

Education for Character



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A man lounges on a beach chair, watching the surf. He is rich, smart, and irritable. Just beyond the breakers, a woman thrashes about, on the verge of going under. The man mutters to himself: “She’s so high maintenance.”

This *New Yorker* cartoon mocks the “me-first-I-can’t-be-bothered” frame of mind you see in newspapers, popular entertainment, and even, now and then, in your own circle. All too often, spouses are just too high maintenance. So are kids and the poor. Perhaps the time will come, or is here already, when even the sick will be too high maintenance, and it will be hard to find people willing to take care of them.

My father is 87. Recently, he was very ill. My two brothers and I took turns going to Spokane, Washington, to be with him in the hospital and to drive our Mom home at night. When strangers came to wash him and change the bed sheets

after an accident, he had no dignity. He couldn’t be sure he’d ever get his strength back, sleep in his own house, drive a car, or swing a golf club.

I admired those strangers, the nurses and other caregivers who came to help. A few months before, I’d visited my daughter, Christina, and her husband in Baltimore. Having just moved back to Maryland from Orlando, she was starting a job in the critical care unit at Sinai Hospital. Because I am now a health-care educator, I wanted more than ever to hear her talk about her work and what it takes to do it well.

When I asked about character—the kind of person you need to be—Christina understood right away and told me a story. In Orlando, she had entered a sick room one day to find the bed empty. Her 80-year-old patient had shuffled with all his gear into the bathroom. Before she got to him, he had sensed her presence and called out anxiously. He had finished and was stuck. “I hate to ask you,” he said, “but I

By Charles Scriven



Left: Kettering College of Medical Arts' (KCMA) hands-on programs include theory, inter-cultural education, and classes in religion to help ensure that growth in Christian character develops in tandem with academic competence. **Above, top:** Charles Scriven, KCMA president, and other college administrators have recently revised the college's mission and vision statement to more accurately reflect the school's unique approach to health-sciences education. **Above, center:** One of the unusual advantages of KCMA faculty and students is the college founders' availability for both inspiration and instruction.

can't. . . ." And Christina knew—she could see that he was too stiff to reach far enough to clean himself.

To the ill-tempered man in the *New Yorker* cartoon, not only would the patient be too high maintenance, the job itself would be too much of a bother. But for an authentic nurse—a person with the right character, a generous heart, a feeling for others, and a readiness to help—this patient was someone with a face and a worth beyond calculation.

In a lovely metaphor, Ellen White said the best people are those who cast their lives, like seed, into the "furrow" of human need. In another metaphor, she declared that everyone belongs to "the great web of humanity" and that a deed of mercy done to one is a deed of mercy done to Christ. In both, she echoed Jesus.¹ Her words stand at cross-purposes with the me-first-I-can't-be-bothered frame of mind. They also stand at cross-purposes with the medicine of the ancient Greeks and Romans, but this is less well-known.

The most famous Roman physician was Galen, who lived a hundred and more years after Jesus. Among his numerous achievements was a still-influential definition of health. Health, he said, is the ability to do what you would like with a minimum of pain and discomfort.²

But Galen practiced medicine before the Jesus movement had upended pagan understanding of human purposes and prospects. A vicious epidemic, perhaps smallpox, broke out in 165 A.D., killing a quarter or more of the population. Galen knew the devastation the plague was wreaking on human health, but he quickly left town for "a country estate in Asia Minor" and stayed—until the danger passed.³

In that time and place, outside the still small circle of Christians, no one considered it more blessed to give than to receive;

no one believed in the ideal of kindness to all. This was an entirely new concept, and except for the few who risked their lives providing food and water for the sick, no one would have rebuked Galen for leaving human need unmet.

Some see a new threat to morality today, in which obligations beyond self-interest again seem beyond the call of duty. But in every age, it's been tempting to retreat into self-obsession. Mere excellence in knowledge and skills is never enough—society always needs a "consecration" that puts the interests of vulnerable others ahead of personal gain.⁴

At any time, the ideal of self-giving generosity can be pushed aside. It has to be discovered, shared, and defended—again and again.

So it's amazing to realize that many educators think colleges have no business upholding a particular view of human morality and character. Jacques Barzun of Columbia University says that trying to instill "any set of personal, social, or political virtues" in the classroom is "either indoctrination or foolery."⁵ John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago echoes this thought, asserting with apparent pride that his university is "a fundamentally amoral institution."⁶ Richard Rorty of the University of Virginia allows that teaching a particular way of life—what he calls "socialization"—makes sense through the first 12 grades, but then should stop. The job of colleges is to give "specialized vocational training" and—even most important—to promote independent thinking, or "self-creation."⁷

But graduates with fine training and the capacity to distrust the values of the past may nevertheless prove ungenerous or



KCMA students have service opportunities overseas while they complete the requirements for clinical experience.



Having students “on the job” very soon after arriving at the college creates a challenging and invigorating environment for learning.

even cruel. During Hitler’s reign of terror, eight of the 14 strategists who developed the Nazi plan for eliminating the Jews held doctoral degrees.⁸

A passion for knowledge and for the process of finding out is simply not enough. Poet W. H. Auden said he would “rejoice in it more” if he “knew more clearly what / We wanted the knowl-

edge for.”⁹ Christian educators do know what it’s for. Faith says knowledge is for the advancement of God’s purposes, made clear through the words and deeds of Jesus. And when you know what knowledge is for, you should train people to that end. You should do all you can to instill in them the right frame of mind and the right habits of the heart.

The me-first-I-can’t-be-bothered outlook drove Galen from his patients. In every age, it makes people shy away from human need or mutates into vicious cruelty. Yet conventional higher education sneers at concern with character, or if it does try to address it, flounders, all too often, in inoffensive platitudes. Few schools uphold the radical vision of Jesus.

It is our work to uphold that vision and to instill it. College students, said Alfred North Whitehead, should learn about “culture” and gain “expert knowledge” in some field.¹⁰ What Whitehead hints at, but should be declared with clarity, is this: Students must also acquire the characters they need to live generous lives.

But in the Adventist setting, doesn’t all this go without saying?

It could go without saying, but if we do not pay constant attention to our distinctive vision, the currents of the surrounding culture will set us adrift. What is more, the opportunity to sell that vision to parents and students will be lost. We really are different, and the difference—if we hold onto it, and if we submit it always to correction—makes us better.

After all, if our students learn to know but do not learn to love, what are they but noisy gongs and clanging symbols? And if we do not teach them to love, what are we? ✍



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REFERENCES

1. The “furrow” metaphor is from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1940), p. 88, and is an echo of the wheat-seed parable in John 12. The “web” metaphor is from *ibid.*, p. 638, and is an echo of the parable of last judgment in Matthew 25.
2. Edmund D. Pellegrino and David C. Thomasma note the definition in *Helping and Healing: Religious Commitment in Health Care* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1997), p. 15.
3. I rely on Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), chapter 4. The quoted matter is on page 85.
4. Pellegrino and Thomasma suggest this in *Helping and Healing*, p. 33.
5. Jacques Barzun, *Begin Here* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 54.
6. John J. Mearsheimer, “The Aims of Education,” *The University of Chicago Record* (October 23, 1997), p. 7.
7. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 118, 126.
8. See David Patterson, *When Learned Men Murder: Essays on the Essence of Higher Education* (Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1966), pp. 4, 5.
9. From his poem “After Reading a Child’s Guide to Modern Physics.”
10. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 1.