Illness As A Refuge And Strength

A Princeton University study explores Ellen White's illness as a spiritual resource.

by Kathleen M. Joyce

ELLEN WHITE WAS NINE YEARS OLD WHEN HER childhood came to an end. Walking home from school one day with her twin sister, Elizabeth, she was knocked unconscious when a stone, thrown by an angry classmate, struck her in the face. She remained unconscious for nearly three weeks, and although she eventually recovered from the injury, she never returned to the life she knew before. In the aftermath of what she later referred to as her "misfortune," she was burdened with a new sense of vulnerability, and began anxiously to contemplate her own death. Worried that she might die spiritually unprepared to enter Christ's kingdom, she prayed earnestly for some sign from God that her sins were forgiven.

The crisis of faith caused by her injury marked the beginning of a spiritual journey that spanned nearly eight decades and earned Ellen White a place in the religious history of 19th-century America. Her work as co-founder and prophet of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has received less attention from historians than that of other American sectarian leaders, but it is no less significant. During the half-century that she led the church, White directed its expansion into an international denomination and laid the foundation for today's extensive network of church-sponsored schools and healthcare facilities. Even more important, she was, and is, the spiritual center of the church, guiding the lives of its 8 million members through her prophetic writings.

In view of White's accomplishments, her distinctiveness as a woman religious leader, and the continued strength of the church she founded, the dearth of scholarly studies of her life is somewhat surprising. Overlooked or perhaps underestimated by historians, the writing of White's life has been left primarily to faithful followers and disillusioned former church members who for decades have been engaged in a battle over the authenticity of her

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prophetic claims. Prophet or plagiarist, visionary or sadly deceived epileptic, passive vessel or woman of calculating ambition, these are the identities typically attributed to White. Even the best studies, those by Ronald Numbers and Jonathan Butler, have failed to set aside entirely the questions of character from which White, even in death, seems unable to escape.[1]

I would like to suggest a more constructive approach to the study of White's life. Ellen White became a force in the American Adventist movement when she was only 17 years old, she lived and led the Adventist faithful for a full three score and ten years beyond that. How do we account for her success and longevity as a religious leader? This is the question, I believe, with which anyone who seeks to understand White's life must begin.

Today I would like to begin to answer that question by arguing that White's experience and use of illness was critical to her success as a religious leader, providing her with a way to disarm her critics and to renew herself spiritually. Illness was the leitmotif of White's life, the theme that she returns to again and again in her autobiographical narratives and her personal correspondence, and her experience of it was closely tied to her experience of God. This connection is made quite explicitly in the story of her childhood injury with which I began today, and that first life crisis served as the prototype for all the ones that followed.

I should note here that White was by no means unique in the way illness and religious faith were joined in her life. Read the stories of the saints and prophets of Christian history and you will see how closely her experience resembled those of others who went before her. There is then, a general point to be made about the relationship between illness and religious experience, particularly conversion experiences, which should not be lost in the discussion of White.

At the same time, however, both the experience of illness and the experience of faith are historical forms that need to be examined against the backdrop of a specific social and cultural setting; to make a universal claim is to lose sight of the distinct character of each experience. In White's case, that setting was 19th-century America, and her gender played a decisive role in determining how she experienced faith and sickness in that historical moment.

Freedom Through Frailty

It is possible that it was clear to Ellen White and her peers what society expected of them as women, wives, and mothers, but for those who have tried, a century later, to recapture a sense of that time, the expectations for and the reality of Victorian womanhood seem much less clear. Closing the gap between myth and reality, perception and practice, is difficult for many reasons, not the least of which is that there never was any such entity as *the* Victorian Woman who conformed to the ideal type promoted in prescriptive literature for women.

What is important, however, is that regardless of how individual women lived, there did exist in middle-class Victorian America some assumptions about how a virtuous woman, loyal wife, and nurturing mother should behave. Some of these assumptions still exist 150 years later, but in Ellen White's lifetime the margin of acceptable deviation was much more limited than it has been in the final decades of the 20th century. Ellen White and her contemporaries were aware of the cost of deviation, and her writings suggest that she made selective use of this Victorian model as she shaped her public image.

White's religious calling put her in a difficult position. On the one hand, she was no social radical; her views on the role of women in society were strictly traditional. Yet on the

other hand, her leadership position forced her to live a life that was quite at odds with her conservative social convictions. Illness, however, offered White a solution to the problem this conflict posed. By emphasizing her physical weakness, she was able to soften her image and deflect potential criticism of her public activities.

White's delicate constitution was one of her trademarks—the characteristic that drew attention to both her life of prophetic sacrifice and her appropriately feminine frailty. Indeed, it is one of the ironies of her life that although she made health reform the centerpiece of her own religious crusade, she never tried to hide her health problems from those around her. Her autobiographies offer an endless litany of the health crises and physical suffering she endured, from attacks of "nervous prostration" to ailments of the respiratory and digestive system so debilitating that she feared for her life.

White's personal correspondence tells much the same story. She portrays herself consistently as a weak, chronically ill woman whose life has been spared only because of the great work God expects of her. Well after her career as a health reformer was established, White still portrayed herself as a delicate woman whose life was easily and often endangered by illnesses of every variety.

When compared to the methods used by other health reformers of the period, White's willingness to emphasize her ill health seems all the more curious. For most evangelists of health, their own personal conversion to a life free of sickness was an essential part of their message, but Ellen White was never consistent in this respect.[2] She did recommend specific hygienic practices and therapeutic treatments that had been beneficial to her and which she understood to be divinely sanctioned, but she did not let her role as health advocate and prophet detract from the continuing saga of her physical maladies. In fact, she seems to have embraced the role of invalid.

In the eyes of her followers, White's physical frailty seemed only to confirm their belief that her prophetic gifts were from God. This remains true even today. A pamphlet issued by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1983, drawing on a theme found in most sympathetic biographies of her, describes White's rise to prophecy in a chapter entitled, "'The Weakest of the Weak': God's Third Choice." In this chapter, one of White's first visions is described. "Suddenly the Holy Spirit rested upon her, and she was taken off in a vision in a manner reminiscent of the holy prophets of Scripture. She was 17 years old, in ill health, and weighed about 80 pounds."[3]

While this emphasis on the prophet's youth, weakness, and appearance of being ill suited to the prophetic task is not unique to her story, it is unusual for this theme to follow, as it did Ellen White, the prophet into maturity. Indeed, the persistence of this theme suggests that White and her biographers have been concerned with something more than illustrating God's ability to achieve great works through even the weakest of vessels. Her frailty, the visions over which she had no control, her unwillingness, especially in the early years, to accept a leadership position that required her to be anything more than God's amanuensis,

Ellen White, at age 78, giving the principal address at the dedication services of Loma Linda Sanitarium, 1906.

reveal a particularly feminine pattern of religious prophecy. It was a pattern that accommodated the need for women to be servants rather than masters, and served to reinforce the comforting perception of women as passive vessels through whom God and men achieved great works. White was in truth anything but passive, but she used these cultural expectations to her advantage. At some level she recognized that by wearing her ill health as a badge of femininity, she could gain the freedom to become the religious leader that she believed God had called her to be.

Confidence From Convalescence

White's illnesses might have served an other function as well. While her health problems guarded her from some of the criticism she might otherwise have encountered, they also provided her with a refuge to which she could flee when she felt her responsibilities were becoming too much for her. The

Ellen White, in health reform "short" skirt and pants, in front of the Health Reform Institute, Battle Creek, Michigan, in the mid-1870s.

way she described her emotional and physical state after her first call to preach the Adventist message illustrates this dual function: "After I came out of this vision I was exceedingly troubled. . . . My health was so poor that I was in constant bodily suffering, and to all appearance had but a short time to live."[4]

In this passage Ellen White portrays herself as a reluctant prophet, a frail woman overcome by what God had made known to her and doubtful of her ability to fulfill her service to God. Yet she did not stand cowering behind the shield of her ill health for long. Those first uncertain months in which she was consumed by bodily suffering appear to have been an essential time of preparation for White, and she emerged from them with new strength and confidence. In her autobiography, *Life Sketches*, White described what happened when she finally ventured out to bring the adventist message to a new community.

> For three months my throat and lungs had been so diseased that I could talk but little, and that in a low and husky tone. On this occasion I stood up in meeting and commenced to speak in a whisper. I continued thus for about five minutes, when the soreness and obstruction left me, my voice became clear and strong, and I spoke with perfect ease and freedom for nearly two hours.[5]

White attributed this miraculous healing to the work of God, but it is possible too that her voice grew stronger as her comfort with her prophetic calling increased.

Just as her physical problems eased the transition to her new life by allowing White to move into the prophetic role gradually, her frailty also helped her to cope with challenges to her authority once she became an Adventist leader. In *Life Sketches*, she describes one of these challenges and her response to it. Theological differences were dividing the community, and White felt the weight of the brewing conflict acutely, writing later that "these strange differences of opinion rolled a heavy weight upon me. I saw that many errors were being

presented as truth. It seemed to me that God was dishonored. Great grief passed on my spirits, and I fainted under the burden. Some feared that I was dying."[6]

She did not die, however, but instead received a vision compelling enough to quell the controversy. "The light of heaven then rested upon me, and I was soon lost to earthly things. . . . I was bidden to tell them that they should yield their errors, and unite upon the truth of the third angel's message. Our meeting closed triumphantly. Truth gained the victory."[7]

Recovery as Spiritual Ritual

With the help of visions, fainting spells, and frequent illnesses, truth was often able to gain the victory when Ellen White was faced with a difficult situation. This is not to suggest that White's illnesses were simply a tool that she used to manipulate people and situations. Real health problems and, I would argue, real faith were involved; White simply put them to use in a way that profited her.

To argue, therefore, that White's strategic use of illness was one of the secrets of her success as a religious leader is not to exclude the possibility that faith itself played a role. White's turn to illness during times of crisis was not just an effective strategy, it was also an essential spiritual exercise. Let me explain by returning again to the story of her childhood injury.

It is clear from her account that in addition to the effect the accident had on her physically, it also had important emotional and spiritual consequences. Sick, anxious, and socially isolated, she turned to God for strength and support. "I sought the Lord earnestly," she wrote years later. "I believed that Jesus did love even me." This admission follows immediately her quite detailed description of the rejection she suffered after her facial injuries altered her appearance.

> Many times I was made to feel deeply my misfortune. With wounded pride, mortified at myself, I have found a lonely spot to think over the trials I was doomed to bear daily. My life was often miserable, for my feelings were keenly sensitive. I could not, like my twin sister, weep out my feelings. My heart seemed so heavy, and ached as though it would break, yet I could not shed a tear. . . . How changeable the friendship of my young companions. A pretty face, dress, or good looks, are much thought of. But let misfortune take some of these away, and the friendship is broken.

What distinguishes this story from others that White tells in her autobiography is the depth of emotion that her words convey and the fact that much of the account doesn't serve an obvious purpose. So much of her autobiography is intended either to add to her stature as a religious leader or to help to establish her spiritual credentials that passages like this one stand out from the rest simply because they don't follow the traditional script.

White's account of the accident and its aftermath is almost certainly an exaggeration, but this fact in itself is revealing. Why does she tell the story as she does? Why does she use it to open her autobiographies when she could have begun with a dramatic account of the visions that came to her just eight years later? I believe that White's dramatic presentation of the incident is not just another example of her tendency to distort the truth, but instead a quite important indication of how profoundly the experience affected her. The long period of convalescence that followed White's childhood injury was the period of her first great religious awakening, and her experience of God during this period laid the foundation for the religious life that followed.

Subsequent experiences—her introduction to William Miller's teachings, her first visions—were more directly relevant to White's career as an Adventist leader, but that first spiritual awakening continued to have a

pronounced effect on her inner life. As an adult, illness allowed White to drink again from the spiritual well she had discovered as a child.

Strength Out of Sickness

Illness was White's spiritual refuge and strength, and as such it was critical to her success as a religious leader. As a refuge, it protected her from criticism and served as a haven to which she could return when events seemed to move beyond her control. At a very fundamental level, it was also the source of her spiritual strength, for it both reminded her of her first decisive experience of faith and freed her to do the work she believed she was called to do.

By arguing that illness had both strategic and spiritual importance to White, I have tried also to suggest a more constructive approach to the study of her life. White was a woman awash in contradictions, some of them quite troubling, that her biographers, both sympathetic and hostile, have tried to resolve. They have done so, for the most part, by denying some parts of her story and embellishing others. The result has been a body of literature that paints White in the extremes. These works fail to satisfy not only because they distort the facts of her life but also because they do not capture its complexity. It is the ambiguity of White's life, its both/and quality, that makes it a life worth writing and reading. Central to this ambiguity, I have argued, is the experience of illness that permitted Ellen White to become and remain an honored prophet to her people.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See Ronald Numbers, *Prophetess of Health* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976; Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992) and Jonathan Butler, "Prophecy, Gender, and Culture: Ellen Gould Harmon [White] and the Roots of Seventh-day Adventism" *Religion and American Culture* 1:1 (Winter 1991): pp. 3-29.

2. The most relevant examples are Mary Gove Nichols and Mary Baker Eddy, both of whom were contemporaries of White. Nichols adopted women's health as her cause and, over the course of her career, promoted dress and dietary reform, hydropathy, and sexual restraint as the keys to a healthy life. Nichols' life was not entirely free of sickness as an adult, but she treated her illnesses as minor setbacks to what was in general a forward march toward health and wholeness. Eddy's experience is also instructive Though not technically a health reformer, she did claim to know how to free people from disease. Eddy explained the illnesses that continued to plague her even after she had made her discovery of Christian Science in one of two ways. When she could, she denied their existence. If this didn't work, she attributed them to the work of malicious animal magnetism.

3. Roger W. Coon, *A Gift of Light* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Company, 1983), p. 23.

4. Ellen White, *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1915), p. 69.

5. Ibid., pp. 72, 73.

6. Ibid., p. 111.

7. Ibid.