

**E**ducation is a conversation between the older and younger generations on what is important.”<sup>1</sup>

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the use of conversation as the act of living. The origins of the word *conversation* reflected much more than the sterile passing of information. Education is not simply a product we sell or a body of information we impart. Education is a tapestry of intricate colors formed by thousands of conversations in and out of the classroom—conversations sewn into lives of students and faculty as they share the journey of life.

So what is necessary for good conversation?

### **Conversations Need Community**

Conversations can take place only in communities. A dictatorship or an oligarchy doesn't hold a conversation. That is why the modeled leadership style is so important at the university. Dictatorial leadership can produce widgets and keep assembly lines running for a time, but it will not produce a university educational environment, a place for conversation.

### **Conversation Needs a Secure Environment**

For conversation to take place, it must be secure from external threats. Certainly there are boundaries to the conversations, but those who are not intimate participants must not, because they hear snippets of the conversation, jump to unwarranted conclusions about the faith or character of the conversants. The constituents, faculty, staff, administration, and board of trustees must develop a mutual trust.

In this relationship of mutual trust, we have freedom to experiment with thoughts. We need no conspiracy theorists using our words to manufacture a complex chain of accusations meant to trap people in dungeons of rumor.

Another inhibitor to good conversation can be our bureaucratic isolation in separate academic buildings and worlds. We need cross-training conversations so that we don't develop congenital intellectual diseases caused by a

# Conversations of Importance

BY GORDON BIETZ

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*Students at Southern Adventist University in conversation with their president, Gordon Bietz, author of this article.*

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lack of communication.

Our colleges and universities are places where important conversations should take place between the older and younger generations of Seventh-day Adventists. We should be able to hold these conversations secure in the knowledge that, through mutual love and

trust, we take each other's words as a sacred trust and sift out the chaff while holding firm to the wheat.

The gospel creates this secure environment. The good news of God's acceptance creates a non-threatening atmosphere for educational conversations.

“Mr. Bietz, we have someone who will be in your neighborhood next week and we would like to sell you. . . .”

Such phone calls symbolize the commercialization of communication in an information society increasingly devoid of conversations. We sell each other rather than engage in meaningful conversations. As Rebecca West said, “There is no such thing as conversation. It is an illusion. There are intersecting monologues, that is all.”<sup>2</sup>

### Threats to Spiritual Conversations

In a world of commercial conversations, an education based on Christian principles has a limited market demand. But let us beware of customer focus gone amuck—where the parameters of the educational conversation are defined by the lowest common denominator of those being educated. We serve students best by challenging them—not by being a summer camp.

Society’s sustained drift toward secularism challenges us. For 600 years after the founding of the first colleges and universities in the Western world, all institutions of higher education were church institutions; all education was religious education. But today, our innate drive for meaning in life is not met by thoughtful religious education; it is more often anesthetized by amusements or chemicals. “The tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less

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### Threats to Conversation Include Sales Monologues

We live in a world where there is little interest in community-building conversations. We are flooded with words, but no one wants to have a conversation.

I received a telephone call the other night. As the phone rang, I thought with some excitement, *Who wants to talk to me—my daughter or son-in-law? My brother? Who would like to hear what I have to say about something? Maybe someone is inviting me out to eat or to a party?* I answered the phone, “Hello, this is the Bietz residence.”

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***For conversation to take place, it must be secure from external threats.***

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about the meaning of his own life, but that it bothers him less and less.”<sup>3</sup> When confronted with meaningful questions about life, the response is too often a thoughtless “Whatever” or a vacuous “Don’t worry, be happy.”

“The situation today is Lots of knowledge, but little understanding/ Lots of means, but little meaning/ Lots of know-how, but little know-why/ Lots of sight, but little insight.”<sup>4</sup>

### Threats to Balanced Conversations

Another threat to meaningful conversations is a superficial professionalism. Our colleges and universities must avoid becoming professional trade schools whose only goal is to provide students with a marketable skill so they can become a cog in society’s information machine. Allowing information to be detached from meaning is as dangerous as having machines detached from operators. In previous centuries, it was

the clergy who were educated, while everyone else simply worked at a trade. Let us not fall to that place again, where only a few of the rich are educated in literature and arts, while the vast majority learn only the technical trade skills necessary to run information machines.

### Technological Conversations—Threat and Promise

Some people believe that the university of the future will consist of people seated in front of computer monitors, surfing the Internet to gain their degrees. No longer will it be necessary to have a teacher in a classroom holding educational conversations with students.

But you don’t sing in a choir on the Internet, or play the organ or an instrument in the orchestra via satellite. You don’t learn to get along in the dorm on the Internet, or play in inter-murals via

computer screen, or give GymMasters programs to high school students—no matter how fast you move your mouse. The vision of a high tech environment could very well become a nightmare as isolated information drones pass eviscerated, dispassionate data across fiber optic lines.

**H**istorian Patricia Nelson Limerick suggested in a recent article in *USA Today* that the delivery of the virtual university doesn’t recognize the complete absence “of the dimensions of education that are most gratifying, most lasting, most life-changing; the contact between living human beings, between mortals, between learners and teachers in ‘real time’ and real space.” She says that virtual learning “is scrupulously soulless, without even a momentary recognition that learners cultivate their souls as well as their skills.”<sup>5</sup>

As a teacher, she self-reflectively says, “Continuing to operate in expensive, clumsy, material reality, I come around a corner on campus, and there stands Robyn, or Bill, or Christine, or Lucinda, or Jason, or Kendra, students who have recently taken classes with me. I do not think, ‘This may be a former client in my market oriented, competency-based, cost-effective educational delivery system, though I would have no way of recognizing such a client face to face.’ I think instead,

# ***Our colleges and universities must avoid becoming professional trade schools whose only goal is to provide students with a marketable skill so they can become a cog in society's information machine.***

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‘Whoopie! I have run into an enormously appealing young person. I am very lucky to have a connection to this individual and very privileged to play a part in watching her education proceed.’”<sup>6</sup>

That is not to say that we shouldn't use technology in every way possible to connect with people far and wide, but fiber optic connections must never replace the face-to-face conversation of teacher and student in the residential environment. There is no virtual reality experience of the kingdom of God that occurs in physical isolation from community and the conversations that such a community evoke.

## **Our Vision—What Is Important?**

“Education is a conversation between the older and younger generations on what is important.”<sup>7</sup> We have already discussed education as a conversation—now, what is important?

“A church's interest in sponsoring schools of its own for interacting with the next generation of young people will depend to a great degree on the extent to which it has a vision and understandings that are distinct from those of the larger society within which it finds itself.”<sup>8</sup>

To the extent that the vision and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church merges with society as a whole, to that same extent there will be a loss of interest in support for our educational institutions.

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As a university family, we have begun the process of clarifying our unique culture and mission. We have discussed a number of values that we consider important:

### **1. A Christ-Centered Campus**

Unashamedly, of prime importance is that our campus be Christ-centered. That means conversations of faith are welcome and encouraged in all classes from biology to music to business and physical education. Faith experiences are not the exclusive domain of religion classes but are part and parcel of the university experience.

### **2. Academic Excellence**

Victor Stoltzfus says “a detailed study shows a strong negative correlation between reputational excellence and any kind of self-reported church relationship.”<sup>9</sup> Did you hear that? It is

saying that community-perceived excellence runs counter to church affiliation. We must show that not to be true of our colleges and universities.

“The enlightenment of the intellect is one of the first steps in Christian growth. One cannot live in harmony with God while in ignorance. Ignorance and true Christianity can never continue in the same individual. This is why God has laid great stress on Christian education.”<sup>10</sup> A value we must hold as vitally important to our conversation is academic quality.

**E**llen White says, “Ignorance is not acceptable to God, and is unfavorable for the doing of His work.”<sup>11</sup> She even goes so far as to say that “Ignorance is a crime when light and knowledge can be obtained.”<sup>12</sup> Maybe we should be giving ignorance tickets instead of parking tickets!

Our school has recently become a university. The implications of that word relate to heightened academic credibility. To be more than a university in name means that faculty, students, and administration must give attention to academic excellence—not necessarily as defined by worldly standards, but certainly as measured by the character, integrity, and competency of our graduates as they enter the employment marketplace.

Again, to quote Ellen White: “It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men’s thought.”<sup>13</sup> We are not here to clone the past in order to protect the status quo. Our Lord died on the cross to protect our freedom. We dishonor Him when we view education as programming rather than conversation.

### **3. A Distinctive Seventh-day Adventist Environment—Theologically, Socially, Morally, and Intellectually**

The Seventh-day Adventist Church grew out of quality conversations between Bible students with very different convictions about truth. The survival of our colleges and universities and the church we love depends on the continuation of those conversations.

We must never face the “cut flower” phenomenon—looking beautiful and bright but cut from our roots. Dead but not knowing it yet. Our roots grow deep in traditional biblical interpretation and are nourished by a commitment to biblical truth. Let us never separate ourselves from those roots. We must be a counter-culture movement rather than a culture-mimicking movement. Let us rise above the sludge that flows as popular culture to model a better way.

### **4. An Ethic of Service**

As we focus on developing marketable skills for our students, we should not be just market-driven but also gospel-driven. We need to prepare students for jobs that should exist—not just for jobs that *do* exist. We must meet human needs, not just Wall Street needs.

Just before Jesus died, He spoke of

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the judgment of all nations, using the symbol of dividing the sheep from the goats. That judgment is based on feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the needy, caring for the sick, and visiting the prisoners. It will not be based on doctrinal accuracy, intellectual achievements, or profession of faith.

We say it would be nice to walk in the footsteps of Jesus  
To be where He was on the holy mountain in Jerusalem  
To be baptized in the Jordan River  
To be by the beautiful lake Galilee.

But:  
You need not go to Jerusalem to walk in His steps.  
You need not go to the Jordan to be baptized.  
You need not go to Galilee to hear His voice.  
For He walks in the crowded alleys

of Los Angeles and Calcutta, His steps may be followed in an inner-city mission, and He may be seen in the eyes of transients passing through the towns of the world. He is there in the dormitory. He eats in the cafeteria. “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”<sup>14</sup>

### **5. A Caring Hospitality That Embraces All Who Come on Our Campus**

The biggest problems the world faces today don’t relate:

- To growing a more hearty variety of wheat,
- To figuring out how to build a stable space station,
- To building fuel efficient cars,
- To knowing how to decrease pollution in the world; or even
- To saving the ecology of the planet.

Our biggest problem today is

- How do we get along with each

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other—Palestinian and Jew, Protestant Irish Republican Army and Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist and Baptist?

Let us model a community of faith that reveals the presence of Jesus Christ in our world so when people come to our campus they sense an atmosphere of love and acceptance.

The balkanization of our world flies in the face of increased communication. It seems that the more we know of other people, the more we distrust them. The more information we share, the more conspiracy theories we hatch. Information alone will not solve the problems of our society. Information must be rooted in a value system that grows out of a knowledge of and acceptance of a Creator God.

A well-known researcher in faith development suggests that growth in faith happens through personal relationships. Truth comes to us in community—as we live in relationship to others. That means that the residential university experience is vital to the transmission of community values. One could say that the prime responsibility of faculty and administration is to provide the environment that attracts faculty and students who believe in the mission of the institution. Enrollment management is not about getting as many students as we can or just any student. It means getting the right student, the one who fits our vision and mission.

Much of the invisible curriculum at the residential university comes from as-

sociation with peers. Much of the truth communicated grows from informal associations among students. If the Christian school has a high percentage of those not affiliated with the culture, mission, and lifestyles of our religious community, then the education of the institution can't properly purport to be communicating denominational convictions. We can't afford to have schools that reinforce popular values. Such values can be found in generous supply in the general educational marketplace.

## 6. Affordable Education for Our Constituency

"Education costs money, but then so does ignorance."<sup>15</sup> Adventist education must not be the exclusive domain of the rich. It needs to be provided to all our young people. As Ellen White has said, "Who can determine which one of a family will prove to be efficient in the work of God? There should be general education of all its members, and all our youth should be permitted to have the blessings and privileges of an education at our schools, that they may be inspired to become laborers together with God."<sup>16</sup>

No matter how good the education, if it is not within the reach of the students we seek to reach, then it is too expensive. We will not find the solution to escalating tuition costs by simply increasing enrollment. We should not deceive ourselves into thinking that there is some magic number out there that makes everything so cost effective that we can reduce tuition. We must determine how we can more cost-effectively deliver the residential educational experience.

## Conclusion

At this time in history, as we chart a spiritual course for schools through the waters of secularism, we face daunting challenges. The future is unknown, but the legacy of our past is clear. Let us stand firmly and united on the founda-

tions built by those who have gone before as we build a future of hope.

As Abraham Lincoln faced the crises of the Civil War, he said, "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew."<sup>17</sup>

One of the phrases that I enjoy hearing at the beginning of the Indianapolis 500 race is, "Gentlemen, start your engines!" A similar phrase is used at the Olympics: "Let the games begin." And now I say, "Faculty, staff, and students, let the conversations begin." ✍

*Gordon Bietz is President of Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee. This article is based on his inauguration address on October 23, 1997.*

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