

Institute for Christian Teaching
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

**THE TEACHER'S PERSONAL TOUCH:
THE SOCIAL DIMENSION IN ADVENTIST EDUCATION**

by
Brent Balmer
Taiwan Adventist College
Yu Chi, Taiwan

**438-00 Institute for Christian Teaching
12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904 USA**

Prepared for the
27th International Faith and Learning Seminar
Misson College, Muak Lek, Thailand
December 3-15, 2000

THE TEACHER'S PERSONAL TOUCH: THE SOCIAL DIMENSION IN ADVENTIST EDUCATION

Introduction: The Fourth Dimension

"... the function of Christian education is to restore the balanced image of God in students."
George R. Knight

The Seventh-day Adventist model of Christian education is generally portrayed as the harmonious development of three dimensions of humanity, the spiritual, the mental, and the physical, while a fourth dimension, the social, is at times also included but just as often ignored. One of the basic understandings of human beings, however, whether from a Christian perspective or any other philosophical basis is the fact that human beings are social creatures who not only desire and seek for social interaction and fulfillment but who have a basic need for that interaction. As a result, it would seem that fostering the social aspect of human development must necessarily be on a par with fostering growth in the areas of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual in any Adventist educational model.

In this essay I will propose that the social aspect of Adventist educational philosophy is one of the most important elements in the student-teacher relationship when considered in the light of the role of the Adventist teacher as an agent of salvation in his or her work as an educator. I believe that many Adventist teachers define, perhaps subconsciously, the social aspect of their profession as being limited to occasionally

mingling with students outside of class at school-sponsored functions. I would like to show the importance of carrying this notion a step further so that the social interaction between teachers and students can develop, if possible, into true, lifelong friendships. What I am imagining are relationships in which the teacher becomes not only a supplier of knowledge, a preacher of moral values, and merely a passing acquaintance in the life of the student, but a mentor as well, one who will continue as a trusted advisor and model into the years beyond the end of the student's formal educational process.

But even beyond the idea of mentoring, I believe that student-teacher relationships can possibly develop into lifelong friendships that can be meaningful to both the teacher and the student throughout their future lives. As Jesus, the Master Teacher, is the true and lasting friend of each of us who have learned of Him, so Christian teachers should also strive to develop, where possible, similar relationships with those who come under their care. Teachers stand in the place of Christ in the school, and what better goal to strive for as an educator than to be a true friend to man as Jesus was and is.

Fundamentals

"It is not good that the man should be alone."
God

As a first step in examining the role of teacher-student relationships, it is necessary to establish the philosophical basis on which social growth should be seen as an integral part of the Adventist model of education. The starting point for that task would naturally be the Bible from any Christian point of view, for the Bible is the primer for all Christian thought and practice.

Perhaps the fundamental text for establishing the four-dimensional model in Adventist education is Luke's description of the maturing process of the boy Jesus. Luke 2:52 describes that maturing process as growth in four areas: wisdom, stature, the favor of God, and the favor of man. If we consider the "favor of man" as being an indicator of social development, then it is obvious that Luke is equating the social aspect of Jesus' development with His spiritual growth (the favor of God), His mental growth (wisdom) and His physical growth (stature). Thus all four were essential elements of Jesus' maturation process through which He became not only a well-rounded personality but also the perfect Son of God and thus the ultimate pattern for all the people of His creation.

The words of this text demonstrate the importance to God of the whole person. As George Knight has pointed out, "The body is not more important than the spirit or vice versa. Whatever affects one part of man affects the whole. Balance between the spiritual, social, physical, and mental is the ideal as it is seen in the development of Jesus" (183-184).

In the Bible an awareness of the social needs of human beings becomes evident in the very first pages of Genesis where we find God declaring that it was not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18). "As a social being, he [Adam] needed the understanding, sympathy, and companionship of one who shared his nature. He needed someone with whom he could share human love" (Davidson and Steed 126). From this it is evident that the social nature of man is a God-given attribute. Thus it is something that from the beginnings of human history also required nurturing in those creatures, created in His

own image, as they began the process of growing and developing physically, mentally, and spiritually.

However, Knight also points out that “since the Fall man has suffered from a lack of health [in the spiritual, mental, social, and physical dimensions] as well as in their interrelationship,” and he states that “[p]art of the educative function of redemption is to restore man to health in each of his aspects and in his combined totality. Restoration of the image therefore has social, spiritual, mental, and physical ramifications”(184). And, as Ellen White noted, God made provision for the social needs of His children, “for the kindly and helpful associations that do so much to cultivate sympathy and to brighten and sweeten life” (*Education* 41).

Social Education and the Teacher/Pastor

A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.”
Henry Adams

Equating the social dimension of people with the spiritual, the physical, and the mental necessarily ties it as well to the educational process. Ideally, this growth process should take place in the home under the nurturing care of loving parents, for this was the divine plan of education from the earliest time. Education, as envisioned by God, was to be a family-centered activity with the parents as the teachers, instructing their children in both secular and religious lines (White, *Adventist Home* 181-182).

But, the cultural development of mankind has led through time to the situation we find evident in nearly all modern societies today in which education is primarily the

business of the school. Thus, while not the ideal, this means that teachers rather than parents now play a vital role, if not the major role, in the education of young people.

In a Christian-based educational setting this “business” of education takes on added meaning as those teachers necessarily apply themselves to the spiritual nurturing of the students under their care, as well as to the traditional secular educational endeavors of mental and physical training. And, of course, inextricably tied to all of these is the social dimension, because people develop spiritually, mentally, and physically in the setting of a formal school educational program where they must necessarily interact with other people.

George Knight speaks to this point as well when he describes the function of Christian education as a means of restoring the balanced image of God in students and thus as a redemptive act. He states, “If education is viewed in this manner, then the role of the teacher is ministerial and pastoral in the sense that the teacher is leading his young people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ” (186).

Social Development and Holistic Education

“[The curriculum] cannot focus merely on the mental or any other part. It must develop the whole man.”
George R. Knight

One distinction between the social education of students as compared to their spiritual, mental, and physical education in a school setting would seem to be the lack of emphasis placed on that facet of growth in the core curriculum. Typically, the majority of class offerings in a school are aimed at the mental, spiritual, and physical development of students while few, if any, classes are offered that deal specifically with social growth.

That phase of education appears to be tied more to the co-curricular and extra-curricular programs of the school through the experiential learning process of interacting with teachers and other students within the various activities that are planned to take place outside the classroom and yet within the structured program of the school. Yet social development must necessarily be considered an integral part of a holistic educational process and an important element of the ultimate goal of Christian education which is to produce students whose beliefs are Bible-based and service-oriented. Ellen White tells us, "Especially should those who have tasted of the love of Christ [believers in His Word] develop the social powers, for in this way they may win souls [service orientation] to the Saviour" (*Testimonies, Vol. 6* 172).

The Teacher's Role

"We all need teachers in our lives."
Mitch Albom

In view of the importance thus placed on the social development of Christians, and realizing the major role of the Christian school in facilitating growth in all areas of human life, it would seem that educators should feel the need to become socially involved with their students. By participating in a variety of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities they would be helping to fulfill the mandate for the well-rounded preparation of students in all phases of their growth and development.

If Christian teachers truly wanted to fulfill their pastoral role in the nurturing of faith in their students, they would undoubtedly see the wisdom of spending significant amounts of quality time with them in social settings outside the structured environment of the formal classroom. There are certainly those who do just that, yet the tendency of

many teachers seems to be to relegate their role as “social instructors” to a much lower rung of the educational ladder than the other aspects of their educational work. In many cases this is probably an unconscious act, since many social activities that are planned for the students are not necessarily required for the teaching staff. And yet even Christ, in His role as teacher, recognized the importance of social mixing in His work as the Restorer of the image of God in man.

Jesus has been described as one who had social relationships with His ‘pupils,’ and as a teacher who never sought to isolate Himself from the ones He was teaching. He “mixed with them and engaged in their social events,” and “this mixing is no less important today.” In fact, “[o]ne of the most beneficial gifts a teacher can offer his students is the gift of companionship in their work and play.” And why is this? It is because “[i]t is important to build relationships outside the classroom if teachers are to be successful inside of it” for “personal relationships with students lead to understanding on the part of both parties” (Knight 192-193). And understanding, after all, is one of the primary goals of education.

Given the importance of the social growth factor in the educational scheme, as has been demonstrated above, it would seem that Christian teachers would do well to find ways to incorporate more of the social aspects of education into their activities as professional teacher-pastors. Perhaps teachers have felt that the social dimension of the maturation process mainly involves students learning to interact with each other both in and out of school, developing what we often call social skills. But as we have seen, the importance of the teacher as a socializing agent is a demonstrable fact when we consider

the activities of Jesus as He worked on earth, laboring to teach his 'pupils' in a better way.

The work of a pastor and that of a teacher can be favorably compared. A pastor is a care giver for the "souls of his flock," but at the same time he must be a teacher "who teaches by precept and example to both individuals and the corporate body of the church." And the teacher, while "an expounder of truth," also needs to have "an abiding care for the individuals under his tutelage" (Knight 186-187).

I believe the words "individuals" and "example" as used above are keys to understanding the real power behind the foregoing statements. First of all, teachers teach by example as much as they do by classroom presentation of study material. They are models of a particular lifestyle to their students, and modeling, providing the student with an example to follow, is recognized as not only an effective teaching method but "unquestionably the most powerful illustrative method," because "[t]hrough *exemplary* strategies, the teacher seeks to evidence in his own life what he wants his students to become." And the result of this is that "[s]tudents tend to fashion their lives more according to what the teacher does than by what is said. The manner in which the teacher treats the student . . . can graphically illustrate the integration of faith and learning, or lack thereof" (Taylor 6).

Secondly, relating with students on an individual basis is perhaps the most effective means of all in modeling lifestyle to a student. Jesus went "outside the classroom," so to speak, when He met with individuals such as Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-9), Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-26) in one-on-one encounters where teaching could be done on a personal, intimate level.

It is interesting to note that Jesus chose to work in an individual way with people when He could just as well have been using that time to speak to the masses who often followed Him wherever He went. After all, how could He hope to accomplish His purposes with humanity one person at a time when the world about Him was filled with numberless persons He could never hope to contact on an individual basis? And yet, by doing just that, by working and relating with individuals in informal settings, He set an example to all those whose task it is to teach, and by teaching to bring individual students into a saving relationship with Him.

The Power of Friendship

"There is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother."
Proverbs

Because God created people with a social nature, it is understandable that most people feel the need for friends and place a certain value on friendship. Friendship is a powerful force in the lives of most people, and as sociologist Jan Yager has pointed out, it is a glorious relationship based on such acquirable traits as honesty, faithfulness, loyalty, being a good listener, having ideas in common, and love. It is something that is vital throughout life. Yet, she says, most people "are unaware how powerful and positive friendship can be, or they would take it more seriously" (5-6).

Jesus understood the power of friendship. In His role as Creator he had brought forth human beings on earth whose joy and fulfillment in life was dependent on the satisfaction of certain needs, spiritual, mental, physical, and social. The Bible makes evident the importance and power of friendship. In Exodus 33:11 (NIV) we read that, "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaking with his friend." And

Proverbs (17:17 NIV) tells us that, “[a] friend loves at all times”, and (18:24 NIV) that “there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” Jesus said that those who do what God commands are His friends (John 15:14).

The Teacher as Friend

“I hope that one day you will think of me as your friend.”
Morrie Schwartz

So, how do we relate the idea of friendship to the profession of teaching? I believe that it relates ultimately in the sense that the greatest teachers are those who become the greatest friends of their students, following the example of Jesus, the Master Teacher, the greatest friend of mankind. The closer the relationship between the teacher and his or her student, the more intimate and personal the contact between them, the more likely it is that the student will come to view the teacher as a role model to be emulated.

But it goes deeper than that. What is needed, from the standpoint of Christian education, is not just an older, wiser person on which to model character, but rather the inculcation in students of a Christian worldview. Students need a moral lens through which to see the world and by which they can navigate through life as they continue to develop and mature as Christians in a secular society. Steven Garber suggests that it is the “dynamic relationship of a faculty member opening up his life to a student which enables young people to understand that their worldview can also become a way of life,” for the teacher’s care and commitment incarnates the substance of the worldview that he wishes his student to embrace (129).

How, then, is the creation of this kind of relationship to be accomplished? By looking at the example of Jesus we can see that as He worked “outside the classroom,”

socializing with the people, and especially entering into close personal encounters with individuals, He was able to transform lives—through the personal touch. If teacher-pastors truly want to be care givers, if they want to have a lasting impact on the lives of their students, they will seek them out individually (or allow themselves to be sought out) away from the formality of the classroom or even the school social function, and thus give them the opportunity to develop a life-long bond that can provide for those students a continuing source of nurturing both spiritually and mentally, or perhaps even just socially. Teachers can thus become a permanent link between their students and their God.

This approach, in a sense, takes the teacher beyond even the role of mentor, for mentoring, in actuality, is a hierarchical relationship in which there is an imbalance of power. It is a situation in which the mentor has the knowledge and the protégé learns from the mentor, and thus the protégé can never be viewed as the mentor's equal. As such, the relationship is always one step removed from true friendship (Yager 181-182). By becoming a true friend, the teacher can influence a student in ways impossible to a mentor, for true friendships allow for an openness that approaches the original family ideal of education. It is also a learning situation from which both participants can benefit.

In her baccalaureate address to the 1999 graduates of the University of Pennsylvania, Penn University president, Judith Rodin, made the following observation:

The teacher-student relationship is sacred and timeless: A unique union that is long respected and as singular as the two individuals in it. It is a relationship that can definitely change the lives of the learned and the learner. Consider Socrates and Plato. Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller. These teachers and students shared formal lessons, to be sure. But even greater were their shared life lessons.

Life lessons—isn't that what Christian education is about, after all? Life lessons that give students a world view on which to base their choices and decisions as they face an ever more complex and confusing existence. Life lessons that lead students through the various fields of knowledge toward the ultimate goal of total spiritual, mental, physical, and social development and thus toward a return to the ideal state in which man was originally created. Or, as Ellen White stated it in a familiar passage, life lessons which “restore in man the image of his Maker,” which “bring him back to the perfection in which he was created,” and which “promote the development of body, mind, and soul, that the divine purpose in his creation might be realized.” This, she says, “was to be the work of redemption. This is the object of education, the great object of life” (*Education* 16-17)

Theory Put into Practice

“Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at your house.”
Jesus

In the recent best-selling book, *Tuesdays With Morrie*, sports columnist Mitch Albom describes his re-encounter with Morrie Schwartz, a former college professor who had been a significant figure in Albom's life as an undergraduate student. When Albom rediscovered his former teacher through a chance event, Schwartz was dying of ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease. Albom arranged to visit his old teacher, and that first visit led to a re-establishing of their old habit during Albom's college days of meeting each Tuesday to discuss various “life lessons.”

Alboms' book, inspired by these visits with Schwartz' during his last illness, is a moving evocation of the powerful influence for good that a teacher who is also a friend can have in the life of a student. As they spent these final hours together, Schwartz was able to reawaken in Albom a sense of purpose in his life—in effect, to turn his life around. Schwartz, for all his positiveness about life and even death, did not really profess any religion. He seemed to be attracted to portions of various religious philosophies, and yet his attitude toward life, his words of wisdom shared with a former student, his friendship and care, worked a miracle in that student's life.

If a man who is not even sure of his relationship with God can have such a profound influence for good in the life of a former student, how much more should Christian teachers be able and willing to change the lives of those who come under their tutelage?

In Conclusion

"From the Christian perspective teaching might be viewed as the art of loving God's children."
George R. Knight

While I have tried in this paper to demonstrate the great possibilities that are open to Christian teacher-pastors as they work with their students beyond the setting of the school program, both formal and informal, I realize that the ideal is not always possible. It would be unrealistic to think that each Christian teacher can develop such a close and abiding friendship with each student that comes under his or her care in the course of a life-long career, for teachers are busy people who come to know many hundreds or even thousands of students over time. And, then again, each of us relates to different people in different ways, and often we do not have what is commonly referred to as "chemistry"

with certain students. But striving for the ideal is a worthy goal, to give all we can give to as many as we can.

There are many ways in which a teacher can work to develop friendships with students. Just participating in the extra-curricular and co-curricular activities of the school is a great beginning, for it is in such settings that the artificial barriers erected by the formal “student-teacher” relationship in the classroom can begin to be broken down. Beyond that teachers can be sensitive to those students who are in some way attracted to them outside the structured learning situations in the classroom. Perhaps not every student is in need of a teacher friend, but there are many whose lives can be significantly impacted by even the smallest of attentions. Something as simple as providing a quiet place in one’s office or at home where a student or even a small group of students can find momentary refuge from the hustle and bustle of the academic routine can make a life-long impression.

While reminiscing with former students, I have at times been amazed at the events that some of them have pointed out as memorable occasions in our previous informal relationships. Often they were things of which I had no recollection. What had seemed to me at the time to be insignificant happenings had somehow made a lasting impression on them. In this regard I believe Ellen White’s comments about relationships within the family are also applicable to teachers as they relate to their students. “The little attentions,” she says, “the small acts of love and self-sacrifice, that flow out from the life as quietly as the fragrance from a flower—these constitute no small share of the blessings and happiness of life” (*Faith I Live By* 267).

For those who teach in small Christian schools, of which there are many in the Adventist system, the opportunities for close personal interaction with students abound. For those who work in the larger institutions of our denomination, it becomes a matter of commitment to using brief moments and small opportunities to create bonds with students that will make life-long impressions on them. If each teacher approached his or her profession with this attitude of commitment to engaging students in meaningful encounters in even casual, informal circumstances, I believe a tremendous impact could be made on the lives of countless young people in our schools. For it is not so much in our preaching or our teaching that we reach students with the Good News about God, but rather it is in the way we demonstrate and model for them the life of the Master Teacher, Jesus. I believe the words of St. Francis of Assisi are a fitting summation of this approach. He said, "Go and preach the gospel—and if you must, use words."

WORKS CITED

- Albom, Mitch. *Tuesdays With Morrie*. London: Warner Books, 1997.
- Davidson, Virginia and Ernest H. J. Steed. *Proverbs: Wisdom to Live By*. (Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide, October, November, December, 2000). Pacific Press Publishing Association.
- Garber, Steven. *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
- Knight, George R. *Philosophy and Education: An Introduction in Christian Perspective*. Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1980.
- Rodin, Judith. "Life Lessons: Remarks at Baccalaureate by Judith Rodin, President of the University." *University of Pennsylvania Almanac, Vol. 45, No. 33, Tuesday, May 18/25, 1999*. n. pag. Online.
- Taylor, John Wesley. "Instructional Strategies for the Integration of Faith and Learning." (A paper presented at the 27th International Faith and Learning Seminar, Mission College, Muak Lek, Thailand, December 3-15, 2000).
- White, Ellen G. *Education*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1952.
- . *Testimonies for the Church, Vol. 6*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948.
- . *The Adventist Home*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980.

---. *The Faith I Live By*. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958.

Yager, Jan. (1997) *Friendships: The Power of Friendship and How it Shapes Our Lives*. Stamford, CT: Hanacroix Creek Books, 1997.