

BEING YOUNG AND BEING WISE

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:40, 46, 47, 52, RSV

We adults assume that you have to have gray hair to be wise, that the precondition for wisdom is maturity. We reflect that thinking very often by the way we treat children. Some of this comes from a lack of understanding about what wisdom really is. Wisdom is not just passed on like knowledge. Wisdom is much more complex and subtle. It is more difficult to receive and to achieve. In the final analysis wisdom has little to do with age.

I'm not talking about 2-year-olds; I'm talking about children who are getting toward the age of accountability, the age of self-understanding, the age when their feelings, sensitivities and perceptions are being sharpened—early teens or even earlier perhaps. I'm talking about the age that Jesus was in the Scripture Reading when his questions amazed the temple scholars.

Seventh-day Adventists have always believed that to educate a person you have to get a balanced, proportional relationship between the mind, the emotions and the body. We believe that these three things have to be integrated and grow together.

While there are many ways to define wisdom let me offer as one definition of wisdom, the harmonious development of the mental, physical and spiritual powers. In Philippians Paul told the early church, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." What does it mean to have the mind of Christ? To think and to feel as he thought and felt? It's not enough just to think apart from emotion. We are total persons; we think and feel together.

I would like to focus primarily on the feelings and then move to the mind and body and the integration of thought and action. I'm beginning with the feelings because that's where we suffer the most, even in our own Christian education.

Any of you who are parents have felt the humiliation of losing your temper when your child has a temper tantrum. You sense the irony in that kind of experience, the stupidity. You realize at those moments, perhaps more than any other, that you can be a baby even if you are 50 years old. The whole question of how children learn, how they become wise, has received a phenomenal amount of study in the 20th century. We now know more about human beings and what makes them tick than any generation in history.

When Haim Ginott was doing most of his work, he was conducting some seminars for parents on how to raise children. Two women who took one of his seminars later wrote a book in which they outlined the shock they received as day by day all of their ways of handling each other in their families were blown away by Ginott's insights.

When Ginott got into the question of how children learn, how they become sensitive and wise, he pointed out that the thing which distinguishes his method from what most parents do is that he never uses language around children that evaluates them. He only uses language that describes feelings and situations. He doesn't want language to get in the way of a child's sensing he has the freedom to solve problems and his sensing that he needs to be open, vulnerable and honest with his feelings and that he won't be shut off and condemned if he is.

BEING YOUNG AND BEING WISE

He gives an example, and I know you will all identify with it. I used to have the horrors when my wife planned a nice dinner and grape juice was on the table. With your nice linen and a light-colored carpet, if any child spills grape juice you have problems. (I'm usually the one who has to shampoo the rug.)

The typical reaction if you don't have company when an accident like this happens is to "blow your cool." You tell the child how clumsy he is, you told him to be careful and he knocks over the glass. All of the language you are using in this incident is language of evaluation. Ginott says that what happens when you react that way, even with an adult, [is that] the individual marshals all of his defenses to defend himself or to shift blame. Ginott points out that if you want the child to work out a solution to the problem and be free to do something about the problem, you don't start attacking the person. You don't evaluate the person's actions. You say, "Oh, I see that you spilled the grape juice. Let me help you clean it up." I know this isn't always easy, but all of the child's energy is directed toward dealing with the problem. You don't attack him any more than you would attack yourself if you spilled the juice.

A lot of people want to back out of their discomfort in handling a situation like that by saying, "They're only words. The children know we really love them." Yes, they do but words have power. They can bruise just as easily as fists can. I have seen married people who are certain that the other person really loves them but who can't handle having their spouse cut them down in public, even in a teasing way, reminding them that their grammar needs improvement or making some other remark that is meant to be loving but cuts and hurts just the same. The way we speak to one another, especially to children, cannot be lightly dismissed.

It's interesting that as children mature (get into their early teens, etc.) they start parroting back what they have heard from their parents and friends. Thus, you see the cruelty children exhibit toward their friends—a child who has poor eyesight and can't play games well will hear about it for many years. When I was in grade school there was a child who began to lose his hair because of disease and he had to wear a baseball cap to school each day. He was teased unmercifully by his peers and he would cry when he was alone because of the pain he was experiencing. All of the language he heard was evaluative and condemnatory. It's true that very often children are insensitive, unkind and cruel just like we are.

Apparently Jesus never got into that kind of thing. It would be easy to say it was because he was the Son of God. There is more to it than that. As the Holy Spirit guided Mary and Joseph, Jesus was given an example in his home of how to deal with his feelings, of how to deal with crises and how to deal with other people. He learned early that you treat people the way you want to be treated. That means that one of the things we have to do with the young to help them to be wise is to be honest, open and vulnerable. That doesn't mean that everyone's feelings are always correct. We sometimes have feelings that are wrong but that doesn't mean you can't be honest about them. If this kid doesn't like Aunt Harriet, aged 80, pinching his cheek then he ought to be able to say so in a kind way. She needs to know she has limits even with an 8-year-old.

When I first got involved in Little League when my son was playing baseball, I was warned that the people you had to watch out for were the adults. I have seen parents go wild in a baseball game because their kids made a mistake. Or a kid misses a line drive and the ball cracks him on a leg. He falls over in pain, but his father is yelling at him to stop being a baby, "Get up and get the ball." What is the message the child receives? When I say I suffer, I'm really not suffering. I'm not being honest. As

many of you know, we've raised a generation of men who have never been able to say they hurt, they're afraid or they're in pain. The gaps that are created between people when they can't be open are almost unimaginable.

Another significant point which Ginott made was that, and I think Jesus was like this in a very powerful way, when children are allowed to express their feelings honestly and feel safe doing so, they can deal with suffering. They don't repress it.

Our tendency as parents is, if something happens to a child, to try to replace what is lost. For example, if a child loses his dog, and for many children this is a terrible experience, we may offer to get another dog immediately. We may even try to tell the child he shouldn't feel that badly about the loss of a dog. Instead, we should sit down and say, "I know. I know how you're suffering." We can communicate in that experience of sharing the suffering that it can be endured, that it won't destroy them, that they can put things back together and life still has meaning.

Educating the feelings has got to be one of the most important tasks of Christian education. It's a task that the whole educational system has neglected. When I say Christian education, I'm not just referring to Sligo School, Takoma Academy and Columbia Union College. I'm also referring to Sabbath School and to the life of the church as a whole.

Ellen White makes a very perceptive observation: "The thoughts [including the feelings] and actions combined make up the character." I want you to consider the implications of that statement. It is not enough to think correctly and never act on what you think—there is no character development if that's true—nor is it enough to act blindly without understanding the rationale for your actions. You don't grow in terms of character unless the two of them are combined.

Let me give an example of how this can be translated into education. One of the things that we wrestled with when I was teaching was how do we help working adults to obtain a college degree. There seemed to be a growing interest on the part of many adults to going back to school, but they were at a point in their lives where their financial obligations forced them to continue working. We set up an adult degree program (and Columbia Union College has a similar program). It was an attempt to help people integrate action or work with study.

One of the women who enrolled for the class did something unusual, but it was a good example of the kind of thing which happened for many of the students. Her life's ambition had been to hike the Appalachian Trail which would take quite a bit of time. She inquired if there were some way she could do that and get college credit. Her advisers helped her work out a program where she studied the economics, the culture and the whole spectrum of what constitutes Appalachia—industry, the people, the customs, etc. She spent four to five months reading 15-20 hours a week in that area and writing papers and reports. Then she hiked the Appalachian Trail on her vacation for about six weeks, interviewing people on the road, attending folk festivals, visiting museums, etc. When she returned she had a full year's credit in the humanities. What was exciting for her was that she could integrate what she read with what she was doing.

We had another student who had a Russian background and who had many relatives still living in Russia. He wanted to take a trip to Russia so he decided to study Russian Literature intensively and

BEING YOUNG AND BEING WISE

then go to Russia. When he went he attended lectures and visited museums as well as saw many of his relatives.

We all recognize that those people learned better than anyone else. If I want to learn how to speak German I should visit Germany. If I want to learn what it's like to live in Thailand I should go to Thailand and not just attend a National Geographic film. As simple and elementary as that principle is, we tend to forget and miss it. Some time ago I gave a talk to some church school teachers in which I tried to show that there might be ways in which we could do a better job in this.

If you simply teach the parable of the Good Samaritan and its principles and the children in the class never actually translate the implications of that parable into action, no spiritual growth has taken place. That doesn't mean that the teacher has to do something with the class every time, but it may mean that as a part of the assignment you tell the child, "This week one of the things I want you to do is (a), (b) or (c) and think how it relates to the parable that we just studied in class. Hand in a written report on what happened."

This doesn't need to happen just in religion classes—it should happen in math and history as well. I realize that some people will question how you can have character development in math class because it's a pure science. It's true that in the past religious schools misunderstood how math could be integrated with life in terms of spiritual and moral development and some of them became famous for having students add 5 apples and 5 apples to make 10 apples, instead of 5 apples, etc. That is obviously trivial and superficial.

In using our math abilities, it is possible to integrate thought and actions. In talking with a pastor of the Rochester (New York) church, he told me about a church member who had worked for 40 years for the Kodak Corporation. For a time he was chief of its patents division. He was in charge of every invention worked on by Kodak for cameras and photography. He had a lot of inventors working under him. In his early career at Kodak he invented the radio transmitter that bounced the signal off the earth and then was caught by a plane flying overhead which would trigger a camera to take a picture at certain altitudes. This camera and radio device was used to develop maps and for reconnaissance purposes during the war. During the latter part of the war the Pentagon sent through a Top Secret request for the blueprints on his invention. When the Government wants something in wartime, you can't stand on your patent rights.

Later he learned that this was the device used to detonate the Atomic Bomb over Hiroshima. He felt terribly guilty about this. He felt almost responsible. The facts are probably that he wasn't responsible. Nevertheless I was impressed with the fact that this man felt that he had some responsibility for how his inventions were used, for how his math and science were applied. The same second thoughts have occurred to people like Robert Oppenheimer, who was at Los Alamos and with other scientists helped invent the Atomic Bomb. [Albert] Einstein himself terribly regretted the fact that the energy equation which he thought would help liberate the world and provide cheap energy and perhaps have applications for medicine, etc., was used to obliterate hundreds of thousands of people.

In other words, while there is no such thing as Christian mathematics in the sense that you add the numbers up differently, there is a Christian mathematics in the sense that people who are educated in math who are Christians are sensitive to the implications and applications of what they know. They

care about how it's used. Science is not bracketed off here and religion there. They are integrated. The way I think and how those thoughts are translated into actions are important. They are linked and I cannot ignore them.

We see this in history more easily. We all accept that a Christian looks at history differently than a secular person does. He sees behind the observable forces of history—the politics, the culture, etc.—the fact that in every moment of history, in every life and in every event, good and evil are somehow in a life and death struggle. He understands that history's ultimate meaning is there. The Christian doesn't know anything different about history in terms of facts and understandings than the non-Christian except that his philosophy of what history means and what is really going on and where history is heading has a different understanding.

I want to say that Jesus in Luke 2 exhibited wisdom. Even if he couldn't verbalize it articulately at age 12 or 13, he sensed it all. In *Desire of Ages* Ellen White tells us of his early childhood and that Jesus exhibited a sensitivity to the suffering of people as a child that most adults never learn. I would expect nothing less of him. Christ was able to integrate the way he thought and acted. He translated his ideas into reality. He understood why he did what he did. One of the things that all of us get distressed about is when we see not only young people but adults who ought to know better, manifesting an immaturity, and a lack of wisdom with other people.

I want to appeal to young people to be wise, to be sensitive to feelings—your own and other people's. I want to appeal to young people to think before you do something and understand why you do it. Make sure you have a good reason for doing it. If you're doing something just because you're told to without understanding why, back away from that and begin to think about it.

If you think only, you have an intellectual relationship to truth. It's not enough. If you do only, you have a blind, authoritarian relationship to truth. The thoughts and actions combined make up the character. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."

Wisdom has very little to do with age. Even our young people can be as wise as Christ himself.