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WHAT IS TRUTH? COMPOSITION ASSIGNMENTS  
FOR GROWTH IN VALUES

by

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Introduction to the Project

The composition class affords unique opportunities for helping young adults become aware of their presuppositions and formulate their world views. Language is a powerful tool for creating our realities and understanding our personal identities. The circumstances and events of our lives have little meaning for us until we have told ourselves stories about them. When we put such "stories" in writing, we reinforce their power to influence our beliefs, feelings, and actions and thus help form our values.

That this is true is reinforced anthropologically by the Genesis account of creation. Man was mandated God's vice regent, charged with dominion over all that God had brought into being. Adam's introduction to his work--his in-service training--was a linguistic task. The man was directed to practice using his unique gift of speech and at the same time markedly expand his language by naming the living creatures, with God's delighted interaction. The act of naming the creatures has deep symbolical significance, since whatever we name we control. Thus Adam's designating a name for each creature, a process heard and affirmed by his divine Mentor (perhaps discussed unthreateningly as the work proceeded) schooled the man to wisely administer the garden that was his world.

After his companion's creation Adam composed the first poem, naming her "woman," a term replete with relational significance:

bone and flesh of man, separate yet part, equal but dependent. The name defined and established their relationship. After sin and curse had entered, Adam exercised the power of language and concretized his developing world view in the face of unbearable loss and tragedy by particularizing the name further: Eve, he said; Mother, because she was the mother of all living (and in the intensifying power of language, Mother of the Living One!) This as the woman stood, cursed and trembling, an exile from Paradise, bowed with guilt, mother of no one. Adam's gift of that name constituted a triumphant expression of faith which signaled his acceptance of the proffered salvation and empowered his companion to become what his vision had proclaimed.

What has all of this to do with the composition classroom? I see this connection: one of the chief developmental tasks of the young adult is to intensify the process of self identification by defining her world as she sees it. The hidden agenda of the Seventh-day Adventist teacher is to nurture that process even as he teaches rhetorical techniques and compositional skills, affording a climate in which the student can try on for size and utility the Adventist world view and life style, hoping she will grow comfortable with it, adopt it for her own, and begin to articulate her unique addition to the Adventist Christian demonstration.

Secular teachers of composition understand this function of language to empower developing individuals to clarify their world. William E. Coles, in his influential text in which the writing assignments are organized around a single theme, begins his

explication to students by expressing this principle:

The real subject of the assignments is language, and their real function is to involve you with the activity of language using, of composing in the largest sense of the word. They are constructed to give you the chance to work out in your own terms and for yourself what it means to see yourself as a composer of your own reality. For composed this reality is, composed by language, . . . with which each one of us frames and organizes the world he lives in and by which, for better or for worse, each one of us is framed and organized Composing: Writing as a Self-creating Process, pp. 1, 2).

I like the way Coles continues his orientation to the students. His course, he explains, is to be "a course in composing, selecting, putting together." The assignments "seek to make it possible for a future physicist, say, . . . to become more responsible to himself as a user of the language of physics" (p. 2). The assignments offer the student "a chance or an opportunity," a deliberately intended compliment. This is so because "you will be supplying your own information and material." The student is invited to write out of his own ideas, feelings, and experience, "and from this seemingly shapeless and yet entirely individual source you will derive whatever it is you have to say." Thus Coles stresses that "all of the questions of all of the assignments may be understood to involve the same issues: where and how with this problem do you locate your self?"

(p. 2).

I have quoted Coles at some length because I believe he enunciates principles valuable to the Adventist teacher, whose most important goal for the composition class (a goal which in no way excludes other discipline-related concerns) is to provide an opportunity for the students to experiment with expressions of their own belief and value systems in a nurturing, unconstrained setting.

At this point it is appropriate to state the objectives of this curricular experiment. I list them beginning with the most generic, those objectives common to nearly all composition courses:

- a. To teach appropriate rhetorical strategies and afford students opportunity to develop skill in using them.
- b. To provide opportunity for practice with commonly utilized modes of development (modern adaptations of the topoi of classical rhetoric, such as description, narration, definition, comparison/contrast, causal analysis, etc.).
- c. To allow students to supply much of their own subject matter as they write from personal experience and observation.
- d. To encourage students to begin thinking about how the skilled use of language can empower them in their chosen discipline or profession.
- e. To provide students opportunity to confront issues which assail them, forces such as materialism, secularism, hedonism, misused sexuality, substance abuse, etc.

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- f. To invite students to think about Adventist values, such as their personal relationship to the Sabbath.
- g. To provide ample room for the uncommitted student or the non-Adventist. It is essential that students not feel constrained to write "what the teacher wants."
- h. To afford through use of a single theme some focus for class discussion and sequence of assignments.

This final objective will be met by arranging the assignments under the rubric of "What is truth?" The topic is chosen because it affords considerable latitude, since truth can be approached in various ways, such as artistic truth, integrity, disciplinary concerns such as truth in advertising, etc., as well as from a theological perspective.

Possibly experience will prove that in arranging a sequence of assignments of increasing difficulty to accommodate developing skills, in coordinating the various methods of development, while utilizing the unifying rubric, I have attempted a task with too much complexity. However, I wish to make the attempt, hoping that in so packaging the writings, I will allow the student to carry away some unified, memorable impressions.

#### Assignments

What follows are notes toward assignments which use the motif "What is truth?" to teach writing skills and approaches and give students the opportunity to work through issues important to young Adventists. Some assignments deal almost entirely with "truth" in the artistic, compositional sense, while others are concerned directly with issues. As given here, the assignments are not

fully worked out, nor do they necessarily appear in the order in which they will be used. What is being developed is essentially a syllabus for a writing course; when the supplementary material is included, the scope of this project will have been exceeded. The following fragments may afford points of departure toward such a sequence of assignments.

1. Truth in Writing

This is a course about writing--and thinking--truthfully.

Class discussion: ways in which words can be made to lie, and how most of us have formed the habit of dishonest writing without ever realizing it. Here we will present samples of honest writing and of writing which causes words to lie.

Class divides into discussion groups and spend a few minutes developing criteria for honest writing. They return and group leaders share the results.

Teacher's criteria:

1. Truthful writing coincides with the experience of the author.
2. Truthful writing is simple as opposed to inflated.
3. Truthful writing has substance. It's not a collection of words to cover up lack of thought.
4. Truthful writing avoids overgeneralities.
5. Truthful writing surprises. It uses fresh comparisons which sometimes elicit disbelief at first but which provoke thought.
6. Truthful writing strives for verisimilitude: it tries to put the reader inside an experience.

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7. Truthful writing doesn't come naturally. It's difficult. It only seems to flow.

Teacher shares former students' "Thoughts on Writing Honestly," (see Appendix A). Do you think the students who wrote those comments were writing truthfully?

In-class Free Writing: Writing as quickly as you can, not stopping to polish your words, set down in a short paragraph what honest writing means to you, how it connects with your experience.

Sharing of free writings, then of teacher-written background writing, "What is Truth?" (see Appendix B). Discussion of the writing and of the assignment:

#### WRITING ASSIGNMENT 1: "WHAT IS TRUTH?"

Now we've dealt imaginatively with the scene between Pilate and Jesus, where Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" Pilate was a judge. Why does a judge need to know the truth?

Who today needs the answer to Pilate's question?

A physicist?

A psychiatrist?

A pastor?

A hair stylist?

A teacher?

A young parent?

A college student brought up in an Adventist home?

Let's each focus on some one questioner. The nearer we can come to ourselves, to our own interests and needs, the more honestly we're confronting this assignment.

Where to start? Think about an aspect of your projected

career in which your actions will need to be firmly based in truth. Then think of something from the life or teachings of Jesus, or from some other Bible story or teaching, which points the way to truth in the setting you are addressing. Use one Bible passage or several (use a concordance if you need to). Connect an aspect of Biblical truth--truth as it is in Jesus--with your occupation or personal situation.

Try to keep tone conversational. Use analogies, figures of speech, if you like. Don't worry about writing "what Dr. Hamm wants": each approach will be different.

Do your best to confine your writing to two typed double-spaced pages with standard margins.

## 2. Description: Writing with our senses

The truth of concrete, specific detail

Read and discuss short samples of effective descriptive detail.

Read and discuss Archibald MacLeish's "Ars Poetica," a poetic treatment of concrete sensory detail as truth.

Discuss the following statement by Garrison Keillor, author of best-selling Lake Wobegon Days:

". . .it is more worthy in the eyes of God and better for us as a people if a writer make three pages sharp and funny about the lives of geese than to make three hundred flat and flabby about God or the American people."

Do you agree? Why or why not?

## ASSIGNMENT 2: DESCRIPTION OF A PLACE: WRITING WITH OUR SENSES

Write a description that brings to life your memories of a

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place you remember well. Do you think that an attempt to describe your town might end up "flat and flabby"? Perhaps better to take us into your memories of the farm, or of the house and surroundings, or even of one room. You could take us to the old swimming hole, or perhaps the barn, or the neighborhood grocery store, or the pizza place where you took your first date. Show us the details that make the memory "memorable." Get the idea?

Help us see, hear, touch, maybe smell or taste, how it was. Try to create a mood for us. Your description should be about two double-spaced pages long. Have fun taking us back in time!

### 3. ASSIGNMENT 3: Writing from Evidence: "The Girdle of Truth"

The arming of the hero is a motif often exploited in literature. This highly ritualized action becomes richly symbolic of the hero's coming victory over opposing forces. The most famous example comes from Homer's Iliad (XVIII, 478-606). Achilles has lost his armor when the friend he loaned it to is killed by the Trojan hero Hektor. Now Achilles' mother, the goddess Thetis, prevails upon the heavenly blacksmith Hephaestos to make new armor for her son. On the marvelous shield Hephaestos portrays the earth, the heavens, the sea, the planets, a city in peace and a city at war, harvest festivals, scenes from animal life, and the joyful life of young men and maidens. Once Achilles is clad in this armor the reader can entertain no doubt that he will come off victorious in the fight.

W. H. Auden uses the Homeric shield as the metaphor for his ironic poem "The Shield of Achilles," about the inversion of

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values in today's life. Here the scenes on the shield are reminiscent of the holocaust, the concentration camp, the ghetto; and the goddess is appalled. Clearly the question is, How is heroism possible in a world where values are so inverted?

A powerful contrast in the motif of the arming of the hero is found in one of the most perfectly crafted heroic stories ever written, that of David and Goliath, found in 1 Samuel 17. Read that entire chapter thoughtfully and reflect upon the meaning conveyed by the ironic contrasts of Goliath's armor, Saul's armor, and David's battle dress. Do you see a connection in verse 45?

Still another wonderful literary account of armor is penned by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 6: 10-17 (see also 1 Corinthians 10: 3-5). This detailing of the Christian armor is worthy of much prayerful reflection, for it is God's provision for Christian victory. Clad in that invincible armor the weakest, most fearful saint is unassailable before a universe of Goliaths.

Since the focus of our writing this semester is truth, note that the first piece of armor to be put on is the "belt of truth." What does that mean to you? Write an essay exploring it. You may share from the Scriptures an aspect of truth which is precious to you, explaining how it serves to protect. Or you may explore the truth of Bible promises: are they truth we can depend on? Or share an experience you've had, in which you either became aware of the preciousness of a truth or else learned that a specific truth is indeed protective armor. If you aren't comfortable with a religious approach, discuss a truth which is foundational to your own value system, your way of looking at life.

Be as concrete and specific as possible. Your paper should be 2-3 pages long.

#### 4. The Truth about Secularism

Read Chapter 7 in Stephen D. Eyre's Defeating the Dragons of the World (beginning on p. 117). We will discuss this reading together in class. Look carefully at the discussion questions at the end of the chapter, especially the last one.

#### ASSIGNMENT 4: DEFEATING THE DRAGON OF SECULARISM

Eyre discusses many ways professed Christians maintain part of their life "off-limits" to God. Choose one of them and explore how it has been happening in your own life. Have you been putting God in a box? What can you do to give God more access to your entire life?

If you are not comfortable with this approach, you might want to explore your reasons for holding a secular point of view. On what are they based?

Being honest on either side of this issue will not be automatic. Your writing will have more value for yourself and for us if you strive for truth with your own self. Try to give abundant specific detail, examples that help us see just what you are getting at.

This writing should be two to three pages long.

#### FINAL ASSIGNMENT: Looking Back

You've often heard a quotation from the Servant of the Lord that expresses that we have nothing to fear for the future except as we forget the Lord's rich dealings with us in our past. Well, it's true! God's promises are truth, just as much as are the ten

commandments. And when we remember the ways in which God has come through for us, the ways He has used people and circumstances to meet specific needs, our faith is strengthened to rely vibrantly on Him in our present difficulties.

Think back in your own life. Is there a time when you can see that God was working? Tell us the story. First help us see the situation you were in: the need, uncertainty, maybe crisis. Give us realistic details to put us inside the scene with you. Then show us what happened. Use any narrative technique appropriate: dialog, concrete descriptive detail, suspense, symbolism. Don't build in a moral, but let us discover, along with you and possibly other characters, the special meaning the event had for you. Readers can apply this meaning to their own situations.

If you can't see any evidence of God's working in your life up to this point, you might tell how God worked in the life of someone in your family or someone you know. Or you could bring dynamically alive a story from the Bible. But don't give up on your own history too easily. The working of God doesn't have to be something spectacular; it may even be quite incidental and ordinary.

This writing may need to be a bit longer than others we've written: three to five pages might be appropriate, especially if you include dialog.

#### OVERVIEW OF ASSIGNMENT SEQUENCE "WHAT IS TRUTH?"

Since space does not allow detailed development of a complete assignment cycle, the following listing is supplied. Some of

these assignments have been partially elaborated above. Others could easily be created by the teacher in such a way as to meet rhetorical needs of a particular class or fit with expectations of a specific composition program. Using Stephen Eyre's paperback Defeating the Dragons of the World (please see bibliography) as a supplementary reader might be considered. It is a fresh, thoughtful discussion, directed at young adults, of the ways this world encroaches on Christian thought, often without our awareness.

1. Strategies for Definition: Identifying and Shaping Meaning  
    "What Is Truth?"
2. The Truth of Description: Bringing People and Places to  
    Life  
    A Remembered Place
3. Exploring and Evaluating: The Truth of Comparison  
    Contrasting Two Life Styles I Might Choose
4. Probing Cause and Effect  
    How Is Secularism Affecting Me?
5. Reporting and Interpreting: The Truth of Narration  
    Narrating an Occurrence that Taught Me about Substance  
    Abuse
6. Writing from Evidence  
    "The Belt of Truth"
7. Explaining and Supporting: Using Evidence  
    Development by Example: How Materialism Affects Me
8. A Backward Look: "Go Tell What God Did for You"

Appendix A: Excerpts from Student Responses to Writing Honestly

Honesty to others starts with honesty to one's self.

I have been taught to lie both in my writing and in my life. It has been driven into my brain that it isn't worth getting hurt by telling what I feel. I try to hide so many things from people, so they won't see the real me.

Writing truthfully is like wearing your shirt wrongside out. Everyone can see the loose threads, the missed stitches and the knots....People hide behind big words, colloquialisms and overworked phrases because they're afraid if they let their true thoughts out on paper they'll be torn apart and crumpled.

To achieve the goal of truthful writing I feel that I must let some of my inner self escape and become woven into what I am trying to create.

In order to write honestly, I feel that I am going to have to meet and honestly know myself. But just studying more and more "Engfish" will not help me to know and better understand English; trying to find myself and my honest writing style will not come from digging from inside myself. It will come from a close personal relationship with God, who made me and gave me the mind I have. He is the only one who really knows me, and truth can come only from Him.

The exciting thing about truthful writing is that I don't ever have to kid myself that "I have arrived;" for truth is always new, alive, different. There is always more to learn.

Writing that causes the reader to empathize . . . is good writing. It may cause embarrassment or even disgust, but that is a risk that must be taken when presenting truth.

When my writing equals the simplicity of a child, then I will know that I have reached my goal.

Honesty is one of the childhood traits we shouldn't have left behind. Writing exactly what we feel is a re-education, re-winding our way of thinking and acting onto another reel, but it will untangle a lot of communication problems and allow us to view ourselves and others more clearly.

To shake the habit of untruthful writing I must either eliminate all unuseful words or start my learning process over.

To scratch my leg when the character in the story has gotten bit by a mosquito; to feel an intense relief when the fever breaks and the little boy is going to live; to discover after a suspenseful chapter I had bruised the apple I had been holding. This is honest writing.

I can only hope to write truthfully as I allow myself to be straight-forward and vulnerable to life itself.

## Appendix B: Teacher-written sample

## What Is Truth?

The watch's smoking torch lit the passageway between dwelling quarters and praetorium, and the procurator could see that it would soon be full day. An evil one, he feared. The presentiment about the day seemed out of proportion to his irritation at being summoned so early from his bed. Judea was a distasteful post at best; one never knew what the excitable people would do next. Worst of all were the crafty religious leaders, forever trying to ingratiate themselves into one's favor but only waiting a chance to stab Caesar in the back. Since this was feast time, he'd have to look to his safety; with a million people in town and feelings high anyway, an insurrection would blaze up like hurricane-fanned tinder. Fortunately, the worst terrorist was safely behind bars: he knew the people were sure to try to get him to release Barabbas, but he was not going to see anyone who set himself up as "King of the Jews" freed to light that fuse. As for this trial he'd been routed out of bed for--he'd let them have their way at feast time: what was one more crucifixion? The road to Rome was paved with the crosses of Caesar's puppet's enemies.

Arrived at the chamber to the salutes of legionnaires, Pilate took his place on the judgment seat. The prisoner would be another sullen, slinking cur, lashing out with oaths against a world he couldn't conquer. Pilate's eyes scanned the hall without locating the victim.

"The accused?" he questioned of the centurion who served as chief officer of the court.

"There, your honor." The soldier indicated a man of medium

height wearing a soiled blood-stained tunic.

Pilate's eyes registered surprise bordering on disbelief. Wrists tightly bound behind him with a chain held painfully taut between two soldiers, the Man seemed oblivious to His surroundings. In fact, in all his life Pilate had never witnessed such dignity. Not insolence, not bravado, held the bleeding shoulders erect and the chest high: the prisoner stood as though he somehow owned the land he trod. The face, Pilate thought, would be with him always: it was filled with sadness diffused with joy, and utterly without resentment. When the prisoner turned and cast his eyes upon Pilate, the Roman thought it must have been the first time in his life that anyone had ever really looked at him and seen him as a person. The glance made him conscious of his humanity in a way he'd never been before. He felt both more and less free, as though infinite possibilities for his own development had just been opened before him, yet as though somehow there would never be any going back to the farce he'd called life for forty-seven years. Pilate wanted to explore the possibilities the look had opened to him, but the court was called to order by the chief officer and the trial had started.

The proceedings were a blur of angry, shouting Jews, unfounded accusations, threats and innuendoes that normally would have intimidated the governor into doing what was asked. But today Pilate was a man at last. He could act and stand up and take the consequences. It wasn't that this case was so different from scores of others. It was just that the unforgettable Face had made Pilate aware for the first time that injustice was something more than a word, that integrity did actually exist,

that a puppet who'd danced to anyone's pull of the strings could stand up to the universe, that what he did mattered. The thought made him dizzy.

What were they saying now, that this man made himself out a king? King? Pilate passed his hand over his eyes in wonderment. Why, that was it: the prisoner stood like a king. But what sort of kingship could overlook all of this, could own it all--even the shameful--could even somehow make Pilate himself sovereign in a way he'd never dreamed possible? It was as though he were about to be born again, into a higher life than he'd ever known, into a kingdom in a completely different dimension from Caesar's. He must talk with Jesus alone.

When the two men stood together in the inner chamber, Pilate had no words to express what he sensed. "You--you are a king?" He was stammering like a simpleton.

"You have judged correctly." The eyes seemed to see not Pilate's form so much as his soul, to read inner longings the Roman had never known existed. The voice went on, human, weary, pain-constricted, yet sure, resonant with joy. "My kingdom is not from here, not from this world."

"Not like--Caesar's?"

The prisoner shook his head. "My kingdom is in a higher realm. It is for this that I came into the world: to reveal my kingdom."

Pilate's eyes widened. Yesterday--an hour ago--this would all have been insanity. Now he wondered if anything else could ever matter.

"I came into the world, " resumed Jesus, "to--"

"Came?" Pilot interrupted. "From where?"

"From my kingdom, " Jesus affirmed, glancing upward. It seemed as though a warmth of light suffused His face. Pilate could not tell whether the glow descended upon Him or shone out from within.

"Yes, I have come to bear witness to the truth. One who is of the truth hears me and accepts me for what I am." There was invitation in the tone, as though it mattered to Jesus whether or not Pilate accepted, a kind of mattering that had nothing at all to do with whether the governor released Him or crucified Him.

"Truth. What is it?" Could this be truth--that the values Pilate had lived by, this governorship, climbing the ladder of empire by coercion, flattery, or duplicity--that these were non-values; and that it was by relinquishing authority that one could be connected with the only power that really mattered, power in a higher dimension, that satisfied one down inside, that made freedom of action possible?

The shouting outside broke Pilate's reverie. The roar--he had heard it before--like a crazed human organism, crescendoing into a hurricane: by hand-gained experience he knew that the mob was one step away from insurrection.

Pilate darted for the door instinctively. The disturbance must be quelled without delay. Then he hesitated. Truth. What mattered more, his post as procurator? or becoming part of a kingdom based on truth? He knew what he would do. He would take the hands, release the fetters. Not the subject but the King had the authority to confront human nature. He would send the King to meet the mob.

"Pontius Pilate!" The roar was deafening. "Pilate, don't be bewitched. Come out here at once. Come or you are not Caesar's friend."

Pilate shook himself out of his trance, shrugging into the role he had always played. Weak at the core as he knew himself to be, he was the Roman, by training and authority. It was too humiliating to think he couldn't handle a handful of Jews. How foolish to have believed for a moment that not only Jesus' destiny but Pilot's own salvation lay in the prisoner's fettered hands.

"Truth--what is it?" he muttered as he strode forth to quell the insurrection.

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