

My Parents and Ellen White: *History as Autobiography* | BY JONATHAN BUTLER

Reflecting on how I became interested in history, I think less about those bright, orange-covered biographies written for children, with their silhouetted illustrations of historical figures, and more about my father, who is far more vivid and colorful in my long-term memory than a silhouette. He was twelve years older than my mother—about halfway between my mother and my maternal grandparents in age—and he was a storyteller. He reminisced about a chapter of the past that I would not have known, at least in such a personal and entertaining way, without him. I used to coax him into telling me stories by saying, “Dad, tell me about back when you were alive.” And before long, he had whisked me off on a magic carpet, to an unimaginable world where there were gas lamps, the occasional car on dirt roads, silent films, and a full day’s work for 25 cents.

The most startling story about his past, however, was the one he never told me. I pieced together some of it from what my parents said to each other in muffled undertones, an ill-conceived strategy to keep secrets from a child, who was only all the more intent on eavesdropping. My Aunt Charlotte told me the full story. It turns out that my dad was the illegitimate child of a forty-three-year-old man named Fred Slack, my natural grandfather, and a sixteen-year-old girl, Christine Kennedy, who would become my grandmother. This was, understandably, ancient history



My radiant mother at 47.

in our family, either unknown or suppressed when I was a child; I knew only that Frank Butler, whom my grandmother had later married, was my grandpa.

Leaving aside the dubious fact that I could have been named Slack, the disparity in ages between my dad and mom, as well as between Fred Slack and my grandmother, resulted in a telling lesson of just how short American history really is. Though I was born in 1945, my grandfather was born in 1861 (at the beginning of the Civil War), and my great grandfather was born in 1817 (when Adams and Jefferson each had nine years to live). In a sense, I guess, I came by my interest in history illegitimately.

If my dad awakened my interest in American history, my mother ensured that I would care especially about church history. While Dad was the occasional Congregationalist, my mother, a devout Seventh-day Adventist, immersed us in the faith and practices of Adventism long before our formal baptisms. Nothing about my life was untouched by religion. Growing up Adventist, I knew far more about biblical history than American history. I especially mastered a “canon within a canon” that included the Ten Commandments, the Levitical dietary laws, and Daniel and Revelation.

In the 1950s, I could not attend Saturday matinees with my public school friends, as I explained weekly to my buddy Steve, “Because it says so in Exodus 20.” My dad’s pipe smoking was a sin that would keep him from heaven, not a health hazard that shortened his life. As a ten year



My rakish father at 31, three years before marrying my mother.

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My proud dad holding me as an infant in 1945.

of a Roman Catholic, John F. Kennedy, to the White House. While every evening my father, under a nimbus cloud of pipe smoke, read the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New Yorker* as well as his daily staple of fiction, biography, and, as a frustrated actor, stage plays, my mother read Ellen White. In their own ways, they were both looking for the truth, but my father happily meandered in its direction; my mother believed she was taking the more direct route.

"Sister White," as she was known in our home, was anything but a historical figure. She was really a contemporary. At first I did not know her as a writer but as a voice channeled through my mother, my Aunt Lilah, and my grandmother (who could have played the prophet on stage). Sister White provided the running, and inspiring, commentary on whether we could eat white bread, or daydream, or swim rather than wade in the ocean on Sabbath afternoon, or whether my mother could wear pants instead of a dress when she drove the Glendale Academy school bus.

As my mother's child—and Sister White's "grandchild" so to speak—at 12 years old I became something of a boy preacher, who felt perfectly at ease speaking before congregations of 300 or more church members. I was, paradoxically, quite uncomfortable talking at church to a girl named Margie, who sang in a trio, wore snugly fitting dresses and, to my eyes, astonishingly high heels. In retrospect, I'm sure that my being at once self-possessed in the pulpit but

old, I handwrote a letter to President Eisenhower advising him on foreign policy based on Daniel 2. In 1960, I was crushed (though only temporarily) by the election

otherwise socially awkward would have pleased all the women in my life—except perhaps Margie. It certainly would have gratified that invisible woman my mother always quoted, who exerted her still, small voice on me in any social situation. At seventeen, I had matured a little but nonetheless chastised my steady girlfriend for listening to rock-and-roll music. "Why not?" she asked incredulously. "Because," I told her, "it arouses the animal passions."

It would be easy to make the argument that, for most of their fifty-two years together, my parents were unhappily married. But it would be more accurate to say that my dad was happily married to my mother, while my mother was unhappily married to my father. My mother believed—and quoted to me with feeling—Sister White's comments that "to connect with an unbeliever is to place yourself on Satan's ground." Though Mom could be forgiven for the mismatch because she had not converted to Adventism until two years into the marriage, theirs had become "a home where the shadows are never lifted," as Sister White had said.

Even as a fairly young child, though, I suspected that the problems between them involved more than their religious differences. They were simply two very different people. My dad sat in a wingback chair every evening and read Edgar Allan Poe, or Dorothy Day, or Tennessee



My beautiful mom with her motley children at lunch in the park (I'm on the far left).



On a family outing at Knott's Berry Farm (my stage-struck father often donned hats).

Williams. My mother seldom sat at all, unless it was to type furiously on a manuscript (which she did professionally), or knit sweaters or sew dresses (which she did for fun). She also gardened and raised earthworms, ran the Dorcas Society, and den mothered the Pathfinders.

On Friday afternoons—the “Preparation Day”—when Mom cleaned house, only her Rachmaninoff LPs could be heard above the noise of the vacuum cleaner. Every few months she took her turn superintending the Sabbath School, her voice quavering from nerves. Every week she unfailingly cranked out the church bulletins, with the blue ink of the mimeograph machine smudging her rubber gloves. She did her reading in small increments—the tracts she stuffed in the literature rack at the grocery store each week and the latest *Morning Watch* devotional book. My parents were as different as Edgar Allan Poe and Ellen White.

As their middle child, with an instinct for bridging the gap between them, I did my best to improve their relationship, with little, if any, demonstrable success. Nothing I did seemed to lessen the daily reminders of the basic incom-

patibility between them. Most school days, Dad chauffeured me back and forth to the Academy—an hour’s drive for him—easing my life considerably and giving him a respite from my mother. I could tell that they had just been quarreling—or she had been haranguing him—when he stared wistfully out the car window and offered his familiar refrain, “Your mother has always been my girl.” When I quoted the phrase to her, she could not believe that he had meant it with affection. For her part, she tirelessly



My mother in her mid-30s with my sister and me on a family vacation in Oceanside, California.

inventoried to me all of his faults, but when I asked her why then had she married him, she typically offered no more of a rationale than that “he had such soft hands.”

Whatever the seemingly insurmountable divide between them—whether spiritual or psychological or cultural—I refused to accept the view of my mother, or Sister White, that my parents’ marriage had made of our home a satanic preserve, enveloped in unrelenting shadows. I might have conceded that this had been

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my mother's marital experience, but, in my view, it would have been no way to characterize what life had been like for me growing up. Her unhappy marriage had not made mine an unpleasant childhood. In fact, I came to see my parents' differences—even the religious ones—as a kind of advantage for me.

My parents were so obviously different in their approaches to life that it served, I think, to broaden my own perspective on life. I cannot take much credit for this—it was the natural outgrowth of my circumstances—but by being exposed as a child to these two dissimilar people, it was as if I became well travelled without ever leaving home. As to their religious differences in particular, I think there was a real benefit for me there as well. I had inherited my mother's certainty about "the truth," but I also understood my father's tolerance for people who thought differently. I was baptized a Seventh-day Adventist, but I was quietly proud of the fact that I was the one child in the family whom Dad had taken for infant baptism in the Congregationalist Church. Spiritually speaking, I was a child of both my parents.

My dad embodied my "outside" world reported in the newspaper, or reflected in great literature, or talked about at the grocery store or at town hall meetings. My mother personified my



Mom and Dad had their happy times together.

"inside" world conveyed in Sabbath School lessons or sermons, in *Junior Guide* or *The Youth's Instructor* (in those days). I found both worlds fascinating. When it got too dark to play outdoors, I came home and hung over my dad's chair and tried to read what he was reading over his shoulder, as the pipe smoke wafted upward. I liked his books about movie stars in the 1920s and 30s, especially when they had pictures.

The "movie stars" in my mother's world were television evangelists like George Vandeman and William Fagal, the King's Heralds Quartet or, my favorite, Del Delker. Sabbaths began with frozen raspberries and cream, as a break from the more mundane weekday regimen of oatmeal or Ruskets, and Sabbaths ended with potlucks in glorious Lacy Park. After lunch I slyly feasted on the conversational drippings of my mother and aunt rather than playing with the other kids. These often incomprehensible yet riveting talks might include arcane theological speculation on whether character perfection was a possibility,^o or more practical theology regarding just how far short of perfection the minister's wife had fallen, in her blue eye shadow and black hose. Inevitably, Mom and Lilah got around to their husbands—my dad and my Uncle Tom—and what an inexhaustible study in imperfection they were.

I probably should not have been privy to their adult conversations, but through them I gained access to the fact that my parents occupied two separate worlds, each spinning on a different axis and (if you asked my mother) in different orbits as well. It fell upon me to establish dual citizenship, as it were, so that I could move easily in both their worlds. Both worlds mattered a great deal to me. Having grown up an Adventist, my "native tongue," as it were, was my mother's tongue. I navigated in my father's environs by learning a "second language." But I wanted to be fluent in both languages, not just the one. Down deep I sensed that I could establish citizenship in both worlds without being a "tourist" in either one. At times there were awkward, even embarrassing, moments when I felt that I had been too "liberal" in my mother's world or too "parochial"



Dad's most familiar pose, reading in his wingback chair (his pipe tucked out of sight for the photo).

in my father's. But my mother was usually charitable about my "liberalism," and my father was protective of my "sectarian" ways.

Taking both worlds seriously was a way of taking both of my parents seriously, but there was more to it than that. I felt the need to do something that neither of my parents had been able to do—integrate their two, separate lives into one, cohesive whole. I needed to do this even before I could have understood—or put into words—what I was doing. My father sat in his wingback chair each night and drank in the larger culture. My mother occupied a pew each week and focused intently on the church. Metaphorically speaking, Dad could not see Mom's world clearly through all the pipe smoke; the stained-glass windows had distorted my mom's view of Dad's world.

In grappling with an adult task at which both of my parents had failed, I think there was more involved for me than the abstract juxtaposition of religion and culture. There was something deeply personal and emotional in all this, which I could only have seen at the time "through a glass darkly." I was no prodigy at understanding my parents and how they impacted my life. It took time, and even this late in the game I could still use more time. But reflecting on my formative years, I came to understand—if my parents did not—that their worlds not only interconnected but even complemented each other. I also think that by recognizing that their worlds somehow fit together, I had found a way of vali-

dating their marriage. That is, in my nascent mind, I came to believe that Dad's and Mom's two worlds belonged side by side, just as they themselves belonged together.

If they continued to struggle as a couple, I found myself benefiting from their less than ideal relationship in many respects. I now think, for example, that it is too glib—in fact, fundamentally inaccurate—to see my life as a passage from my mother's world to my father's. It is unfair as well to describe her world as pinched, rigid, and sectarian and his as open, tolerant, and cosmopolitan. These are caricatures that would never hold up to the reality and complexity of their lives. Most importantly, I think it is better for me to see how I have always—and will always—reside in both of their worlds, and that I am all the better for it.

It would be a distortion, then, to reflect on my story as if it were "exit" literature; in the way I find most examples of that genre to be a distortion. Such stories tiresomely convey, in effect, I was parochial once, and now I am urbane; I was marginal and now I am mainstream. I find these narratives irritatingly condescending and simplistic. After reading them, I always want to say something on behalf of those intelligent and interesting women who served me countless potluck lunches on Sabbath and talked and talked into the late afternoon.

I entered La Sierra College as a Theology, not a History, major, although I understood the harsh truth that this could cost me dates with girls like Margie, who had no intention of becoming ministers' wives. I might have protested (though I would never have done so out loud) that I did not exactly fit the mold of the typical ministerial student. I could also say the same for many of my fellow "theologues." This may have had a good deal to do with our being Southern California Adventists, and having a sophisticated crop of college professors, but for me it also had to do with being my father's son.

In college, I found myself reading not just Ellen White's *Steps to Christ* but also C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*; not just Paul's *Romans* but also Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*; not just the Psalms

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but T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* and his "Journey of the Magi." In those days, both Mom and Dad liked hearing me preach, which should not have been a huge surprise since I was their son, but I think they each saw themselves in my sermons. In my preaching, they were not just seeing their son in the pulpit; they were looking into a mirror at their own marriage, and concluding that something good had come from it after all.

I enrolled at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in the late 1960s. It was a golden time and place for ministerial education in Adventism. Our gifted, young, seminary professors, with PhDs from distinguished schools like Harvard, and the University of Chicago, Tübingen and Duke, were the reason we came to see Adventism in fresh and imaginative ways. I took a seminar on American religion from a brand new, Harvard-educated professor, Roy Branson, and his class provided a guided tour to a world beyond the church without leaving the church.

Branson introduced me to several classics in the field of American religion, by historians like Perry Miller, Sidney Mead, Whitney Cross, and Timothy Smith. For me the collective impact of these books—especially Mead's—was an epiphany. Each study, in its own way, made abundantly clear that Adventism could not be understood as an insular movement, unaffected by its religious, cultural, and social setting. I realized that non-Adventist academics, viewing Adventism from the outside, could teach us much more about who we were—and who we are—than Adventist insiders could ever do on their own. In other words, to understand Seventh-day Adventism, I should not just listen to my mother; I had to hear what my dad was saying too.

As a result of that class on American religion, I decided to attend the University of Chicago—where Mead had taught for many years—and study under Mead's most creative and prolific student, Martin Marty. When I got to Chicago, I was young and green, excited and a little terrified. On my first day there, I stared incredulously at the faculty directory by the elevator in the Divinity School lobby. Nearly every name on it

was a celebrity in the academic world of religion. I had read the work of these professors as texts in my Seminary classes; now I would be actually taking classes from them, in the flesh. The prospect elated me, but it seized me with insecurity as well. I felt as if I had been invited to a special occasion by mistake. I was an impostor who soon would be exposed, collared, and removed from the building.

Just then I noticed a man shuffling toward the adjacent elevator. Clothes beyond rumpled, hair comically unkempt, glasses as thick as Coke bottle bottoms, he could have passed for the great circus clown, Emmett Kelly, out of costume. I recognized Mircea Eliade from book jacket photos and knew him to be the greatest scholar of Comparative Religions of the time, and perhaps ever. I had read him at the Seminary and begun to see the world through his all-seeing eyes. From reading him, I knew that I would never see anything quite the same way again. I could not form speech in his presence, but I think I nodded to him as he entered the elevator. At least I hope I did.

Thankfully, I was not expelled from Chicago on my first day. But to make my way there called for an educational "baptism by immersion," so to speak, not a token "sprinkling." I had to submerge myself in its culture. I had to live and breathe it. I could not audit classes; I could not take them by correspondence, intellectually and socially removed from the full educational experience. I had to get used to a biblical schol-



These are the women on whom I eavesdropped on Sabbath afternoons; my aunt Lilah and my mother, with their first born sons, flanking my grandmother ("Granny") in 1941.



My father and mother on their 50th wedding anniversary; he was 84 and she was 72. He passed away two years later.

ar, who knew much more about the Bible than I did, illuminate one scriptural passage after another, with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. I had to find the basement coffee shop, even though I did not drink coffee, so I could talk things out with fellow students.

In my first conversation with Marty, over his coffee and my decaffeinated tea, he advised me not to study Seventh-day Adventism while I was there. He gave me two reasons: first, it could be too narrowing for me professionally; and second, it could get me into trouble with my church. It was good advice. In other words, he was urging me to find a balance between my parents' two worlds that would allow me to contribute constructively to both. At Chicago, I specialized in the history of millenarianism, and of course my own tradition was never far removed from my thinking, but I avoided Adventism as a research topic. Later, when I delved into the Adventist sources, I was excited by what I found there. I think by staying away from Adventism in my graduate studies, I could understand it in a deeper and richer sense when I returned. It was by traveling through Chicago that I saw Battle Creek and Loma Linda in new and meaningful ways.

I am no longer a believing or practicing Seventh-day Adventist by my mother's definition of that term. With respect to what the church taught me as a child and young adult, I am more agnostic than Adventist. But oddly, I spend my days voraciously

reading Ellen White's writings as I peck away on a biography of the prophet. My father became an Adventist in the last twenty years of his life. In that period, we had some of our most satisfying conversations. Our paths had crisscrossed in different directions, and yet I never felt closer to him. In ways that were not enough for my mother, I probably continue to be an Adventist, on some level, as James Joyce continued to be a Dubliner. Joyce lived most of his life abroad and never returned home, but reading his work leaves no doubt as to where home was for him.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "All history is biography." I might tweak the great man's remark and say that all historians are being, to some degree, autobiographical. Much of my academic work since Chicago has been an effort to show how Seventh-day Adventism has been contoured by the wider culture. My dissertation, however, had nothing to do with Adventism; I had taken Marty's advice. But it did explore how evangelical notions of afterlife have been shaped by their cultural context. My mother typed my thesis for me several times, since this was prior to the word processor. I dedicated the book that resulted from it to her and my dad. In a sense, they deserve mention in anything I write about the marriage of religion and culture. Their marriage shed light on what I do; it did not cast a shadow. ■

Jonathan M. Butler obtained a PhD in church history at the University of Chicago and authored *Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling: Heaven and Hell in American Revivalism 1870–1920* (1991). Most of his scholarly publications, however, have focused on Millerism and Adventism. He coedited (with Ronald L. Numbers) *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (1987). He contributed two chapters to Terrie Dopp Aamodt, Gary Land, and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet* (2014).



Author's note: My thanks to Becky Richardson, my youngest sibling, who provided the photos. She had not been born when the family shots were taken.

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