
Growing Up Adventist: Watching Your Step in Brewster, WA

by Dan Lamberton

I am talking with friends in a Seattle restaurant. We meet together because we work at poetry and the University of Washington offers us a place to study and to write. We are drawn to one another partly because we are so unlike. One of us is Islamic and a restaurant owner; two write for high-tech firms; the friend next to me is a bright and eccentric barmaid; another is an older woman, recently divorced, who is starting her second year of graduate school at Columbia and is full of New York and freedom.

We ask ourselves what we have left from our childhood religions. We all insist that our spirituality is still important, although no one claims to be at ease with any creed. As we left childhood, God became even more mysterious, His mystery leaving an increasingly large question mark. The presence of God is inescapable. But where, we wonder, does spirituality come from? We don't answer the question well.

I say that my own spirituality remains partly because I was raised on a farm, and bad weather often reminded us of our frailty. When my friends insist that spirituality remains a persistent theme in my writing, I tell them my imagination was formed by a Seventh-day Adventist childhood.

At home, we weren't especially strict Adventists. Although we took our faith seriously, we differed from many in our church. We ate our cattle, sheep, and chickens. I remember the

slaughter and dressing of these animals. We children sometimes joked about other Adventists' strict dietary rules, about carob and the church's commercial attempts to simulate meat with soybean products.

But we weren't lax. Once, when I nearly burned our house down, my father didn't give me the spanking everyone thought I deserved. Instead, he took me into the bedroom where we shook hands on my promise never to smoke in my life. This was before the Surgeon General's report, and not smoking seemed peculiarly Adventist to me.

When we milked cows in the barn, we listened to rock and roll on a portable radio. But if we caught each other singing Elvis or Jerry Lee Lewis on Saturday, we'd just say "Sabbath," and the singer stopped. We played basketball and HORSE during the week, but on Sabbath changed the game to MOSES.

Ours was a large family of Adventists—I had five brothers and sisters and nearly 70 first cousins. I am quite certain I would now be a Mennonite or Lutheran, as my ancestors once were, if I had been born to one of those religions. I have never had much interest in changing churches or in persuading others to join mine. My grandparents, however, *became* Adventists.

Mother seldom spoke of her past. But what I do know of my mother's side intrigues me. Her family blended independence with conviction. Mother came from Saskatchewan; her uncle was T. E. Unruh, a conference president. One of her aunts began as a staunch Adventist, but later wrote a book denouncing Ellen White. My mother says her own parents gathered their neighbors together

Dan Lamberton, assistant professor of English at Walla Walla College, is working on a doctorate at the University of Washington. His brother Henry (just a year older), is an associate professor of religion at Loma Linda University.

for discussions of prophecy, urging them to accept Adventist doctrine. My grandma traveled about, raising money to build the churches in Nipawin and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. But of her six children, only my mother remained an Adventist.

From my mother I heard stories of uncommon devotion. Her father died an Adventist, but the last time my mother saw him, he was leaning against a door in the Old Sailors' home in Victoria, B.C., gesturing toward her with his beer bottle. "Bernice," he said, "never give up the message."

My mother's oldest sister left Adventism on a Sabbath morning. Radio had come to northern Saskatchewan, and over the air my Aunt Edna heard a minister explain grace and salvation. She decided that her *Sabbath School Quarterly* missed the whole point of Romans; its avoidance of grace was too much.

My cousin remembers the Sabbath morning when they drove to church in a truck. Her mother honked the horn until the little congregation came outside, and then all six children stood up in the back of the truck and yelled, "We're going to the circus." Church officials came to convince my aunt of her doctrinal error, but she and her family did not count themselves Adventists again.

My favorite story of this family happens several years after their break from the church. Two of my cousins stole a new Studebaker from an Adventist church parking lot. They toured the small northern towns for several days, avoiding the dragnets and radio bulletins, leaving service-station attendants holding dripping gasoline hoses, registering as the Hardy Boys at the little inns, taking clothes and meals and driving away. They also avoided severe punishment from the provincial law because members of the same Adventist church where the boys' escapades began would not aid the province by pressing charges. Instead, the church members promised the authorities that they would look after the youngsters.

These same cousins who had taken the car visited us often. Once, when I was 12 or so, one of them threw me a swimming mask and told me to watch underwater while he and his wife submerged and kissed.

They knew irreverence and reverence. They believed in grace and they argued that our Adventist doctrine was a heavy anchor of law, thrown overboard before we reached the harbor of Christ's free salvation. I have never again seen such spiritual conviction and enthusiasm as they had. We challenged each other with Biblical debates; text ran up against text. I remember one cousin weeping because, she said, she loved us and feared we would go on rejecting the gospel.

But we grew up in my dad's hometown, and my father's parents and their religious outlook did the most to form our lives. I feel it still—practical, intense, and driven by the maverick devotion of

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people who take a thing very seriously although they don't study it much. Grandfather had strong patriarchal ideas even before the family became Adventists. He kept his daughters on a short leash—they dressed strangely—and his sons were insecure. My father says that Adventism actually softened his father. Prior to his conversion he had fierce and unpredictable beliefs. Adventism gave the family a code and the relief of order.

My father's mother worked hard and held her own firm opinions. She flew around the house, baked bread daily, canned as many as 200 quarts of peaches in a day and commandeered her army of 14 children. She whacked any child who hinted at, wondered aloud about, or betrayed any knowledge of sex. My father got his hardest spanking when he was quite small, and his mother found him inspecting a hole in the fork of his pants. She also said "daresn't," as in "You daresn't keep that *True West* magazine. It's full of fiction; take it back to the drugstore." So I took it back.

My father often draws an analogy between his

church and his mother. Both embarrassed him; but for both he is grateful. He remembers his mother as pregnant, toothless, and quick to tears. She and my grandfather never made any money. My father felt self-conscious about his mother's well-scrubbed but obvious unsightliness. She didn't own a bra or get false teeth until she was in her fifties. Her most notable achievement was overseeing her home's exploding population. But she was generous and saw to it that her children ate well and that they advanced themselves.

My father's analogy emphasizes ambivalence. He knew the church separated him from the community. Still, although the church embarrassed him at times, he is sure that without it he would never have left his father's orchard and

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lumber work, and gone on to Walla Walla College and then the College of Medical Evangelists. It was an Adventist preacher who encouraged my grandparents to send their children on to school.

His parents had read their way into Adventism. In South Dakota, a Catholic woman had informed them that Saturday was the true Sabbath; although they searched, they found no biblical evidence on which to contradict her. They bought *Daniel and the Revelation* from a colporteur and decided the book was right. My grandparents moved to Washington State, in part, to make an easier transition to Sabbathkeeping. On a homestead above Spokane, they settled next to Adventist neighbors. Accepting their church required only minor adjustments. They quit eating pigs.

Because of the prospect of orchard work, and because they heard an Adventist family lived there, they moved to Brewster, Washington. Then, as now, the town thrived on apples and

athletics. A family with eight muscular boys did the town some disservice by keeping its sons off the school teams. I see pictures of my father lined up for track. He has a uniform and a correct stance. But he never ran for his school. My grandmother cried and cried when my father mentioned the coach's interest in him. Sabbath observance separated him from the rest of the students. Curiously enough, my father could box without parental interference. He stayed out of high school for a year and represented his lumber crew in the ring. But Sabbaths didn't pose the problem in the camps that they did in the high school.

When my father talks with us now about the church, he wonders if, because of our Adventism, we also felt separated from our community. He remembers with some sadness taking us past the public school and on through the orchards to the little Adventist school. He says that when we drove past the public school, we sometimes hid on the car floor.

My brother Henry remembers how he felt as an Adventist child in our community: "I grew up in my father's hometown, a place where he had suffered considerable hardship. Dad felt there was virtue in hardship, and we felt he went out of his way to find it for us. He made sure that we walked the two miles from our home to school. For my father, walking to school was part of a good education that enjoyed rank alongside the three 'R's.' And since we went to an Adventist school, we also got the fourth 'R' of religion.

"We could walk to school by two routes. One was on the Great Northern Railroad tracks that passed just below our house. The other route followed the road that went through town and on by the public school. Both of these routes were very dangerous.

"The railway was dangerous because hobos camped along it. Every fall, at pear and apple harvest time, these men we called 'bums' rode the freight cars into town. Most orchardists did not provide shelter for these workers, so they slept and cooked their meals on a concrete foundation slab next to the railroad along which we walked. At harvest's peak, the 'bum camp' overflowed into the sagebrush and lumber piles that lined the

Overture to My Mother's Northern Story

by Dan Lamberton

In Saskatchewan, it got so cold
in our small home, this when I was a girl,
that our breathing laced the walls with ice;
we'd wake to see the mist we breathed in dreams
still gleaming in the morning with our prayers.
Yes, it was cold, and Mother sewed so well
that weather and her dress shop let us leave
the prairie farm and move to Battleford.
But before that, before the school, before
the bus to my Aunt Rose's in the States,
before your father and his town, now ours,
I was a girl from the Saskatchewan prairie.

I often wish that you had seen my mother.
This picture shows her hair was dark; I thought
of a black plum. There she holds Naomi,
my sister who died up in Nanaimo.
Some stories are too strange to understand,
but, since you ask, can you say what this one
might tell you of my mother? She had nine sisters;
and their mother, nearly dead from surgery,
heard God say that her daughters, some now married,
were Christ's ten virgins who should all come home.
Who can argue if they came for visions
or for love? But for a while they came back home.
My dad spent most of those years in Missoula.
You know that I have a half-brother there?
When Dad came back the rest of us were born.

My father, plowing, turned over the prairie
that we thought unsurfaced since the silt
of Noah's flood. Yet here were dusty bags
of pemmican, broken arrow shafts
and once a skull we sent to Saskatoon.

This picture's of my brother Joe who died
at seventeen. I don't know where he got
that Indian bonnet, but when I think of him
I think of how we swam our ponds in summer.
That gray far-western river and his western
grave are darker dreams than I know how
to say. That boy by Joe is Rudy, who played
accordion while Ukrainian farmers sang.

Before the rest of us moved in to town,
my sisters left for the Adventist school.
They went with shoes my father altered with
his saw; he cut their three-inch heels to one.
An act that hard made all his acts ambiguous
and I began to make plans of my own.

("At least," I say to her, "they had new shoes
to cut." "Think of Dad's story," I say,
"his dad came home with a bargain wash-tub
full of women's button shoes he hoped to fit
as western boots on his young boys. Except
for school it might have worked. Remember how
Dad tells of herding cows, with his bare feet so cold
he warmed them in the cows' fresh dung? I see
him spring from pie to pie the way a boy
would ford a stream by jumping stone to stone.")

Your father's stories go well around our table.
Besides, each hill or old homestead pulls
memories from him that you can see
and hear. These quiet mountains stand beside
each other as chapters for his book. Out on the prairie
we had aspen groves. Without Saskatchewan
in your eyes my stories reflect on me
alone, although they may go far beyond
my sight; a tale's not all a story tells.
Like you I asked for things I could not hear.

My uncle might have told you more than this:
He sired a baby by a Mounty's wife,
and she could not keep the child. She sent my uncle
to a stubble field to burn a haystack
with the baby tucked inside. And I see
only smoke against the northern lights
and shame on fire below the winter moon.

I'm seventy, but if I could have more children
I'd lie down on this table as my mother
did on hers and bring this farm to life.
I'd have you all again. You know those aspens
you played in by the barn? Out on the prairie
were such groves that gave the land a voice.
Each farmer's section had its family
of round-leafed, white-barked groves. Each grove held secrets
in its undergrowth of Juneberries
and wild rose. And each had its own sound
to which it tuned the wind. One grove might ask "who"
and then, like owls, grow quiet if I came near.
At night, while coyotes barked, around the trees
danced shadows of the Indians and their children.
Those trees saw stories that I dream to hear,
but I won't know them till I know the wind.

railway.

“My uncles called these transient fruit pickers ‘winos’ because many of them spent their evenings at the local taverns. When my grandmother looked after us, she hinted at the appetites these ‘bums’ had for small children. So we were sure they would attack us if they got half a notion or if they weren’t treated with respect. Walking on the tracks so close to where they sat staring at us was an adventuresome thing to do. We quickened our steps and mostly kept our eyes straight ahead, glancing to the side only in order to get a running start if one of them raced out to grab us.

“We were little children, first through sixth graders, and we feared these men. But after weeks without incident, we did get the courage to wave and talk. A few times, after hearing in school about the necessity to witness for our faith, we

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handed some of them sack lunches with *Signs of the Times* or *Listen*, the temperance magazine, tucked inside.

“The second dangerous route to our school avoided the railroad tracks, and went down a long hill and turned a sharp right in front of the public school. In the fall, the giants from the high school football team would walk down part of this road on their way to practice.

“The public school was the same group of red brick buildings where our father had gone to school. But now it had a big gymnasium with glass backboards and a shiny hardwood floor. There were cute cheerleaders and Friday night dances. The students knew how to have a good time.

“On past the public school, our Adventist school was a little white building that doubled as our church. It sat near the Columbia River and our Uncle Ray’s rye fields. The school had been hauled to its existing site on a house-moving truck. As the school grew, it added wings of grey pumice-stone block or white plaster. The win-

dows were the texture of a sliding-glass shower door and, because of church, were stained yellow except for those that had broken and been replaced by clear glass. Our play field was dirt, and the little children would run about acting like wild horses while the older ones played work-up. Sometime we had battles using clumps of rye uprooted from my uncle’s field. The clodded dirt at the roots made for fine missiles and satisfying effects on impact.

“I was embarrassed to carry my lunch bucket and walk home on the road. I much preferred the danger of walking the rails past the hobo camp to the feeling of walking, isolated and conspicuous, among the crowd of laughing young people who emerged out of the public school at the end of the school day. It seemed honorable to be struck by, or forced to drink from, a wine bottle while giving out *Listen* magazine.

“I could think of nothing redeeming in the imagined ridicule of my public school peers. Walking by them reminded me that I was different. Not so much because I went to school in an older building, but because I was a member of a religious minority that kept apart from them. We were sectarian.

“Not everyone who grows up in a community where he is part of a religious minority feels the way I did as a child. In fact, many of my classmates seemed to feel superior to or just not interested in people outside our group. But I suffered from an attitude common enough among members of religious minorities for sociologists to have given it the name ‘Sectarian paranoia.’ ”

Work and the use of time was a moral issue both with the Adventist church and with my family. “Work for the night is coming,” said the hymn. “Work like you’re killing snakes,” said my dad. “Don’t dawdle or daydream.” Still, I wondered what Moses, Jesus, and Paul were doing in the desert and the wilderness. When Jesus prayed all night, what did he pray about? When David meditated on the law “day and night,” was he working on legal solutions? Mysteries. But I still grew up convinced that all thoughts should be linear and come in full sentences.

My church did not see itself arousing the imaginative life. Rather, it worked to master my imagination. In children's Sabbath school we stacked books according to their moral worth—comic books on the bottom, secular publishers next, followed by nature titles, church publications, Ellen White, up to the Holy Bible's place on the top. This exercise taught me several things. I saw books as power objects, I learned about hierarchy and publishers, and I still feel uncomfortable to find something on top of my Bible.

In the barbershop I could never read the Donald Duck or Chip 'n' Dale comics at leisure. Each time I sensed a body passing outside the shop window, I feared it was someone from our church who might think ill of me. I quickly slid the comic book under the smock the barber had tied around my neck. I'm sure he wondered what this jumpy kid was doing.

My brother Henry witnessed to someone who was standing in the drugstore, enjoying the Sunday color section. "You won't go to heaven if you read those," he said. Of course, we loved the comics ourselves. Guilt couldn't keep them, *Treasure Island*, *Robin Hood*, or the *Brothers Grimm* out of our hands.

In fact, it was our parents who handed some of those books over to us in the first place. That was one way I learned the difference between the standards of my home and the standards of my school. Our parents read Aesop and Jack London to us—books our church school library would not have stocked. Ironically, this led me to trust my school more. School outlined a pretty clear standard. My parents were less codified. Moreover, my parents were not in print, and therefore lacked the authority of the *Junior Guide* or of *On Becoming a Man*.

This dissonance between school and home, between textual authority and the imagination, between freedom and restraint, reverberated into my adolescence. For example, no one mentioned sex in our grade school. My parents talked to us about it some; once, to the boys around the kitchen table, my father talked about masturbation in a way that was intended to help us accept ourselves and be neither excessive nor full of guilt.

Our home and my father's office supplied us

with surgery and anatomy texts and with clinical advice books on sex. By the time I was out of junior high, I had peered into books by Albert Ellis, by the feminists Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir, and into all kinds of manuals. But the book I really believed in was Harold Shryock's *On Becoming a Man*. It meshed with my grandma, with what I read in *Messages to Young People*, with what wasn't said in our school, and with what I could imagine of God watching me. All through my adolescence I met Adventist classmates who admitted the guilt and self-loathing they felt about their sexuality. I remember one classmate who was certain that oth-

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ers knew his eyeglasses were evidence of his "self-abuse." "I'd be blind," another friend assured him. But I imagine my classmate's guilt has hung on.

My Adventist childhood was a luxuriant garden of irony. We were educated to avoid fictions and the dreamy life, but we had planted in us stories that made fictions thrive and the imagination flourish. The church sowed me with prophecies, dreams, and predictions—with beasts, dragons, whores, and feet of clay. One day I would be wheat or chaff.

One of my clearest memories has me sitting on the floor at the back of the congregation while the minister tells of brave people who died rather horrible deaths for their faith. Naked men sang "We will not give up the cross" while they froze to death on the ice; women gave up their babies before giving in to blasphemy; martyrs sang as flames burned them. This could be my future if I remained faithful through that imminent "time of trouble." At night my parents tried to comfort me, but their language lacked the minister's power.

Our church was in our school building and

during one apocalyptic sermon, I managed to open a bookcase door and slip out a *National Geographic*. In the magazine I found pictures of a medieval battle—swords, spears, and headless bodies. They fit right into stories of the final conflict that I had been told over and over. I suppose it was at my instigation that my little sisters and I played martyrs with their dolls. What could be more noble play than to fight and not to yield? Like Luther, the chubby dolls rode to challenge the Catholics, were betrayed by cowering men, and finally, while tied to a Juneberry bush, they met the smoky fate of John Huss.

My Adventism defined my language, my friendships, my interests. Because of the Adventist church, I am now haunted by stories and symbols.

Those that have stayed with me the longest are from the Bible, the top book on my Sabbath school stack of acceptable reading. I often tell my students in introductory literature classes that if they have learned and heard the Bible, especially if they listened to the King James and memorized from it, they have an advantage. They have internalized not just a source of inspiration, but also of imagery, rhythm, and sound.

My Adventist education made me familiar with the Bible; I knew its language and used it. When I needed inspiration, I could quote from the Gospels, from Psalms, from Paul, and from the last chapter of Revelation. I got over my childhood fear of the dark by quoting texts about light, and remembering Christ's comforting "Let not your heart be troubled," from John 14:1. When I was concerned about my procrastination in school, I asked God to help me study to show myself approved, as Paul encouraged Timothy to do.

We also used texts joyfully and in word play. "Why stand ye there gazing?" my friend asked people who were staring at something. With Ellen White we took larger liberties. After a speech by a strict and pushy adult, we'd mumble "C on D and F," short for *Counsels on Diet and Foods*. Once I cut myself handling barbed wire. "Self-abuse," I groaned, and my brother and I cackled, and kept on laughing long after a joke should normally have faded away.

My friends around the table in Seattle say that my language and even my poetry still show the conflict between a strong moral code and the desire for a less censored life. I tell them I value that conflict.