



# The Art of Teaching the Bible

From reading Genesis to creating art to understanding Creation; from Gospel stories to the whole person worshiping.

by Ron Jolliffe

Hearing four-part harmony fill the sterile confines of the tiered lecture hall startled me. I had brought carols on CDs to my Ministry of Jesus class, but I had expected the class to be reserved about singing in an academic environment. So I had placed a transparency of the song on the overhead projector and timidly suggested that we sing the first verse. Something wonderful happened. Without a piano, the students sang, not just in unison, but in four-part harmony. They didn't stop after the first verse. When they finished, they asked if I had brought other carols.

After singing, I asked them to find the verses in Matthew or Luke that had instructed the hymn writer. They noticed that the carols were predominantly based on the Lukan infancy narrative with its sheep and manger, angels singing and cattle lowing (clearly some editorial license). Not many, they saw, had to do with the Matthean Magi, the house, the slaugh-

ter of the innocents, or the opulent gifts. They wondered why I had brought only "We Three Kings" for Matthew's story. After class, several students said everyone liked it and hoped we could do it again.

Adventist higher education has a tradition of commitment to educating the whole person. Mission statements in Adventist college bulletins commonly state that the college intends to train the whole person, mind, body, and soul. Walla Walla College "aims to develop in students the whole of their human potential." While a college's reach certainly must exceed its grasp, these ideals continue to challenge faculty to teach more effectively.

Western higher education invests the majority of its resources in the development of verbal and analytical skills. The creative and celebrative skills are too frequently overlooked, or even dismissed as "non-academic" and inappropriate for the college classroom. Consequently, in the majority of classes, students are rewarded for reactionary work—responding to arguments, analyzing literature, categorizing art periods, exegeting Scripture

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texts, learning taxonomies, and reacting to position statements.

I've discovered that when I require students only to read texts, they do little more than note potential quiz questions. For example, if they are to read the birth narratives of Jesus, many (probably instructed by crèches) notice no essential differences among the four Gospels. But if I require them not only to read the four Gospels, but to list differences among their narratives of the birth of Jesus, students are more observant, seeing differences among the texts they otherwise overlook.

However, even this careful observation leads to responses other than worship. When handling the texts analytically, students typically bring good critical skills to the task and respond in predictable, "academic" ways: concerns about how to explain the differences or harmonize them, questions about background information, and discussions of the relationship of inspiration and factuality. During the past few years, as I have begun to utilize various art forms to augment lectures and class discussions, I have noticed something new occurring in the classroom.

When critical study is coupled with the arts (for example, the music and poetry of the carols), the discussion frequently includes a larger number of students, and becomes more interdisciplinary. Now, in addition to more standard "academic" concerns, the discussion incorporates nativity scenes, church versus cathedral architecture, holiday gift-giving, Christmas trees, Ingathering, caroling, and the work of the Spirit through young people. The text ceases to be an isolated object for dissection, and becomes part of a more integrated awareness of the multifold layers and meanings of Jesus' birth.

The inclusion of song in the classroom significantly enhanced the quality of the Ministry of Jesus course. However, the approach to the text remained primarily verbal, and still involved reacting to the creative work of

others. I wondered if there was a way to allow students to actually bring their own creative skills into the course, so that they could respond out of their own unique vision and experience.

I was encouraged in this line of thinking by certain biblical texts. What might we come to understand by actually "go[ing] to the ant" or "consider[ing] the lilies" (Proverbs 6:6; Luke 12:27)? There must be something to know that is not conveyed by verbal instruction. Since neither Proverbs nor Jesus say what is to be discovered, perhaps the lesson must be experienced rather than learned from a lecture.

When the weather permitted, I began taking students out of doors to sketch leaves, rocks, and trees. When inclement weather restricted outdoor activity, I brought dandelion stems and stones into the classroom. Sketching teaches us how little we actually know about familiar things. Students tell me they didn't realize how much they depend on symbols for their drawing, and how difficult it is to actually see what is there.

However, my favorite creative activity for the classroom is having students make faces with clay. Learning by doing an activity the text describes can be instructive (though certainly not all texts should be practiced: Matthew 27:5!) For example, what might be understood about the process of creation by making a head and face out of modeling clay as part of the study of Genesis 2:7?

After seeing how responsive students in the classroom have been learning with clay, I've distributed clay to audiences and workshop participants. I ask them to shape heads and faces following step-by-step instructions. I am amazed by the attentive, silent concentration grown adults lavish on their work with a bit of clay. Afterward, participants say:

"I was amazed that I could actually make something myself."

"The clay has a mind of its own. I couldn't

control it completely.”

“This face doesn’t look like anybody I know. But clearly some kinds of conversation would be consistent with who it is, and some kinds would not ‘fit’ at all. It has a personality.”

Reflecting on just these comments, I find myself amazed at what these observations have taught me. Why are we continually surprised at the work of our hands? Do we actually think we could be made in the image of the Creator, yet not be creative?

In attempting to experience the role of creator, we learn about the Creator. We also learn about ourselves. We discover that although creators have intentions, the created also has “rights” that are inherent in its nature. The creator has no control over these inherent “rights,” unless willing to substantially alter the very essence of the medium itself. But this usually destroys the very qualities that made the medium attractive in the first place. Finally, the created always has the impress of its creator. The faces we make do have personalities. Even though they are made of clay, they still have potentialities that are individually unique. Wouldn’t it be interesting to select several of these heads and let them be the characters in a novel?

Sculptures by students of Ron Jolliffe.



Another homework assignment requires students to “Respond to [a biblical text] non-verbally.” Sometimes the assignment is to be done individually, though normally I ask groups of students to work together on a project. They come to class with sketches, collages, dramatic mime performances, music, etc.

Some years ago, for a Parables of Jesus class, I assigned groups of six to eight students a text or parable to non-verbally “explain, teach, or illustrate” to the rest of the class. One group was assigned the text “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). When the time came for them to make their presentation, within 60 seconds they had covered a long classroom wall with butcher paper from the floor up eight feet. Other students appeared with an overhead projector to serve as a “light source,” and buckets of finger paint. They began to paint predrawn outlines with their hands. Gradually, life-sized human shadows began emerging, wearing T-shirts and jeans or shorts, corresponding to how the students were dressed. Upon finishing, the eight students took their places between the projector and the nine shadow figures they had painted. Each was holding a tool reflected in his or her shadow that they planned to use in service to the tall, central, ninth figure, Jesus.

It is not easy to verbalize the understanding that art seems capable of giving in the classroom. Perhaps an anecdote can capture some of that essence. Recently I sat in Room 10 of the Monet introspective at the Art Institute of Chicago, surrounded by scores of people looking at paintings of water lilies. One person entered with a companion and said aloud, “What are these? I didn’t know Monet did anything this abstract. I don’t see anything in these at all,” and went directly on to Room 11. Some minutes later a second couple entered. One of them repeated words similar to what I had just heard.

The other answered, "These are paintings of water lilies."

"I don't see anything."

After several attempts to explain what the pictures were about, the companion said, "Come, look at this early water lily painting, just where we entered the room. It shows the shoreline. In later works Monet omitted the shoreline. These dark green areas are tree reflections, and the globs of paint are the lilies floating on the surface."

After nearly a minute of concentration, the first person said, "Oh! I see them! They're beautiful!" and proceeded to walk slowly around the room absorbing water lilies floating on the surface of deep tree reflections.

Art teaches us something fundamental about language. Without art, we operate under an illusion about words. School, with its primary focus on verbal skills, leaves many with the incorrect impression that words are exact, accurate depictions of reality. Art does not solve the problem of describing reality, but it does make us aware that words are only one way to perceive and describe reality.

I am aware that not all courses easily lend themselves to creativity, especially at introductory levels. This is especially the case where students are learning the basic skills and language of a discipline. Nevertheless, when even beginning students are required to utilize a creative activity, they learn more quickly.

A more genuine concern is the difficulty of grading these types of assignments. Misguided applications and personal subjectivity are a

necessary part of any creative activity. Learning involves more than right answers. It is important to remind ourselves that assigning grades is far less important than learning, and discovering what does not work is also an important part of education.

It seems that what students learn through art and words is qualitatively different from what they learn through words alone. If we learned to think through both art and words, perhaps Adventists would exhibit less hubris about how right we are. To understand through art and words could lead us to practice our faith more responsibly.

To use just one example, we have a long-standing commitment to the words "heavenly sanctuary." When heard and believed only through words, the heavenly sanctuary seems essentially interchangeable with some physical building in heaven. Were we to come to understand "our sanctuary message" through the interaction of art and word, we might choose to spend more time as Adventists being a "heavenly sanctuary" to other people. It was Jesus himself who continually reminded us that "the Kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:21, NASB). Imagine an Adventism that was considered less a repository of truthful facts about certain biblical texts and more a sanctuary for those needing a city of refuge.

Providing opportunity to participate in the text verbally and creatively in the classroom seems to touch the whole student, and that is what Adventist college mission statements claim: Adventists educate the whole person.