

Coping With Criticism Constructively

BY GINGER KETTING

Our first reaction to criticism must be to care for the emotions that it produces.

“I sent my child to an Adventist elementary school, thinking that she would be in a better environment there. But she has heard stuff on the playground that just shocks me! What am I paying all that tuition money for?”

“Adventist education isn’t safe for our young people anymore. They go to our colleges where their faith is destroyed by teachers who teach them to doubt those truths that have shaped our church and been the distinctive marks of our message.”

“I saw a young man at the checkout counter of the college market with rings all over his fingers. I asked if he was an Adventist. When he said he was, I told him I couldn’t see how he could call himself an Adventist with those rings on. What is going on with our young people, and why aren’t the colleges teaching them what it means to be Adventist?”

“I am sending my son to the local Christian academy rather than the Adventist one. The education in the Adventist academy is mediocre and the students don’t seem to care to excel academically, although the teachers do mean well. Where he is now there are all kinds of opportunities, the test scores are high, and they have good Christian values. That’s what’s important to us, and the Adventist academy doesn’t provide that.”

Criticism is hard for a teacher to hear. Whether the criticism is directed at one’s own efforts, the school for which one works, the entire Adventist school system, or education in general, it often zings right through a educator’s skin and straight to the heart. We take it personally. We get mad. We come back defensive and ready to fight.

During my first two years of teaching, my mother advised me over and over during our weekly phone chats, “Ginger, you’re going to have to grow a thicker skin.” A thicker skin? If I grew a thicker skin, criticism would simply slide off and I wouldn’t care enough to set people straight. How could that be helpful? I wanted misinformation corrected. I wanted gossip stopped. I wanted justice. And I desperately wanted to know

that I was in the ideal profession, doing an ideal job for the families I served, changing the world for the better by teaching in an ideal educational system—the Adventist educational system. Criticism only served to wreck my neat, tidy world and set me off-balance. It left me disappointed—but more to the point, it left me worried deep down that the critic was right.

In reality, Adventist education is a messy, messy business. It’s like trying to make the perfect treat in an unpredictable kitchen with ingredients supplied by a careless shopper. First, you throw in some teachers in need of grace, mostly with good intentions, at various levels of professional expertise. Then you take students in the midst of that great and unpredictable process of growing up, during which they try new things and explore life for themselves. Add families from widely varying backgrounds, many of whom suffer from fractures, dysfunctions, and quirks. Throw in some financial worries for the school, bare-bones facilities, and varying levels of local church support, and try to make this all live up to the ideals presented in the Bible and Ellen White’s writings on education. From one viewpoint, Adventist education is the recipe for a great adventure! From another, it’s a recipe for struggle and disappointment. Despite being a great blessing, Adventist education remains an untidy and unpredictable business.

Because of the challenges of carrying out the ideals of Adventist education in a less-than-ideal world and church, criticism tends to be even more painful. The extremely high expectations of families and other church workers can place a burden on Adventist educators that often seems too heavy to bear. Adventists as a people tend to

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Finally, educators are under pressure because of the hopes of those who view Adventist education as a final chance to reform their children. These expectations are often unrealistic, and so the family goes away to tell others of their deep and rancorous disappointment. We in turn are left with feelings of guilt and helplessness because we wanted so much to be able to effect a change in those confused young lives.

So how do we deal with criticism? It may be helpful to look first at the critics themselves, along with the nature of their criticism, and then look at ourselves and our options for response.

The Critics

In my career as an educator, I have observed several types of critics. The ones I like best are the concerned parents who see a problem and approach the teacher or administrator who is directly involved. Some of these are sincere, thoughtful people who give educators the benefit of the doubt, asking, "How can we solve this together?" Others are angry parents or community members who come in to tell us off. Both follow the biblical guidelines of taking a concern directly to the one with whom they have the problem. I call these the "to-your-face" critics.

These critics generally want to initiate change and serve as a catalyst for fixing the problem. Whether or not their approach is polite, they are at least willing to take responsibility for their criticism, and to participate in some sort of open dialogue, no matter how flawed. Once they feel they have been heard, to-your-face critics are generally willing to listen to new information that may shed a different light on the situa-

The author helps one of her students with a class project.

look for perfection or at least compliance with a perceived "blueprint," rather than understanding that growth toward maturity and understanding must be accomplished anew with each successive generation. A people with such a clear, structured view of what Christianity should look like can easily fall into the trap of griping and criticizing when they think their brothers and sisters fall short of the ideal.

Differences of belief, lifestyle, and culture within the church can also cause

friction when individual families and church members expect the school to support their own personal agendas. For example, a community member who believes drama is evil may rise up in indignation when the school begins a drama outreach ministry. And parents from a culture in which girls are expected to behave quietly with eyes downcast will react with alarm to teachers who encourage their daughter to think critically, speak up with her own opinions, and make eye contact.

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tion, and/or to work constructively with the educator to solve the problem.

The second type of critic I have observed is the “behind-your-back” critic. These are the gossipers who get on the telephone or the Internet, or convene a “sidewalk committee” to discuss the faults and problems they perceive. Even though the stories have rarely been checked out with the people concerned, they are often received by these critics as truth. Behind-your-back critics tend to be gripers in search of a whipping boy. They uncritically embrace the current notion, promoted by the media, that education is to blame for all the ills of society. Some are truly dissatisfied with the popular culture and think that by speaking out, they can change it. Others see their tirades mostly as an entertaining game, not stopping to consider the horrible damage they cause to the educational community, and by extension, to the children being served.

Their attacks are demoralizing for several reasons: The educator often cannot track down the source of the criticism and is thus unable to initiate a dialogue, he or she may lack the fortitude to address the critic and end up suffering in silence, or may become so busy “putting out fires” as to become distracted from his or her real role—that of serving students. Deep down, behind-your-back critics really don’t care if the problem gets addressed; if they did, they would take their concerns to the per-

son(s) capable of facilitating change. They are more caught up with creating a sensation, giving themselves a feeling of power. And they do wield power because word-of-mouth itself is such a powerful tool, whether used constructively or destructively.

The third kind of critic, the “letter-writer” critic, tends to appear more frequently in connection with academy- and college-level education. Generally, these critics have read, heard, or seen something that concerns them, and wish to take the school to task for not educating as they see fit. Their objections sometimes address curricular issues, but more often deal with cultural or lifestyle issues. Like the behind-your-back critics, they rarely contact the educator directly to find out whether what they heard or perceived is true. And they generally roust about in Ellen White’s writings for quotes to brandish in order to back up their point.

Even when letter-writer critics have a valid point, they create problems with their “hit-and-run” method of stating their concerns. Although they seek to effect change, they prefer to distance themselves from the hard work of finding a solution. Once again, the educator is usually left scratching his or her head about an appropriate response, for several reasons: the letter-writer may be unknown to the recipient or even anonymous; the letter-writer does not suggest any desired solution, and it may be unclear how widespread the concern may be among the constituency. We all know that we cannot please all of the people all of the time, but it is helpful to know whether a critic represents a broader spectrum.

Responding to Critics

Let me begin with two assumptions from which I work as an Adventist educator: (1) It is best to react to criticism as formative, rather than summative. (2) All criticism, if based on correct information, contains at least a seed of truth.

In dealing with the first assumption, one of my father’s oft-repeated adages comes to mind: “Never allow yourself to believe that someone is deliberately trying to hurt you.” Even when a critic

intends to injure, if educators refuse to see it that way, this frees them to deal with the criticism kindly and constructively. When an educator does not view an attack as deliberate, it is easier to assume that the criticism is formative rather than summative. As with formative assessment, formative criticism is a statement of present concerns, not a final value statement. This leaves open the possibility that both the critic’s opinions and the person or situation being criticized may change. In other words, nothing is final.

S econd, it is always helpful to begin with the assumption that there is a seed of truth beneath any criticism, as long as the criticism is not based on misinformation. Rejecting it out-of-hand only closes the door to communication and/or the improvement of Adventist education. Taking criticism seriously while seeking out the seed of truth that fostered it pays homage to the mission of Adventist education: We are here to prepare our students for service. In doing so, we seek to provide the highest quality of education possible.

Having made these assumptions, our first reaction to criticism must be to care for the emotions that it produces. Our first reaction is to feel attacked or put down, to experience confusion, anger, or grief. It may sound like “psychobabble” to say that we must stop to feel these emotions, but that really is the truth. People typically go into shock for a while after being physically injured; it makes sense that we also go into emotional shock after being injured by criticism.

At this time, two important strategies need to be followed. First, *before* responding to the criticism, we need a safe place to deal with the emotions it triggers. In other words, we need to delay our response in some way. With the behind-your-back critic and the letter-writer critic, this is simple. No one is looking us in the eye, waiting for a response. But we need to let to-your-face critics know that we have heard their concern—and then claim our space. An appropriate response would be, “I

understand that you are concerned about _____ for the following reasons: _____. I need a little time to think through your concerns carefully. I promise to get back in touch with you within the next [few days, week].” This provides crucial time for an emotional response, as well as any research we need to do into the problem. It also creates time to follow the second important strategy: talking with a trusted person about the criticism.

The Bible has made it abundantly clear that we are not meant to live or solve problems alone (“It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner”; “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”; “Without counsel, plans go wrong, but with many advisers they succeed”—NRSV). To respond to criticism in a godly manner, we need the strength provided by a trusted and wise confidant. Such a person can listen to the situation and our feelings about it, help us evaluate the criticism, and enable us to face up to that “seed of truth” that may underlie the criticism. One caveat: Make sure the listener understands the importance of listening *first*. Trying to solve the problem without first acknowledg-

ing the emotions will short-circuit the process, in the same way that medical personnel must avoid operating on an injured victim who has not yet been stabilized. There is also a biblical precedent for this: Over and over, Moses went to complain to God before addressing the complaints of the children of Israel. The fact that he went to God rather than another person doesn’t indicate that we must only take our problems to God; God chose to speak directly to Moses, whereas today He usually employs the wisdom of those around us to touch our lives.

Once we have worked through the emotions, bounced the problem off of a trusted listener, and assessed the validity of the criticism, it is time to respond. At this point, we need to prayerfully select from a number of approaches. Prayer is essential because there is no formula to prescribe which response best fits a particular type of criticism. Sometimes, defending oneself is the most appropriate response, as Job did when criticized by his friends. Some critics blurt out their criticisms unthinkingly, and would

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benefit from a firm reminder to stop and think about the import of their words and to investigate and consider carefully before criticizing.

Sometimes it is helpful to invite the critic to visit the school, to see the educator(s) and students in action and to participate in the task of education. A biblical example of this response may be seen in the example of Nathaniel, who asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” and was told, “Come and see.” Bringing a critic into the school environment can be a frightening thing. However, this strategy tells the critic, “We have nothing to hide. We want you as an ally.” The same analyti-

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The author invites reactions from one of her classes.

cal thinking that makes the critic a pest can be a blessing when put to work on behalf of the school. I know a number of Adventist educators who have successfully employed this strategy.

At other times, it's best to purposefully keep silent and not respond, as Jesus did when accused by the leaders of Jerusalem. I have always loved a passage found in the book *Fullness of Joy*, by Eric B. Hare, which passionately and succinctly expresses this type of response.

"From an unknown writer comes this gem:

"The Lord has given to every man his work. It is his business to do it, and the devil's business to hinder him if he can. So sure as God has given you a work to do, Satan will try to hinder you. He may throw you from it; he may present other things more promising. He may allure you by worldly prospects, he may assault you with slander, torment you with false accusations, set you at work defending your character, employ pious persons to lie about you, and excellent men to slander you. You may have Pilate and Herod, Annas and Caiaphas all combined against you, and Judas standing by you ready to sell you for thirty pieces of silver, and you may wonder why all these things come upon you. Can you not see that the whole thing is brought about through the craft of the devil? To draw you off from your work and hinder your obedience to God?"

"Keep about your work. Do not flinch because the lion roars; do not stop to stone the devil's dogs; do not fool away your time chasing the devil's rabbits. Do your work. Let liars lie, let sectarians quarrel, let corporations resolve, let editors publish, let the devil do his worst; but see to it that nothing hinders you from fulfilling the work God has given you.

"He has not sent you to make money. He has not commanded you to get rich. He has never bidden you defend your character. He has not set you at work to contradict falsehood which Satan and his servants may start to peddle. If you do these things, you will do nothing else; you will be at work for yourself and not for the Lord.

"Keep about your work. Let your

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aim be as steady as a star. Let the world brawl and bubble. You may be assaulted, wronged, insulted, slandered, wounded, and rejected; you may be abused by foes, forsaken by friends, and despised and rejected of men, but see to it with steadfast determination, with unflinching zeal, that you pursue the great purpose of your life and object of your being until at last you can say, 'I have finished the work which Thou gavest me to do. . . .'"

This response of silence in face of criticism is obviously appropriate only if, in assessing the situation, you conclude that the criticism is truly undeserved, and feel impressed by God to continue on without addressing it.

Finally, there are times when we search our hearts and see a need to change in response to the criticism. Sometimes, we simply need to repent and reform as Josiah did when he realized that he and his people were not in compliance with the Law. These are always humbling and painful times, and yet they are wonderful opportunities for growth (although appreciated mostly in retrospect!). We may or may not wish to let the critics know that their comments were the source of change, but in order to be true to ourselves and our mission of providing the best education possible for God's children, we must be willing to repent, reform, and grow. That is the whole essence of our accountability to God as Adventist educators.

The Most Powerful Strategy: Prevention

The most powerful and painless strategy in dealing with criticism of Ad-

ventist education or educators is clearly that of prevention. First, we must think through what we do and plan carefully to provide the best and most caring education possible. A high-quality education is less the sum of the school's computers, teacher's aides, newest textbooks, and playground equipment than it is the product of the personal connections the teacher makes with the students, the competency of his or her instruction, and the high level of expectations the teacher holds for student learning and behavior.

Second, the Adventist educator must strive to communicate more effectively with all the groups served by the school. This includes letting students know the goals they are required to meet and keeping parents informed about the curriculum and happenings around the school. The pastor(s) must be updated about the activities of the school and consulted when they can assist the school and its families, particularly when they can shepherd families whose children may be having problems at school. The constituency must be reminded from time to time—when a problem is not the only item on their agenda—that growing up is not a tidy business, and education can best be served by patience, understanding, and love on their part. By informing the public about the good happenings at the school (by newspaper stories, student outreach, etc.), you will create a sense of pride and ownership in the school for the constituency members.

Finally, we must let people connected to Adventist education know that they are always welcome to give us feedback, and that we will respond to them in grace-filled ways. After all, once we all remember that we belong to the same team and share common goals, working together will usually supplant the need for criticism. ☞

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