

Give them some truth

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It was John Lennon who sang passionately “Just give me some truth, all I want is the truth”. It didn’t seem too much to ask. And you have to give credit to a man who chased everything, from tripping on LSD to transcendental meditation with the Maharishi, in order to discover his truth. But in the end, it seems his worldview was hopelessly muddled. In “Give peace a chance”, he sang against faith; in one of his final songs, “Grow old along with me”, he sweetly sang “God bless our love”. So what was it? A material world without God, or a spiritual world with Him? Or did he live in a world where both contradictory truths could coexist, simultaneously?

It is, I admit, unfashionable to talk about the idea of truth at all. Our liquid modernity is all about multiple paths, personal truths that have no external calibration, different ideas of right and wrong of equal value, coexisting mutually exclusive small truths. Truth, they say, is the first casualty of war—and the idea of truth was the first, and most profound, casualty of the Western cultural revolution of the '60s—the results of which continue to reverberate.

When my spouse, Leisa Morton-Standish, was working on her PhD at the University of Maryland, she had a professor who very proudly announced that he no longer saw right and wrong—just shades of grey. I wonder what shade of grey the Holocaust was in his mind? How about the 9/11 terrorist attack, 7/7 or Bali bombings? I suppose they would be fairly dark shades of grey? What about child molestation or rape, cannibalism or slavery, torture or persecution?

As absurd as the “shades of grey” approach to truth may be when applied at the margins, it is necessary if we abandon the concept of truth. Because if we admit some things are wrong, it implies some things are equally and unequivocally right. And the idea of a truth that transcends personal experience or cultural prejudice is an anathema to those dedicated to dismantling the old paradigms of western society—specifically the Christian paradigm.

And they’ve done a fabulous job in their quest. At the conclusion of the London Riots of 2011, Britain went through a period of intense soul

searching. Why did people from all backgrounds join in the rampage of theft and destruction? Many possible causes were provided, but chief among them was the widespread abandonment of the idea of right and wrong—the idea of a truth that transcends the moment or the individual.

Similarly, the sexual anarchy that has become endemic in the western world is based on a simple idea—as long as people want to do it, it's fine to do. Of course, the subsequent explosion in sexually transmitted diseases, unstable family structures, abuse of children (which is particularly prevalent when the man in the house is not the father of the children), and the other tragedies that have followed have destroyed millions of lives and sapped the strength of our society. But what's odd is that even though these results of bad—dare I say wrong—behaviour are readily critiqued in polite society, the sexual anarchy that ensures the devastating outcomes is, for many, beyond reproach.

But not everyone has bought into this brave new liquid reality in which truth regarding anything other than physical reality is not only elusive, but non-existent. Not everyone believes all moral codes are equally valid. Not everyone has adopted the intellectually sloppy practice of proclaiming mutually exclusive claims to be simultaneously equally valid. Not everyone believes that every question of morality and spirituality floats within an amorphous grey mist. Some of us still believe in a knowable right and wrong, an immutable guide to morality, that spiritual and moral truths are the most important truths of all, and their understanding and following is our guide.

And that is the primary reason I, as a parent, turn to Adventist education, whether it is primary, secondary or tertiary. The moment Christian education loses its unique worldview, it loses its reason to exist. When it embraces its essential defining character, it is irreplaceable.

That isn't to say that as a parent I want my children inculcated in a simplistic worldview that fails to present nuance, complexity, argument and counter argument. A rigorous education requires the development of complex analytical thinking. And that can only be done by exploring the questions, the strengths and the weaknesses.

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However, in the Adventist setting, this exploration must occur within the context of the Christian paradigm, just as the exploration in secular universities occurs unquestionably in a materialist paradigm. If I wanted my children exploring complex questions within a materialist paradigm, I'd save myself the money and send them to secular settings. We sacrifice not because we want simplicity, therefore, but because we want the complexity of life to be explored from a Christian perspective, within the Christian paradigm.

Of course, we are not just looking to Christian education to provide perspective; we are also looking for two other critical aspects. The first is a quality academic experience. The second is a nurturing, individualistic environment.

I must admit to being a bit of a fatalist when it comes to academic performance. I was shuffled through nine schools during my K–12 education. To make things a little more complex, those schools were in five nations on three continents. This rather incoherent education apparently didn't disadvantage me tremendously, if at all. And I suppose it may have enriched it.

I received my MBA from the University of Virginia's prestigious Darden Graduate School of Management and later, graduated from one of the best law schools in the US, with honours. I suppose I could have done better academically if I'd gone to elite schools, but I somewhat doubt it. The kids I knew in Adventist schools who were motivated and had academic ability, did as well as you'd expect them to do—lawyers, doctors, academics, business people, and so on. I am, therefore, not a believer that the school makes an enormous difference in the academic/career trajectory of students.

My ideal education in primary school would involve competent teachers ensuring basic skills—reading, writing, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division—and then lots of time to explore anything else the student likes. It would involve absolutely no homework—as studies suggest it's a waste of time and it makes life miserable. And, most importantly, it prevents kids from doing what they do best—playing, exploring and imagining.

The future belongs to those who can think creatively—think Steve Jobs—not to those who can replicate accurately—think factory workers. The world is wide open for problem-solvers and big dreamers. I hope my children will be able to experience that in their education.

Along with that, one of the greatest strengths of Christian education is that the schools tend to be smaller. As such, students don't generally get lost in the crowd. That is a feature that I appreciated

as a student, and one that I now greatly appreciate as the parent of students. I appreciate that all the teachers at my girls' primary school know their name. I appreciate that children from the lowest to the highest grades all know each other. No-one is a nobody. Every individual counts. May it ever be so in Adventist education. Education on an industrial scale is not superior to a hand-crafted product.

Before closing, it's worth noting that it is critical that all schools take into account the reality of two career families. It would be helpful, for example, if schools offered popular activities as an after school option—swimming, gymnastics, music lessons, ballet, soccer, a foreign language, etc—to alleviate the burden on working parents. In addition, such programs may attract children from the community and should be profitable. For example, my children currently attend an after school French program and an after school ballet program at the Anglican school near our home. But it is so much easier for working parents when after school programs run at the school. The same goes for vacation care programs.

Conclusion

I am not only satisfied, I am delighted with the education my children are currently receiving at an Adventist school. The school has a great Christ-infused culture, the academics are solid and it provides a wonderful, nurturing environment. I'd be even more delighted if they outlawed homework! I wish every child in the world could experience the kind of education they are enjoying. **TEACH**

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