



To Educate the Imagination

Fine Arts for Today's College Student

By Norman L. Wendth

We have been told over and over again that the current generation of college students is different. They are supposedly more serious, more goal oriented. The decline in SAT scores has ended, and may be reversing. My experience with students I have recently advised tends to confirm this wonderful-sounding academic gossip. Unfortunately, I also sense other changes in this generation as well.

Students have always been eager to argue their way out of required courses whenever they could; in this, today's student has not changed. What does seem different, however, is the type of argument I now hear against the various arts requirements.

It doesn't seem very long ago that the typical attempt at evasion involved an earnest young ministerial candidate who would bring to the advising session an underlined copy of the *Testimonies* in order to convince me that some stories

and paintings "have a corrupting influence," or that "the knowledge of music without the knowledge of cookery is not worth much." Painting, music, and literature were presumed evil until proven useful.

Dangerous—Or Useless?

The contemporary student seems largely to have abandoned these traditional arguments, however. Instead of the theology major, the representative student seems now to be the future CPA or medical technician who argues the *uselessness* rather than the *danger* of the arts. "Executives don't read poetry," one explains loftily. "History of Art won't get me into Loma Linda," observes another. Furthermore, most tend to be extremely impatient with answers that are not clearly and immediately career-oriented. "Does it pay?" they demand to know.

I should be glad in at least one respect, I guess. Complaints with no religio-political dimension are much less stressfully handled. A simple "those are the requirements" often suf-

Associate Professor of English
Pacific Union College
Angwin, California

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fices, and with a shrug my advisees move onto other subjects. Of course, this evasive maneuver has not convinced them of the value of the arts, but I have not wasted our time or my energy, either.

I very much fear, however, that such easier advising sessions are in fact a sign that our incoming students have not accepted our traditional educational goals—in fact, they may not even be aware of them. I am referring, of course, to the old idea that an SDA college education should have *changed* its graduates, should have guided their personalities and characters up new and better paths, and should have made them better men and women. At least the ministerial student and I always agreed upon that basic goal. Our arguments were always over specifics: Was not Picasso somehow dangerous? Would music appreciation help him appreciate Jesus? Was not Milton more valuable than Hawthorne? Of course the arts had the power to change people—that was exactly what concerned him.

Nowadays a more alarming possibility presents itself—objections to our arts requirements may indicate more than just a skepticism about the power of the arts. Students may believe that there is no reason to change! Having been told over and over that “You’re OK,” or even that virtue means living out your own feelings, they are quite satisfied with their selves. They have therefore come to college with the clear and single purpose of being trained for some well-paying technical career. And when everything is judged only as it contributes to some financial “bottom line,” we should not be surprised to find that such students view music, art, and literature as a complete waste of time.

Life-changing Power

Simply muttering that “Computer programmers need to be aware of the great monuments of human intellect, too,” betrays our traditional values. Yes, the arts can be taught so that they

have pragmatic appeal. There can be financial rewards for cultural name-dropping. Career advancement can result from acquiring good writing skills. Art and literature do offer useful information about the world in which we live. If we teach the arts only on this level, however, our students might as well attend the local community college. If we really believe in Adventist education, we must do much more. We must teach music, art, and literature so that our students feel their life-changing power. Furthermore, we must clearly explain to incoming students that we are deliberately setting out to convert the intellectual and refine and sensitize the technocrat.

In short, we must re-emphasize the need to educate the imagination. This familiar concept has seemingly not occurred to many of our students, and may even have been half forgotten by some of us. But the arts change people by affecting the imagination. How to properly direct this change is what our fine-arts requirements have traditionally dealt with.

Let me be specific. What kinds of changes do the arts offer young technicians? First, these young people can expect to have their sympathies enlarged. A purely pragmatic world view is necessarily self-centered. The arts offer a broader perspective—one perceived through another’s eyes. This interaction will enlarge the participants’ own world and develop their sympathies for others. We often give lip service to the idea of “walking a mile in another man’s moccasins”; the arts give us the means to do just that. C. S. Lewis puts it very well:

One of the things we feel after reading a great work is “I have got out.” Or from another point of view, “I have got in”; pierced the shell of some other monad and discovered what it is like inside.

Good reading, therefore, though it is not essentially an affectional or moral or intellectual activity, has something in common with all three. In love we escape from our self into one other. In the moral sphere, every act of justice or charity involves putting ourselves in the other person’s place and thus transcending our own competitive particularity. In coming to understand anything we are rejecting the facts as they

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are for us in favour of the facts as they are. The primary impulse of each is to maintain and aggrandise himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness. In love, in virtue, in the pursuit of knowledge, and in the reception of the arts, we are doing this. Obviously this process can be described either as an enlargement or as a temporary annihilation of the self. But that is an old paradox; "he that loseth his life shall save it."¹

Can anyone doubt that the above statement describes positive moral growth?

Awareness, Growth, and Maturity

Emotional growth and maturity may also be promoted by the arts. Music, for example, is logically similar to the forms of human feelings (Susanne Langer in *Philosophy in a New Key* calls music a tonal analogue of emotive life). A Beethoven symphony, therefore, may direct us through nondiscursive forms of emotion that are more complex than, or are resolved differently from, our habitual emotional patterns. We can thus in a sense "practice" experiencing mature psychological reactions. (Kenneth Burke in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* has shown how this can work with literature as well.) Emotional growth may not immediately result in career advancement, but no one should consequently question its value.

The added richness that the arts can teach us to discover in everyday life has been pointed out over and over again. We need not go to the extremes of an Oscar Wilde to notice how different our world appears after a painting has taught us to see our surroundings as we had never before experienced them. Does a natural landscape look the same to us after we have contemplated a Turner? A Monet? Do we see the same face in the mirror now as before we met Picasso? We seldom realize how much our awareness of the visual world has been made richer and fuller by the subtle schooling of our great artists. Is not this richness, this change,

worth more than the monetary rewards found on a balance sheet?

Sanctifying the Imagination

The arts affect us in many other ways as well, but the most important one seems to me to be the sanctification of the imagination. I suspect that my current advisees' disdain for all things not immediately useful results in part from their imaginations having been educated primarily by popular American culture, especially television. No matter how well indoctrinated with Adventist theology they may be, their imaginations live in a world created by such programs as "Dynasty," "The A-Team," and "The Love Boat." While television does sometimes challenge specific Adventist teachings, the greater danger by far comes from the artificial world created by its shows and advertising—a world in which values are material or conventional, in which mores are relative. Where the imagination is, there will the heart be also.

A sanctified imagination, on the other hand, sees holiness in the world. Many of us have read Lewis' spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, and remember how he was affected by reading George MacDonald's *Phantastes*. "That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized," he writes; "the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer."² Longer, yes, but it happened; inexorably the will and the intellect followed the imagination.

I do not thus imply that the arts will convert us—that job belongs to the interaction of our will and the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the genuine change that the arts can make in the imagination can play a leading role in that large change. This is just one more reason why our students' imaginations must be educated, grounded securely in a sanctified world view.

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ever, let the inevitable failures and sense of helplessness turn them into cynical or indifferent spectators of the socio-political scene. Neither can they allow themselves to fall into the quixotic pitfall of expecting an evolutionary utopia, imagining that mere human efforts will provide definitive panaceas.

The Christian teacher will seek to preserve society, but he or she will also shed light into the darker corners of community life that need to be dealt with and even changed. The Christian teacher will try to inspire his or her students to act likewise and light candles of social involvement, rather than simply denouncing the darkness of the world. The Adventist teacher is buoyed up by eschatological optimism. He has social concern. This is why he prays: "Come Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20). □

FOOTNOTES

¹ Shailer Mathews, *Jesus on Social Institutions* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), p. 49.

² Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), p. 78.

³ The text credited to Phillips is from *The New Testament in Modern English* © J. B. Phillips. Used by permission of The Macmillan Company.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1909), pp. 172, 331, 338, 339.

⁵ _____, *Testimonies to Ministers* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1944), p. 372; _____, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948), vol. 3, p. 246.

⁶ _____, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1946), p. 544.

⁷ _____, *Testimonies*, vol. 3, p. 184; _____, *Medical Ministry* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1932), p. 232.

⁸ _____, *Testimonies*, vol. 4, p. 620; vol. 2, p. 570; vol. 1, p. 481.

⁹ _____, *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 517, 518; _____, *Welfare Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1952), p. 242.

¹⁰ _____, *Testimonies*, vol. 3, p. 367.

¹¹ _____, *Messages to Young People* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Assn., 1930), p. 233.

¹² _____, *Testimonies*, vol. 1, p. 421.

¹³ _____, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1913), pp. 46, 59.

¹⁴ _____, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1941), p. 254.

¹⁵ J. Ellul, "Social Change," *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1973), p. 631.

¹⁶ Mathews, *Jesus on Social Institutions*, p. 60.

¹⁷ John R. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove: Illinois Intersarsity Press, 1975), pp. 26, 27.

¹⁸ From *The New English Bible*. © The Delegates of the Oxford University Press and the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press 1970. Reprinted by permission.

¹⁹ Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Assn., 1923), pp. 475, 477.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 475-484.

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A belief in the "uselessness" of the arts, therefore, may indicate a need for the education of the imagination, a need that the very requirements being protested against are designed to address. In my opinion, the primary value of the arts to our technical majors is that their power helps foster change and growth, thus furthering the primary goal of Adventist education. So long as our colleges retain character development as the first priority in education, we shall need to enlist the aid of these powerful educational tools. □

Financing Church Colleges

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Some teachers may feel insecure about having their work examined in this way, but in the long run such evaluations will help to give teachers credit for the hard work they are performing. It should be noted that, generally speaking, most employees feel they are working harder than anyone else. Some academic departments also feel that they are carrying a disproportionate share of the teaching loads. Actual observation of activities and hours worked may help settle the issue of work loads.

Administrators should allow each teacher to reach his or her own potential. Possibly a "management by objectives" approach

—such as rewards for publications, teaching excellence, research, or counseling—could allow each teacher to pursue his or her own area of excellence.

Most teachers do want to teach, and administrators should allow them full loads, along with the proper recognition and rewards for hard work. A good rule for administrators to use in their dealings with teachers is to have as few teachers as possible, work them hard, and treat them lavishly.

Reconsider Expensive Programs

3. In making spending decisions colleges shouldn't commit large amounts of money to a few people.

SDA colleges should not allow themselves to become—or remain—generic institutions.

One of the trends carried forward from the 1960s, when increasing enrollments allowed for expansion of programs, was to offer programs that served only a few students. Now that enrollments are decreasing, schools must reconsider and perhaps eliminate some of these programs.

Adjust Wage Scales

4. Allow the wage scales to more nearly reflect the market rate of pay. About one-third of the workers in our schools are paid more than the market rate; about one-third receive just about the right amount; and one-third are underpaid. It takes no genius to discover that the "overpaid" stay and the "underpaid" leave. The college may thus perpetuate incompetence while losing its most creative and productive employees.

5. Periodically visit other institutions and survey their programs.