
The Psychological World of Ellen White

by Ronald L. Numbers and Janet S. Numbers

Ellen G. White, the founding prophetess of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, died in 1915. Her views on subjects ranging from science to theology have continued to influence Adventist beliefs and practices up to the present. As recently as 1977 the trustees of the Ellen G. White Estate published a two-volume compilation of her writings on mental health, not as a historical monument, but as a practical, reliable guide for the late 20th century. The compilers, believing that "Ellen G. White wrote under the influence of the Spirit of God," expressed confidence that "as research in psychology and mental health progresses, her reputation for setting forth sound psychological principles will be still more firmly established."¹ They made little effort

to place White's statements in their historical context—the only way, in our opinion, that her views can be properly understood. In this article we attempt not only to outline what she taught about the causes and cures of mental illness, but to identify the ways in which the Bible, contemporary medical ideas, and especially her own experience may have influenced her opinions. Our study is far from definitive, but it does suggest, we think, some of the ways in which a knowledge of historical context can clarify the meaning and significance of Ellen White's various comments on mental health.

Diseases of the Brain and Diseases of the Soul

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In harmony with the prevailing psychiatric opinion of her time, Ellen White tended to regard mental illness as a somatic condition: a diseased brain. According to her understanding of human physiology, there was a two-way street between the brain and the rest of the body. The nervous system, like a telegraph network, transmitted "vital force" or "electrical energy" from the brain to other organs, while the vascular system

carried blood to the brain. A healthy brain needed to be constantly supplied with pure blood. "If by correct habits of eating and drinking the blood is kept pure," she wrote, "the brain will be properly nourished."² A "mysterious and wonderful relation" thus existed between mind and body. In fact, White estimated that nine-tenths of all physical diseases originated in the mind.³

Because God at the creation had endowed Adam with so plentiful a supply of vital force that it took about 2,000 years of "indulgence of appetite and lustful passion" for disease to gain a foothold, White surmised that there had been no imbecility among the antediluvians.⁴ However, as humans continued to squander their reservoir of vital force, the incidence of mental and physical disease had risen correspondingly. The race's only hope for maintaining health lay in carefully preserving the remaining vital force, and all persons—except idiots—had a moral responsibility to do so.⁵

Although Ellen White generally regarded mental illness as somatic rather than spiritual, she did give a religious interpretation to the apparently hysterical behavior of some of her contemporaries. Mid-19th century America abounded with visionaries, trance mediums, and religious enthusiasts of all descriptions. They could be found among Shakers and spiritualists as well as Methodists and Millerites.⁶ For example, during the winter of 1842–43 John Starkweather and other Boston Millerites began to display various "cataleptic and epileptic" phenomena, and a few years later a veritable epidemic of what Joshua V. Himes called "visionary nonsense" broke out among the Millerites of Portland, Ma. By 1845 fanaticism among Millerites had reached such proportions that Himes declared the movement to be "seven feet deep" in mesmerism.⁷

Ellen White viewed such deviant behavior not as a manifestation of an unbalanced mind, but as spiritual pathology or, in a few instances, as a genuine outpouring

of the Holy Spirit. William E. Foy's visions in 1842 fell into the latter category. As he described his experience, he was on one occasion "seized as in the agonies of death, and my breath left me; and it appeared to me that I was a spirit separate from this body." On another occasion he heard a strange voice, then "immediately fell to the floor, and knew nothing about this body, until twelve hours and a half had passed away, as I was afterwards informed." A physician who examined him during one of his visions testified that he "could not find any appearance of life, except around the heart."⁸ Later in the 1840s, when Ellen White encountered some ministers manifesting similar behavior, which they believed to be caused by the Holy Ghost, she attributed it to the "power of Satan."⁹ In both instances, her own experience rather than the external phenomena seems to have determined her response: Foy's visions corresponded remarkably with her own, while the ministers taught doctrines contrary to hers.

Repeatedly throughout her life White struggled to preserve or regain her physical and mental health. When she was a child of about 10, a thrown stone hit her on the nose, knocking her unconscious for several weeks, temporarily disfiguring her face, and prostrating her nervous system to the extent that she could not resume her schooling. In 1840 she and her family accepted William Miller's prediction that the world would soon end, and the anticipation of this event, especially the prospect of being lost, caused her intense agony. She "frequently remained bowed in prayer nearly all night, groaning and trembling with inexpressible anguish, and a hopelessness that passes all description."¹⁰ Although religious anxiety was not uncommon among pious New England children, Ellen's experience seems to have been unusually intense. By 1842 she was having ecstatic religious experiences in

which the “Spirit of God” would render her unconscious, causing her to fall to the floor. Such episodes occurred less frequently as she grew older, but they continued at least into the 1870s.¹¹

From her youth onward White, like many Victorian women, felt a need to share the details of her medical history—from nosebleeds to rheumatic pains—with others. Sprinkled liberally throughout her testimonies, letters, and autobiographical writings are complaints of lung, heart, and stomach ailments,¹² frequent “fainting fits” (sometimes as often as once or twice a day),¹³ paralytic attacks (at least five by her mid-40s),¹⁴ pressure on the brain,¹⁵ and breathing difficulties.¹⁶ At least once a decade from her teens through her 50s she expected imminent death from disease.¹⁷ She frequently suffered from anxiety and depression.¹⁸ On one occasion her “mind wandered” for two weeks, and on another it became “strangely confused.” At times she did not want to live.¹⁹ Although she commonly ascribed the illnesses of others to violations of the laws of health, she was inclined—especially during her early ministry—to attribute her own mental and physical ailments to the machinations of Satan and his evil angels, who had made her and her husband “the special objects” of their attention and who had gone so far as to cause several near-fatal accidents.²⁰

In December, 1844, shortly after the great Millerite disappointment, she began going into trances, during which she experienced visions. These episodes, modeled in part after the visions of the biblical prophets, were unpredictable; she might be praying, addressing a large audience, or lying sick in bed, when suddenly she would be off on “a deep plunge in the glory.” Often she would first shout “Glory! G—l-o-r-y! G—l—o—r—y!”—which, as Ron Graybill, an associate secretary of the White Estate, has recently shown, was a favorite exclamation among the Methodists of her day.²¹ Then, unless caught by some alert brother nearby, she slowly sank to the floor. After a short

time in this deathlike state, new power flowed through her body, and she rose to her feet. On occasion she possessed extraordinary strength, once reportedly holding an 18-pound Bible in her outstretched hand for a half hour.

During these trances, which came five or 10 times a year and lasted from a few minutes to several hours, she frequently described the scenes she was seeing. Sometimes she would also hear voices and music, smell a “sweet fragrance,” or feel an angel’s hand on her head. Occasionally she would be transported to far away places, usually guided by an unnamed male angel. According to the testimony of numerous witnesses, including some physicians, her vital functions slowed alarmingly, with her heart beating sluggishly and respiration becoming imperceptible. Although she was able to move about freely, others could not forcibly budge her limbs. Many visions left her in total darkness for short periods, but usually her sight returned to normal after a few days.²²

“The world as seen by Ellen White consisted of two spheres: the material one and an invisible one. Electric or magnetic forces permitted interaction between the spheres.”

The pattern of her visionary experiences suggests a strong need for reinforcement from persons who believed her trances to be supernatural. Even before her first vision, relatives and friends had interpreted her dreams and faintings as evidence of divine power, and her early visions brought similar assurances from those closest to her.²³ During the 1850s, when for a period fellow believers ignored her testimony, the visions became “less and less frequent” and White sank into depression.²⁴ Later, when they expressed appreciation of her gift, the visions returned. They remained fairly

common into the 1860s, but disappeared by the late 1870s, when dreams gradually replaced the trances.²⁵ There were, according to Ellen White, three categories of dreams: those arising "from the common things of life, with which the Spirit of God has nothing to do," "false dreams, as well as false visions, which are inspired by the spirit of Satan," and "dreams from the Lord," such as hers, which "are classed in the word of God with visions, and are as truly the fruits of the spirit of prophecy as visions."²⁶

Skeptics who rejected her claim to inspiration tended to regard her as a hysteric or, more commonly, especially during her early ministry, as "a wonderful fanatic and trance medium."²⁷ This reaction is understandable in view of the great number of mesmerists, spiritualists, and miscellaneous other clairvoyants whose experiences paralleled Ellen White's. Although mesmerism or animal magnetism, as it was also called, originated in Europe in the 1770s, it did not attract much attention in the United States until the 1830s, when a French mesmerist named Charles Poyen came to America. Before long hypnotic displays became a favorite American entertainment. "Animal Magnetism soon became the fashion, in the principal towns and villages of the Eastern and Middle States," recalled one observer. "Old men and women, young men and maidens, boys and girls, of all classes and sizes, were engaged in studying the mesmeric phenomena, and mesmerizing or being mesmerized."²⁸ Through mesmerism Americans gained a familiarity with trances and, in some instances, with spirit communication during these states. Thus when the Fox sisters touched off the spirit-rapping craze of the 1850s, they found a well-prepared audience. Many mesmerists embraced spiritualism, and it became virtually impossible for the uninitiated to differentiate between the two movements. As one historian has recently noted, "Mesmerized persons, especially those who attributed their powers to the inspiration of guardian spirits, were indistinguishable in their

actions from many of the later trance mediums of the spiritualist movement."²⁹

From outward appearances, there was also nothing to identify Ellen White's trances as being distinctive. In fact, Seventh-day Adventists were "often branded as Spiritualists" precisely because, as Ellen White explained, they believed "in the restoration of the gifts."³⁰ During her early ministry she frequently encountered allegations that her visions were simply mesmeric trances. Indeed, the phenomena were so similar that even she at times wondered whether or not she was being mesmerized. The discovery that she could have visions in private, away from the magnetizing influence of others, provided some comfort, but nagging questions remained in her mind until a peculiar episode, similar to that experienced by the father of John the Baptist, erased all doubt:

While at family prayers one morning, the power of God began to rest upon me, and the thought rushed into my mind that it was mesmerism, and I resisted it. Immediately I was struck dumb, and for a few moments was lost to everything around me. I then saw my sin in doubting the power of God, and that for so doing I was struck dumb, but that my tongue should be loosed in less than twenty-four hours.

During her enforced silence she communicated with others by means of a slate and pencil, and for the first time since her childhood accident her writing hand did not tremble. The following day her speech returned, and from then on she knew that mesmerism had nothing to do with her visions.³¹ Others, however, remained doubtful, and for years she and her apologists continued to insist that she was not a mesmerist.

White did not question the genuineness of phenomena associated with mesmerism and spiritualism, but she believed that they were Satanic in nature and that practitioners of these arts were "channels for Satan's electric currents."³³ Like Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, White greatly feared being influenced by what

Eddy called malicious animal magnetism. White described how on one occasion the Lord protected her from a mesmeric attack:

. . . I felt a human influence being exerted against me. I looked at J[oseph] T[urner]. He had his hand up to his face, and was looking through his fingers, his eyes intently fixed upon me. His lips were compressed, and a low groan now and then escaped him. In a moment I remembered the promise which the Lord . . . had shown me in Portland; that if I was in danger of being affected by a human influence, to ask for another angel, who would be sent to protect me. I then raised my hands to heaven and earnestly cried, Another angel, Father! another angel! I knew that my request was granted. I felt shielded by the strong Spirit of the Lord, and was borne above every earthly influence, and with freedom finished my testimony.³⁴

As this and other evidence suggest, the world as seen by Ellen White consisted of two spheres: the material one revealed by our senses, and an invisible one inhabited by good and evil angels. Electric or magnetic forces permitted interaction between the spheres.

In 1862 White published a condemnation of mesmerism and related sciences that has subsequently elicited much discussion. She wrote:

The sciences of phrenology, psychology, and mesmerism are the channels through which he [Satan] comes more directly to this generation. . . . Phrenology and mesmerism are very much exalted. They are good in their place, but they are seized upon by Satan as his most powerful agents to deceive and destroy souls. . . . Thousands are conversing with, and receiving instructions from, this demon-god, and acting according to his teachings. The world, which is supposed to be benefited so much by phrenology and animal magnetism, never was so corrupt. Satan used these very things to destroy virtue and lay the foundation of Spiritualism.³⁵

These strictures, we believe, can only be understood within the context of White's own visionary experiences and her need to distinguish between her trances and those of her contemporaries.

Phrenology was the science of the mind developed by two German physicians, Franz Joseph Gall, and his student Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, and brought to the United States

in the 1830s by Spurzheim and a Scottish convert, George Combe. According to phrenological theory, the human brain is made up of a number of different "organs," each corresponding to a mental "faculty" such as amativeness, acquisitiveness, or philoprogenitiveness. Since the relative strength of any propensity could be determined by measuring the size of its corresponding organ, it was not difficult for a skilled phrenologist to "read" a person's character by carefully examining the skull.³⁶ White herself often used phrenological language, and in 1864 she took her sons to a physician for a physical examination and phrenological reading.³⁷

Although many orthodox Christians criticized phrenology for its implied materialism, which seemed to diminish individual moral responsibility, White condemned it primarily because of its sometimes close connection with mesmerism and spiritualism. (She seems to have included psychology in her list merely because of its frequent association with these other evils.)³⁸ In the early 1840s mesmerists discovered that they could elicit distinctive responses in hypnotized subjects by stimulating particular phrenological organs. This gave rise to a hybrid movement known as phrenomagnetism. With this development, says one historian, phrenology appeared to veer away from materialism and "toward spiritualism and the occult"—the worst possible direction from White's point of view.³⁹

The Causes and Cures of Mental Illness

By the 19th century the idea of insanity as demonic possession had largely disappeared from both medical and theological literature. Although some religious writers continued to invoke the power of Satan, it was more common, says Norman Dain, for orthodox ministers to admit "the theoretical possibility of demonological possession

but [deny] its actual presence in the mentally ill. This position enabled clergymen to accept the concept of somatic pathology and to sanction medical treatment of insanity."⁴⁰ Such was the stance of Ellen White. She knew from the Bible that demonic possession could cause insanity; but whenever she discussed mental illness in her own time, she appealed to natural rather than supernatural causes. Even in relating the story of how Jesus cured the "maniac of Capernaum" by rebuking the "demon" that possessed him, she suggests that the maniac lost his mind because of intemperance and frivolity.⁴¹

Mid-century American psychiatrists commonly separated the causes of insanity into two categories: predisposing and exciting. Predisposing causes included such factors as inherited tendencies and neglect of personal health, which, though not directly the cause of insanity, could make a person vulnerable to the disease. Exciting causes allegedly precipitated abnormal behavior. Asylum superintendents in the annual reports listed among exciting causes everything from excessive study or labor, disappointed ambition, and physical abuse to Mormonism, Millerism, mesmerism, and spirit rappings. Some superintendents distinguished between "physical" and "moral" causes, but it was never clear which label to apply to a condition like masturbation. The admitting physician customarily relied on accounts of relatives and friends to assign the exciting cause, though they were well aware of the hazards of such an approach, including the possibility that they might be confusing cause with effect.⁴²

Although Ellen White never wrote systematically on the etiology of mental illness, her scattered comments on the subject generally reflected the prevailing opinions of her time. Like many psychiatrists, especially those writing after the Civil War, she believed that a large percentage of mental illness was attributable to inheritance. Typical of her many statements was one written shortly after having a major vision on health reform in 1863. "As

the result of wrong habits in parents," she said, "disease and imbecility have been transmitted to their offspring."⁴³ In her opinion, no habits had a more insidious effect than those that violated the laws of health:

Our ancestors have bequeathed to us customs and appetites which are filling the world with disease. The sins of the parents, through perverted appetite, are with fearful power visited upon the children to the third and fourth generations. The bad eating of many generations, the gluttonous and self-indulgent habits of the people, are filling our poorhouses, our prisons, and our insane asylums. Intemperance, in drinking tea and coffee, wine, beer, rum, and brandy, and the use of tobacco, opium, and other narcotics, has resulted in great mental and physical degeneracy, and this degeneracy is constantly increasing.⁴⁴

Fortunately for the great majority of humans—and the doctrine of free will—right living could overcome a predisposition to insanity inherited from one's parents. But persons so predisposed had a "duty to ascertain wherein their parents violated the laws of their being" and to make sure that they did not continue in the same course. White thus agreed with the mental hygienists of the late 19th century that insanity was a preventable disease.⁴⁵

A person's own intemperance could also contribute to insanity. In fact, White assigned the "main cause" of the disease to "improper diet, irregular meals, a lack of physical exercise, and careless inattention in other respects to the laws of health."⁴⁶ Her enthusiasm for health reform following her 1863 vision no doubt encouraged her in this belief, but her own experience confirmed it. "When my brain is confused," she wrote in 1900, "I know that I have been making some mistake in my diet."⁴⁷

Much of the world's "deformity, disease and imbecility" she believed could be "traced directly back to the drug-poisons administered by the hand of a doctor as a remedy for some of life's ills." Strychnine was particularly dangerous, in part because it overheated the spinal column.⁴⁸ In an 1871 column explaining how the wearing of wigs

could affect one's mental health, she described the physiological relationship between insanity and overheating the brain:

The artificial hair and pads covering the base of the brain, heat and excite the spinal nerves centering in the brain. The head should ever be kept cool. The heat caused by these artificials induce the blood to the brain. The action of blood upon the lower or animal organs of the brain, causes unnatural activity, tends to recklessness in morals, and the mind and heart is in danger of being corrupted. . . .

In consequence of the brain being congested its nerves lose their healthy action, and take on morbid conditions. . . .

Many have lost their reason, and become hopelessly insane, by following this deforming fashion. . . .⁴⁹

White did not acknowledge it, but this view was virtually identical to that previously expressed by Dr. James Caleb Jackson, with whom she had become acquainted in the 1860s.⁵⁰

To the 19th-century mind, a connection between masturbation and insanity seemed self-evident. Thus it probably surprised no one when White reported after her 1863 vision that God had identified imbecility as resulting from self abuse. "Everywhere I looked," she recalled, "I saw imbecility, dwarfed forms, crippled limbs, misshapen heads, and deformity of every description."⁵¹ Some readers may have been surprised, however, by her description of the physical effects of masturbation on the brain. Among girls who masturbate, she wrote in *An Appeal to Mothers*, "the head often decays inwardly. Cancerous humor, which would lay dormant in the system their life-time, is inflamed, and commences its eating, destructive work. The mind is often utterly ruined, and insanity takes place."⁵²

In addition to the various physical causes of insanity, White at one time or another identified a host of what her contemporaries called moral causes: frustrated ambition, excessive grief, guilt, gossip, and novel reading, the excitement of which weakened the "delicate machinery of the brain."

"Thousands are today in the insane asylum," she observed, "whose minds became unbalanced by novel reading."⁵³ White was not alone in seeing this activity as a threat to mental health. In his annual report for 1846, the superintendent of the Mount Hope Institution in Baltimore warned parents to "guard their young daughters" against the pernicious practice of reading works of fiction. "We have had several cases of moral insanity, for which no other cause could be assigned than excessive novel reading."⁵⁴

During times of religious enthusiasm and revivalism, asylum superintendents often listed religious anxiety or excitement among the leading causes of insanity. Shortly after the Millerite disappointment in 1844, for example, Amariah Brigham, superintendent of the New York State Lunatic Asylum in Utica, noted that 32 Millerites had been committed during the past year alone. "The nervous system of many of those who have been kept in a state of excitement and alarm for months," he explained, "has received a shock that will predispose them to all the various and distressing forms of nervous disease and to insanity, and will also render their offspring born hereafter, liable to the same."⁵⁵

The nature of the relationship between religion and insanity generated considerable debate in the 19th century, and Ellen White resented the "infidels" who attributed insanity to religion. "The religion of Christ," she argued, "so far from being the cause of insanity, is one of its most effectual remedies; for it is a potent soother of the nerves." Nevertheless, she conceded that under certain conditions remorse for sin could unbalance the mind and that "erroneous doctrines," such as "an eternally burning hell," could have the same effect.⁵⁶ Her own experiences in the 1840s made these connections seem plausible; in fact, she sometimes suspected that "many inmates of insane asylums were brought there by experiences similar to my own." As a teenager she had suffered intense anxiety about her chances for salvation, and while listening to sermons

describing hell, her "imagination would be so wrought upon that the perspiration would start, and it was difficult to suppress a cry of anguish." Sometimes she spent entire nights agonizing about her spiritual condition, and once she slipped into "a melancholy state" for several weeks, during which "not one ray of light pierced the thick clouds of darkness around me."⁵⁷

White also possessed first-hand knowledge of Millerites who had lost their minds during the turmoil following the disappointment:

. . . after the passing of the time in 1844, fanaticism in various forms arose. . . . I went into their meetings. There was much excitement, with noise and confusion. . . . Some appeared to be in vision, and fell to the floor. . . . As the result of fanatical movements such as I have described, persons in no way responsible for them have in some cases lost their reason. They could not harmonize the scenes of excitement and tumult with their own past precious experience; they were pressed beyond measure to receive the message of error; it was represented to them that unless they did this they would be lost; and as the result their mind was unbalanced, and some became insane.⁵⁸

How much of this account paralleled her own experience we cannot determine. However, we do know that during this same time *she* experienced visions and fell to the floor and became so mentally distraught that "for two weeks my mind wandered," an episode she later referred to as her "extreme sickness."⁵⁹

During White's formative years, American psychiatrists expressed great optimism about curing the mentally ill with what they termed moral therapy. This form of treatment involved removing patients from the environments that had caused their illnesses and placing them in an asylum, where their lives would be restructured. Asylum superintendents reported remarkable cure rates, sometimes as high as 90 percent. However, during the latter decades of the century, as mental institutions filled up with intractable cases of insanity and increasingly assumed a custodial function, optimism gave way to pessimism.⁶⁰

Although White gives no evidence of being aware of these trends, she did express herself from time to time on the best—and worst—means of treating mental illness. Unlike her writing on etiology, which rarely went beyond natural causes, her discussions of therapy often referred to the supernatural. The physician who treats mental illness, she said in a typical statement, can be efficacious only if he is aware of "the power of divine grace. . . . [I]f he has a firm hold upon God, he will be able to help the diseased, distracted mind."⁶¹ White was not recommending that religious healing supplant medical therapy, only that one should always supplement the other.

At least once in her career, however, she attempted to use prayer alone to cure what she probably regarded as a mental illness. Upon encountering an Adventist sister in Massachusetts suffering from "fit," White "In the name and strength of Jesus . . . put my arms around her, and lifted her up from the bed, and rebuked the power of Satan, and bid her, 'Go free.' She was instantly brought out of the fit, and praised the Lord with us."⁶² It is significant that this incident occurred during White's early ministry, in 1846, when she for a few years rejected medicine and relied solely on spiritual healing. By the mid-1850s she had resumed going to physicians and taking medicines.

For theological more than therapeutic reasons White strongly condemned using the so-called mind cure—"the most awful science which has ever been advocated"⁶⁴—to treat physical or mental problems. The strength of her feeling stemmed from the fact that she associated the mind cure with the much-feared activities of spiritualists and mesmerists. "At the beginning of my work," she wrote in 1901,

I had the mind-cure science to contend with. I was sent from place to place to declare the falseness of this science, into which many were entering. The mind cure was entered upon very innocently—to relieve the tension upon the

minds of nervous invalids. But, oh, how sad were the results! God sent me from place to place to rebuke everything pertaining to this science.⁶⁵

She does not say whether the dire consequences of using the mind cure were physical or spiritual, but it seems likely that she had less concern about the efficacy of the mind cure than about the propriety of exposing oneself to Satan's "electric currents."⁶⁶

“Although Ellen White’s theological views may have enduring values, we have no reason to expect that current research on the human mind will corroborate her scientific views.”

White’s most common prescriptions for preventing and curing mental disorders, especially depression, called for will power and physical exercise. “The power of the will is not valued as it should be,” she wrote. “Exercised in the right direction, it would control the imagination and be a potent means of resisting and overcoming diseases of both mind and body.”⁶⁷ Although she did not elaborate on the physiological processes involved, she once asserted that exercising the will would give “tone and strength” to the mind and nerves.⁶⁸

She also attached considerable therapeutic value to physical exercise, especially after the mental breakdown of her husband, James, in the mid-1860s.⁶⁹ On 31 October 1865, the *Review and Herald* carried the following announcement: “The arduous and unremitting labors of Bro. White for several years in the past, and especially for the past summer, imposing heavy taxations upon his mind and nervous system, finally culminated in a shock of paralysis, leaving his nervous system, as a matter of course, in a shattered condition, and his brain somewhat dis-

turbed.”⁷⁰ According to his wife’s account, her overworked husband broke down on the morning of August 16, while walking with her through a vegetable garden. At first they called in a physician to shock him with an electric battery, but they soon terminated this therapy because, for reasons not given, it undermined their faith in God. After five weeks of little progress, Ellen took her ailing husband to a water cure in Dansville, N.Y., where they remained until early December. But even with daily hydrotherapy, James improved little. “He suffered with the most extreme nervousness. Ellen later recalled. “I could not sew or knit in his room, or converse but very little, as he was easily agitated, and his brain confused almost beyond endurance.”⁷¹

Shortly after removing her husband from Dansville, Ellen went into vision and learned about the importance of physical activity:

I was shown that the position of Dr. [Jackson] in regard to amusements was all wrong, and that his views of physical exercise were not all correct. . . . He has to a great degree condemned physical labor for the sick, and his teaching in many cases has proved a great injury to them. Such mental exercise as playing cards, chess, and checkers, excites and wearies the brain and hinders recovery, while light and pleasant physical labor will occupy the time, improve the circulation, relieve and restore the brain, and prove a decided benefit to the health. But take from the invalid all such employment, and he becomes restless, and, with a diseased imagination, views his case as much worse than it really is, which tends to imbecility.⁷²

Back home in Michigan, Ellen applied her therapeutic regimen in a personal effort “to save [her] husband’s brain.” She constantly kept him “working at . . . little things” and “would not allow him to remain quiet.” After 18 months of this therapy James showed signs of returning to normal—although as late as 1871 Ellen in a letter to her children compared his condition with that of a man “near insanity.” Her success in treating James convinced Ellen that she had found the best method for treating the mentally disturbed, and she recommended

that the physicians at the Western Health Reform Institute follow her example. "Lead the patients along step by step, step by step," she advised, "keeping their minds so busily occupied that they have no time to brood over their own condition."⁷³

Our intention in this essay has not been to evaluate the validity of Ellen White's psychological advice or to diagnose her psychological condition, but rather to explore her

psychological world, relying to a greater extent than we would like on her published statements and recollections. Not surprisingly, our historical review shows that her opinions on mental health were deeply rooted in her own experience and in the culture of 19th century America. Thus, although Ellen White's theological insights may have enduring value, we have no reason to expect that current research on the human mind will corroborate her scientific views.

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12. Regarding her heart, see, e.g., EGW, *Spiritual Gifts: My Christian Experience, Views and Labors in Connection with the Rise and Progress of the Third Angel's Message* (Battle Creek, Mich.: James White, 1860), pp. 184-186; EGW, *Testimonies*, I, 185; II, 271-301, 371; IX, 65-66. Regarding her lungs, see, e.g., EGW, *Spiritual Gifts* (1860), pp. 30, 206-207; EGW, *Testimonies*, I, 604-605. Regarding her stomach, see, e.g., EGW, "Our Late Experience," *Review and Herald* 27 (Feb. 27, 1866), 98.
13. EGW, *Spiritual Gifts* (1860), pp. 184-186; EGW, *Testimonies*, II, 10; EGW to Edson White, June 10, 1869 (White Estate, W-6-1869); EGW, Sermon at Berrien Springs, May 21, 1904 (White Estate, MS-50-1904).
14. EGW, *Spiritual Gifts* (1860), pp. 271-272; EGW, *Testimonies*, II, 371.
15. EGW, *Testimonies*, I, 576-81; II, 271-301.
16. EGW, *Spiritual Gifts* (1860), pp. 184-186; EGW, *Testimonies*, I, 185.
17. *Life Sketches*, p. 69; EGW, *Spiritual Gifts* (1860), pp. 206-207; EGW, *Testimonies*, I, 185; EGW to Edson White, June 10, 1869; EGW, *The Writing and Sending Out of the Testimonies to the Church* (n.d.), p. 19.
18. *Life Sketches*, pp. 29-31, 323-324; EGW, *Spiritual Gifts* (1860), pp. 16-18; EGW, *Testimonies*, I, 576-81; EGW, "Communication from Sister White," *Review and Herald* 7 (Jan. 10, 1856), 118.
19. EGW, *Spiritual Gifts* (1860), pp. 51, 69; EGW, *Testimonies*, I, 185, 604-605.
20. EGW, *Testimonies*, I, 185, 346-347; EGW, *Spiritual Gifts* (1860), pp. 271-272.
21. Ron Graybill, "Glory! Glory! Glory!" (unpublished MS, March, 1983).
22. Much of the material in this and the previous paragraph is extracted from Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, pp. 18-19. Regarding hallucinations, see, e.g., *Life Sketches*, p. 310; EGW, *Testimonies*, IX, 65-66; *Selected Messages from the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Washington: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), I, 207; Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Elmshaven Years, 1900-1905* (Washington: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1981), pp. 23-24, 53-54.
23. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, p. 10.
24. EGW, "Communication from Sister White," *Review and Herald* 7 (Jan. 10, 1856), 118.
25. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, p. 181.
26. EGW, *Testimonies*, I, 569.
27. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, pp. 19-20; Isaac C. Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message and Mission, Doctrine and People* (Yarmouth, Maine: I. C. Wellcome, 1874), p. 402.
28. John D. Davies, *Phrenology, Fad and Science: A 19th-Century American Crusade* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1955), pp. 126-127; Eric T. Carlson, "Charles Poyen Brings Mesmerism to America," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 15 (1960), 121-132.

29. R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Cows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 9; Frank Podmore, *Mediums of the 19th Century*, 2 vols. (New Hyde Park, N.Y.: University Books, 1963), I, 202–204.
30. EGW, *Testimonies*, I, 421. On the similarity between White and spirit mediums, see also J. N. Loughborough, *The Great Second Advent Movement: Its Rise and Progress* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1909), p. 210.
31. *Life Sketches*, pp. 88–90.
32. James White, *Life Incidents, in Connection with the Great Advent Movement* (Battle Creek: SDA Pub. Assn., 1868), pp. 272–273; [Uriah Smith], *The Visions of Mrs. E. G. White* (Battle Creek, Mich.: SDA Pub. Assn., 1868), pp. 5–6.
33. EGW, *Testimonies*, V, 193; *Early Writings*, p. 21.
34. EGW, *Spiritual Gifts* (1860), pp. 62–63. On Mary Baker Eddy, see Edwin Franden Dakin, *Mrs. Eddy: The Biography of a Virginal Mind* (New York, N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), pp. 131–132, 159–160.
35. EGW, *Testimonies*, I, 290–297.
36. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, p. 67.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91.
38. See, e.g., Davies, *Phrenology*, p. 130.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 126–134.
40. Norman Dain, *Concepts of Insanity in the United States, 1789–1865* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1964), p. 187.
41. EGW, *The Desire of Ages: The Conflict of the Ages Illustrated in the Life of Christ* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), pp. 255–256.
42. See, e.g., Amariah Brigham, *First Annual Report of the Superintendent of the New York State Lunatic Asylum at Utica* (1843), pp. 20–22. A common system of classification divided insanity into mania, melancholia, dementia, and idiocy; but, as Brigham noted (p. 25), no system of classification seemed to be “of much practical utility.”
43. *Selected Messages*, II, 465. See also Dain, *Concepts of Insanity*, p. 109.
44. EGW, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, I, 144.
45. EGW, “Duty to Know Ourselves,” *Health Reformer* 1 (Aug., 1866), 2. On the prevention of insanity, see Barbara Sicherman, *The Quest for Mental Health in America, 1880–1917* (New York, N.Y.: Arno Press, 1980), pp. 79–152.
46. EGW, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, II, 382.
47. *Guidelines to Mental Health: Materials Assembled from the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1966), p. 217.
48. *Selected Messages*, II, 442; EGW, *Spiritual Gifts: Important Facts of Faith, Laws of Health, and Testimonies Nos. 1–10* (Battle Creek, Mich.: SDA Pub. Assn., 1864), p. 138.
49. EGW, “Words to Christian Mothers on the Subject of Life, Health, and Happiness.—2,” *Health Reformer* 6 (Oct., 1871), 121.
50. “The Hair,” *Health Reformer* 5 (May, 1871), 266.
51. EGW, *An Appeal to Mothers: The Great Cause of the Physical, Mental, and Moral Ruin of Many of the Children of Our Time* (Battle Creek, Mich.: SDA Pub. Assn., 1864), p. 17. Writing to the parents of a boy who indulged in “secret vice,” White warned that he would “eventually become idiotic” if he continued his wicked ways; EGW, *Testimonies*, II, 402. On masturbation, see H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., “The Disease of Masturbation: Values and the Concept of Disease,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 48 (1974), 234–248.
52. EGW, *Appeal to Mothers*, pp. 17, 27.
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54. William H. Stokes, *Fourth Annual Report of the Mount Hope Institution for the Year 1846*, p. 34.
55. [Amariah Brigham], “Millerism,” *American Journal of Insanity* 1 (Jan., 1845), 250.
56. *Guidelines to Mental Health*, p. 16.
57. EGW, *Testimonies*, I, 25; *Life Sketches*, pp. 29–31; EGW, *Spiritual Gifts* (1860), pp. 16–18.
58. *Selected Messages*, II, 34–35.
59. EGW, *Spiritual Gifts* (1860), pp. 51, 69.
60. Dain, *Concepts of Insanity*, p. 113. See also Gerald N. Grob, *Mental Institutions in America: Social Policy to 1875* (New York, N.Y.: Free Press, 1973); and David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1971).
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62. EGW, *Spiritual Gifts* (1860), pp. 71–72.
63. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, pp. 32–36.
64. EGW, *Medical Ministry: A Treatise on Medical Missionary Work in the Gospel* (Pacific Press, Pub. Assn., 1932), p. 116.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
66. EGW, *Testimonies*, V, 193–198.
67. EGW, *Ministry of Healing*, p. 246.
68. EGW, *Testimonies*, I, 387.
69. See, e.g., EGW, *Testimonies*, II, 325; *Guidelines to Mental Health*, p. 78.
70. H. S. Lay, “Eld. White and Wife, and Eld. Loughborough,” *Review and Herald* 26 (Oct. 31, 1865), 172.
71. EGW, “Our Late Experience,” *ibid.*, 27 (Feb. 20, 1866), 89–91.
72. EGW, *Testimonies*, I, 554–555.
73. *Selected Messages*, II, 306–308; EGW to Edson and Emma White, Nov. 15, 1871 (White Estate, W-15-1871).