objectives depend upon the first, for the tendency to undervalue classroom teaching and the increasing pessimism about the citizenry's ability to think are related to the widely decried befuddlement about values.

Just what does "values" mean in the educational context? The term is meaningless unless it involves moral choice. Moral choice depends largely upon the ability to sense differences between

BY TERRIE DOPP AAMODT

specified alternatives, after which conscience urges the person to choose the “right” or “moral” or “ethical” ones.

Our values are what we consider most worthwhile or most desirable. They are related to our beliefs, although they are not identical. Beliefs are propositions we hold to be true; values are what we hold to be important. Values determine priorities and underlie actions, but they are usually implicit and unspoken. It is possible to talk long and passionately about beliefs without acknowledging the values implied by those beliefs. Sometimes these discussions of beliefs are mistakenly labeled as discussions of values.

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mission of what is worthwhile,” as the educational philosopher R. S. Peters defines it, then values determine the goals of the process.<sup>2</sup> The boundaries of moral education are defined by behavior as well as by terminology. Because values are tied to actions, moral values are taught most effectively by example

rather than by fiat, since actions speak louder than words.

### **Liberal Education and Values**

In a college or university setting, moral education takes place mostly in the context of liberal education. When Cardinal Newman spelled out his definition of liberal education in 1852, he noted that the word *liberal* is derived from a Latin root that means “free,” and that its opposite is “servile.”<sup>3</sup> Servility is associated with slavery and passivity.

Given this context, then, a liberal education includes the freedom to explore issues, including those questions whose answers are not apparent, and it includes the freedom to follow truth where it leads. It implies that the individual takes responsibility for active, involved decision-making. Stated in another way, liberal education avoids intellectual passivity and indoctrination. According to Peters, it implies that a student’s “outlook is transformed by what he knows.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, liberal education must provide the student with basic information, tools to make sound judgments, and the discernment to understand the moral impact of choices. Servile training, on the other hand, would transmit information but would not equip students to make judgments. It is easy to see how moral monstrosities or nonthinking basket cases could emerge from servile training.

### **Universal Values**

We are most likely to achieve truth and understanding when we examine our claims freely in an open, congenial atmosphere. This free exchange must occur to ensure a liberal learning environment. Within such an atmosphere, certain ideas will emerge consistently. These common threads reveal widely shared attitudes and approach a sense of universal objective value. They are what C. S. Lewis called “the Tao” and are common to major belief systems throughout history. The Tao, or “universal moral path,” affirms values such as honesty, fairness, and consideration for others. Lewis claims that philoso-

phies purporting to be new systems are merely fragments of the Tao, “arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation.”<sup>5</sup> The values of the Tao, even if only implicit, provide the most compatible environment for examining and evaluating ideas. However, the entire process must take place in an atmosphere of free choice, not coercion. Coercion is servile.

The values of liberal education partake of the Tao’s mandate of consideration for others. An excellent way to encourage compassion and to ensure its existence is service learning. What better way is there to exercise the skills and values of caring for others? Strong and growing community-service programs on many campuses are one of the most encouraging signs that colleges do transmit positive values. (See Ernest Bursey’s article on page 15.)

### SDAs and Liberal Education

Seventh-day Adventist higher education exists within the values of liberal education. Our commitment to the tradition of liberal education dates back to 1910, when Ellen White advised the denomination to upgrade its school of medicine to produce fully certified

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physicians.<sup>6</sup> Her directive ensured that the feeder colleges would also seek accreditation and develop strong liberal-education programs.

The beginnings of Adventist commitment to liberal education actually occurred much earlier, however, when Ellen White and Adventist educators formed their philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Much of classic Adventist educational philosophy appears in Ellen White’s 1903 book, *Education*. For Ellen White, the Adventist educational expression of the Tao is embodied in God’s law—the Golden Rule injunction to love God and one’s neighbor. This law, she says, “guards the rights, the individuality, of

every human being.”<sup>8</sup> It forms the basis of a value system that shows how the members of an educational community should be treated. The goals of liberal education—to develop independent thinkers who hold values of fairness and compassion—are the goals of Adventist educational philosophy. Ellen White states that “true education” trains students “to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men’s thought.”<sup>9</sup> The values of truth and integrity that accompany this type of education, she says, will make students “a positive force for the stability and uplifting of society.”<sup>10</sup>

### Threats to Liberal Education

One of the reasons liberal education is in danger today is that specialization and fragmentation have separated intellect from responsibility. Adventist philosophy insists that mind, body, and spirit are interrelated and interdependent. Since Adventists do not subscribe to the philosophical dualism that separates spirit from matter and subordinates the flesh, they stress the importance of sound physical health in building intellectual strength. Throughout higher education, student health is increasingly becoming a matter of concern. Whether decrying substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, or dormitory diets that seem to consist entirely of marshmallow creme, Pop-Tarts®, and jolts of caffeine, most college leaders would envy Adventists’ awareness about health. We know that what people put into their heads and into their bodies does matter; it affects both intellectual and spiritual health. Our educational administrators could profitably give this area greater emphasis.

The Adventist belief in God as Creator leads to another significant set of values. Implicit in that belief is the need to care for God’s creation. Careful stewardship of the environment is part of the Adventist birthright that few have claimed. Seventh-day Adventism, if it is true to its principles, should exhibit the utmost tender care for the natural world and a fierce determination to protect it.

Another inescapable part of Advent-

ist heritage that affects its stance toward liberal education is apocalypticism. Nothing has been drummed into young Adventist heads over the decades more insistently than the idea that in the end, each individual will be held accountable for his or her actions. There could be no stronger incentive for cultivating independent thought, resisting coercion, rejecting servility, and embracing a liberal education.

The premillennialist bent of Adventist apocalypticism should impart an acute sensitivity to the brokenness of the world. Adventist theology teaches that the world will not get better and better. Our literal belief in a divine reckoning finds expression in Matthew 25, where the sole criterion that sends people up with the sheep or down with the goats is the way they have dealt with the most broken lives in the world. Could there be a stronger call to caring and community service?

Seventh-day Adventist higher education does not exist primarily to perpetuate a culture or a belief system. If it did, we would only be talking to ourselves, telling ourselves what we wanted to hear. Neither does Seventh-day Adventist higher education exist primarily as an Ivy League clone. Plenty of other, much more generously endowed institutions can fill that role. If Seventh-day Adventist higher education has a reason to exist, it must be because it can fill a place in the educational mosaic that no other institution can fill. And that purpose surely includes bringing a testimony and bearing witness to an educational philosophy that has something to say to the entire world, not just to the Adventist world, the Christian world, or the American world.

One might think that Christian or denominational institutions, which have spent so much time defining and proclaiming values, would be leaders in exemplifying them. However, the more rigorous the emphasis on behavior and its consequences, the more frequently opportunities for hypocrisy occur. The Gospels clearly show that the sins of lust, drunkenness, and dishonesty cannot compete with the big one—pride.

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### Recovering Our Values

It is time for Seventh-day Adventist educators and students to notice the implicit values in their educational traditions and to recover them. It is time to face values. How successfully does your college or university campus articulate and transmit its core values? Perhaps a good place to start would be to apply the points from the Wingspread Report in the section entitled "Taking Values Seriously" to your traditions and track record.

Wingspread asked: What does the core curriculum look like? Does it pro-

vide a rigorous liberal education? Will it teach students to "live rightly and well in a free society"? Any review of the general-studies program should rearticulate a response to the big questions about ultimate goals. (See the article by Fritz Guy and Rennie Schoepflin on page 4.)

### Producing Students of Character

Wingspread also asked: How does the college ensure that entering students will graduate as individuals of character? On our planning sheets, we address these matters in a myriad of classes and spiritual gatherings large and small. Adventist colleges do what most schools envy and what critics of education say colleges must do: Its inhabitants meet together as a campus community. But since those gatherings are perceived as a supplement to an already crowded academic calendar, they may be treated as annoyances rather than values-building opportunities. It ought to be possible to integrate these campus gatherings more closely into the educational enterprise. Some Adventist college faculty members are suggesting that their colleges embed into the curriculum a non-credit colloquium in Faith and Learning that meets

at the time formerly designated as “chapel.” That concept could be combined with the opportunity for students and faculty to meet together in small groups for significant blocks of time—an hour and a half weekly—to focus on various aspects of faith and learning and educating for life—whether Bible study, spirituality, science and religion, or the challenges of carrying on family and professional lives simultaneously. Required chapels and worships as we know them would become a thing of the past. These small groups and colloquia would integrate education and values and set the pattern for a lifetime of spiritual growth.

Wingspread also asked each campus to consider how they fostered these values:

- Civic virtues within its community,
- Values such as respect for the individual,
- Conviction that common interests exceed individual differences,
- Concern for those who come after us,
- Support for the freedoms in the Bill of Rights (or other statements of human rights),
- Respect for the views of others, and
- The necessity to exercise rights responsibly.

#### Values and Campus Climate

The final questions Wingspread asks

of a college apply to the institution itself: How does it model the values and skills expected? How could the general climate of civility on campus be improved? In other words, what is the tone, the general mood of your campus? How is its cultural diversity perceived? Does collegiality or mistrust characterize its system of governance?

A major reason for the coherence we have achieved on Adventist campuses is that our common Christian heritage and the Seventh-day Adventist context are stronger than our individual differences. They form the glue for the community. It is our responsibility to look for the underlying values implicit in this heritage and to articulate them. However, we must examine them carefully to ascertain their relevance to our current goals. Unless the values that arise from our traditions can bring meaning to the lives of those in the community who have a different heritage, they are not worth preserving. We would only be talking to ourselves, telling ourselves what we want to hear.

Adventist colleges and universities need not apologize for contextualizing higher education within Seventh-day Adventist Christian values, remembering that Ellen White and the Tao both demand independent thought. While coercion is inappropriate in the collegiate arena, it is appropriate to present ideas in the context of the values that

have brought Adventist higher education into being and continue to shape its existence. As long as we operate in this manner, we need not worry about being purveyors of servility.

Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities must face the large issues of values that underlie their very existence. When those values are recovered and articulated, liberal education will thrive in an atmosphere of civility, and Adventist higher education will be able to offer itself at face value. ☞

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*Terrie Dopp Aamodt is Professor of English and History at Walla Walla College, College Place, Washington. The material for this article was presented at a Walla Walla College Distinguished Faculty Lecture on Christian Education in November 1994, and at a faculty colloquium at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California, in September 1995.*

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Wingspread Group on Higher Education, *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education* (The Johnson Foundation, 1993), p. 7.
2. R. S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), pp. 31-35.
3. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, Inc., 1973), rpt. 1852 ed., p. 106.
4. Peters, p. 31.
5. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 56.
6. See *Review and Herald* (May 19, 1910) and *Medical Evangelistic Library*, No. 1, pp. 5, 15, cited in Richard A. Schaefer, *Legacy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1978), p. 92; also, George R. Knight, *Myths in Adventism* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1985), pp. 37-41.
7. “The first collection of articles from the pen of Mrs. E. G. White on the subject of Christian Education was published in 1886.” It was entitled “Selections From the Testimonies Concerning the Subject of Education,” and was followed by “Special Testimonies on Education” in 1897, and *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, published in 1900, which contained “the major part of the author’s writings on education during the years 1893-1896” (Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* [Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Assn., 1923], p. 5 (Preface)).
8. Ellen White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), pp. 16, 77. She quotes Luke 10:27.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 30.