The Gift of Discontent

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Historians in recent centuries have focused their attention on the rise and fall of the many civilizations that have been known in the past. Why, they ask, has a civilization or a society known a period of great creativity, and why, then, does life seem to have gone from it? Why has the cultural leadership that it held for a brief season passed from it and been taken into other hands?

Arnold J. Toynbee tries to explain this arrest of progress as failure to respond creatively to the challenge of certain difficulties that have to be faced. He reminds us that change is always with us, whether we will it or not, and that we human beings have to learn how to cope with new situations by being not only willing and ready but also actively seeking to change ourselves and our outlook.[1]

The modern mind, acutely conscious of the sweep of history and chronically apprehensive, is quick to ask, "Is it our turn now?" In answer to this question one needs to recall that civilizations, societies, organizations, and institutions do not exist apart from individuals. A civilization or an organization decays and dies when its individuals lose their vitality.[2]

I

The failure to respond creatively to the challenges and difficulties that lie ahead is one of the greatest dangers the church faces. Many of its college and university students are looking forward to "settling down," "receiving a call," making their own way financially, getting married. All of these are important and desirable things to do. But if they mean, in essence, relaxing

for a moment the quest for truth, the struggle for self-discipline and self-improvement, the longing for understanding and maturity, then for these young adults it is as T. S. Eliot says: "In my beginning is my end."

According to the familiar words of Alexander Pope,

> A little learning is a dang'rous thing;
> Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
> There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
> And drinking largely sobers us again.[3]

Most of the rising generation of the church has only tasted of the fullness and richness of life's experience. They must now drink deeply.

Many people stop learning in several dimensions of their lives long before they are graduated from college. Others settle into rigid and unchanging patterns of views and ideas by the time they are twenty-five or thirty. By their mid-thirties most will have stopped acquiring new skills or new attitudes in any central aspect of their lives. By the time they are ready for the "gold watch" at the end of their careers, it cannot be said of many of them that they have had "forty years' experience;" in most cases they will more likely have had "one year's experience forty times."[4]

As we add years, progressively we may narrow too much the scope and variety of our lives. Of all the interests we might pursue, we settle on a few. Of all the people with whom we might associate, we select a small number. We let ourselves be caught in a web of fixed relationships. We develop set ways of doing things. I am not suggesting that a choosing process is wholly avoidable or undesirable. If the process of maturing did not involve selection, there might be no focus or coherence in one's life. The danger, however, is that any new relationships and any alternate ways of thinking and acting will be resisted and rejected.

As the years go by, we view our familiar surroundings with less and less freshness of perception. No longer do we look with wakeful, perceiving eyes at the familiar faces of people or at other features of our everyday world. We tend to become intellectually myopic.[5]

II

Most young Adventists become active, productive contributors to a society that insists that they "join the crowd." They discover quickly the rigidifying that stems from excessive attention to precedent, the imprisonment of men by their procedures, the encircling web of vested interests that entangles new growth in every field of endeavor. They soon learn the real

meaning of such statements as "Let's table it for further study," "Let's refer it to a committee," and "We have always followed the practice of . . ."[6]

A case in point is useful here. Many years ago the leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church agreed that it was important that the children of the church be educated in church schools from the first grade through college. This plan was basic in the nineteenth century and remains so in the twentieth. It was decided that this goal could best be achieved by assigning organizational responsibility to the local churches for the elementary level of education, to the local conferences for the secondary level, to the union conferences for the undergraduate college level, and to the General Conference for the graduate and professional level.

The arrangement seemed practical and wise and worked reasonably well for many years. Since World War II, however, educational advances nationally have indicated — in some ways dramatically — that this pattern of organization is no longer adequate. On the elementary and secondary school levels there must be a systematic program of consolidation, and on the college level there must be less attention to geographic boundaries and more attention to cooperation and academic statesmanship. How are suggestions for change received? They are stoutly resisted. But changes must come; and they will come.

A revolution in education in the United States has already begun. There will be no "coat holders" and "interested bystanders." Several prominent national educators suggest that it will be as significantly effective as the American or the French revolution. Adventist institutions of higher learning are faced with several alternatives:

1. To continue functioning as they are, academically and administratively. In time this would lead to cessation of operation of many.

2. To discontinue functioning on the college and university level. This seems inconceivable.

3. To accept federal and state funds in unrestricted amounts. This would abandon policies followed for decades.

4. To assess or tax all church members an additional ten to fifteen percent above the regular tithe.

The alternatives are not pleasing to hear, and, lacking an easier way, the church has thus far, by default, chosen the first option — a preservation of the status quo. But a new structure must be forthcoming. Those now in administrative positions will serve, at best perhaps, as Davids collecting the materials. Members of a new generation will then, as Solomons, build the new structure.

III

If, then, one of the greatest dangers facing the church and its people is that of intellectual stagnation and decay, of failure to respond creatively to change, what can be done to foster renewal?

No one knows for sure why some persons are capable of self-renewal and others are not. But there are important clues. For the person who is growing intellectually, the development of his own potentialities and the process of self-discovery never end. "Divine perfection is denied to human beings. But to wear out our lives in the pursuit of worthy though imperfectly attainable ideals is the essence of human dignity." But because the circumstances of our lives have never demanded them, the potentialities of most people have never been developed.

Applying himself to the exploration of the full range of his own potentialities is not something that the vital, growing person leaves to chance. It is something he pursues systematically, perhaps avidly, to the end of his days. He looks forward to the continual adventure of encounter between himself and the claims of life — not only the claims he happens onto, but also the claims he himself initiates.

One morning after having received her doctorate the day before, a former colleague appeared in my office and requested permission to take a refresher course at a nearby university. I am certain that for her the development of potentialities and the process of self-discovery will never end.

A self-renewing person makes things happen; he does not trust to "luck," "fortune," and "circumstances." He works, and works hard, at making things happen. He takes the extra course, spends Saturday night with the books instead of the boys, takes additional responsibility when others take it easy. (A graduate student from Sweden asked his professor, "What do you Americans mean by saying, when you part from one another, 'Take it easy'? Do you really mean for the other person to 'take it easy'?" Perhaps we do.)

IV

The maxim "know thyself" — so ancient, so deceptively simple, so difficult to follow — is also basic to intellectual growth. One who has become a stranger to himself has lost the capacity for genuine growth.

"It is not only the most difficult thing to know oneself, but the most inconvenient one too."[7] Man has always employed an enormous variety of clever devices for running away from himself. We keep ourselves so busy with "busy work," fill our lives with so many diversions, stuff our heads

with so many facts, involve ourselves with so many people, and cover so much ground, that we never take time to prove the fearful and wonderful world within. The truth of the matter is that we don't want to know ourselves, nor to live within ourselves. By middle life most of us are fugitives from ourselves.[8]

One reason why younger people may learn more than the middle-aged is that they are more willing to risk, less eager to take refuge in a "consensus." By middle age most of us carry in our heads a tremendous catalogue of ideas we have no intention of trying again, because we tried them once and failed, or tried them once and succeeded less than our self-esteem demanded. But as Elbert Hubbard reminds us, "There is no failure except in no longer trying. There is no defeat except from within, no really insurmountable barrier save our own inherent weakness of purpose."[9]

We pay a heavy price for our fear of failure. It is a powerful obstacle to self-development. It assures the progressive narrowing of the personality and prevents exploration and experimentation. There is no learning without some difficulty and fumbling. A person who wants to keep on learning must keep on risking failure — all his life. "No one ever drowned by falling into the water. He drowned only by remaining there." A prelude to overcoming this fear is the willingness to understand oneself.[10]

V

Another characteristic of the intellectually growing person is initiative. The barriers that once hedged him in become the familiar boundaries that he traces and retraces as he grows older; getting beyond them requires extra drive, enthusiasm, and energy. An old Chinese proverb says, "Man must sit in chair with mouth open very, very long time for roast duck to fly in."

In some degree, initiative is a matter of sheer physical energy. No matter how intellectual or spiritual one's interests may be, there is an immensely important physical element in his capacity to learn, grow, recover from defeats, surmount obstacles, and live with vigor. Anyone interested in leading a creative life will have the deepest concern and respect for the marvelously intricate organism that he is.

Beyond maintaining good health, there is more that can be done. Everyone has noted the astonishing amounts of energy that seem available to those who enjoy or find meaning in what they do. Unless a person has great conviction about the value of what he is doing, he had better find something about which he can have such a conviction. Obviously not everyone can spend all of his time pursuing his deepest convictions; but, either in his

career or in his part-time avocation, every person can be involved in something about which he cares deeply.[11]

The conventions and artificialities of life — to say nothing of habit, routine, and simple momentum — carry us so far from the sources of our interest and conviction that we need to follow the few basic lessons of relating to our own being. When Emerson said, "Once we had wooden chalices and golden priests; now we have golden chalices and wooden priests," he was concerned with the fetters that shackle the individual.[12]

VI

A new generation of Adventists is not to be urged to stand a dreary watch over the ancient values, or to cherish ideals that are embalmed in the memory of old battles and ancestral deeds. It must look to the past, indeed — but there it must find truths valid for its own time and place. To look only to the past constitutes one of the greatest dangers to any movement or institution. Each new generation must fight its own battles, and older generations would do well to leave it alone. Each generation must apply itself to defining and solving the problems of its day and of its future in its own way. Its hope is to be ever plagued with the gift of dissatisfaction and discontent.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

This article is the substance of an address given at the Andrews University summer graduation (August 1969).

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