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David Arthur

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Email from Asia (February)

David Arthur

International School, China

“The time has come,” the Walrus said, “to talk of many things...” (Thank you for that line, Lewis Carroll). Well, not too many because, as economists know, resources are limited. So, writer be mindful!

“Mostly we focus on building each other up, equipping each other for what lies ahead. We recognise that all of us are here in this place for a reason, planned in the mind of God long before we were born.”

Yes, that time has come; time to ‘hang up the China boots’. We have made the decision to return to Australia at the end of this northern hemisphere school year. Do I put this at the start or the finish of this email? The reasons are not complex, and may be summed up by the admonishment of a close friend during our last visit home: “David, China will always be there, but your parents will not” (silly that I had to be reminded).

As a teacher, one is also a learner. So, what have I learned over the last seven-plus years as an expatriate teacher? Some would say, “missionary”, but somehow it doesn’t seem fair to accept such a title after being brought up on a “Jungle Doctor” diet. There are some lessons that stand out, at present.

First, expect the unexpected. Not long ago a lovely student came to see me. Beth* had just found out that she had been rejected by a famous British university, and she had come to talk about it. You might remember one of the posters above my office desk—“Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable”? We chatted about how she felt, and she described her initial feelings of great disappointment. Then, as I almost fell off my office chair, she proceeded to tell me that she was a born-again Christian and she knows that God has a better plan for her life. Stunning! We immediately felt that bond that comes from being part of the Family of God, and a very good friendship has continued to grow. We often take the chance to encourage each other, and Beth has a good friend whom she is introducing to the Master. Just when you need encouragement, it comes along in a most unexpected way. On another occasion, when a parent thanks you—for helping his adolescent son out of a messy social situation and setting the right direction again—it’s an experience that is really worth having.

Second, the powerful support of a small group of believers (having being part of two such groups) will never again be discounted. Such an experience is really valued, even if we don’t all agree on some tenets of the Christian faith. We are there to

fellowship and support each other. Consequently it is often ‘us against them’—‘strangers’ in sometimes hostile, foreign territory. We don’t get together to argue about doctrine, but to concentrate on things we agree upon. Oh! If someone asks what Adventists believe about an issue, we’re happy to tell them. But mostly we focus on building each other up, equipping each other for what lies ahead. We recognise that all of us are here in this place for a reason, planned in the mind of God long before we were born. So we try our best with His help not to waste the opportunities he gives us each day. One of the saddest days will be when saying “goodbye” to the people in these groups, though it will only be “until we meet again”. Mizpah.

“But”, you ask, “what about the teaching itself?” Here I reiterate some of the thoughts of past columns: As far as students’ desire to learn and lack of discipline problems are concerned, it has been somewhat like being in ‘teaching heaven’. As throughout all the years of one’s teaching ministry, friendships that will last a life time have been forged, challenging new thoughts proposed, many good results attained, lives touched and students launched into undergraduate success; and beyond. But, what *really* matters in the end? You’ll remember that this has been one of the major themes, over the years, of my stay in China. To me, what really matters is helping students decide to use their time and means to enable them to spend their lives making a positive difference in the lives of others, and to leave the world a better place. What really matters for the Christian teacher is changed lives, not trophies, certificates, high marks or degrees, even though these may have their usefulness at the right time and place, in a student’s life.

And as with all of life, it is not about programs, or places, but about people. Friends made here amongst colleagues and students are very precious and will last forever. The time spent living here will have a very important place in my life, and I will never be the same again. What does the future hold? I’m unsure at present. Perhaps God wants me to make use of the lessons learned from experiences in China, on the next part of the journey—whatever it may be. More excitement awaits! **TEACH**

*Pseudonym