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The heart of the Seventh-day Adventist health message

Friday evening, June 5, 1863, in the house of A. Hilliard at Otsego, Michigan, United States, Ellen White received the vision on “the great subject of Health Reform.”¹ On that day, Ellen and James White had traveled to Otsego, about 30 miles from Battle Creek, to support the evangelistic meetings conducted by R. J. Lawrence and M. E. Cornell. They stopped with the Hilliard family where, at sunset time, a number of believers gathered to welcome the Sabbath. Ellen White was asked to offer the opening Sabbath prayer, during which she received a 45-minute vision. Was God’s choice to communicate at such a specific time, the commencement of the Sabbath, intentional? Or was it just a coincidence? A closer examination of the historical data unfolds an interesting story.

The heart of the Otsego vision

The next day, Sabbath, June 6, 1863, she penned the following reflection: “I was shown some things in regard to my husband and myself.”² First, it appears, the impact of the vision evoked in her mind an inclusively wholistic view of the Sabbath experience.³ In the message written to the church at Monterey on the

same date (June 6), she referred to the blessings of the Sabbath day that rested upon them on that Friday. “Last evening while engaged in family prayer at Brother Hilliard’s, the blessing of the Lord rested upon us, and I was taken in vision.”⁴ This experience took her thoughts away from the frantic activities, heartaches, frustrations, and disappointments. This vision also guided her attention to what God cares about. Much later, she expressed the significance of the Sabbath as a day “designed to bring men into communion with God” and a time where “the hours provide a time for spiritual and relational healing.”⁵

Second, the counsel on health began with a practical lesson based on God’s case study. James and Ellen White visited Otsego to support the evangelistic tent meetings conducted by R. J. Lawrence and M. E. Cornell, scheduled to commence on June 6. While James struggled with depression resulting from overwork, they continued to focus on the activity and expansion of God’s work at the cost of personal health. In this context, God provided a case study demonstrating what matters to Him most. Ellen White wrote, “I saw that now we should take special care of the health God has given us, for our work was not yet done” and

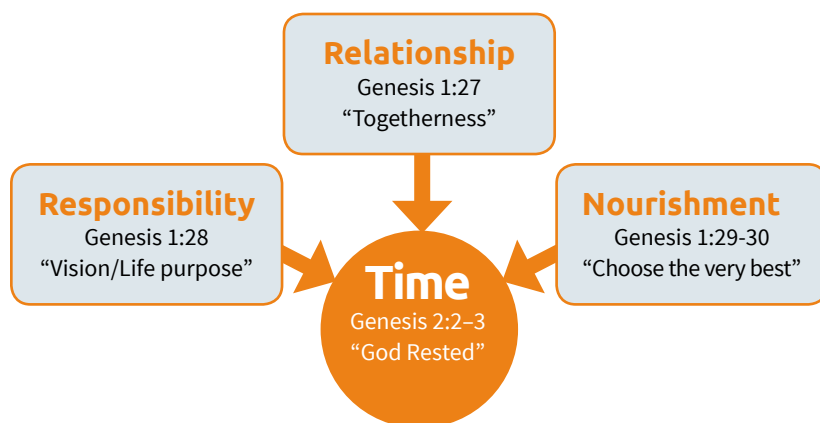
that “Satan was preserving in his efforts to destroy our usefulness.”⁶

Is it possible to assume that overactivity contributes to lack of usefulness and tiredness impacts the health of interpersonal relationships? “I saw that we neither understood the depth and keenness of the heart trials of the other. Each heart was peculiarly sensitive, therefore each should be especially careful not to cause each other one shade of sadness or trial.”⁷ God’s message to James White was direct and pointed. The stresses involved with the setting up of the church organization contributed to his unhealthy mindset. He dwelt too much on the past injustice, and his mind “seemed chained to these unpleasant memories.”⁸ In other words, lack of a well-balanced lifestyle contributed to stress, worry, negative predisposition, discouragement, and even unchristian attitudes such as an unforgiving spirit. “I saw an angel standing by the side of my husband pointing him upward, saying, ‘For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.’ . . . Jesus forgives errors and mistakes and grievous sins.”⁹

The timing of this vision drew attention to the key elements necessary for human well-being, namely time and relationships. Sabbath, a time-out with God, provided a space for personal and

relational healing, a time for celebration and renewal of spiritual vitality.¹⁰ God rested on this day from all His creative activity to celebrate a relational togetherness with His creation.

Does it mean that during this time she remained silent on this vital subject? A careful examination of manuscripts and letters shows her ongoing concern for the spiritual well-being of



Success in accomplishing God's purpose for life (Gen. 1:28) depended on good health, a balanced lifestyle, and a happy predisposition flowing from both spiritual and physical nourishment. No wonder Ellen White was advised to "take time to devote to our health that we may in a degree recover from the effects of overdoing and overtaxing the mind."¹¹ The context of the Otsego vision experience drew attention to the value of spiritual nourishment flowing from a relational, life-changing experience with God.

The interim: June 6, 1863 and August 1864

Even though the vision came at a crucial time, directing the church's attention to the basic health laws, Ellen White did not describe its content until August 1864, followed by a series of six pamphlets entitled "Health or How to Live" in 1865. Schwarz suggests that a "variety of reasons prevented Mrs White from publishing any extensive material."¹² Through December 1863, Ellen and James White traveled throughout New England. During this period the family experienced the loss of their son Henry. Further, James White wrote in November, "Her time when not in meeting or traveling, since we left Michigan in August has been wholly occupied with local and personal testimonies."¹³

the believers; matters associated with the attitude of the heart.¹⁴ Further, in the context of frantic activities connected with the progressive growth of the church, she admonished the ministers that they were overtaxing their energies by not giving the mind time to rest. She pointed out, "The mind affects the body."¹⁵ In November 1863, she referred to the importance of "plain and wholesome food."¹⁶ Finally, in the fourth volume of *Spiritual Gifts*, published in August 1864, she included a full overview of the vision received in June 1863. This vision commenced with reference to God's provisions in the Garden of Eden, the reasons that led mankind into intemperance, the relationship of diet and disease, and the simple methods in combating poor health. The overall principle was straightforward: "In order to preserve health, temperance in all things is necessary. Temperance in labor, temperance in eating and drinking."¹⁷

Schwarz observes, "As soon as Mrs White began to speak and write extensively on healthful living, many persons commented on the similarity of her teachings to those of early reformers."¹⁸ Soon after writing down the health principles revealed to her in the Otsego vision, Ellen and James White visited Dr. Jackson's "Our Home on the Hillside" clinic to observe his practices. Further,

they invited Dr. Trall to present a series of health presentations at Battle Creek, Michigan. More interesting is the inclusion of articles by the early reformers in the six publications "Health and How to Live."¹⁹

In contrast, Arthur White argues that the health principles shown to Ellen White were "so different from the concepts commonly held at that time."²⁰ One may ask, *In what way was the counsel similar and at the same time different to the reformers of her time?* On this point, Schwarz provides an interesting insight:

"Preoccupied with the problems of the Civil War and Reconstruction during the 1860s, Americans proved less responsive than previously to the admonition of health reformers. About the same time advances in antiseptic, bacteriology, and pathology began to steal the reformers thunder. Many of their followers now shifted their attention to the gymnastic and physical culture program of Dio Lewis. As old ideas and convictions faded into the background, the collection of reform principles that had developed during a quarter of a century seemed destined to disappear as a distinctive system. At the critical moment Seventh-day Adventists added principles of healthful living to their religious tenets."²¹ Ellen White's focus on cleanliness, sunlight, fresh air, the value and use of water, vegetarianism, and the value of positive attitudes resonated with the voices of the American reformers.²² However, at the time when the old health-reform principles seemed destined to disappear as a distinctive system, the vision given to Ellen White introduced a unique focus. Firstly, it drew attention to what matters to God most, namely, spiritual health. Secondly, it prompted an awareness of a wholistic approach to well-being.

Wholistic approach to well-being

The Otsego vision focused on the elements necessary for the progressive development of a healthy mind, body, and spirit. Ellen White wrote, "Between the mind and the body there

is a mysterious and wonderful relation. They react upon each other. To keep the body in a healthy condition to develop its strength, that every part of the living machinery may act harmoniously, should be the first study of our life.”²³ For this purpose the body required the best physical nourishment. Much later she argued, “grains, fruits, nuts, and vegetables constitute the diet chosen for us by our Creator. These foods, prepared in as simple and natural a manner as possible, are the most healthful and nourishing. They impart strength, power of endurance, and vigor of intellect that are not afforded by a more complex and stimulating diet.”²⁴ At the same time, the nourishment of the body required a balanced approach to diet. A return to the original diet did not apply one rule for all. Ellen White cautioned, “But not all foods wholesome in themselves are equally suited to our needs under all circumstances. . . . Our diet should be suited to the season, to the climate in which we live, and to the occupation we follow.”²⁵ Here, the selection of healthy and nutritious food should be guided by “sound judgment.”

In the framework of sound judgment and common sense, she called for a balanced approach to reforms, suggesting, “Not all who profess to believe in dietetic reform are really reformers.” She maintained, “With many persons the reform consists merely in discarding certain unwholesome foods. They do not understand clearly the principles of health, and their tables, still loaded with harmful dainties, are far from being an example of Christian temperance and moderation.”²⁶ It seemed to her that a partial knowledge of the dietary principles leads to a rigid attitude, ill health, and insensitive imposition of personal views on others.²⁷ She called for a balanced view of temperance in work, eating, drinking, and the basic care of life. Here she cautioned that health reform should not be understood as an end in itself. Rather, a healthy lifestyle provided “the best condition for the highest service to God and man.”²⁸

The principles revealed in the Otsego vision moved beyond an emphasis on the cure of the body. It is noteworthy that the nineteenth-century reform movements in America awakened interest in various aspects relating to a healthy lifestyle. Other reformers of that time promoted vegetarianism, sanitation, water treatments, fresh air, and other public health reforms. However, God’s initiative to communicate at the commencement of the Sabbath, a time, as expressed by Ellen White, when “the blessings of the Lord rested upon us,” took the Seventh-day Adventist emphasis on health to the heart of the matter, the realm for spiritual nourishment—a place for the healing of the heart, mind, and human attitudes.

Conclusion

God confronted the progressively growing church at the most crucial part of its journey—a need for a spiritual reorientation in preparation for its role in education (1872) and mission (1874). The emphasis on the Sabbath reminded the church that its identity was not grounded in activity but in God’s call to a journey of pilgrimage. More so, the identity was not simply a nametag but a fullness of life that germinates out of a transformational faith experience with God. Referring to the transformational nature of Christ-focused spiritual well-being, Ellen White wrote, “Marvelous will be the transformation wrought in him who by faith opens the door of the heart to the Saviour.”²⁹ Such transformation enhances the use of common sense to follow the basic principles of life—the laws of health.³⁰

Finally, a relational experience with God, built on trust, faith, and confidence in His presence, adds a sparkle of motivational and inspirational energy. “With the power and light that God imparts, you can comprehend more and accomplish more than you ever before deemed possible.”³¹ Here, one finds the heart of the Seventh-day Adventist health message—a motivational and

inspirational framework for God’s mission in the world. 

- 1 Ellen White, “Questions and Answers,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 8, 1867, 261.
- 2 Ellen White, Ms. 1, 1863.
- 3 Arthur White comments, “The sun having set Friday evening, June 5, the new day had begun. In referring to the vision June 6 is given as the date. In subsequent reporting various phases of what was revealed in the vision, both June 5 and June 6 are cited.” See *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, 390, 433, 449, 517; and *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 8, 1867. Arthur White, *The Progressive Years 1862–1876* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1896), 18.
- 4 Ellen White, Ms. 2, June 6, 1863.
- 5 Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), 286, 287.
- 6 Ellen White, Ms. 1, 1863.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages*, 286, 287.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Richard W. Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg: The Pioneering Health Reformer* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2006), 20. See also W. C. White, *Sketches and Memories*, 3, 4. While visiting the home of Dr Horatio S. Lay, Ellen White was encouraged to share more information about the health vision. As Willie recalled, his mother objected by saying “that she was not familiar with the medical language and that much of the matter presented to her was so different from the commonly accepted views that she feared she could not relate it so that it could be understood.”
- 13 James White, “Eastern Tour,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 24, 1863, 204.
- 14 Ellen White wrote, “We should take special care of health.” However, in her mind health was linked with the development of “cheerful, hopeful, peaceful frame of mind” (Ms. 1, June 6, 1863). On the same date, in a message written to the church at Monterey, she addressed the issue of moral integrity (Ms. 2, June 6). The church in Caledonia listened to her admonition regarding “negative predisposition,” “lack of perseverance.” She pointed out that “self-pride destroys the true spirituality” and advised that they believed in truth but failed to practice it (Ms. 3, July 22, 1863).
- 15 Ms. 7, 1863; Ms. 11, 1863; Ms. 16, late 1863; Letter 12, June 1863.
- 16 Letter, November 23, 1863. “Those who believe the truth should practice economy, live upon plain wholesome food, always making it a rule to live within their means.”
- 17 Ellen White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 4A (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1864), 146.
- 18 Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg*, 21.
- 19 Ibid., 27.
- 20 Arthur White, *The Progressive Years 1862–1876*, 21.
- 21 Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg*, 27.
- 22 Ibid., 23–26.
- 23 Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, 485, 486.
- 24 Ellen White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1909), 296.
- 25 Ibid., 296, 297.
- 26 Ibid., 318.
- 27 Ibid., 318, 319.
- 28 Ibid., 319.
- 29 Ibid., 93.
- 30 Ibid., 319.
- 31 Ibid., 514.

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