

My Brothers and My Sisters | BY STEVEN SPRUILL

This article is about us, not me. So I'll start off with only two facts about the me part of us, and if, at the end, you're still reading, still interested, I'll provide a bit more about who I am and where I'm coming from.

I write novels for a living.

I'm also a Seventh-day Adventist.

Or, to be more precise, there will never be a time when I was not raised Seventh-day Adventist.

Psychologists will tell you the first two decades of life are the most formative. They'll also tell you that people can change despite the enormous and enduring influence of our start in life. I changed. In my early twenties, I had a long dialogue with myself and others. We Adventists call it "soul-searching." (Hereafter, I will use "We" to refer to Adventists in the same way a Jew might use it to locate himself with other Jews irrespective of religious practice.)

By my mid-twenties, I could no longer profess to believe the doctrines that make Seventh-day Adventism unique. That part of me is probably now different from the you part of us. But I believe we are, all of us, all the things we have ever been. People raised in the Seventh-day Adventist Church tend to be different from people raised in other ways—and similar to each other in a number of important respects. Part of me will always be Adventist. What is that part, and how significant is it? Much of what makes you and me "We"—and different from most other people—is our shared experience.

That's what this article is about—the culture of Adventism. It is a tie that binds, whether or not you or I acknowledge it. You, and I, and those raised Adventist who still believe but don't live up to it, all share a rich heritage. In my view, the bond of that mutual background too often goes unsought and unacknowledged.



"Uncle" Arthur Maxwell took this photo of his sons Graham and Malcolm that was used on the cover of *Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories*, and more recently on the cover of *Spectrum*. Malcolm passed away October 1, 2007.

So what is Adventist culture?

Most of us would probably think of music first. Adventist music is Adventist not because it is different from the music of other denominations, though in a few cases it is, but because it happens in church and school and becomes inseparable from the Adventist experience. A hymn takes on a personalized meaning when it was the one playing when you were lowered into a Seventh-day Adventist baptistry. Endless loops of "Just as I Am" might roll from the organ during altar

calls in other denominations but what you meant when you walked down the aisle to commit and recommit to Christ was different from what a Baptist or Jehovah's Witness meant, and the music that accompanies that act takes on a very particular emotional meaning that you and I share. Whenever the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" is sung, members of the Battle Creek Tabernacle going back several generations will think of Battle Creek Academy reunions, when the whole congregation joins in on that great anthem.

Also, Adventists value and emphasize music in ways I haven't encountered anywhere else. The church and school immerse us in particular sorts of music throughout our upbringing as Adventists. During times when budget cuts have prompted many high schools to curtail or abandon their music programs, I know of no instance where even the most impoverished Adventist Academy has done so. It would be unthinkable.

Music is part of the ministry, and it is taught by our choir and band directors with a professionalism that is surely unsurpassed elsewhere. In my sixteen years of Adventist education, I encountered no music teachers who ever gave me the impression that what they were doing with their lives was dispensable, a hobby, a luxury. They were career musicians no less important in academy life than the math and physics teachers. Observing these sterling examples of passion and dedication to their art helped me decide it was all right to give my life to mine.

We Adventists also share a continuing exposure to visual art of a very particular sort, especially paintings. It would be almost impossible to be raised Adventist and be unfamiliar with the *Bible Story* books. The power of the stories is magnified by the lavish illustrations. There is a painting of Christ and the Rich Young Ruler well known to Adventists. That painting—the sorrow on Christ's face, the regret on the rich man's—has a powerful effect on our attitudes toward money and the stuff it buys and is more effective than any words when the offering plate comes around. Harry Anderson's painting of Christ, seen in so many of our churches and schools, takes on the particular flavor of what we were taught about Jesus that is unique to Adventism. Like the music, it evokes that shared experience.

As a kid, I loved to draw and in my early teens, began painting. I decided to do a portrait of Judas. The complex, tormented "bad boy" of the apostles fascinated me. I took up my brushes and, within a few weeks, the face of Christ gazed back at me. Such is the iconic power of Harry Anderson's Christ.

Music, paintings, what about fiction? Some Adventists still consider it the same as lies. It won't surprise you that I find that sad. This article is about what We Adventists share, not what we don't. Most readers of *Spectrum* can probably agree with me that each of the arts, including fiction, can tell the truth or be used to degrade and deceive. My good friend Ray Garton, another Adventist novelist featured in *Spectrum* this issue, recently sent me part of his novel-in-progress based on his experiences at Rio Lindo Academy. I have not read funnier, richer, more touching passages. Every word rings true in the most powerful sense. I hope you'll all have a chance to read Ray's novel someday soon.

But at this point, aside from the parables of Christ, the literary heritage We Adventists share is all "fact." To me, if fiction is a lie because it is "made up," then so is a painting. At their best, both are tools for illuminating truths we couldn't see as clearly in any other light. It was from trying to paint that I learned oak leaves aren't simply green. The undersides are a darker green, even burnt umber, whereas the tops are chartreuse where they catch the light. It was from writing novels that I came to appreciate that people are, to others, not what they think or feel themselves to "be," but what they do.

Another part of the great heritage We Adventists share is food. Potluck! The very word makes me hungry (and as I write this, I just had lunch.) Last I checked, about half of Adventists eat no meat. The other half are also well acquainted with vegetarian cooking, because official church and school potlucks are vegetarian. I defy anyone to tell me Adventist potlucks aren't unique feasts. There must be a hundred Adventist recipes for "nut loaf." We all know what Savita gravy is. Skallops. Choplets. Others are now enjoying these foods, but We Adventists pioneered them. We might have sold them, but we still own them.

Beyond vegetarianism, those Adventists who eat meat do so in a very particular way. Steaks are rarely rare. Hamburgers are cooked or grilled until they are white inside. (I wonder how many Adventist catsup addicts were created by those desiccating burgers.) Our queasy attitude toward pork and shellfish go well beyond whether they are appetizing or good for us, all the way to will they imperil our souls? Most religions have food taboos; those of Jews come closest to ours, but Adventist attitudes toward diet are a unique part of our shared heritage.

So is imagination. We Adventists are taught young to see beyond the surface of everyday life. To imagine. Some of what we are taught and urged to see with our mind's eye is sublime. Heaven. Guardian angels. We imagine ours there beside us, invisible but real, and chills of rapture go up our spines. Our imaginations are also tested with the dark and the horrific. We visualize Satan or his angels in the room with us. The Beast with ten horns haunts our dreams. I've spoken with younger Adventists who have somehow missed the weeks when the traveling evangelist would come to their local church and stage a revival.

In my own youth, such events invariably contained vivid poster-board illustrations or slide projections of the prophecies from Daniel and Revelation. What powerful images! The towering, glowering idol with the feet of clay, the four horsemen of the apocalypse, that frightening beast of the papacy. Very scary stuff that engages whatever imagination each of us was born with, be it small or great. Ray Garton and I have discussed this and agree it's a wonder more kids raised Adventist don't grow up to be horror writers! However that may be, We Adventists who were raised in the Church share an early and continuing exposure to images and ideas from beyond this world that stretch for a lifetime our capacity to imagine.

The last bit of cultural heritage I'd like to mention is our lexicon, a collection of words that have taken on uniquely Adventist inflections. I'm sure after this article goes to press, I will slap my forehead in dismay at all the ones I omitted, but each of you will be able to add your own. Here are a few that came easily to my mind:

Colporteur, as in our child's prayer of "God bless the missionaries and the colporteurs." Most Adventists know what a colporteur is. Few others do.

Truth-filled literature. (See colporteur.)

PDA (public display of affection). No one who went to an Adventist academy could fail to recognize this concept, if not the acronym, itself.

Adventist. As most of us have noticed, Adventists pronounce this word AD-vent-ist. Nearly all non-Adventists pronounce it ad-VENT-ist.

Backslider. Other churches may use this highly charged term. In Adventism, it inspires a particular uneasiness, a feeling of needing to circle the wagons and defend the faith. We worry whether we are backsliders because we watched a movie in a theater rather than on TV, or drank caffeinated coffee.



Men's Club?

Some doors are still closed to women...

because Adventist women still can't serve as ordained ministers. And that's too bad. For them and for us. When we deny people's spiritual gifts, a terrible thing happens. We cripple the body of Christ. Doesn't the church need the gifts of ordained men and women? Isn't it time to open this door?

Contact TEAM.

TIME FOR EQUALITY IN ADVENTIST MINISTRY

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Still with me? For those who are interested, here's a bit more about me. If you feel no need for that, please skip down to the last four paragraphs.

Remember that old TV game show, "To Tell the Truth"? Celebrity panelists questioned contestants from a particular walk of life, then tried to pick the real glass blower or worm farmer from the imposters. Picture four guys on camera standing behind their chairs, each in turn saying, "My name is Steve." Then the narrator off-stage reads the following biographical hook written from "Steve's" point of view:

"Once upon a time, at the Catholic University of America, when I was supposed to be studying, I wrote my first novel and sold it to Doubleday. After finishing the doctorate and internship in clinical psychology, I abandoned all thought of a practice and wrote novels. Fourteen of them and eight or nine stories have been published by Doubleday, Berkley, Dell, St. Martin's Press, and TOR. The novels include science fiction, military and medical thrillers, and a trilogy about a D.C. Cop, two physicians, and a human predator who just might be the reality behind the vampire myth. I've been featured in The Literary Guild and Doubleday Book Club, condensed in *Good Housekeeping Magazine* and reprinted in *Reader's Digest* abridged books. My work has been translated into twenty foreign languages. I recently wrote and illustrated a psychological self-help book on the wisdom of SpongeBob Squarepants, but mostly I write fiction. Not too long ago, I wrote the nation's number one best-selling novel."¹

After this introduction, the four "Steves" sit down, the celebrities ask their questions, make their picks, and at the end, the host says, "Will the real Steve please stand up."

All four stand up. One says, "I'm Steve Lyon." The next says, "I'm Steve Morgan," the next says, "I'm Steven Harri-man," and the last says, "I'm Steven Spruill." That last one is the real me, the other guys are my pseudonyms. Here's what I'd say about myself: I'm not famous. There's no reason you should have heard of me. Only a few million Americans read novels, and many of those will buy only best-sellers (which might explain why there aren't more best-selling novelists). I think fame would be fun in a certain way and not so fun in a lot of others. My friend, Ray Garton, is too modest to tell you this, so I will: Readers recently voted him the prestigious Grand Master Award, which he shares with such elite best-selling novelists as Peter Straub and Stephen King.

As the only two Adventist novelists we know of, Ray and I have the feeling we grew up together and went to

different schools together. As noted earlier, he attended Rio Lindo Academy. I went to Battle Creek Academy, grades one through twelve. While at BCA, I worshipped at the Battle Creek Tabernacle. At age eighteen, I took I-94 west to Andrews University, capping off my Adventist education with a bachelors in biology and a proposal of marriage to Nancy Lyon, a graduate of Takoma Academy, then in the final year of her teens. Nancy and I have been partners and best friends ever since.

I'm aware that, in the eyes of some Adventists, if not many, I might look like a backslider. Indeed, based on the writings of Ellen G. White, one could argue that "Adventist novelist" is an oxymoron. Whether someone can, in good conscience, leave the doctrinal part of the Church is an argument I prefer to avoid. Sonny Jurgenson, the great quarterback of the Washington Redskins, is now a "color" commentator for Redskin games. A master of the forward pass, Sonny once quipped: "Three things can happen when you pass. Two of them are bad."

I think the same could be said of arguing religion. If one or both minds in the argument are closed it's a waste of breath. If one were to succeed in undermining the other's faith that can sustain in the darkest hour, that would be even worse. I suppose there exists a third outcome that might be good, but I'm not sure what it is. Rather than argue, I prefer to believe that what unites you and me is greater than what divides. By being raised Adventist, we are not strangers, even if we've never met.

A few years ago, I traveled on a small plane flying between Caribbean Islands. The pilot, copilot, and flight attendant were a clean-cut young man with red hair. He stood beside the fold-down stairway to usher us off the plane. As I drew even with him, he looked me in the eye and murmured, "LDS?" For a dyslexic second, I thought he was offering me LSD. Then I realized he was asking me if I was a Mormon.

"Seventh-day Adventist," I replied, and he nodded knowingly.

If that young man could see what he saw in me, surely We can see it in each other. ■

Notes and References

1. In the nation of Hungary.

Novelist and psychologist Steve Spruill lives in Virginia.