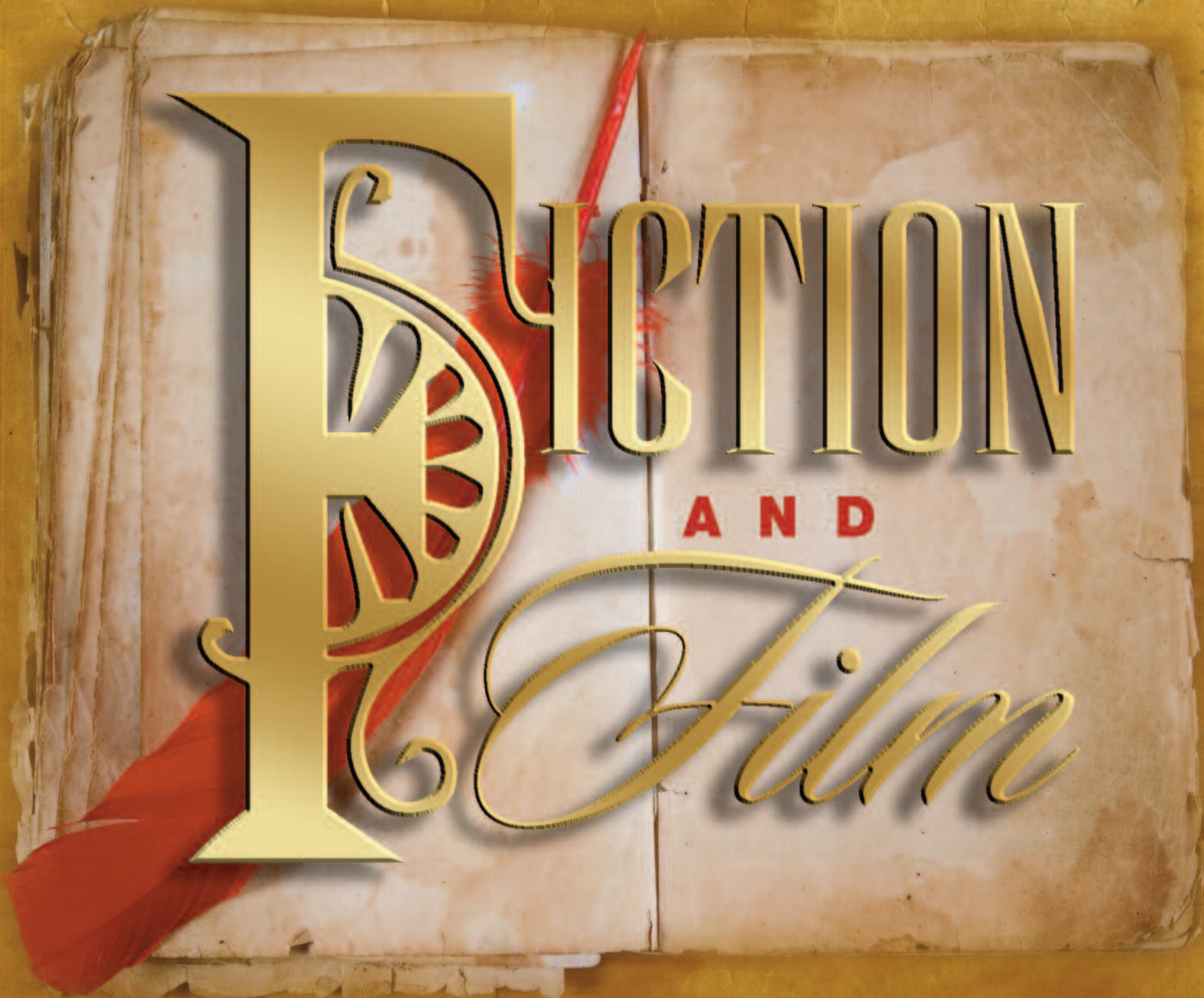

BY SCOTT MONCRIEFF and VANESSA CORREDERA

Thoughts on Teaching Potentially Controversial Narratives

Most Seventh-day Adventist English teachers who use literature in the classroom—and possibly narrative film—have faced variations of the following scenarios:

• Sarah,[1] after the first day of class, says, "In my family, we don't read fiction. Mrs. White said you shouldn't read fiction, so I can't read the Nathaniel Hawthorne story you assigned us."

• The principal says that Jason's mother read the story assigned for English and is concerned about what's going on in the classroom.

• A seminary student decides that some films selected for class use are inappropriate for student access in the library and writes a note of concern to the university president with a copy to the union president.

As Seventh-day Adventist teachers, we take such concerns seriously. English professionals must think through the pedagogical value of teaching fictional narratives in the classroom, anticipate some of the most common objections to such use, and beyond that, consider the appropriate use of material that may be somewhat challenging, controversial, or mature, in addition to its fictional nature. In this article, we first discuss reasons for teaching fiction in literature and film. We then turn toward a discussion of how to approach difficult content in the classroom, and how to discuss the teaching of this content with concerned parents, administrators, and constituents. For Tips on Selecting Fictional Materials, see page 25.

Why Teach Fiction?

The English curriculum at Adventist colleges and universities mandates that fiction is taught to English majors and general students enrolled in certain English courses. This was not always the case: In the 1920s, at least according to my [Moncrieff's] Adventist-educated great aunt, fictional narrative was *verboten*, even narrative poetry. In the 1950s and 1960s, the issue was contentious, but by the 1980s and 1990s, concerns about teaching fiction, particularly with regard to Ellen White's comments on the topic, were dying away. Since then, the issue will occasionally crop up.[2] This article will first identify several reasons for teaching fiction—primarily addressing literature, although some of the arguments also apply to film.

1. Narratives form a significant part of the literary legacy (a text's and/or author's cultural, aesthetic, ideological, and linguistic influence across time) of the best American, British, and world writers, be it Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry, the dramas of William Shakespeare, short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Flannery O'Connor, and more recent authors such as Alice Walker, Tim O'Brien, Jamaica Kincaid, and Jhumpa Lahiri, or novelists such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Zadie Smith, and Kazuo Ishiguro. These writers and many others around the world have created works of significant intellectual and artistic merit, as well as lasting cultural impact that repays diligent study.

2. Narratives are inherently interesting. They capture students' attention, and while this might also be true of amusement park rides, stories have a bigger learning upside as they draw students in and make complex ideas more accessible. Christ's use of narrative—the parable of the prodigal son, for example—serves as a helpful reminder of the way that stories speak to a broad audience and make sophisticated ideas understandable.

3. Stories allow us to empathize, to enter the perspective of another. As Christians, we are commanded to have compassion for others and to understand the ways others think.[3] Entering and examining the points of view provided in stories, as well as the implied point of view of the author, are basic skills developed by studying narratives. For instance, Zora Neale Hurston's strong use of accents and dialect in the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) immerses readers in African-American culture in Florida during the early 20th century. Moreover, by focusing on the African-American woman Janie Crawford, Hurston makes readers confront the particular difficulties facing an independent woman of color during this era.

4. Stories present conflict, which leads to consideration of choices and values, not as abstractions but in compelling, concrete contexts. Furthermore, stories allow students to consider situations, behaviors, and ethical concerns with a certain salutary amount of distance. They will be freer to discuss situations

involving "characters" than ones in their own lives, and more engaged than if they are discussing mere abstract principles. Thus, a discussion of the conflicting depiction of war in Homer's *The Iliad* (ca. 8th century B.C.)—where martial prowess is both celebrated and yet shown to cause unspeakable suffering—opens up a discussion about our own current attitudes toward the valorization of violence.

5. Stories can help students improve their interpretive skills, develop subtlety, and deal with ambiguity. Often, the best stories are those on which we have to meditate and return to because they challenge our comfortable way of thinking or allow us to consider a particular idea or issue in a new way. Like *The Iliad,* the film *The Hunger Games* (United States, 2012) presents a trenchant commentary on violence, specifically as a means of entertainment. Upon further consideration, however, students discern that the film also explores questions of gender, such as what it means for a young woman to be considered a hero, as well as questions of class, as seen in its representation of the way that the "haves" callously determine the fates of the "have nots."

6. Narratives help students develop critical thinking by encouraging them to go beyond their initial emotional reaction to a text in order to assess various facets of the narrative, including its structure, content, depiction of characters, and overall message.[4] Students may thus initially champion Hamlet's quest for revenge in Shakespeare's eponymous tragedy (ca. 1603), but after considering the entire play, especially the depiction in a performance or film of Hamlet's murder of Polonius and his influence in causing Ophelia's madness, they may be led to question Renaissance attitudes toward revenge.

Teaching Controversial Material

Additional concerns arise, however, when these narratives—whether in literature or in film—have challenging, controversial, or "difficult" content. One of the great values of narrative, as noted above, is that it introduces us in a captivating way to others' perspectives (both through authors and characters), their voices, and their points of view. Yet as our everyday lives demonstrate, others' experiences do not always neatly mesh with our own and can easily take us out of our comfort zones. The articulation of these experiences and points of view through narrative may thus involve coarse language, emotionally challenging imagery, interactions of a sexual nature, immoral behavior, or other facets that make the content of a text discomfiting. In fact, for some readers, anything that does not end on a positive note is troublesome. Furthermore, the issue resides not only with a book's or film's content, but also with the fact that what may prove quite comfortable for one reader or viewer may seriously offend another.

For some, the answer is simple: Do not teach narratives containing controversial content. Yet such an approach, we think, proves too limiting. The Bible itself holds in tension stories of beauty and hope with stories of a far more disturbing nature—the romantic and stirring marital expression of love in Song of Solomon with the tale of Lot and his daughters[5]; the sparing of Rahab due to her faith with the destruction of entire cities and people due to God's command[6]; and Christ's redemptive, selfless sacrifice with Lucifer's cunning, selfish deception.[7] Ellen White reminds us that human history is comprised of a Great Controversy, and just as the Bible manifests this controversy, so do our human-made narratives.[8]

We must remember that when an author includes difficult content within his or her work, he or she may not be doing so with an uncritical eye. It is quite possible that the author will frame a negative example, an example of human failing or frailty, in a critical light that helps the reader to see its folly. In the movie *The Help* (2011), for example, director Tate Taylor depicts racism in 1960s Mississippi but is clearly critical of those who espouse racist ideas. On the other hand, the writer may present a perspective with which readers only partly agree or which they reject, or which they haven't really considered before. All of these cases present us with an opportunity to learn significantly if we and our students apply critical thinking to the text.

That is not to say, however, that every book, television show, or film has inherent pedagogical value. As educators, we must thoughtfully and prayerfully use our judgment. As Francis Bacon says in his essay "Of Studies," "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention."[9]

The same selective process can be applied to television shows and films. For example, it may not be appropriate to show students an entire episode of a World War II miniseries due to its graphic imagery. But a short clip may help communicate the loneliness and moral difficulties with which soldiers grappled, an emotion-laden concept not as accessible through a history textbook. Likewise, excluding the works of the important Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros from a global literature course because of sensitive, mature content may be difficult; however, Cisneros's most well-known works are collections of vignettes or short stories from which individual readings may be selected. Thus, a teacher may choose to assign a short story exploring a young woman's emotional distance from her Mexican family rather than one about a mature woman's affair.

Sometimes, however, because of specific pedagogical opportunities inherent to particular texts and films, we choose to use narratives that will include difficult content. In these cases, Bacon's words are especially helpful, and we can expand on them for further insight. These narratives must be read, taught, and discussed with diligence and attention.

Conversations between teacher and students are crucial, for the value of narrative texts, whether literary or televisual, lies in the fact that they provide a low-stakes site for students to grapple with the personal, social, political, and spiritual issues they (or their friends) will inevitably face. The Bible itself presents these tensions; they are omnipresent in the information that bombards students on a daily basis, from music to advertisements to the ideas held by their peers. Narratives allow for Christian educators to help mentor and shepherd their students as they confront new ideas, perspectives, and topics that will shape their worldviews. For maximum effectiveness in teaching literature, we need not avoid these topics but rather discuss them first in a Christian environment so that students are prepared to face them in a less-spiritual, at-times-combative en-

Take time to build respect and a rapport with students so that when challenging material is presented, they will be more likely to exhibit trust and respect the teacher's judgment.

vironment. This type of Spirit-led engagement can thus be a shaper rather than troubler of faith. As John Milton explains in his treatise *Areopagitica* (1644):

"Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably. . . . As therefore the state of man now is, what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear without the knowledge of evil? He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true warfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where the immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat."[10]

Invoking the familiar Pauline metaphor of running a spiritual race, Milton describes the individual's spiritual journey as a race and the challenges to it posed by evil and its presence in the world as dust and heat.[11] If one does not confront evil's presence, he argues, one is not tested, and this is not true virtue at all. As Christian educators, we can use literature, television, and film as tools to prepare our students for this inevitable testing by giving them the Christian vocabulary and knowledge that will help them as they shape their ever-developing paradigms.

Tips for Selecting Fictional Materials

1. Consider the literary value of the material. Returning to Bacon's metaphor, is this a book one should chew, digest, or spit out? Is the author or text itself well-respected? Is it a required part of the curriculum? Evaluate the tradeoffs of mixed content, and be confident that the text adds value and depth to the course.

2. Be comfortable, confident, and unapologetic when teaching the material. A teacher does not have to agree with everything the author says, but if there is discomfort with the subject matter, students will sense this and be affected by it. Approach the text confidently, and students are more likely to trust that there is a thoughtful purpose behind the inclusion of a particular text or film, even if it is not apparent immediately.

3. Take the students' maturity into account. Educators at the secondary level are well aware that seniors may be able to handle a text that freshmen cannot. At the tertiary level, it would be wise to consider what might appeal to and be appropriate for the general-education student as compared to English majors. The latter typically have more training as textual interpreters and need additional opportunities to apply their skills; for this reason, they tend to be more flexible about reading and viewing assigned narratives.

4. Be thoughtful about when in the term to assign text with difficult content. Take time to build respect and a rapport with students so that when challenging material is presented, they will be more likely to exhibit trust and respect the teacher's judgment. For instance, in an introduction to film class, I [Moncrieff] might begin with something like the excellent *The Road Home* (China, 1998) and use something also excellent but more mature, like *Monsoon Wedding* (India, 2001) or *Goodbye Lenin* (Germany, 2003), later in the semester.

5. Consider talking with a fellow teacher or your department chair about a potentially difficult text, the reasons for choosing it, and any concerns. We have done this on several occasions and profited by the feedback we have received. Of course, this only works when you have a collegial, open, and respectful relationship with your colleagues.

Tips for Teaching Difficult Content

1. Prayerfully and thoughtfully read and vet the texts. Even if a text is part of a mandated curriculum, do not depend on word of mouth or another person's point of view. This may seem basic, but we have known teachers who failed to fully read a text, assigned it, and then were surprised by the content. Furthermore, when considering using a potentially difficult text read several years ago without a class in mind, have a fresh look at it. A text or film looks different when one is thinking about it in regard to a specific class context.

2. Consider addressing the tough issues head on. I [Corredera] am ambivalent about this because at times I think I risk bringing attention to an issue that my students did not identify as a concern. But I have found it very helpful to share with students that some of the texts in class may have difficult content. For example, when I introduced my New Global Literature course, I told students that global texts, particularly postcolonial texts, often confront the personal, psychological, and social aftermath of oppression, which means that they are not always the easiest to read. For example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) addresses the Nigerian civil war and Nigerian independence and thus depicts the horrors of genocide. I found it better to be upfront about these issues so that students could be prepared mentally and emotionally.

3. Prepare a thoughtful explanation for the texts chosen. Be able to articulate whether they address themes crucial to the course, whether they are authored by prominent and respected writers, whether they are considered an established part of a curriculum, etc. For example, I [Corredera] chose *Half of a Yellow Sun* because Adichie is a well-respected, award-winning author whose works are widely taught in global literature courses

and because this highly lauded, Orange Prize-winning, thoughtful novel perfectly encapsulated themes that were central to the course while adding a new text to our departmental curriculum.

4. Address the difficult content directly. Students often become frustrated if they are made to read difficult content and are not given an opportunity to discuss it. Thus, when my [Corredera's] students read Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), a novel portraying the suffering of women in Afghanistan pre- and post-Taliban, I made sure to discuss the depiction of domestic violence and abuse against the two female protagonists, Laila and Mariam. In fact, I specifically asked students whether, if by reading this text, which frankly depicts the misogynistic brutality against Afghan women, we were participating in making violence against women a form of entertainment. This led to an incredibly productive, thoughtful conversation about the ethics of content and reading.

5. Last but not least**, be prepared to address and discuss how we consider difficult content as Christians.** Guiding questions include: Is this text's/film's content gratuitous or justifiable? How might a Christian perspective allow us to approach this text differently, with a unique point of view? What social, ethical issues might difficult content raise for us as Christians? These types of conversations allow students to begin developing their own approaches toward worrisome content found across a wide range of narratives.[12]

Tips for Discussing Difficult Content With Administrators and/or Parents

1. If at all possible, **begin conversations with prayer**. A confrontation over content runs the risk of feeling personal, as if one is being judged for the content selected. Prayer, in addition to invoking the ever-needful guidance of the Holy Spirit, helps defuse the situation and sets the appropriate tone and context for the ensuing conversation.

2. Be ready to explain your rationale. Just as a teacher should be able to communicate to students *why* a specific text has been selected, a teacher should be able to do the same for administrators and parents. Consider not only addressing the value of the text itself, but also how the particular challenging material (mature content, for example) can promote students' intellectual, personal, and spiritual growth.

3. Be prepared to address how the difficult content furthers the aims of Christian education. Point to the ethical value of a particular narrative; address how a story exposes students to the less-privileged experiences of others around the world; explain how a film forces students to confront problematic stereotypes about those considered Other; or explain how a text or film promotes equality or social justice. While the explanations may vary, be prepared to articulate the Christian value of a text just as readily as its intellectual or artistic value.

4. Be open minded and open hearted. Again, prayer goes a long way in helping create a productive dialogue about content. It is all too easy to dismiss those with concerns as too narrow-minded or ignorant. Instead, consider various ways to strike a balance between pushing a student to expand his or her thinking while at the same time being sensitive to individual concerns. Perhaps this will take the form of further one-on-one conversations, or it might mean an alternate assignment. These options can likewise be communicated to an administrator or parent. As mentioned earlier, colleagues or a departmental chair can be excellent resources for considering how to handle any confrontation over course material.

5. At the same time, **be prepared to defend the decision to strongly encourage a student to read or engage with a particular text.** Perhaps the text is crucial for the curriculum or necessary for anyone who has aspirations for graduate school. Perhaps not reading a particular text may compromise the student's ability to participate in and understand future assignments. Whatever the case may be, have a rationale for encouraging a student to complete the reading or viewing, or for suggesting (at the tertiary level) another section or course.

In conclusion, let us share with you what some of our students see as the value of reading potentially controversial material (keeping in mind that they were not aware of our article's points when we solicited these comments). Here are some of their responses:

• "Reading difficult texts has given me the ability to approach subjects which I previously may have felt uncomfortable discussing or been unable to discuss."

• "Christ's call to 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' necessitates an experiential understanding of whomever that other may be. In order for me to understand how I would wish to be treated were I another, I must first understand my

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Other's perspective—a daunting task. . . . For me, literature helps fill in that epistemic gap. Reading controversial or difficult texts . . . grants me the gift of seeing the world from many perspectives."

• "I've benefited greatly by reading 'difficult' or controversial texts. As responsible, educated, and loving individuals, having certain exposure to the trials people experience allows us to be more empathetic. Literature can create awareness for those abused and marginalized, allowing us to shift our thinking for the better."

• "So much of the content that many deem 'objectionable' is present because it provides a more honest picture of a situation, experience, or person. Often, certain content is required to maintain the accuracy, impact, even poignancy of works—whether factual or literary fiction reflective of truth. We are called to engage with and witness to the world, and we can't do that from a safe and sanitized bubble."

Clearly, these students see reading difficult texts as not only improving their perspectives on the world around them, but also as part of their individual, Christian growth and mission. As educators, it is our responsibility to continue encouraging this development in the English classroom through the texts we choose to teach and discuss.[13] ✐

This article has been peer reviewed.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The names used in these scenarios are pseudonyms.
2. For those interested in reading more about this subject, see Scott Moncrieff's article in *Dialogue* or Keith Clouten's article in the April/May 2014 issue of *The Journal of Adventist Education* (which includes a helpful additional bibliography on the issue). Both articles are listed in the bibliography.
3. See Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; and Romans 12:15.
4. For further thoughts on how narratives in particular help shape students, see Wayne C. Booth, "The Ethics of Teaching Literature," *College English* 61:1 (1998):41-55.
5. Take the mutuality expressed in the following verse, as well as the typological reference to Christ: "I am my beloved's / And my beloved is mine. / He feeds his flock among the lilies" (Song of Solomon 6:3). For the story of Lot and his daughters, see Genesis 19:30-36. All Bible references in this article are quoted are from the NKJV. Texts credited to NKJV are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982, by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
6. For the story of Rahab, see Joshua 2:1-24. God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is one of the most well-known examples of God's condemnation of a city. See Genesis 19:1-29.
7. Matthew 27:32-56 provides one example of Christ's sacrifice. For Satan's deception of Eve as the snake in the Garden of Eden, see Genesis 3:1-24.
8. See *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* by Ellen G. White (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1911).
9. Francis Bacon, *Essayes: Religious Meditations. Places of Perswasion and Disswasion. Seene and Allowed* (London, 1597), sig. B2v. Original spelling in quote is modernized for clarity.
10. John Milton, "Areopagitica," *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Merritt Y. Hughes, ed. (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 2003), p. 728.
11. Ibid.
12. See 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 and 2 Timothy 4:6-8.
13. We must acknowledge that while we have intended this advice to appeal to a broad audience, it may be complicated by the grade level a teacher instructs or the location where a teacher is employed. For example, a grade school teacher will most likely have to grapple with greater parental concerns and more varied maturity levels among students. Moreover, texts may be "difficult" in the more common sense of the word. Student A may be able to read Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and understand it (or at least, most of it), while Student B's reading level may preclude even the most cursory engagement with this famous tragedy. For teachers in certain parts of the world, issues may likewise differ. Without trying to overgeneralize, complex topics regarding Otherness, gender, class, and spirituality take on different dimensions across cultures. Moreover, if we return to the *Romeo and Juliet* example, a teacher may not simply have to confront the text, but he or she may also have to discuss with students the way that Shakespeare historically has been used as a pedagogical tool in the Colonial project of assimilation. We cannot address these nuances here, but we do hope that some of this advice can be helpful if even applied in the broadest way possible.