

# Risking Being Right

By Heather Isaac

Five months have passed since that fateful Sunday in late August when I arrived at seminary and almost turned around and went home. I remember desperately asking God for some sign that I had made the right decision, that my impulse to come had not been misguided. As is God's prerogative, he remained silent. However, I stayed despite the silence.

My life path took a turn that day, and as a result I am not the same now. With only one semester behind me, I have come to understand that San Francisco Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian institution, is at this time the best place for me to be.

This is not to say that I don't feel beaten up at times. A few weeks ago, someone asked me to compare my life to one of the four seasons. Without exaggerating, I responded, "The season of chaos." There was a period this fall when I was afraid to answer the phone for fear of what news it might bring. I had a hard time describing how God was working in my life at that time because my life seemed messier than ever. But I chose to believe he was there—working from within the murkiness.

When I am asked what the experience of being at a Presbyterian seminary has done to my Adventism, I answer that I don't really know yet. But when I compare my experience of seminary with the formal theological education I encountered in college, I realize that I am getting more than I ever bargained for. *Nothing* is being spoon-fed to me now.

Learning to feed oneself can be awkward, but I am grateful for the experience of independent struggle within a supportive, diverse Christian community. Rather than learning a theology, I am learning to think theologically. This process is as disturbing as it is liberating. The responsibility to represent God faithfully requires the humility to be critical of one's beliefs, to ask if one can possibly be wrong.

As someone who will perhaps become a teacher of theology, I am concerned about recent evaluations of teaching standards in Adventist theological and religious education. I worry that important theological dialogues will soon be compromised or silenced. In order to do justice to Adventism as a theology, we must not invest ourselves more in the institution of theology than in the process of theology; we must risk teaching students to think theologically rather than simply to recite a theology.

However, before we can teach others to think critically we must be critical of ourselves. I am reminded of several instances where this process was short-circuited while I was in



college. By and large, my college experience was one of new insight and growth. I value those years for the people who challenged and supported me. However, with a few treasured exceptions, I did not have the same positive educational experience in my religion or theology classes.

For a period during my junior year I considered taking a major in theology. By the end of that year, however, I was so frustrated that I dropped out of the program. As a woman, I felt marginally accepted in the department; I felt that I was a foreigner.

The signs were often subtle. One faculty member, from whom I had never taken a class, once asked me with kindness

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Photo: Courtesy of Quicksilver

and good intentions, "How's our little Hebrew scholar doing?" A fellow student and future pastor was quick to remind me that women were spiritually unfit to be leaders in the church. In my Bible classes I often felt patronized when I asked questions; the professor would nod patiently for me to finish, thank me, then continue with his lecture. Once, when I pursued a question after class, he explained that many things about the Bible, even some that might appear obvious, could only be understood by biblical scholars. That moment, above all the rest, sets me imagining that perhaps one day I will become a biblical scholar only to finish that conversation.

I understand that my experience is anecdotal and that it does not fully represent the spectrum of Adventist theological education. But my story represents one type of experience that should be addressed in Adventist schools. Is it possible that something is lacking in our theological pedagogy beyond doctrinal homogeneity? To think theologically means to seek God with our lives beyond the ease with which any one theology allows us to rest or to think that we fully understand God in a final and exclusive sense. How right can we be if the theology we teach emphasizes conformity over diversity and exclusive privilege over universal access?

I am an Adventist theologian in training, but I am learning that my theology is not Adventism. My theology is my life. Adventism was the primary religious vocabulary with which I learned to speak the theology of my life. However, my life is a study of God and even more: it is God's study of me. As I approach an infinite God with the finite days of my life, I must ask if I should include more words in my evolving expression of faith in a loving God.

I do not know what comes next in my theology, only that God is on the other side, inside, and outside of it even as he stands silently beside me. He makes himself known when he must. The rest remains to be discovered. The tension between the presence and silence of God is where true theological education begins.

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