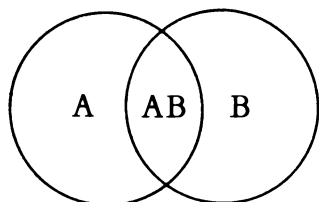

Meditation in the Morning

by Richard W. Coffen

Seventh-day Adventists traditionally have advocated morning devotions—but why? The usual rationales are often superficial. But the fact is, the conviction that we should meet God in the morning expresses profound psychological truths. To explain why requires looking at the importance of boundaries and transitions in our lives.

Boundaries trigger problems and so demand careful attention and strict regulation. For example, an official slaps a five-yard penalty on a football team if he catches one of its players with his foot over the line of scrimmage. The Mosaic laws guaranteed fixed property boundaries and placed a curse on anyone altering them: “Thou shalt not remove thy neighbour’s landmark” (Deut. 19:14) and “Cursed be he that removeth his neighbour’s landmark” (Deut. 27:17). Ellen G. White observed that “every week God is robbed by some infringement upon the borders of his holy time”¹ and admonished: “We should jealousy guard the edges of the Sabbath.”²

Now “in principle, a boundary has no dimension,”³ but for logical discussion a Euler diagram can help us visualize that which normally has no physical proportions.



Section *AB* provides a magnified view of the boundary zone shared by two contiguous areas. Zone *AB* can evoke emotions of fascination and/or revulsion and can also become viewed as sacred or verboten. Area *AB* is frequently a potent source of anxiety.

When *A* stands for land and *B* stands for water, *AB* stands for swamp. Marshy areas provide a particularly fecund ecosystem. Swamps teem with various life forms, but we also often perceive them as spooky areas in which lurk hidden and unknown dangers.

When *A* denotes right and *B* denotes wrong, *AB* denotes that which is morally ambiguous. We crave a morality that deals in only black and white issues, and we feel highly uncomfortable with the morally gray areas of life.

When *A* is God and *B* is man, *AB* is Jesus Christ. Immediately we enter the realm of the mysterious—how can Jesus be both divine and human and how do His divinity and humanity interrelate? The nature of Jesus has concerned the church for centuries.

Often a celebration or ritual of some sort marks zone *AB*. For instance, when *A* represents 1983 and *B* represents 1984, *AB* becomes New Year’s Eve with its attendant festivities. When *A* stands for life and *B* stands for death, *AB* is marked by the funeral service. When *A* signifies the state of singleness and *B* signifies the state of matrimony, *AB* is marked by the wedding service and honeymoon.

We can begin to understand Edmund Leach’s observation: “The principle that all boundaries are *artificial* interruptions to what is naturally continuous, and that ambiguity, which is implicit in the boundary as such, is a

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source of anxiety, applies to time as well as to space.”⁴

Gail Sheehy sensed the significance of the *AB* zone and wrote a book that took the country by storm—*Passages*. Why was *Passages* such a success? Because the author put her finger on one of our deep psychological needs. Each stage of transition in life is accompanied by a certain amount of anxiety. As Gail Sheehy described it, “We are left exposed and vulnerable.”⁵ Her book, mapping out each successive adult crisis, evoked the hope that if we knew in advance something about these coming passages, we might be able to cope more effectively as we pass through them. *Passages* held out the promise to reduce our anxiety during our predictable transitional periods of life.

Primitive cultures typically respond to life’s transitions—and usually with more sensitivity than we do in our highly civilized and industrialized age. Especially do they focus on the area of *AB*, between the *A* of childhood and the *B* of adulthood. Anthropologists call their puberty ceremonies *rites de passage*.

With this in mind we can apply the Euler diagram to morning devotions. *A* is the period of darkness, night, sleep, and inactivity. *B* is the period of light, day, wakefulness, and activity. *AB* is thus invested with multisignificance and loaded with potential danger. We need a particularly potent *rite de passage* to see us through this perilous period and to help alleviate our feelings of *angst* during our passage through this time of marginality. For the Seventh-day Adventist, morning devotions fulfill that role.

Because morning devotions constitute a *rite de passage*, we regard them as highly important. Most of us may be more mentally alert later on in the day, but intellectual acuity is not the issue. By beginning the day with God, we meet a deep psychological need and can, therefore, rest assured that all is well with the world.

Probably this explains the results of an experiment performed by a group of academy students. On some days these students had morning devotions. On other days they did not. It all depended on how early they arose each morning and how they spent their time before school. The students perceived things as going much better on those days begun with morning devotions than on the days begun without prayer and Bible study. Most likely their anxiety level was higher on those days when they did not go through the proper *rite de passage*.

“By beginning the day with God, we meet a deep psychological need and can, therefore, rest assured that all is well with the world.”

The conviction that we should meet God in the morning reflects truths about our most fundamental selves. Daily devotions at the potentially traumatic borderline between a night of sleep and inactivity and a day of wakefulness and activity is a *rite de passage*. By closing “one cycle of time and open[ing] another [we] set out to achieve a complete regeneration of time⁶—thus making the new day safe to enter.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 4 (Mountain View California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1944), p. 247.

2. *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 356.

3. Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 33.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

5. Gail Sheehy, *Passages* (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1977), p. 29.

6. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1963), p. 398.