



The Questioning Imagination

A commencement address at Canadian Union College by one of Adventism's most respected educators.

by Otilie Stafford

IT IS A PLEASURE TO BE HERE, TO FIND FORMER colleagues and friends here, and to be part of this celebration. Academic events tie the entire academic community together, and commencements have a common uniting memory and hope for the future that makes them similar, no matter what country the institution. They give us time to pause and reflect on what events mean—moments out of time to think about what time's envious and calumniating effects truly are. And in this kind of reflective pause, to think about how we have been changed by knowledge and experience.

The educated person learns how to live with such change. Learns how to welcome the unsettling of ideas and the shattering of visions that knowledge and experience often produce, and still to trust in the mind's "blessed rage for order" and to wait for the reshaping

of meanings.

This resilience of the mind and its ability to venture into new and (for the individual at any rate), unexplored territories is a central concern of education.

"The mind is an enchanting thing," said Marianne Moore, "like Gieseeking playing Scarlatti." Most of you are too young to remember Gieseeking, the great pianist, but if you have heard his recordings, you know what Marianne Moore was getting at. The intricacy, the great delicacy and complexity of the music, performed with such skill and ease that its difficulty is completely hidden, and the performance creates the impression of perfect freedom.

The mind, she is saying, is just such a performer. Trained to discipline, and yet, by discipline, freed.

Every musician and athlete must know that we must labor to be beautiful, whether it is Gieseeking the virtuoso, or Kristi Yamaguchi, the balletic skater. Alfred North Whitehead, in the more abstruse language of the philosopher, echoes the poet's admiration for this

Otilie Stafford, who received her Ph.D. in English literature from Boston University, is director of the adult degree program and professor of English at Atlantic Union College. She continues to teach in the English department, which she chaired for 25 years.

enchanted process of the mind. You quote him in your motto: "Wherever ideas are effective, there is freedom."

It is particularly pleasant to be speaking to a graduating class that has the good sense to quote Alfred North Whitehead. We have never managed to quite catch up to Whitehead, even though it is now almost 75 years since he came to this continent, changing his profession and venturing into a world of new ideas when his contemporaries were planning their retirements.

He was 63 when he came to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Harvard University, having already had a distinguished career as a mathematician. But there were new ideas he wanted to explore, and dynamic changes were the central reality of life, he believed. He came to a department of philosophy that was in its golden years, but with a group of distinguished philosophers whose primary concern was epistemology. Whitehead wanted to talk about metaphysics. His first lecture at Harvard left students and faculty alike shaking their heads. They could not understand him.

But his Friday night seminars in his home gradually drew a group of students and colleagues into a conversation that led to a series of books by Whitehead, and to a changed view of philosophy in the department he had joined.

He began to talk and write about education before he left England, basing his lectures on a "main idea": "The students are alive, and the purpose of education is to stimulate and guide their self-development." He called this the "one fundamental principle of education." Transmission of knowledge was not the role of education, but the transformation of the mind and the lives of students and of their societies.

"Bits of knowledge can easily be learned; what matters is their *use*." His chief attack was on "inert ideas," both in his early lectures

about education and in his book, published shortly after he came to Harvard, *The Aims of Education*. "Inert ideas" he defined as "those ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilized, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations."

Basing his further statements about education on these early ones, he began exploring the uses of imagination and the responsibility education places on those who are fortunate enough to obtain it. "The fortunate people are those whose minds are filled with thoughts in which they forget themselves and remember others." "The whole point of a university . . . is to bring the young under the intellectual influence of a band of imaginative scholars."

The emphasis, of course, is on *imaginative*. Whitehead always credited his own teachers and his associates for the kind of imaginative scholarship they exemplified. All of us owe vast debts of gratitude to those who lit our fires, to those whose minds freed our minds to be adventurous.

"The human soul," he declared, "cannot endure monotony; it needs to be 'fertilized' by transient but vivid experiences; art meets this need."

"Imagination is more important than knowledge," Einstein said. "The tragedy of the world," said Whitehead, "is that those who are experienced have feeble imaginations. Fools act on imagination without knowledge; pedants act on knowledge without imagination. The task of education is to weld together imagination and experience."

Imagination frees us from imprisonments of various kinds: it frees us from our own subjective visions—locked up in the cell of our own experiences and emotions, we are alienated from others, and cannot grow beyond our own limitations. We react strongly to our own experiences, but, lacking the imaginative ability to see them as common to the experiences of humankind, we fall into self-aggrandizement or self-pity.

Imagination frees us from the rigidity of a view that sees what *has been* and what *is* as the only possibilities. Such a view imposes conformity on the society or institutional structure, aiming at crushing any suggestion of something different. Every *imaginative act* that is based upon *knowledge* overpasses the established order in some way and in some degree. It is likely at first to appear at least eccentric, at worst rebellious and chaotic, but it is truly a freeing from the established.

And imagination frees us from the certainty that chains of cause and result determine whatever happens, that nothing we can do will make a difference.

Such a failure of the imagination leaves us passive, lazy, and selfish parasites on a power structure or subject to haphazard events.

The ironic utopias of the 20th century picture this condition. In 1984 a society has become passive and lost its freedom. In *Brave New World* a society has become lazy and lost its concern about what happens. In both cases the faculty that has been destroyed has been the imagination.

We have all encountered the individual who, as a subordinate, has a strong sense of outrage when the persons he works under are unjust to him or dictatorial in their dealings with him. He may take a stand against tyranny, even become the spokesman for those who are oppressed by it. Years and upward mobility later, he himself becomes the person in power, and cannot understand why those under him object to his dictatorial ways. He cannot use his past personal sense of

injustice as a way of understanding the roots of injustice as they grow vines that choke others. Nor can he understand that his own sense in one kind of relationship may be similar to that of others in the same relationship, even when he is in an opposite position. His imaginative powers have failed to free him from the imprisonment of subjectivity.

We just had our alumni weekend at Atlantic Union College. I have very mixed feelings about these events. It is wonderful to see classmates, former students, from the near and distant past. It is disturbing to listen to those who have grown old viewing everything dif-

ferent in today's society as "signs of evil times," thinking, apparently, that the past was good, but the present world is descending into chaos. My mother's generation grew up in the Jazz Age, the world of bootlegging, speak-easies, free love, and agnosticism. Today those few who are left from her generation are shocked by drugs, the ignoring of the law, and cynicism. What happens to memory and

imagination as we grow old? Do we forget as we grow, and therefore cannot free ourselves from our own prejudices? Or do we understand the past, but cannot extend its lessons into the present and future, just as the subjective individual cannot extend her own personal experiences to illuminate the experiences of others?

Does imagination's power diminish as one grows older? I cannot think it necessarily does. There are so many Georgia O'Keeffes, Albert Einsteins, Mstislav Rostropoviches, whose imaginative power extends over their entire

I would hope the hunger and thirst for knowledge, the keen delight in the quest, will drive you from question to question; that you will be neither fool nor pedant, but will so combine imagination and knowledge that you will have the power to change your personal worlds and the worlds around you.

lifetimes. And there are occasionally, Whiteheads, who have the courage and the imagination to change their lives and start something new, even at a stage in life when others are hardening into banality. Such persons are truly free, and at a time in life when freedom often diminishes, they are the most free. It is such freedom that Whitehead urges us toward.

The imagination feeds upon curiosity, a feeling that Whitehead says education should begin with: "A *ferment* already stirring in the mind." That ferment grows out of the instinctive, deep, human desire to *know*. The imaginative scholar becomes comfortable with the knowledge that there are few fixed truths, and that the questions themselves are that mind's purpose. It is Whitehead who sees the importance of uniting the young and the old together in the search for answers to questions. Such a union preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest for life. A college is not concerned with merely imparting knowledge, but with a sense of adventure that the search for knowledge brings.

The writer Annie Dillard found such a zest for life early in her childhood. She describes sitting on the cold marble floor of a library in Pittsburgh, as a child, while her mother talked to the librarians. The child Annie had gone to a section of the library far away from the children's books, and was looking with curiosity at the books in the nature section. She lifted down from the shelves the *Field Guide to Ponds and Streams*. Not knowing anything at all about ponds and streams, which were scarce in central Pittsburgh, she leafed through the book. What a shocker it was! Here was a whole area of life she hadn't even known existed. Then she looked at the card in the back of the book. It was filled with names, some of persons who had taken the same book out over and over. Who were these people, living in the middle

of Pittsburgh, who were so fascinated with the life in ponds and streams, she wondered? The book changed Annie Dillard's life, leading her to a lifelong curiosity about the natural world around her, and the sense of the mysterious that lies behind that world.

The adult Dillard, at the end of her Pulitzer prize-winning book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, talks about the energy that results from a combination of experience and imagination. She writes:

Thomas Merton wrote, "There is always a temptation to diddle around in the contemplative life, making itsy-bitsy statues." There is always an enormous temptation to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. It is so self-conscious, so apparently moral, simply to step aside from the gaps where the creeks and winds pour down, saying, I never merited this grace, quite rightly, and then to walk along the rest of our days on the edge of rage. I won't have it. The world is wilder in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant and bright. We are making hay when we should be making whoopee; we are raising tomatoes when we should be raising Cain, or Lazarus. . . . The gaps are the things. The gaps are the spirit's one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound . . . Stalk the gaps. Squeak into a gap in the soil, turn, and unlock a universe. This is how you spend the afternoon. *Spend* the afternoon. You can't take it with you.

Annie Dillard has a more recent book out. Her first novel, and a blockbuster. In an article in the Sunday *New York Times*, she talks about the preparation for the imaginative life of the writer as reading. Read! Read! Read!, she says. It fills the mind, so that the knowledge and the imagination can work together. In *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard talks about the sentimental poster that hung in the Pittsburgh library—"When you open a book, anything can happen." But, she adds, "This was so. A book is a bomb, a land mine you want to go off . . . Books swept me away."

The chief malady of the mind of man, said Pascal, is a restless curiosity about things that he does not know and cannot understand. It is this curiosity that preserves the connection between the knowledge and the zest for life. If that curiosity operates, suggests Whitehead, "a fact is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energizing as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes."

How do we manage to keep the inquisitive eye and mind alive and well, throughout life, however long? How do we bring together the imaginative ability to see visions of worlds that do not exist, even as we study about the one in which we live? How can students be led to refine their questions so they will lead to further and fuller questions? How can the sense of learning as an adventure in which we move into the mysterious and the astonishing be kept fresh? How can we keep alive the idea of lifelong learning carrying us to the edge of knowledge? Can we learn to use our questions and our curiosity to change ourselves and our societies? Can we, by escaping from the conventional wisdom, by sensing the infinite possibilities for change, actually transform our worlds?



F.W. Maitland describes the qualities that shape the life of the imaginative scholar:

The hunger and thirst for knowledge, the keen delight in the chase, the good humored willingness to admit that the scent was false, the eager desire to get on with the work, the cheerful resolution to go back and begin again, the broad good sense, the unaffected modesty, the imperturbable temper, the gratitude for any little help that was given.

What a vital and dynamic list of qualities—none of them connected with the gathering of inert facts, with the sense of being an authority, of having found answers, or of learning how to do things efficiently! Good humor, a recognition that false starts are inevitable and often precede finding the right path; modesty, and especially a thirst for knowledge and a delight in the adventure of pursuing it. How can an educational system develop these qualities in graduates? Higher education is puzzled when it tries to answer this question.

We understand how to say, here is a body of knowledge you must master if you are to work in this area. There will be an exam over it in April. I am not so sure that we understand how to develop a sense of adventure, the ability to ask productive and expansive questions, the imaginative power that true scholarship needs. How do we develop the eager desire, the cheerful resolution, the good sense and modesty that Maitland thinks characterize the educated person?

Without these qualities, we are trapped by dilemmas because we cannot imagine ways to think differently about what we know. We grow and learn and solve problems when we not only tolerate, but delight in, the knowledge that many false starts can precede finding the right path, and that the fact that we have made false starts does not doom us to following them to their disastrous ends.

How can we educate our children, our young adults, our older adults, and those who

are in charge of doing the educating, to understand that the curiosity and openness to possibilities is a *way of living* and not an article of commerce? That education should produce a *kind of mind and character* and not a job applicant. That such an education should be actively shaping our lives and our discourses during the entire course of a lifetime. Lifelong learning then is not a plea for continuing education. It is a commitment to a life dedicated to the hunger and thirst for knowledge, the excitement of the chase, to the inquisitive eye and the open mind.

I have had for several years on the bulletin board over my desk these words of Rilke:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue . . . Live the questions. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers.

If the purpose of the education is to lead us to further and more profound questions, not to give us absolute answers, one must ask how questioning and curiosity change between the experience of the child, sitting on the cold marble floor of the library, surprised by the book that seems to have no relation to the world around her, and the educated mind of the adult. The answer to that question should, I suppose, shape the structures of education, the methodology of teachers, the curricula of the college. Surely one aim would be to keep the inquisitive eye and mind alive and well, resilient and with a joy in the performing, like Gieseeking playing Scarlatti, and not to forget them as academic disciplines engage them. But they must not just survive, they must develop. Here Whitehead's protest against inert facts becomes important. What happens *while* the facts are being mastered, and *after* they are encountered is much more important to the freeing of the mind than is the learning of them.

The gift that the college has to offer to its students is the ability to adventure for answers, the old gift of the educated imagination that can see visions and dream dreams. As Whitehead says, "It is a dangerous gift, which has started many a conflagration. If we are too timid as to that danger, the proper course is to shut down our universities." But, he also says, "You must be free to think rightly *and wrongly*, and free to appreciate the variousness of the universe." It is the gift that lends zest to life, that gives life meaning, whether we are living in the middle of happiness and good fortune, or in the middle of tragedy.

Christopher Fry, the English playwright, tells about his last encounter with his friend Charles Williams, who shouted to him from the tailboard of a London bus, "When we're dead we shall have the sensation of having enjoyed life altogether, whatever has happened to us."

"The distance between us had widened," says Fry, "and he leaned out into the space so that his voice should reach me. 'Even if we've been murdered, what a pleasure to have been capable of it!'"

Fry goes on to add, "He was not at all saying that everything is for the best in this best of all worlds. He was saying that there is an angle of the experience where the dark is distilled into light; either here or hereafter, in or out of time: where our tragic fate finds itself with perfect pitch, and goes straight to the key which creation was composed in." Only a combination of experience and imagination could see life whole in a way that reaches beyond the immediate and chaotic and sees its deeper meaning in all events, joyous and tragic. Such an imaginative vision brings a sense of zest to life, whatever its contents may be.

"A university," Whitehead thought, "is imaginative or it is nothing—at least nothing useful . . . The gift the university has to offer is the old one of imagination, the lighted torch which

passes from hand to hand . . . It is a gift which all must pray for their country who desire for it an abiding greatness."

I would hope for those graduating today, as I would hope for all of us rejoicing in the event, that your lives will be filled with the excitement of curiosity, the hunger and thirst for knowledge, the keen delight in the quest, that you will be driven from question to question as you learn and find answers, that the mysterious and the inexplicable will always be there, that you will be freed from the familiar and the trite, that you will be neither

fool nor pedant, but will so combine imagination and knowledge that you will have the power to change your personal worlds and the worlds around you.

Because, as the great questioner Hamlet asks:

What is a man [or a woman]
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure, He that made us with such a large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
[Imagination] and godlike reason
To fust in us unused.