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# Not Some Sainly Mr. Chips: A Memoir of Walter Utt

by Bruce Anderson

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**S**pectrum readers may remember Walter Utt as an occasional contributor. In clear, astringent prose he discussed topics such as the search for an “Adventist” philosophy of history, the origins of “the Ford affair,”<sup>1</sup> and, most recently, the historical errors of *Omega*.<sup>2</sup> Lightly seasoned with hard-edged wit, these essays suggested a writer put off by pomposness or puffery. Walton’s celebrated tract, for example, never quite recovered from Utt’s dissection of its “breathless and spooky” style and high-handed use of facts. In another article, Utt summed up the sins of Desmond Ford as well as anyone by saying that the charismatic Australian had been guilty of talking “in front of the children.” Calling for the church of the 1980s to face the necessity of addressing “a question of doctrine publicly rather than discreetly in some theological dove-cote,” Utt saw a lesson in the history of the 1919 Bible Conference. In 1919, he wrote, church leaders looked at the problem of Ellen White’s authority and “realized its complexity and divisiveness, blenched, and swept it back under the rug.”

A larger group of Adventists know Walter Utt from his two historical novels published by Pacific Press. *The Wrath of the King* (1966) described the adventures of a Huguenot family escaping France after the revocation of the edict of toleration. Utt clearly enjoyed himself in the creation of the book’s hero, Major Armand de

Gandon, dashing Protestant officer in the Regiment of Maine. (I think I remember Walter complaining that the publisher had pruned a romantic subplot.) His second novel, *Home to Our Valleys!* (1977), described the “Glorious Return” of the Waldenses to their Piedmont home in 1689. Like the first, it was so richly detailed and scrupulously accurate that some readers thought that the “historical” overwhelmed the “novel.”

I knew Walter Utt as his student. From 1957 to 1960 I was a history major at Pacific Union College, entertained and overawed by “Doctor Utt.” But his greatest impact on me came after graduation, in the letters we exchanged several times a year. Whenever I wrote, he answered promptly, sometimes covering several sheets with his odd, left-handed scrawl, more often typing his missives, which were always lively, gossipy, candid. I realized when he died in 1985 that my file of 72 Utt letters was one of my most precious possessions, the kind of thing you grab first when the house is on fire. I also recognized that, outside my immediate family, this Christian teacher had been the most important person in my life.

As I discussed my Utt papers with his colleagues and other former students, I found that there are dozens of people around the country with similar treasured files. By conventional academic standards, Walter Utt was not a very productive scholar. He wrote only three books, none an academic treatment of his specialty, and left unfinished his lengthy, scholarly study of Huguenot resistance to Louis XIV (the “real one” he used to call this almost-completed book). But if the full range of his writing is considered—the

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campus newspaper articles, the contributions to church papers, and his personal correspondence—Walter Utt was a voluminous writer. It occurred to me that his letters say a great deal about the rewarding and vexing world of the Adventist teacher. Walter Utt was like many of our best teachers: his casual and large sacrifices, his professional obscurity, his powerful influence in his students' lives.

Walter's letters cover a remarkable range of topics, big and small. (I was unable to call him by his first name until 18 years after graduating from Pacific Union College, when he insisted that I do so. Even now it does not seem quite appropriate.) As I read his letters over now, the most interesting ones are those in which he discusses his role as both an intellectual and a believer. He seemed to understand clearly the requirements of an Adventist "loyal opposition." Much as he was a political contrarian, skeptical of Eisenhower amid Angwin's blind admiration of Ike in 1952, and of conventional liberalism in the 1980s, Walter offended both fideist and iconoclast among Seventh-day Adventists.

"I am inclined to wish to weigh, balance, analyze, consider causations, etc., and this probably prevents me from the fiery commitment I should have," he wrote in 1971. He added, in typical Utt fashion, that it was sometimes difficult to accept the "ukases" of "one's masters," especially "when you suspect many of them of being little more than careerists and innocent of theology, intellect, or visible piety."

He laughed when a crusading "liberal" Adventist called him a "gradualist." The word "was a good descriptive term for one of my historical view and temperament but to him it is a pretty strong pejorative—about equal to 'imperialist lackey' or 'running dog.'" A few months later Utt added, "I realize he sees me as a 1977 Erasmus when I should be a Luther."

The same caution and moderation appeared to Adventist reactionaries as cynicism. But Walter was no cynic. At heart he was a defender of the faith—witty, skeptical, independent, but a defender nonetheless. Somebody once said that the

world is divided into two camps: liberals who wonder why the world isn't better and conservatives who are surprised that it isn't worse. By that definition, Walter was a profound conservative.

He recognized that the Adventist educational system had been assigned an "essentially defensive role," and only hoped that this role could be carried out sensibly and flexibly. "I do understand the fears of those who distrust historians and sociologists messing around with the origins of the church," he wrote in 1973. "They have reason to fear some consequences. It's just that, from my standpoint, to cover up or to misrepresent (notice how I refrained from mentioning Froom's latest book) is even worse." A talk by a White Estate spokesman prompted these reflections: "We speak of truth being able to take care of itself but don't really believe it, the way we act." The spokesman kept talking "about 'responsible' historians having no problem, though *even they can-*

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not be shown some materials in the files." Since the archives were private property, historians were told, the White Estate must have the right to reject irresponsible scholars or research that would not help the church. "In the meantime, browsing," he said, "is not permitted. (I love browsing in archives. You stumble on such interesting trivia that way.)"

"I do wish that our church would allow something on the order of a Hundred Flowers to Bloom," he wrote on another occasion. "Could we live with both Roy Branson and . . . Robert Brinsmead? I realize that Truth is truth and that we should not foster error, yet each of us perceives Truth through such a darkling glass, I feel very uncomfortable at many of the specific efforts to make precise application of general and true statements." Cocksure intolerance irritated Walter more than anything else (with the possible exception of wacky conspiracy theories). "From a discussion Sabbath I witnessed, which stopped just

in time to avoid acrimony, I judge the PUC faculty is not capable of a warm mutual respect which would permit real discussion of questions such as the nature of inspiration, or even the tithing system without instant . . . suspicion.”

Even as Pacific Union College faced bitter theological quarrels in the late 1970s, Utt cherished a calm, self-deprecating detachment. He explained the situation at the college to me just before my family and I moved to Angwin in 1978. “The Justification/Sanctification split here does not really upset the college campus that much, outside the Religion department, but it does reverberate around the ‘field’ . . . and . . . as it is picked up by the extremists of either side, one finds it a battle between antinomians and perfectionists.” Ever a fanatical moderate, Utt refused to be entirely solemn about the matter. “Each of us, they say, makes a God in his own image, so therefore I *know* that God, being an English gentleman, somewhat of the views of C. S. Lewis, prefers a tilt to the justification side but is able to understand and pity the zealots even if He doesn’t necessarily have to agree with them.”

What kept Walter Utt going was his students. Like many Seventh-day Adventist teachers, he saw the chance to have an impact on thoughtful young people as more important than institutional politics. Sometimes he found himself “more bitter or frustrated than I ought to be,” as a result of being constantly “talked down to, bombarded with platitudes, while real problems are not discussed or tackled.” Those were the days he went home and wrote a scintillating letter on his battered typewriter.

As he explained to me in 1968: “I have accepted the . . . thesis that God is not of necessity preoccupied with His Church organizations, but He does expect to process individuals in the judgment. My lot being cast . . . with the organized work, part of the criteria in my personal case will be my attitudes and relationship with the ‘work,’ but my real significance, such as it is, will be my effect in personal relationship.” Such selective, occasional withdrawal was the only sensible way of “living with the never-ending stream of bla-bla, of watching the leadership shy away in terror at change, real or imaginary.” Scratching away in a

handwriting only the initiated could decipher, he retreated a bit from this “grim” analysis. “Actually I respond quickly and begin to purr like a cat when spoken to in a friendly tone.”

He was sad when favorite students abandoned Adventism. “I always hope that somehow the students, the kind I like—talkers and thinkers, perhaps—will prove sound enough in basic philosophy, and perceptive enough, to see the important things about man and his destiny, without getting too badly derailed and permanently turned off. . . by their collisions with or observation of the older generation. If it becomes simply the peculiarities of the quaint SDA subculture, and they can’t see beyond that to what we are trying haltingly to call their attention to, then we have failed.”

One of the most memorable letters he sent me described a series of discussions he had with a former student, in whose home he was visiting. Now a successful professional, this student was a cheerful agnostic who had ceased going to church, largely in reaction to the rigidity and exclusiveness of his parents’ Adventism. “He and I discussed these things way late sometimes, long after the ladies had retired with strong hints we do likewise.” Walter wished that his student-now-friend could “go along a little more with the externals while he debates these matters in his mind . . . I hope his evolution eventually brings him closer to what you and I regard as basics again . . . I have to agree . . . absolute certainty is not available in human terms of proof or demonstration, but however inconsistent it may be, I hate to let loose of some ‘fundamentals’ and be completely at sea. All systems and system-makers are *not* alike, to my way of thinking.”

Walter Utt was a hemophiliac, plagued by constant pain and frequent bleeding episodes, forced to inch his way around campus with the aid of one or two canes. Though I am a physician, I heard little about his physical problems in the letters, and when he did refer to them, he wrote matter-of-factly, tersely. I found this near-silence eloquent. Never indulging in self-pity—or even conscious courage—his few direct comments on

his handicap were ironical and amused. When I was drafted into the Army, he wrote admitting his curious fascination with things military. "I can remember being actually envious when registering for the draft in 1942 because I could not go. I was never crazy enough to say so out loud—religious implications hardly being the reason—for fear of being either considered a nut or a liar. I have always had a strong interest in military history and such appurtenances thereto as uniforms, but of course it was a safe, armchair interest." Then he added, in a most untypical reference to his illness: "Perhaps the Lord equipped me with my disability to prevent me from being killed in Italy in 1943 or getting yaws or something in New Guinea in 1944. To believe this, however, seems to make me loom a little larger than real life in the scheme of things, for more obviously valuable types were eliminated in those years."

For a long time I knew little of Walter's early years. Though I was vaguely aware (perhaps from reading Walter's history of the college, published in 1957) that his father had been a Pacific Union College teacher, I never thought to ask him about his childhood, his rather informal education, and his graduate work. Walter's letters did not dwell on his own history. Shortly before his unexpected death in 1985, in a long, leisurely, Sabbath-afternoon conversation in Walter's home, I made a point of asking about his life before he became "Doctor Utt."

A profoundly learned man, Walter Utt hardly went to school at all. Disabled in the second grade by bleeding into his knees and ankles, he was unable to walk until he entered college. ("Why my legs straightened enough to stand on then, I don't know," he told me. "Nice timing though.") Restless as a child, with time on his hands, young Walter read everything he could find, even employing the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for pleasure reading. When his father came home from an auction with a set of bound volumes of a turn-of-the-century magazine called *World History*, eight-year-old Walter read them all the way through. Walter's younger brother, Richard, remembers that he then "began teaching what he

had learned to anyone who would listen, principally me." At the age of 10, Walter was sent to the hemophilia research ward of Chicago's Cook County Hospital, where he stayed for a year and a half. Separated from his family, Walter remembered hours of solitary reading, sitting in his wheelchair under a dim light, straining his eyes.

Later, while his family was living in Berkeley, California, Walter's educational program became more structured, with a "home visitation" teacher visiting him once a week. Still, his only extended experience with normal schooling was limited to his college and graduate-school years.

After graduating from Pacific Union College, Walter worked as a payroll clerk in the Kaiser Shipyards and saved for graduate school. A month before World War II ended, he quit his job to enroll at the University of California, Berkeley. In six years at Berkeley, Walter served as a teaching assistant in history and speech and earned a Phi Beta Kappa key. Six months before he finished writing his doctoral dissertation, he agreed to become the second teacher in the history department at Pacific Union College, joining the faculty in 1951.

In 1954, after his older colleague resigned, Walter began his 31-year tenure as chairman of the history department. Until the 1960s there were never more than two people in the department. ("There was a while there I taught the only sociology that was being taught. Never taught it before in my life. In fact when they asked me to teach it I wasn't even sure what it was. And geography and political science and that sort of stuff. So I just had the valor of ignorance, I guess. . . . Looking at the size of those classes and knowing how I graded then, I don't know how I did it. I just didn't know any better.")

During his long reign as professor of history he steadily pursued his interest in the Huguenot heroes of southern France. He made four arduous research trips to Europe to gather material for this work, always looking for the human details that he considered the most fascinating part of history. Describing his nearly completed book in 1985, he expressed eloquent compassion for "people who are standing for the truth with fingers crossed behind their backs. . . believers who are trying to

be good enough that God will eventually accept them but [who have] got to live in the meantime. . . protect their family and their property.” Even as he refused to condemn those who “pretended and survived” in a time of persecution, his real admiration was for those he called “the hard nuts. . . the peasants who had nothing to lose and were hard to get at anyhow.”

**I**t was with anger and a profound sense of loss that I confronted Walter’s death three years ago, at the too-young age of 63. Clutching my folders full of letters, I was bitterly disappointed that I could never again ask his advice or enjoy his witty commentary on people and events. (It is still difficult to believe he is gone, and I still half expect to hear him teach his Sabbath school class next week.) However, my grief has diminished and been replaced with a measure of acceptance.

His letters now remind me not only of a beloved friend, but also of his work. Near the end (though neither of us knew his death was near), he expressed a note of weariness, as if he had been worn down in a long struggle to defend his church

and his faith from people who had all the answers, on the one hand, and those who had only questions, on the other. I wondered, as I reread his letters, if my church has sufficiently cherished its Walter Utts. Teachers like Walter Utt have too often been considered disloyal, somehow, for challenging illusions and exposing shortcomings; their patient, steady defense of the enduring principles of Christianity have too easily been overlooked.

I told Walter once that I wanted to write something about him. “I don’t mind at my age and condition being mentioned as one of the Adventist teachers who has apparently worn better than most,” he told me, “but I don’t want to be singled out as some kind of saintly Mr. Chips, or anything of that sort.”

Walter Utt does deserve to be singled out, but not, like James Hilton’s fictional teacher, as a charming illustration of a disappearing type. I realize that our schools face serious financial and administrative problems. But none of these worrisome problems is as serious as the challenge of continuing to discover and nurture dedicated Christian teachers, men and women like the one who still teaches me in a dozen old file folders.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. Walter Utt, “Ford Dismissal: Reactions and Response—Journalistic Fairness?” *Spectrum*, 11:2 (1980), pp. 2-11.

2. Walter Utt, “Omega—An Historical View,” *Spectrum*, 12:2 (1981), pp. 57-62.