

## Inside “Red Books:” A View of Loss and, Maybe, Recovery

A. Gregory Schneider, Pacific Union College

Back in the early 1980s, early in my career at Pacific Union College, I ducked. So did many other academics and pastors whose job it was to reflect upon and hand on the treasure-in-earthen-vessels we call Adventism. We went to ground, to use a metaphor of the hunted. People were being hounded and destroyed, at least in terms of career and personal reputation and credibility. As a result of our going to ground, the conversations we ought to have had about Ellen White--her inspiration, her teachings, her character and accomplishments--did not take place. And of course no students could be invited into non-existent conversations. In effect, we who ducked helped to suppress discourse and hence knowledge of Ellen White.

When Mei Ann Teo, PUC’s artist in residence for drama, first tried to recruit me for the documentary theater project that became “Red Books: Our Search for Ellen White,” I resisted. But it is hard to hold out against Mei Ann. She has a passion for theater that goes much deeper than ego and a professionalism that goes way beyond mere competence; she is a delight to work with. Besides, she let me know she really *needed* me. For a Singaporean Chinese woman, Mei Ann is a remarkably effective Jewish Mother.“

Guilt induction aside, I quickly realized I needed the play. There is a line in Scene 14 where a character speaks of “our cowardice” and our “shame” in not coming up with an honest cultural framework within which to share Ellen White. This line echoes conversations I had been having with the person behind the character while we leaned on door posts in the Psychology Department at PUC and realized together that there was unfinished work we need to do. I needed the play as a way to start overcoming the shame--and the pain.

In the year since the close of live performances, I have realized that the play is a gift from Mei Ann and the other “young guys” of the cast to me and people like me who suffered the wound they asked about. I have come to admit to myself that I joined the play for my own healing as much as to try to make a contribution to SDA culture. This very personal as well as professional engagement with the play is the reason for the “inside Red Books” phrase in my title. I’m still very much inside the play, still trying to make personal and academic sense of it. So, here are some reflections on a few lines from the play. First, about the loss of Ellen White:

“We were starving!”

This line from Scene 7, evokes for me a memory of Sabbath Schools in 1977 and 1978, my very first years at PUC. Well before the 9:30 start time, an amphitheater classroom seating more than 200 filled to standing room only--not every sabbath: only the days that Desmond Ford [g1]was teaching. Some came to try pin him down, to expose him for the heretic they believed him to be. Most, however, were hungry for his

message. The particulars of that message? There is a forensic, “alien” righteousness, imputed to all humanity who have faith in Jesus Christ who atoned for all sin once and for all on the cross. Salvation is by faith in this Divine Person and the cosmic transaction He and His Father made in heavenly places, NOT by any mental disposition, or moral act, or spiritual practice that seeks to partake of the divine nature and/or transform human nature into a divine likeness. The latter things are good and should be done and sought, but salvation is in no way contingent upon them. Any theology that hints otherwise is “perfectionism,” a mistake to be resolutely rejected because it compromises the holy confidence that God’s Advent people must have in order effectively to preach the gospel to all the fallen world and thus lead to the final coming of Christ.

It was this message, NOT primarily his remarks on the Sanctuary doctrine[g2], that aroused the extraordinarily hateful opposition that eventually succeeded in expelling Des from the Adventist ministry. There was something about his version of righteousness by faith that seemed like rotten pollution to certain Adventists of the 1970s, even while it seemed like food to the starving for others. Either way, it was Ellen White who was controlling the food supply.

So I must ask, who was this particular Ellen White? It was the prophet on the pedestal, the devotional icon on the wall, the crafter of the club with which pious SDAs pounded themselves and each other for the sake of attaining a perfection that would make us ready for the time of trouble and the coming of the Lord. In the generational metaphor that helped structure “Red Books,” I am speaking of the Ellen White of the “second generation,” the generation of believers who came after those who knew Ellen White personally, when she was not dead.

Here is a list of features drawn from my own second-generation memory of this particular Ellen White:

1. A walking, talking miracle. She had little education, yet wrote huge amounts of elegantly flowing prose about an astonishingly wide range of subjects, or so we were told. Implication: only the special, miraculous prophetic gift of God could account for her literary and intellectual accomplishments.

2. A visionary medium of God’s “present truth.” She conveyed the messages He designed for this particular age, like the health message, and the “blueprint” for education. She may not have been verbally inspired exactly, in the sense of being stenographer to God’s dictation, but she was the next best thing. If there were ideas or causes she did not write about, that was conclusive evidence that God did not want us worrying about those things in these last days of Earth’s history. If she were the “lesser light leading to the greater light” of the Bible, her lesser light still determined which things were to be highlighted, and which cast in shadow.

3. A standing example of how God chooses the weak to speak truth to the mighty, hence a standing rebuke to learned men who think more highly of their own scholarship than of the direct words of God from this simple woman. Implication: Academic and professional expertise, however much valued as signs of achievement and claims to respectability, were also suspect as temptations to put oneself above the prophet and

those who followed her. Items 2 and 3 taken together implied, furthermore, that all teachings must be vetted through her writings and shown to be in accord with them.

4. Exemplar of true spirituality and the way of salvation. As author of the divinely inspired *Steps to Christ* and *Desire of Ages*, she must have known better than any other mortal in modern times what it meant to follow Christ, to do what He would do, to enter into a personal relationship with him. And if she wrote of these things, surely she also embodied these things.

5. A beacon of safety from the errors and consequent immoralities of the World. Imagine her high and lifted up, shedding around her a circle of light that encompassed the faithful, her light was marker of those who had “the Truth” in the midst of our dark world. To have Ellen G. White was to be right, to look up to her was also to claim ascendancy over those who were wrong.

That is how I remember the Ellen White of my upbringing in 1950s and 60s Takoma Park (Maryland) [g3] Adventism. What I also remember from those days is the respectful attention that pious folk could claim in Sabbath Schools or around Sabbath afternoon dinner tables by means of Ellen White quotes. More than that, I remember the lifestyle of probity undergirded by quotes from the prophet, a way of being in the world that emphasized self-control, a control that made clear the priority of mind over body, reason over emotion, thinking over sensation, morality over beauty, duty over pleasure. My memory of life in the 1950s SDA church, home, and school resonates with that of David James Duncan in his novel, *The Brothers K* who has his main character describe the kind of pious adults “who spent their every sabbath if not their entire lives trying to forget the existence of things like . . . .”<sup>1</sup> Well, Duncan has a mildly crude bodily reference that I will refrain from using here because this is, after all, an Adventist audience, but I hope we all get the point.

I am persuaded that what Duncan and I were seeing was the embodiment of the 19th-century perfectionist ideal promulgated not only by Ellen White, but also by John Harvey Kellogg. [g4] As Bull and Lockhart make clear in their recent update of *Seeking a Sanctuary*, White and Kellogg created a science out of the pursuit of happiness by means of a regimen of diet, health, recreation, dress, and family life focused together to accomplish a sexual restraint that would prepare us for existence in the next world.<sup>2</sup> This sexual suppression was not the whole, but it was still at the heart, of what Ellen White and theologians who followed her meant by the perfection of character that would prepare us for translation to heaven and, further, precipitate the Lord’s second coming.<sup>3</sup>

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1. David James Duncan, *The Brothers K* (New York: Bantam Books, 1996), 70–71.

2. Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-Day Adventism and the American Dream* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2007), 162–81.

3. Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 90–92.

This is the Ellen White and the lifestyle she promulgated that Adventists were taking into the 1970s, the decade that ended in what “Red Books” depicts as “The Crash” in Scene 8. The Crash and its aftermath cover a lot of what I mean when I speak of the loss of Ellen White. Some things were happening in “The World,” furthermore, that helped create The Crash.

I mean chiefly the 1960s equal rights and sexual revolutions that stimulated assorted conservative Christian accommodations and reactions in the 1970s. Marabel Morgan (*The Total Woman*) and Tim and Beverly LaHaye (*The Act of Marriage*) were telling evangelicals that marital sex should be both ecstatic and innocent.<sup>4</sup> Charles Wittschiebe (*God Invented Sex*) was doing something similar in SDA circles. This proliferation of sex manuals for the religious answered, I believe, a growing inner pressure for openness to personal impulses for pleasure and self-expression in an increasingly sophisticated consumer society. Some these same evangelicals also led the culture war backlash against sexual liberalization, and against “rights” movements in general, especially women’s rights. The 1970s saw *Roe v. Wade*, the Equal Rights Amendment, and the anti-feminist movement that defeated the amendment. The Christian Right arose in the form of figures like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson.

The SDA position in these trends was ambivalent, but I suspect the turmoil over sexual liberalization and over the demands of various movements for equality and recognition created a general background anxiety among Adventists, a sense of a world out of control in exactly those ways that good sexually restrained Seventh-day Adventists could not allow themselves.

Another trend was the psychologization of faith and character: Psychology and religion have had a decades long love/hate relationship because both “provide concepts and technologies for the ordering of the interior life.”<sup>5</sup> Much of what we now find on the “spirituality and self-help” shelves of bookstores is an outcome of the conflicts and concatenations of the two. Among conservative Christians it took awhile to baptize popular psychology and make it seem safe from worldliness, but by the 1970s Tim LaHaye’s *Spirit-Filled Temperament*,<sup>6</sup> Dobson’s “Focus on the Family,” and kindred efforts ministered to the need for psychological ideas and programs that seemed plausibly “Christian” and thus, broadly, “safe” for the American evangelical sub-culture.

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4. These latter two adjectives are taken from Peter Gardella, *Innocent Ecstasy: How Christianity Gave America an Ethic of Sexual Pleasure* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

5. Don S. Browning and Terry D. Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies, 2nd Ed.* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 2.

6. Tim LaHaye, *Spirit-Controlled Temperament* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1966).

This inward psychological turn among evangelicals is important for Adventists because it sheds light on the spurt of popular SDA interest in the perfectionist “harvest principle” theology during the 1970s. This is the theology that makes the individual’s inner spiritual achievement the hinge of cosmic history. Rather than look to actions of the Catholic church or apostate Protestants on a stealth march to establish Sunday laws as evidence to support our faith, we could look within to elicit, develop, hope for, work for, the perfection of individual character, a perfection that if reproduced in a critical mass of faithful Adventists would move Christ to leave the Heavenly Sanctuary and come to receive His own. This inward turn spared us the embarrassments of certain paranoid and apocalyptic habits of mind. It gave us instead an invitation to a great and heavy meaning of interior life, but also, for some of us, to cycles of unbearable psychological self-inflation and deflation.

This theology was also a fateful move to make in that it placed ever heavier weight on the inspiration and authority of Ellen White exactly at the time that Adventist professionalism would produce a series of critical literary and historical analyses of her writings. Adventists had been going off to get advanced degrees from some time, but it is an indicator of a new critical mass of Adventist professionals that AAF and Spectrum [g5] got started in 1969 and were only about ten years old when The Crash happened. Being Adventist and professional, especially in certain academic areas, led to some serious tensions:

**Career vs. Calling:** Is my work a pursuit of mere worldly success or can it also be an instance of the service to God and humanity that my SDA upbringing told me it must be?

**Professional reference groups vs. SDA community:** Do I adhere to the standards of truth and good practice that I have learned in my profession and follow them wherever they lead, or do I limit what I am willing to believe, teach, and do by way of the prior commitments of my religious community? Can my professional training actually help renew or reform my community’s faith and practice?

In the midst of these conflicting demands, where does the sincere, believing SDA professional find himself or herself?

For some of us this question of professional and religious identity was profoundly complicated by the Ellen of the Pedestal, the Ellen who forbade all challenges to her authority, reducing them to expressions of human pride, or worse, insinuations of the Devil. This was the Ellen who insisted that every idea we had be vetted through her writings. She was the one who had long told us to guard the avenues to our physical bodies, denying ourselves all those sensations that might rouse passion and thus distract the soul from its heavenly calling. That was starvation enough, but what many of us felt was much broader, deeper, and more complex.

Indeed, any of several metaphors of bodily privation might serve to convey the problem: we were dying of thirst, we were suffocating. We had read of a Savior who promised life and life abundantly, but we could not taste, smell, hear, see, or feel it. The Ellen White we served was guardian of the boundaries. She told us to guard the avenues of our souls and to guard the edges of the Sabbath. So vigilant, so obsessive became our

guarding of the boundaries that we knew better what we were not than what we were. Notions of sanctification, that work of a lifetime's garnering of imparted righteousness, came to suggest a patrolling of the boundaries so perfect as to render the physical body and the metaphorical bodies of the soul and of the church perfectly impermeable. But no human body, literal or metaphorical, can survive that way, much less thrive.

Des Ford meant his message to repair and renew the Adventist faith, based on his diagnosis of a people paralyzed by salvation anxiety. It is not clear to me how well he sensed the mental, emotional, and bodily privation I knew from growing up Adventist in America. Regardless, Des ran into a maelstrom of social and cultural forces that made the outcome of his ministry in the U.S. something rather different from his intentions. Here's my effort to sort out the vectors of the storm we sailed into together at the end of the 1970s.

First, I think it likely that the cultural transformations and upheavals of the 1960s and 70s having to do with sex and gender, helped to undo decisively Adventism's 19th-century perfectionist synthesis of piety, health, diet, recreation, dress, and family all aimed at the control of sexuality. The practice of perfectionist spirituality as sexual restraint came to seem ever more implausible to wider and wider swathes of Adventist people. This change, as Bull and Lockhart have noted in their chapter on "The Science of Happiness," resulted in a "pick and choose" approach to Adventist lifestyle.<sup>7</sup> Such change did not come easily, however. I think it created a pervasive anxiety in American Adventism over boundaries and identity. This Adventist version of "cafeteria Christianity" was experienced as a promise of liberation by some, as a threat to the integrity of self, church, and cosmos by others. For most it was likely strange mixtures of both.

Second, into the midst of this mostly subliminal stress, came the much more explicit disillusionment caused by historical-critical discoveries about Ellen White's sources, including especially Ron Numbers's deconstruction of Ellen White as prophet of the health message. From the perspective of the historians, what they were doing was their jobs. They were following the standards and practices of their profession, hoping to serve the church by promoting deeper understanding of the church's history. For many others in the church, however, their works were an invasion and a betrayal-- history as Trojan horse containing not Greeks, but Trojans who were traitors.

If "pick-and-choose" Adventism carried some vague sense of threat for many Adventists, the historians' work represented a direct attack. The target was Ellen, the idealized culture hero in whom the wholeness Adventist self and society held together-- or so it seemed to many. The lifestyle of piety and probity supported by the ritual quoting of her writings became even more implausible after reading Numbers. Claims to attention and status by means of the mastery of Ellen White were invalidated. Even those who did not care much about strict piety and probity could feel attacked. I

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7. Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-Day Adventism and the American Dream* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2007), 181.

remember my father, a firmly anti-vegetarian autocrat of the family dining table who also rejected EGW on sex, though he was less vocal about that, at least around the children. He was also a pragmatic agent of Adventist institutional life--local elder, SS teacher, chair of assorted building committees, conference committee member. He loved the church and had a certain reverence for EGW as symbol of the church, the mother to be looked up to, respected and protected, but not necessarily obeyed. When the scholarly work on Ellen White came to public notice in the 70s, my Dad's antipathy for her health message on diet or sexuality was irrelevant. It was as if his mother were under attack, and no man worth his salt was going to stand for that.

Third, Des Ford was right that salvation anxiety pervaded many Adventist circles. No doubt it was fueled by the culture currents I mention above, but one should not dismiss it as "nothing but" a reaction to social forces. Messages of righteousness by faith were numerous in those days, and the cassette tape was a universal medium from bringing such sources of hope to the spiritually hungry. This pervasive salvation anxiety was the most obvious reason why Des drew those standing-room-only crowds to Sabbath School in 1977 and 78. It was also the reason why he was so deeply convicted of the necessity of his message to the church. On the week-ends he was not teaching Sabbath School, it was likely he was out in the churches somewhere in the Pacific Union or further afield, taking the Gospel to people in the pew.

Paradoxically, because it is hard to imagine a **less** psychological person than Des, his theology served as a kind of psychic solvent that dissolved the deep cognitive and emotional ties that many SDAs felt to a God and to a Prophet who demanded an impossible cosmic rectitude in inner life and in bodily existence. This promise of freedom, to a certain segment of SDAs, was the pragmatic meaning of Des's message. Before Des ever delivered his invited lecture on Daniel 8:14[g6], then, the maelstrom was upon us. The subversion of Adventism's 19th-century perfectionism by the newly permissive broader culture, the direct threat to perfectionist doctrines of Atonement and Incarnation coming from Des and his growing following, and the disintegration of Ellen White as idealized Adventist culture hero led to an emotional storm.

It was not just ideas at stake, it was our deep sense of Adventist selfhood. Ellen White provided a coherent set of ideals for Adventists to strive for, and in looking up to her we felt lifted up. This sense of uplift was one of the motives that made her 19th-century, antisexual "science of happiness" seem a worthy struggle. A complementary motive was the energy derived from the sense that we Adventists were the special focus of the attention of all the watching worlds of God's unfallen creation. Ellen White in vision was the sign and assurance of this attention--we were the people who kept the commandments and had the Spirit of Prophecy. The attention and respect won in ordinary church life through the ritual quoting of her sayings was a tangible echo of the Divine attention for all who were faithful to our heavenly calling. We were energized to move forward by this sense of God's special regard, to exercise persistently our disciplines of cognitive, emotional, bodily restraint in hopes of realizing the goal God had set before us. The disillusionment of finding the Prophet to be all too human disintegrated the self we had built upon her and left us desolate, dissipated, exposed to

ridicule, including our own self-ridicule. Such blows to the inner self led to explosions of energy that had been bound to our now battered ideal, explosions of fear and rage.<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes the object of rage was the church and its Prophet, seen most notably in reactions like Walter Rea's *The White Lie*, [g7] and its proponents. Sometimes the objects of rage were the academics who did or promoted the historical critical work. More often than either of these, the object of rage was Ford the heretic and all who seemed in some way tainted by association with him.

Des, his message, and his association with Australian aliens Geoffrey Paxton--Anglican "outsider," [g8] and Robert Brinsmead [g9]--chronic heretic, were experienced as an invasive violation by defenders of the Adventist body of perfectionist doctrine and prophetic guidance. They became theological warriors analogous to the family values culture warriors like Falwell and Dobson in the wider evangelical world. The fury with which they carried out their warfare, however, is traceable not just to theological disagreements about the fallen human nature of Christ, but to the above mentioned subliminal anxiety and to the threatened loss of Ellen White as an idealized culture hero and guardian of Adventist boundaries and identity. Ford's message of Reformation righteousness by faith came across to these warriors as an effort to disintegrate the coherent, lifelong striving of body and spirit that Adventist perfectionism promised would result in personal salvation and in the ultimate cleansing of the cosmos. This alien righteousness promised not gospel liberation to them; it threatened worldly libertinism and demonic chaos instead. In the end, Des was accused of mental illness and demon possession in and around the Angwin rumor mill and he was implied to be the "Omega of heresy" in Lewis Walton's scurrilous and dishonest best-selling polemic.<sup>9</sup> The PUC campus was rumored to be engulfed in rampant sexual immorality, drunkenness, and drug use all as a consequence of the college administration's decision to harbor the heretic.

PUC administrators and faculty who were my mentors, main conversation partners, or both lost their jobs outright, or were given strong reasons to move on. Fred Veltman, veteran survivor of SDA turmoil, ended his career in the long denouement of the *Desire of Ages* project, only to see his years-long effort refracted, deflected, and buried by church administrators. Many young theology majors judged too close to Des Ford found themselves without prospects, and many pastors in various local conferences found themselves isolated, stigmatized, and ultimately driven from the

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8. The psychological analysis here and in the following few paragraphs draws upon the theories of psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut. For an introduction to this perspective and some of its potentials for illuminating historical actors, see Heinz Kohut, *Self Psychology and the Humanities: Reflections on a New Psychoanalytic Approach*, ed. and comp. Charles B. Strozier (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).

9. Lewis R. Walton, *Omega* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1981).

ministry. And that's just the story near where lived at the time. This was atmosphere in which I ducked.

A lot of Adventist baby-boomers like me, weary of subjecting ourselves to the Ellen White of the pedestal just gave up in mixed resentment and relief the effort to make her work in our lives. The cohort of younger college-educated Adventists who witnessed the theological acrimony concluded that Ellen White was too toxic to be dealt with and anyway did not speak to the lives they were living. The loss of Ellen White was, by the early 1980s, a widely accomplished fact and an ongoing process.

In closing, a few words about the recovery of Ellen White:

“Every woman should have a red dress . . .”

(Scene 4)

I hear that line, and I immediately react: What! and arouse the animal passions of the men her life?! But scenes 3 and 4 in *Red Books* are intended to present a winsome, human Ellen White, one whom religion has not yet repressed. This is a woman, the writers and our interviewees are saying, who enjoyed the ordinary pleasures of childish mischief and practical jokes. She was a woman who knew that women dress for women and who had empathy and compassion for those who maybe came out second best in the competition to look good. She had empathy because she herself liked to look good, and didn't mind standing out every now and then with the red dress. I should add that this humanizing message has been very popular with our audiences at talkback. People warm to the playful prophet without the pedestal.

I think the red dress scene is really the key suggestion the play has to make about the recovery of Ellen White, a suggestion that undoes the sexual suppression of the 19th century. I think the implications of this undoing are condensed in another line:

“You may be tired of this world we're living in, but I haven't even had a taste of it yet.

(Scene 6)

My last word on recovery stems from the frustrated rant of the young man whose caring but clueless father I play in Scene 6. The father is completely absorbed in end time events, and not a day goes by that he does not rehearse end time scenarios and outlooks to his son. To the son, it seems his father is tired of life. I think the father wants to avoid death. But to put so much energy into the denial of death is, as the existentialist philosophers and theologians have long told us, to deny life as well. The young man underscores his fear of this denial when he voices one of the jokes written into the play that has not gotten very many laughs. After listing some things he wants to do in life that he has not yet had the chance to do, he confesses, “And I don't want to go to heaven a virgin.” I don't know if the lack of laughter is due to audiences thinking it too crude a line, or too poignant.

What I am sure of is that it underscores basic existential realities that Adventists, as a community of faith, need to come to terms with. The living know that they shall die, but the dead know nothing--until the trumpet sounds and the Lord calls forth his own.

Birth, copulation, and death are realities that our hope in the coming of the Lord cannot and, in this life, ought not to deliver us from. They are rather the conditions that create the sequence of generations, the length of our days upon the earth which the Lord has given us. Blessed are they who die in the Lord, from henceforth, says the Spirit. But blessed also are they who marry and make love in the Lord, blessed are they who are born in the Lord, and again, blessed are they who die in the Lord from henceforth, that they rest now from their labors and that their works follow after them.

Adventists have for a long time now been building a blessed community in which people are born, live, love, and die in the Lord. This community may not be the hinge of cosmic history in quite the way our forefathers and foremothers thought. But it is special--something worth holding on to, renewing, and handing on. We have had a habit of trying to recruit people to Adventism by telling them they should join or stay because we alone have the Spirit of Prophecy; we have Ellen White. But an event like "Red Books" impresses upon us that now our community is the reason to belong. We study Ellen White because she is the foundation our own little earthen vessel, with its particular, peculiar treasure--an oil of idiosyncratic flavor and aroma, but which still sheds light for us and for those whom the Spirit is adding to our numbers. In a sense, then, we do not have Ellen White, she has us, and we need to understand the ways in which she has sometimes vexed, but also blessed our living, loving, and dying.