

The Case of the Disappearing Diploma... And Its Dramatic Resolution

BY CLARENCE DUNBEBIN

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If I wanted to get an intense discussion going on the Seventh-day Adventists On-line forum, I would start a thread discussing what it was like to be a boarding academy student. While some would have thoroughly enjoyed their experiences, many who responded would be nursing real and imagined wounds. They believe that their school treated them or someone else unfairly. The resulting pain and outrage remain.

Do I have evidence to support this thesis? Yes, I do. I've seen it more than once over the past two years. D.J.* is a case in point. He has regaled us often with the pain and hurt he experienced "at the hands of Adventist education" and has further expanded on this subject in private E-mail correspondence with me. His hurts and those of others are real. They still feel pain when they think about their school days, although the events happened 20 or more years ago.

It's easy to write about the experiences of others while ignoring our own blunders. In writing this article, I want to illustrate the importance of a simple apology and an attempt to reconcile with a student.

My wife and I have been going back to Highland Academy in Tennessee almost every year

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since 1966, when I was the principal there. In 1986, I accepted the invitation of the alumni association president to speak for the worship hour at the homecoming weekend. A week or two before I was to arrive, I received a long-distance phone call from the president of the class of 1966.

I had no idea where the call would take me, but before it was over, I would quash a plan to publicly confront me during Alumni Homecoming weekend.

The class president said, "Bill's coming to alumni weekend for the first time since he graduated. Do you know anything about his diploma?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Bill didn't receive it at graduation, and he is positive you withheld it on purpose," said Mike. "Do you know why he didn't

get his diploma?"

"I can offer you several reasons why he might not have gotten it, but I really don't know, Mike," I responded. I reminded him that Bill had been very ill with hepatitis during his senior year. Perhaps he didn't have enough credits, but we allowed him to take part in the graduation service anyway.

I also wondered aloud if his family hadn't paid his account. "That could be the reason," I said. "However, I don't believe his parents ever allowed the bill to get out of hand."

Failing to recall anything specific, I finally promised Mike, "Look, I'll check this out and do all I can to see what happened." When Mike and I hung up, I called Charlotte McKee Taylor, a graduate of Highland Academy who was then the registrar.

When I got her on the phone, I asked, "Charlotte, Mike Brown just called to see if I could find Bill Willis' diploma. Apparently, we didn't give it to him at graduation, and he has been carrying some strong feelings against me and the academy for 20 years."

Charlotte quickly told me she had never heard about any problems with Bill's diploma but promised to check and get back to me.

Within two days, she called. "Mr. Dunbebin, I found the diploma! It is safely tucked away in the safe where you or your wife probably put it back in 1966." It was now 1986—20 years later—and we were about to correct a "perceived wrong" and restore a student's confidence in Adventist education.

Now that I knew where the diploma was, I asked, "Did you discover why Bill didn't get his diploma in the first place?"

"Yes, I did," she said. "He owed \$100 on his account, and the business office held the diploma until the family paid the bill." (Remember, \$100 in 1966 meant a lot more than today.)

"OK, that makes sense," I observed. "Do you know if the family ever paid the account?"

"Yes, probably within a month or so. However, apparently no one thought to get the diploma and mail it to them."

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Holding his long-sought-for diploma at arm's length, in a stage whisper he said, "Holy cow! This is my diploma. It's the real thing. It even has all the original signatures on it."

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Armed with those two pieces of information, I asked Charlotte, "Would you see if Jim Ingersoll (the current principal) will release the diploma to me for Alumni Homecoming? I want to give it to Bill as part of my sermon."

Charlotte talked with Mr. Ingersoll, who graciously permitted me to have the "precious diploma."

When my wife and I arrived on campus, I contacted Charlotte, and she gave me the diploma. Now, I only had to decide how to present it to Bill and make amends.

I tentatively planned to work the presentation into the closing moments of my worship message in the gymnasium. I asked Mike what was happening with Bill and the other class members. He said the rest of the class knew I had the diploma, but Bill didn't. Mike and I worked together on the details of my presentation. He told me the entire class was going to sit near Bill at the front of the gymnasium because they wanted to see his reaction up close.

On Sabbath, as I prepared to speak, I did not know that Bill and several other class members had spent much time the night before rehearsing what he intended to do to me after I finished my sermon. I now know the details because of an article Bill sent to the alumni newsletter editor after the homecoming weekend. I'll come back to that later.

Before I took my place in the pulpit, academy officials handled many items relating to alumni and school business, including the Triple-A fund-raising program the academy was joining through the General Conference Philanthropic Services for Institutions.

A General Conference representative presented an appeal, and the ushers distributed offering envelopes throughout the audience. Bill tossed his away. "I'm not giving to an organization to which I don't belong," he muttered.

My sermon focused on witnessing for God. I urged the audience to commit themselves to helping others rather than tearing them down because "restoration is what God desires and not alienation." As I neared the end of my comments, I told the audience, "I want to model what I've been saying to you. To do that, I would like Jerry Baker to escort Bill Willis to the platform."

Bill had been dozing off, but the mention of his name brought him back to reality and he dutifully came to the platform, escorted by Jerry Baker, a former Highland Academy physical education teacher and Bill's close friend. When they stood next to me, I said to Jerry, "When Bill graduated from Highland Academy, we made a big mistake."

Jerry responded, "*You* sure did!" (My gut feeling was, "Jerry, I'm trying to correct a situation that I didn't really cause, and you're hitting me with this?")

Ignoring Jerry's comment, I focused on Bill. Pulling his diploma from the envelope in which Charlotte had put it, I handed it to him with appropriate comments. He stepped back a step or two. Holding his long-sought-for diploma at arm's length, in a stage whisper he said, "Holy cow! This is *my* diploma. It's the real thing. It even has all the original signatures on it."

While I focused on what was happening between Bill and me, the entire audience stood to their feet and applauded. The scene was highly charged with emotion for all of us, but the best was yet to come. In that moment of apology and effort to reach out and retouch the life of a student, healing took place. A former student now saw himself as restored and a member of the school he really did like.

After church, as we waited for the potluck lunch to begin, Bill and I—and many class members—mingled and took pictures. We were all "celebrating his graduation," when out of the clear blue sky, Bill called, "Hey, Baker. Get me one of those envelopes. I want to give Highland Academy \$1,000."

"You had one in church. What did you do with it?" asked Jerry.

"I threw it away. I wasn't a graduate then. Now I'm a member of the alumni association! Look! I have my diploma."

Jerry Baker retorted, "Bill, if you're

giving a thousand dollars, I'll match you." Before the alumni weekend came to a close, more than \$3,000 came to the academy because of this simple act of restoring a student to "full membership" in the academy family.

Bill told me, "Monday, when I get back to Memphis, I'm taking this diploma to the picture framers. I'm getting it framed and I'm putting it up on the wall." His Highland Academy diploma now hangs in the middle of his other valuables—nestled along with his University of Tennessee diploma and real estate certificates.

A few weeks later, Bill wrote a letter to the director of fund-raising for the academy, which was published in their newsletter. He wanted to tell the "rest of the story." "I had been acting out just before graduation and was in trouble with the principal," he wrote.

He added that he was sure I was angry about it. When he opened his diploma cover and saw it was empty, he was positive I had evened the score by withholding his diploma. When he did not get it after his parents paid his bill, he was sure he was correct in his judgment, and this added to his anger toward me and the academy.

When Bill learned I would be the alumni weekend speaker, he decided it was time to even the score once and for all. "I decided to go back to the academy and confront the 'old man' about my diploma," wrote Bill.

He added, "I intended to meet him at the foot of the steps as he came off the platform and tell him what I thought. But again, he had lessons for me to learn just as he had when he was there as principal. Before I could confront him, he confronted me and gave me my diploma. Just think, if I had not been so stubborn, I could have had my diploma 20 years ago. It was lying in the safe. All I needed to do was ask for the registrar to send it to me."

Over the years, I have wondered how many other Bills have left our schools believing something was an absolute fact even if the truth was quite different.

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I had treated him unjustly.

I am grateful for a class president who called to ask what I knew about Bill's diploma. Like most people, I don't enjoy admitting a mistake. However, I can tell you that the feelings I experienced when I apologized and gave Bill his diploma far offset any reluctance I might have had. ✍

* D.J. and Bill are fictitious names.

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