

A REFLECTION ON EXCELLENCE: *Charles Elliott Weniger Award for Excellence 2021*

BY MICHAEL PEARSON

Michael and Helen Pearson, Edwin Henry Krick and Edna Mae Loveless received the Charles E. Weniger Awards for Excellence on February 20, 2021. Michael Pearson presented the Clinton Emmerson Memorial Lecture at the Awards Ceremony. It is published here with permission from the Charles E. Weniger Society for Excellence.

Gratitude

I would like to add my own thanks to the Weniger committee for formally recognizing my contribution to the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church over a good many years. It is heart-warming to have our work noticed and honored. Along with my fellow recipients I am grateful to receive this award and be mentioned in the same sentence as Charles Elliott Weniger who, as professor of English and Dean of the seminary, was himself known for his own excellent contribution to Adventist education. I am certain he would agree, nevertheless, that the greatest reward has come from the people, the students, and colleagues, who have walked beside us over the years. Thanks too go to Clinton Emmerson, for whom



Michael and Helen Pearson

this lecture is named, for keeping the legacy of Charles Weniger alive.

Others

Grateful and honored though we are to be recognized, we would be foolish not to acknowledge that there's something arbitrary about such awards. I can think of many of our Newbold colleagues over the years whose work has been a deeply valuable investment in the lives of generations of students. They were excellent in the classroom, in the personal support they offered to students, in the communities they helped to nurture. We are deeply indebted to them.

So too, all those teachers and students throughout the Adventist schools and colleges in Europe with whom Helen and I have worked over many years—many excellent in their own way. They may go uncelebrated today, but their efforts still help sustain the Church, nurture the poor, and leaven the whole in the public space.

Excellence

Excellence seems like a simple thing—just being outstandingly good at something. But it is not so simple. Especially in a Christian context. Our English word “excellence” comes from Latin roots meaning to “stand out in height or be a culmination.” It seems that if one stands out from others, they in turn must form a mass of averageness for the sake of comparison. Jesus made clear his distaste for such human comparisons. In the Bible “excellence” / “excellent” is usually a descriptor of God, not of human beings.

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, had much to say about excellence as a virtue. So, I want to walk for a moment in the company of Aristotle and Jesus, to eavesdrop on an exchange between them on this theme.

Excellence and Comparison

When, in 2012, *Time* magazine named Stanley Hauerwas as the “best theologian in America,” he responded by saying that “best is not a theological category.” It's true—there are surprisingly few uses of the word “best” in the Bible and they mostly refer to things like wine, food, and land. So, if “excellent” has a notion of “best-ness” within it, then we as a Christian community should perhaps be wary of employing it. I have always been nervous and suspicious of references to an “A student” or a “C student.” While the label may offer a useful shorthand, it is not without its dangers. All teachers have taught “C students” who put every effort into their academic achievements, who later made important contributions, and were wonderful human beings. By the same token, we will have taught “A students” whose work came easily to them and who could become complacent or even arrogant.

In Christian education, excellence can never be simply about a superior position on a bell curve. It is also about endeavor, surmounting obstacles, being curious and challenging your own previous best efforts rather than those of others. Jesus said that secular ways of measuring should not predominate among his followers: “It will not be so among you . . . whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave” (Matt. 20:26–27 NRSV). Aristotle by contrast cared little for slaves and considered that only members of the Athenian elite were capable of excellence.

Excellence and Moderation

An important part of Aristotle's notions of virtue was moderation. For example, courage was a virtue in his judgment. But it was important to distinguish it from recklessness. There was no virtue in seeking martyrdom. His idea is in the same family as temperance, a Christian

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fruit of the Spirit. Paul, in his first Corinthian letter, teaches us that we should be “temperate in all things” and that we should avoid “jealousies,” “selfish ambitions,” “envies.” We do our work as well as we can, but not at the expense of other human values, nor so that we can beat others into second place, but rather so that we can serve others. We do not sacrifice everything just to be top dog. So, excellence and moderation live slightly uncomfortably with each other. Aristotle and Jesus may well agree on that.

Excellence and Habit

Aristotle believed excellence is not primarily about achievement but about habit. Excellence is a habit. It is about working tirelessly on the formation of virtuous habits so that they become second nature. Thanks partly to the legacy of Ellen White’s teaching, we as Adventists have placed strong emphasis on the formation of good habits in both home and school. This formation of good habits is, like sanctification, “the work of a lifetime.” Excellence is more a habit, less an achievement. “We are what we repeatedly do.” Excellence is the work of a lifetime.

Excellence and Freshness

The English poet and priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins says in his poem “God’s Grandeur”:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep
down things; . . .

While the development of habits of thinking is important, good teaching depends also on freshness, on creativity. This is a willingness to revisit the old formulae, the tired conventions, and an eagerness to make new connections. It is a readiness to submit the sharply contoured certainties of morning to the nuances of afternoon light and the shadows of evening. I found that students came most eagerly to class when they did so with the expectation that something fresh was going to happen, that something might take them by surprise, that old things would be said in new ways, and that maybe that the

world would never look quite the same again. Freshness and habit can live together but they live in tension. The teachings of Jesus demonstrate this amply: “You have heard it said but I say unto you . . .” Excellence involves living in tension.

Excellence and Blossoming

Aristotle’s notion of virtue involved the idea of flourishing, of blossoming, of becoming fully “vir,” virile, a true man or, in our more open society, a true human being.

Aristotle’s idea of excellence as part of virtue is not a million miles away from a biblical notion of flourishing as found in Psalm 1:3 (NRSV).

The “blessed,” the virtuous
They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
that yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaf does not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

Jesus says that we find blessedness, we prosper, in unexpected places. In adversity. In the company of those different from ourselves. In serving others. And in so doing those others slowly return to us the gift of our true selves. What greater gift could we desire? What further excellence could be sought?

Excellence and Community

Aristotle says that virtue is to be found within a community; you cannot become virtuous alone; you cannot become excellent alone. But of course, Aristotle spoke from within a certain type of privileged community, an elite. Jesus is far more radical: “blessed are the poor in spirit . . . blessed are those that mourn . . . blessed are the peacemakers . . .” and so on. Blessedness is to be found in the company of those unlike you, the disadvantaged. In losing yourself you mysteriously find yourself; in serving you find fulfillment, you blossom, you find your true self, you excel, you stand out from your previous self.

Excellence is to be found then in community. It means being willing to subordinate your own interests to others’. It means being subject to others on occasion without becoming a cipher. Aristotle saw it as one of the

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supreme virtues by which the virtuous person should live. He taught in ancient Athens, a society unlike ours. He was part of the ruling class. He would not expect the lower order to aspire so high. Nor would he have imagined that blessedness was to be found in the company of the outsider, the downtrodden, the leper, the impure. Jesus expanded our idea of community. Rather, Jesus simply exploded it.

Excellence and Contentment

From a Christian perspective there is one piece of the picture still missing. Our striving after excellence could become relentless and leave us restless and forever discontent. In the pursuit of excellence there is room for satisfaction and contentment. We can pause and see that our work is “very good.” There is a moment when we can be still, and rest satisfied with our efforts. The true gift that the Weniger committee has given us is the assurance that our work has shown good quality, that our efforts have yielded good fruit. And not only us. It is true of so many with whom we four have each worked over so many years and in so many places.

Let us all then hear that affirmation: let us rest content with it for a while.

Then we hear the voice of the apostle Paul when he says to the believers in Corinth: “I will show you a still more excellent way” (I Cor. 12:31 NRSV). Excellence always involves moving on.

We owe Aristotle a debt of gratitude for his profound insights into human nature and behavior, and into the world in which we live, into everyday things. Our indebtedness to him is probably greater than we recognize.

But the “more excellent way” announced in chapter 12 of the first Corinthian letter blossoms in chapter 13 into the invitation to surrender to agape love. And with

this, excellence moves on to a different plane altogether. It goes beyond the “clanging cymbals” and “noisy gongs” of achievement, even the achievement of “all knowledge.” In Christian education, the achievement of results without the accomplishments of love has a hollow ring to it.

Gandhi said that people divide into two groups: travelers and settlers. Some Weniger recipients have been travelers. Helen and I have been settlers. Gandhi added that if you choose to settle, you must dig your wells deep. For us, that has meant digging deep into the roots of a community and digging deep into the overwhelming love of God. Without these we would have been quite exhausted of any resource.

The call to excellence is still to be heard. Charles Elliott Weniger echoed it. Perhaps Jesus had something of this in mind when he talked about giving all to acquire the pearl of great price. “Giving all” is a risk in any field of human endeavor. It is a risk, a risk of trust that we four have found worth taking. We plan to continue but can only continue in the company of people such as yourselves who also have a deep thirst for the “more excellent way.”

And so let us continue our journey—together.



MICHAEL PEARSON is retired in Berkshire in the UK after a lifetime of teaching at Newbold College. His particular interest in the overlaps between philosophy, ethics, and spirituality have led him to wider audiences all over Europe and sometimes beyond. He likes to write a little every day and has some of his efforts published in various forums. His guiding concern is to make connections between his Adventist background, his interior voice, and the wider world of ideas. Helen, his wife of fifty years, his daughter and son-in-law, his son and daughter-in-law, and his three grandchildren make a determined effort to block access to his ivory tower. See their weekly blog at pearsonsperspectives.com.