Understanding the
SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAITH EXPERIENCE
of College and University Students on Adventist Campuses

BY ROGER L. DUDLEY

Every teacher in Seventh-day Adventist higher education would like to see his or her students develop a mature faith and a sound system of values, including commitment to Jesus Christ, His Word, the Adventist Church, and a lifestyle in which they live out the principles of the kingdom of heaven. But how does this happen? How do adolescents and young adults develop worthwhile value systems and commitments that will endure the pressures to be brought against them? If we better understand the process of value formation, we can choose the strategies most likely to aid in the process.

Unfortunately, the method we most naturally turn to is not the primary way that spiritual development takes place—that is, telling youth what is right and wrong and expecting them to incorporate these insights into their characters. The Bible does say that we are to "Impress [God's commandments] on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:7, NIV). However, this means much more than sermonizing. It requires the close, modeling relationship of a parent and child. We will return to this later.

One of the earliest studies on character development was conducted in the 1920s by Hugh Hartshorne and Mark May of Columbia University. They carefully tested and observed 11,000 young people in the areas of deceit, service, and self-control. They found no relationship between behavioral tests of honesty or service and exposure to Sunday schools, Scouts, or character-education classes. They concluded that direct religious instruction had little influence on moral behavior and that merely urging honest behavior or discussing standards and ideals does not automatically bring conduct under control.[1] Subsequent research has generally borne out these findings.

Coercion is even less effective. Often, we feel that we must convince young people to do the right thing. If they seem "hard of hearing," we are tempted to apply pressure. After all, we think, we are doing it for their good. They may not like it now, but someday they will thank us. However, it simply doesn't work that way.

The word value *means not only a worthwhile product (what we value) but also a process (the method by which we arrive at what we value). This process begins in early childhood and continues throughout our entire lives. We are constantly assigning relative worth to things or concepts such as wealth, beauty, power, popularity, happiness, altruism, achievement, freedom, security, adventure, peace of mind, . . .salvation [and the doctrines and standards of the church]. We do this not in abstract terms but as these values are called into action in the situations that arise in the course of everyday living.*[2]

To assign relative worth requires one to carefully sort through the available options, deliberately weighing their respective merits. Values, in other words, are not passively *received*; they are actively *developed*. One cannot force his or her values on another person. Raths et al. suggest that the process of developing values involves seven necessary steps: (1) choosing freely without any coercion, (2) selecting from among real alternatives, (3) choosing after thoughtful consideration of the consequences of each alternative, (4) prizing and cherishing what we have chosen, (5) being willing to affirm our

choice publicly, (6) acting upon our choice, and (7) repeating the action so that it becomes a part of our life pattern. Unless these seven criteria are present, we may "mouth" values and even go through the motions of acting on them, but we do not really have a strong and lasting commitment that will cause us to cling to them though the heavens fall.[3]

The valuing process can be organized under three headings: (1) cognitive or reasoning, (2) affective or attitudinal, (3) behavioral or action. Let us briefly examine each of these areas.

The Cognitive Component

Principled behavior and faith maturity occur as a result of careful moral reasoning. Principles and concepts are internalized only after they have passed the scrutiny of personal examination and have been challenged. Bluntly put, spiritual development does not take place without critical thinking.

Creating a Thinking Climate

The widely reported Valuegenesis study included a scale to measure the "thinking climate" of local congregations. The same measure was used with college-aged youth in a 10-year North American Division study. In general, our churches got low grades on encouraging thinking—and college-age youth were even more pessimistic

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about this than the younger group. It would be interesting to see how students would rate their college classes, their chapels, and their campus churches, for the Valuegenesis study revealed that young people's perceptions about the thinking climate within the church was an important predictor of faith maturity, denominational loyalty, and the intention to remain an Adventist by age 40.[4]

Fostering a thinking climate is essential to faith development, for we cannot really "transmit" values to our youth. In our anxiety about seeing our young people "lose their way" and our compulsion to "do something," we may fool ourselves into believing that we can transfer im-

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portant values directly from our hearts to theirs. But a value cannot be passed from one person to another. We can only help the younger generation to understand the process and to acquire the skills and tools that make it possible for them to develop their own value systems. Seen in this light, true values, faith commitment, and ethical behavior are much more closely related to freedom and choice than to obedience and conformity. Indeed, principled behavior must sometimes lead to disobedience, as it did with the Apostles and with Christian martyrs through the ages.

The freedom of which we speak, however, is responsible. It is never anarchy, rebellion, or plain contrariness. Rollo May suggests that "freedom is man's capacity to take a hand in his own development. It is our capacity to mold ourselves."[5] May quotes Goethe: "He only earns his freedom and existence who daily conquers them anew."[6]

The success of values education and spiritual development lies in helping the youth gain the power to *do* the valuing. In preparation for responsible adulthood, adolescents and young adults must learn to experience values as real and worthwhile *for themselves.* Our goal must be to produce adults who are "strong to think and to act," who are "masters and not slaves of circumstances," and who "possess breadth of mind, clearness of thought, and the courage of their convictions."[7]

I will never forget my sixth-grade teacher. Most of that year is only a blur after the long passage of time, but she had a favorite expression that still rings in my mind. When she asked a question (and each of her questions had only one right answer), and the student (sometimes Roger) would respond with: "Well . . . I think . . .," she would usually snap: "And who gave you permission to think?" Even today the message is clear: "Your job is to learn material and recite on demand. Your personal cogitations are neither needed nor desired. This is school!"

I admit that this is an extreme case and that most educators of youth are not so blunt. Yet in more subtle ways, this is exactly the message many of the older generation have communicated about the development of younger people's minds and morals. We must truly value thinking for oneself, or we will not be able to transmit the one value that makes possible the acquisition of all others.

Achieving a Sense of Identity

Along with other theorists, James Marcia sees the sorting out of values as a process of identity achievement. During the passage from childhood to adulthood, one of the chief tasks is forming a sense of personal identity. "Who am I?" is the existential question. The young person must discover or clarify his or her religious values, interpersonal relationships, vocational goals, and potential as a marriage partner, while developing a philosophy of life. Deep searching is necessary to combine these areas in an authentic manner.

Marcia has proposed four identity statuses that describe the different ways youth go about this crucial task.[8] His four statuses are built on the concepts of *crisis* and *commitment.* Crisis here refers to a challenge to the existing way of constructing reality, which results in cognitive dissonance and motivates the person to explore alternative and competing roles and ideologies to reduce that dissonance. *Commitment* refers to the act of choosing from competing alternatives a way to organize and understand reality, then locking into that choice so that it is not easily reversed. The four statuses are as follows:

• In *Identity Diffusion*, adolescents lack personal commitment and have not experienced a crisis that causes them to search for a cause to embrace. We might say that they have not found and they are not looking.

• In *Identity Foreclosure*, adolescents are committed to a certain set of beliefs, often as a result of parental influences, and are not open to examining or questioning their present convictions. They have either never faced the challenge of a crisis or have refused to engage in any process that would upset their comfort-

able reality. According to Morgan, many youth freeze or crystallize their attitudes so that they do not change much afterward. This is how they cope with cognitive dissonance.[9] In effect, they say: "My mind is made up; don't confuse me with facts." Even if such youth appear to have strong convictions, their values actually belong to someone else. Because their beliefs have not been internalized, they are unlikely to withstand a real test in the unprotected world.

• In *Identity Moratorium*, adolescents are in a state of crisis, which they are attempting to resolve by carefully examining various options. They have not yet made a commitment, but they are on the journey.

• Finally, in *Identity Achievement*, adolescents have passed through the crisis. They have faced the challenges, carefully explored the options, and have deliberately chosen the answers on the basis of the evidence. Their commitment is stable because it has been internalized.

Some studies indicate that the large majority of students arrive at college at either the diffusion or foreclosure stage.[10] To enhance students' spiritual development and faith maturity, the Christian college must encourage them to move forward to achieve moratorium and responsible identity.

This means that "we must not only permit but encourage teenagers to question our value statements. . . . We *must* press adolescents to raise the questions, identify the issues, and think through to the solutions, or they will reach adulthood with a set of 'values' that can easily collapse and disappear in a crisis because they have never been personally committed to them."[11]

Does this mean that our heritage is worthless? Must youth begin from scratch without benefit of the wisdom of the ages? Certainly not! May puts the situation in perspective by showing that the battle is not between individual freedom and tradition (here meaning anything that has been handed down to us); rather, it is how to *use* tradition. The authoritarian asks, "What does the tradition . . .require of me?" The free person inquires, "What does the tradition have to teach me about human life, in my particular time and with my problems?"[12]

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Fostering Mental and Moral Maturation

We can help our students advance toward faith maturity by using strategies based on cognitive development theories of moral formation. Perhaps the best-known and best-researched is that of Lawrence Kohlberg.[13] He has proposed three levels of moral development:

• *The pre-conventional level*, when control of conduct is external, both in terms of the standards themselves and the motivation for obeying them (punishment/rewards);

• *A conventional level*, when control of conduct is external, based on standards set by others. However, motivation is largely internal, as the youth identifies with significant others; and

• *A post-conventional level*, in which the control of conduct is internal, for the standards flow from the source of an enlightened conscience, and the motivation to act is based upon an inner process of thought and judgment. At this level, the moral values have validity apart from the authority of the groups or persons who hold them.

Each level is divided into two stages. The six stages define progressively more mature motivations that underlie moral behavior.

Now, while advanced cognitive development is required for the higher stages of moral reasoning, it is not sufficient by itself. Youth and adults may be capable of abstract thinking and yet not advance to higher moral stages. The task of the teacher or facilitator is to stimulate the youth to move to the highest stages of moral reasoning of which they are capa-

ble, given their cognitive development.

The most common tool for this task is the moral dilemma—"a conflict situation in which what's right or wrong isn't clear-cut or obvious."[14] After choosing dilemmas that are relevant to the experience of the participants, these are presented to the group orally, in written form, or by graphic media. The situation should present conflicting claims involving ethical and moral issues. In each case, more than one reasonable outcome is possible. In the discussion that follows the presentation, participants are encouraged to propose solutions and to support their views. If there is little disagreement, the facilitator may complicate the dilemma by adding other factors using "What if?" questions. The leader probes vague statements to force participants to sharpen their thinking.

Why do such discussions stimulate growth? As a group of students respond to a moral dilemma, they naturally offer different concepts of right and wrong. The sharing of diverse moral opinions forces them to either clarify and reiterate their own moral stances or to integrate the opinions of others into their own moral beliefs. This sharing of moral reasoning also forces each participant to experience conflict or disequilibrium, as his or her ideas are challenged by the beliefs of others.

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Such conflicts provide an ideal environment for moral growth, for the more a child or a young person is exposed to higher-stage thinking, the more likely he or she will be to move to that stage.[15]

The Affective Component

While moral reasoning is foundational to spiritual development and faith maturity, it is not the total picture. The affective or attitudinal component is also crucial. How does the student *feel* about the truths being presented? Does he or she see the concepts as positive or negative? Frightening or comforting? Attractive or repulsive? Hopeful or despairing? Though the conveying of information is certainly important in a college setting, when it comes to transmitting values, the attitudes that teachers instill are even more important. As we attempt to aid our youthful charges in their journey toward faith maturity, we must approach the subject through the framework of relationships.

First—and central—is a relationship with God as a loving Father and Friend. Jesus went to the very core of religion when He stated: "'"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment'" (Matthew 22:37, 38, NIV).

Flowing from this primary relationship, religion works on our own interior relationships, eliminating anxiety and stress and bringing harmony and peace of mind. Jesus spoke of this when He said: "'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. . . . Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid'" (John 14:27, NIV).

Out of this twofold relationship with God and with ourselves comes a new relationship with our fellow humans. The second greatest commandment is to "'"Love your neighbor as yourself"'" (Matthew 22:39, NIV). True Christianity is characterized by compassion and concern for other people. From the Old Testament prophets' cries for justice through the ethical teachings of Jesus to the detailed instruction in the latter part of the Pauline epistles, the theme of caring for our brothers and sisters pervades the Bible. When Christ discussed the great judgment day, "He represented its decision as turning upon one point. When the nations are gathered before Him, there will be but two classes, and their eternal destiny will be determined by what they have done or have neglected to do for Him in the person of the poor and the suffering."[16] On all three relationship dimensions, the most effective teaching comes out of the life of the teacher. By modeling what it means to live in relationships, rather than prescribing and proscribing behaviors, we help the youth to develop positive value systems.

The Valuegenesis study has shown that we most effectively transmit a grace orientation to our youth by providing a climate of warmth and acceptance in our local congregations and by employing caring teachers in our school system. We best learn about and accept grace through warm, supportive, interpersonal relationships with grace-filled people. A major task in the coming years is to instruct our teachers and congregational leaders in how to become that kind of people.

I like to think of value transmission as a huge smorgasbord where all the tempting dishes of competing values are displayed. Here the youth will eventually choose the items they find most appealing. And which will they choose? Those that are the most colorful and attractive, the most delectable and tasty! It is not our responsibility to force our values upon students. It *is* our responsibility to model our values so attractively that they cannot help but see that these values are vastly superior to the competition and will freely embrace them.

The Behavioral Component

As we have seen, spiritual development and faith maturity depend on thoughtful moral reasoning, which involves choosing freely from viable alternatives, after careful consideration of the consequences. They also involve an attitude transformation that leads the individual to prize and cherish the values chosen and to unashamedly and freely display them to others.

But there is more. Any true commitment requires the principled human to act on his or her values. If helping people is part of our value system, we will give our time and energy to do this. If we believe in the church, we will open up our wallets and support its programs with our money. If the Christian home is important to us, we will treat our spouses and children with love and kindness. If we affirm the dignity and value of all humanity, we will work for equal status for all peoples and will refrain from ethic slurs and jokes. If we believe war is wrong, we

will labor for peace. "'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven'" (Matthew 7:21, NRSV).

We promote spiritual development by leading young people into actual spiritual service. In every field of human endeavor, we learn best by *doing*. Can you imagine learning to be a swimmer without ever going into the water? Learning to be a counselor without ever sitting down with a counselee? Learning to be a preacher without ever delivering a sermon? Learning to be a teacher without ever facing a classroom? In no area is this principle more true than in developing a mature faith.

Therefore, we must promote activities like the student missionary program, the youth task force, short-term Maranatha-type experiences, youth fairs, street witnessing, Bible labs, musical witnessing groups, gymnastic witnessing groups, Voice of Youth evangelistic meetings, sunshine bands, temperance teams, big brother/sister tutoring programs, and hundreds of other ways that allow young people to live out their faith. These have been life-changing experiences for many of us. When we actively share our faith, we deepen it.

Finally, we must remember faith maturity is not static—a pinnacle attained once and for all. Rather, it is dynamic. *Mature* and *immature* are not separate categories; rather, maturity is a continuum that includes all of us—some ahead of others, but none having arrived, so that there is no room for growth. A lifetime is

none too long to travel that journey. It is our privilege to share this vision and these attitudes with our students. We must equip them to become principled adults who live in relationship with God, who experience inner serenity, and who bless their fellow humans because they are committed to love and justice. *⊘*

Dr. Roger L. Dudley is Director of the Institute of Church Ministry and Professor of Christian Ministry at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. This article is based on his presentation at the Adventist Higher Education Summit held in Loma Linda, California, in March 1997.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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7. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 18.

8. For a summary and discussion of Marcia's theory, see John Van Wicklin, Ronald J. Burwell, and Richard E. Butman, "Squandered Years: Identity Foreclosed Students and the Liberal Education They Avoid," in D. John Lee and Gloria Goris Stronks, eds., *Assessment in Christian Higher Education: Rhetoric and Reality*, pages 75-102 (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, Inc., 1994). For a stage theory of identity development, see Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968).

9. See Clifford T. Morgan, *A Brief Introduction to Psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1977), p. 392.

10. Van Wicklin, et al., pp. 82-84.

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