

Breathing, bag boys and bottom-line essentials

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Introduction

Special character is becoming a familiar phrase as we attempt to define the unique essence of Adventist Education. So how would *you* define it? Some say that it's "the lifestyle and practices of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as expressed in your school"¹. I like to think it's something bigger. For my 'lifestyle and practices' are born of something grander: they emerge from a keen awareness of the astounding reality and character of my God and my relationship with Him. Of the innumerable qualities He possesses, the hallmark and most astounding one is His love. How sad that this most prominent characteristic has become so trivialised through overexposure that its meaning has been leached of much of its vibrancy. In reality, "amazement and rapture should be our reaction to the God revealed as love"².

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How long since we've really been suffused with *amazement* at the magnitude of God's love? Roberta Bondi had an intimation of it when she said:

Before anything else, above all else, beyond everything else, God loves us. God loves us extravagantly, ridiculously, without limit or condition. God is in love with us. God is besotted with us. God yearns for us. God does not love us 'in spite of who we are' or 'for whom He knows we can become'—God loves us...the very people we are; and not only that, but even against what we ourselves sometimes find plausible, God likes us.³

It's a dazzling reality. Do we know it in our bloodstream? Do we share it in our speech, our tone, and our gestures?

Adventist Education goals

Our rich, inspired heritage boldly declares our goal in Adventist education. "Godliness, Godlikeness is the goal to be reached."⁴ Given that "the work of education and the work of redemption are one"⁵, love is clearly the preeminent common denominator. God revealed it. He gave it. We've received it. It's our

honour to pass the gift on. I need to be an agent who breathes this 'essence of God' into my relationships in my role as a teacher; to prayerfully consider all the creative ways I can breathe out all-that-He-is in my classroom. It's an interesting thing about breathing. When God formed Adam, we know it was His breath that gave him life, but Hebrew scholars tell us that, in a sense, because each letter in the Hebrew name for *Lord*, *YHWH* (Yodh, He, Vav, He) is expressed through the expulsion of breath, the very name of God is curiously fused to the sound of breathing. Radical thought. How interesting too, that the name for breath in scripture is the same word as 'spirit': 'ruah' (Hebrew); 'nooma' (Greek).⁶ When you let God in—you let His Spirit-breath invade you in a very special way. When I breathe Him in personally and breathe Him out into my classes, I am unleashing His Spirit—epitomised by selfless, unconditional love. I will only be able to breathe Him out if I breathe Him in first. His 'special character' can then become my special character.

Joel Barker, a great exponent of the visioning process tells us, "Vision without action is merely a dream, action without vision just passes the time, vision with action can change the world".⁷ To what extent do our actions really match our vision in the arena of loving relationships and a loving school culture? If love is our God's supreme quality, and we are told to emulate Him, then *love* is the bottom-line essential we need to pursue. All my other beliefs and practices flow from this. If we were to invite members from our school community to define our school with three adjectives, how prominently would love feature?

The benefits of loving relationships

Who would not want to pursue rich, loving relationships, for they clearly have a treasury of benefits: If you want to grow faith, resilience, emotional intelligence, academic results, even brain neurons—invest in rich relationships. If you want to reduce risk-taking behaviour, invest in relationships. Invest. Notice. Care. Take time.

But surely our highest calling to *love* emerges

purely and simply from an ardent response to God's opulent love. *To love* is to respond to the preciousness of others because they are precious to Him. It is integral to the "*everything I have commanded you*" embodied in the Great Commission⁸. We are children of God whose primary job is to show the world love. It is the greatest gift we can give. What really matters in life is how we choose to love, how we choose to express that love in our families, our schools, and our world. Long after we are gone—this is what will matter. How interesting that recent Barna research into the secular mindset has identified Christians as being, essentially 'unchristian'.⁹ It would appear that a significant number echo the words of one blunt Mississippian in this declaration, "Christianity has become bloated with blind followers who would rather repeat slogans than actually feel true compassion and care"¹⁰. Sad reality.

What a shame if we were to focus on our 'beliefs' and neglect our 'belonging'—to communicate text, but not context; the context of our humanity. Let us be scathingly honest—it has happened far too often. Lives get bruised from hurtful, careless relationships, when we choose not to honour the human in the equation, or when we, through distraction or neglect, turned a blind eye to meanness or exclusive behaviour in our students.

What if?

What if we were to ask *what if* questions? What if love were to become so seared into our consciousness that it became contagious? What if a love-steeped atmosphere were to deeply pervade our school culture? What differences would we see? What if we were to intentionally focus on being available to be used by God to infuse 'God-memories' into the daily experiences of our students? How would the face of life at our school change? Is this something we are intentionally and prayerfully moving towards? Are we closer this year than last? Bottom line note-to-self: How deeply saturated is our school with the essence of

Godly love—the very Spirit-breath of God Himself, emerging from a "mighty longing after God"?¹¹

All of us would attest to the importance of loving relationships. We see an array of synonymous words in our advertising material—for we do applaud their importance. We all would concur that, yes, people matter most, but when push shoves us into a corner, how easy it is to support the system more than the person, and sadly ignore the cries of the human heart.

The sad reality of the person being swallowed up by the system is not unique to Christian education. Education has for some time now experienced the diminishing of the human spirit.

The 20th century, for all its scientific and technological amazements...was a century in which we watered down our own humanity, turning wisdom into information, destiny into DNA—making it increasingly difficult to find nourishment for the hungers of the heart...We took teaching and learning—that ancient exchange between student and teacher and world in which human beings have always explored the depths of the soul—and started thinning it down into little more than the amassing of data and the mastering of technique.¹²

Fortunately there has been a recent trend to attempt to "reclaim the integrity of teaching and learning so that it can once again become a process in which the whole person is nourished"¹³. The resultant compelling chorus of educators who have walked-the-talk in inspiring ways, profoundly demonstrates what love-in-action in the educational arena can look like 'with skin on'.

Living the vision

1986 saw the release of one of those astounding school transformation tales in *The George McKenna story*. This true account tells of a strong-willed administrator who remarkably transformed one of the most notorious gang-infested South LA high schools into an academic success. His radical reforms saw daily attendance move from 30 to 90 percent. It was transformed from a failing institution

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[Photography:
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to one where nearly 80% of its graduates went on to college. Formerly bored students began reading Shakespeare! When the real Mr McKenna was asked what the bottom-line essential difference was, he declared it to be that he had initiated a culture of 'institutionalised love'. No, not a bureaucratic formalisation of love in a clinical, regimented sense, but rather a total permeation of love into the culture of the school—so that it became not only *what they did* but *who they were*. Love came to thoroughly define them at every level of school life and in every action. Yes, it was tough love at times, a love that invited belief in students and set boundaries for them. But it was real and it was transformational. More recent powerful films like *The freedom writers* only reinforce the exceptional power of caring relationships.

This is a kind of incarnational love—where love invades people. It is loving-from-your-bloodstream—allowing the experience of every person in your school to be sustained with its life-giving benefits. It is breathing in God through personal connection and then breathing Him out to those around. Perhaps this is the reason Gillespie reiterates again and again with the latest *Value-genesis report*, that it's not *what* you do, it's *how* you do it that makes all the difference in Adventist Education.¹⁴

Colin Prentice, eminent former School Principal and CEO of World Vision in New Zealand is another embodiment of this incarnational love. His experience as principal of both an affluent middle class school and a low-decile, challenging school attests to the power of loving relationships and high expectations in school cultural change. His journey is littered with stories of students whose lives were profoundly impacted by his kindness and identification. He was available. He noticed. He learned names. He jogged along with the detention kids on the famous 'Prentice run'. He affirmed through countless handwritten cards. He cared enough to expect their best. He loved them into greatness, and it all poured from His relationship with God. Needless to say, environments were transformed.¹⁵

The veracity of such a notion is also being embraced in the wider community. In the commercial world, Kevin Roberts, CEO of Worldwide, Saatchi and Saatchi and the Ideas Company claims,

A business revolution is changing all the rules in the marketplace. How consumers feel about you—their emotional connection with you—is what determines success. This emotional phenomenon is changing everything.¹⁶

Roberts believes that by building respect and inspiring love, business can move the world. This emotional connection through the expression of

value and care is also the reason eminent hotel chains such as the Ritz Carlton commit to escorting you to your destination rather than simply offering directions. This is an expression of worth and value—in *you*.

Johnny the bag boy—loving with skin on

Barbara Glanz adds her voice to the chorus in her sharing of a very special invasion of memorable, loving acts in her book *The simple truths of service*. She tells of Johnny the bagger—a 19 year old Down syndrome, supermarket 'bag boy', one of 3,000 service providers who attended her customer service training session. In her presentation, she encouraged them to leave their personal 'signature' on their job through a loving act to those they served. Such an act would leave a warm memory and encourage customers to want to return. Her words excited Johnny, but he wondered how he could possibly do that—after all he was just a 'bag boy'. After much thought, he had an idea—he would find a 'thought-for-the-day' and sign his name on each one. His Dad helped him enter it on the computer and then print out copies on small cards. He handed one to every customer with an enthusiastic, "Thanks for shopping with us". A month later, the store manager shared with Barbara how Johnny's line was three times longer than any other checkout. The addition of more cashiers made no difference—they all wanted Johnny's 'thought-for-the-day'. People who used to shop only once a week declared they would now come in every time they went by—just to get Johnny's special thought. A few months later, the store manager again shared how Johnny had transformed the entire store. Every department had thought of ways of making loving memories. The floral department would pin unused or broken flowers on an elderly woman or little girl. Everyone had so much fun creating the memories.¹⁷ Needless to say, their customer-base increased significantly, but how much joy along the journey!

The challenge

In Ellen White's opinion, "the strongest argument in favour of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian".¹⁸ Love. It's an irresistible reality. It's transformational. It's the magnetic pole that pulls the needle on our compass towards Godliness. To love is to answer the call spoken by Christ Himself, "Love one another as I have loved you". It is the essence of sanctification, discipleship, 'living in the light', and 'walking the talk'; the nucleus of the 'fruit of the Spirit', 'letting your light shine' and 'feeding His lambs'.

So what love-memories could we plant heart-deep in the lives of those in *our care this week*?

“What love memories can we plant in the hearts of those in our care this week?”

It's a question worthy of regular focus. And in the grappling and mulling, let us not forget:

- When we create deep connections with our students and between our students—that's love.
- When our inquiry of 'performance' consciously appreciates others' strengths—that's love.
- When we do the unexpected random act of kindness—that's love.
- When we make learning transformational, touching the heart and the soul with things that matter—that's love.
- When we arrange successes for our students—that's love.
- When we celebrate the success of others—that's love.
- When we follow through with promises—that's love.
- When we don't let them give up on themselves—that's love.
- When we look beyond the behaviour to the thoughts and feelings that are motivating it and deal with those—that's love.
- When we say what we really mean and really mean what we say—that's love.
- When people really do matter most—in everything—that's love.

Commitment conversations

Take the time to discuss these questions as a staff:

1. What are the first three adjectives you think of when you think of your school?
2. What are the first three adjectives you think of when you think of Jesus?
3. What intentional traditions, rituals, practices are in place in your school that really celebrate people (not so much their *doing*, but their *being*)?
4. How do you provide time in your life to be alone with God and 'breathe' Him in?
5. Think of your students. Who currently challenges you the most? Dig deeper, what might be happening for them? How can you communicate care as well as your boundaries and expectations? What surprising act of caring could you do for them?
6. How can you leave a signature of caring with all your students today?
7. In what ways do you nurture a caring environment as a staff team?

This is not a touchy-feely invitation. It's a solid, indisputable commission from the God of the universe. It isn't a new message, but it *is* a new day, and in our humanity, it's a thought we need to hear again...and again...and again. So go on—breathe deeply of God right now through personal connection, and then breathe Him into all your encounters—just for today. In a very real sense, ultimately, *you* are the special character of your school. *You* are the agent of God's breath in the life of your classroom. Breathe Him in, breathe Him out...breathe Him in, breathe Him out ... For all the meaningful memories that will really matter to those around you come directly from Him. In *Him* we live and move...and breathe and love. Now that's bottom-line-essential, very special character. **TEACH**

Endnotes

¹ This statement in various forms appears in the *Integration deed of agreement* between the Ministry of Education and Seventh-day Adventist Schools in New Zealand.

² Manning, B. (2005). *Ragamuffin gospel*. Colorado Springs: Multnomah Press, p.100.

³ Source unknown.

⁴ White, E. G. (1903). *Education*. California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, p.18.

⁵ Ibid, p.30.

⁶ Rob Bell explores this concept in the *Nooma* DVD, *Breathe*.

⁷ Joel Barker is a business visionary. Unsourced quotation.

⁸ Matthew 28:16-20

⁹ Kinnaman, D. (2007). *Unchristian*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books

¹⁰ Ibid., p.15.

¹¹ Tozer, A. W. (2004). *The pursuit of God*. Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., p.11.

¹² Palmer, P. (2000). In Kessler, R. *The soul of education*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, p.v.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Gillespie, B.V. (2005). Lecture: *A grace-based ministry to youth*. Loma Linda University: California.

¹⁵ Prentice, C. (2006). *When people matter most*. Wellington: Dunmore Publishing Ltd.

¹⁶ Roberts, K. (2007). *The lovemarks effect: Winning the consumer revolution*. New York: Powerhouse Cultural Entertainment Books, Precis

¹⁷ Blanchard, K., & Glanz, B. (2005). *The simple truths of service*. USA: Blanchard Family Partnership, Glanz Communications, Inc., McMillan Media and Simple Truths.

¹⁸ White, E. G. (1942). *Ministry of healing*. California: Pacific Press Publishing Association. p.470.