
E. G. White, M.D.?

Current Research Evaluates Her Counsels on Health

Roger W. Coon

Where did she get her information?"

The professor's tone of voice was urgent, his face betraying an intensity that would brook no nonsense as he insisted upon an immediate answer.

The 20-year-old Seventh-day Adventist Chinese-American student, pursuing a master's degree in Foods and Nutrition at Cornell University on a National Science Foundation Fellowship, must have inwardly trembled. At his insistence, she began explaining about Ellen G. White, author of an interesting volume entitled *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, which her instructor was holding in his open hand.

Helen Chen had enrolled in a basic History of Nutrition course taught by Dr. Clive M. McCay, professor of nutrition at Cornell's New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Her father, Dr. Philip S. Chen, served as chairman of the division of biology and chemistry at Atlantic Union College, Massachusetts, for nearly 30 years.

Her four brothers—Philip, Jr., John, George, and Sam—were already writing "M.D." after their signatures. Philip, Jr., had also earned a Ph.D. in Pharmacology (on a postdoctoral National Science Foundation Fellowship) at the University of Copenhagen. He was to become third in command at the prestigious National Institutes of Health, the United States government's chief medical research complex in suburban Washington, D.C.

Helen had just received her B.S. in Foods and Nutrition from Atlantic Union College. She had registered for McCay's course in September 1955, and had become acquainted with him through casual visits in his office in the Ani-

mal Husbandry Department where she had lab responsibilities.

In 1982 she would remember him as "a warm and genial man, a professor that was easy to talk with."¹ Upon learning that Helen was a Seventh-day Adventist and a vegetarian, McCay expressed an interest in knowing more about her church and its health teachings.

Helen put him in touch with her father, who initially sent McCay a copy of his *Heart Disease—Cause, Prevention, and Recovery* (one of some 14 books authored by the senior Dr. Chen). Chapter 15 ("Heart Disease and Religion") introduced the Cornell professor to Ellen G. White and her writings on health and nutrition. Ultimately, a copy of *Counsels on Diet and Foods* was provided at his request.

The latter volume, a posthumous compilation published 23 years after Mrs. White's death in 1915, is different from most books from her pen in that the original source and date of publication of each extract is indicated. And the history of nutrition was one of the areas of McCay's considerable professional expertise.

A Specialist in Nutrition History

McCay had received his Ph.D. in biochemistry at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1925, and had spent the next two years as a National Research Council Fellow in Biochemistry at Yale. In 1927 he had begun teaching at Cornell—and had never left. Some 35 years later, when McCay retired in 1962 at the age of 64, his massive *curriculum vitae* made mention of the fact that he had:

- Authored or coauthored more than 150 scientific publica-

tions on various aspects of animal and human nutrition, with special emphasis on the aging process.

- Cofounded (in 1942) the *Archives of Biochemistry* (today, *Archives of Biochemistry and Biophysics*), and served as its early editor.

- Served as editor of the Swiss journal, *Gerontologia*, holding honorary membership in the Swiss Society of Nutrition (only Swiss nationals are permitted to hold full membership).

- Served one year, each, as president of the American Gerontological Society (1949) and the American Institute of Nutrition (1951).

- Written a widely acclaimed book, which earned him a prestigious award and a gold medal.

Following McCay's death in 1967, the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* published a comprehensive life sketch,² while the *Journal of Nutrition* devoted 10 full pages to a retrospective look at his life and considerable contribution to science and humanity.³

McCay was an internationally acclaimed pioneer and authority in nutritional theory, research, and history. Mention a year and, computer-like, the professor would immediately tell the questioner the author and context of the reference.

Since he refused to date the beginning of modern scientific nutrition earlier than the turn of the 20th century, most of what writers and lecturers were saying in the 19th century was, in his opinion, complete nonsense.

Hence his urgent, insistent question to Helen Chen: "Where did she get her information?"

He would ask it again, several months later, of Francis D. Nichol,

editor of the *Review and Herald*. In 1958 Nichol interviewed the professor at his home in Ithaca, New York, upon learning of McCay's deep interest in this remarkable health-reformer who ended her elementary school education in the third or fourth grade because of a childhood accident.

Recounting the experience six years later, Nichol tells that he felt this Unitarian scientist would not understand the Adventist doctrine of inspiration and revelation (which concludes that Mrs. White's information came from a divine source). So he parried the question by reporting that her critics dismissed her by saying that she merely copied the writings of her contemporaries in health reform.

"Nonsense!" McCay exploded. "I simply cannot accept that explanation: it creates a much bigger problem than it resolves!"

"How so?" inquired the somewhat surprised editor.

"If she merely copied her contemporaries, how did she know which ideas to borrow and which to reject, out of the bewildering array of theories and health teachings current in the 19th century? Most were quite irrational and have now been repudiated! She would have had to be a most amazing person, with knowledge beyond her times, in order to do this successfully," he argued, rejecting the so-called "plagiarism" theory.⁴

McCay subsequently became so engrossed in his personal research into Ellen White's writings on nutrition that he gave a lecture to the men's club of his Unitarian church in Ithaca on April 9, 1958, and then presented the same data at lectures before various scientific bodies around the United States during the next several years.⁵

On December 18, 1958, in a Christmas greeting to his former student, Helen Chen (now Mrs. Frank Chung), McCay wrote:

If I were to start life again I

would like to be an Adventist. I believe their philosophy has the best solution of the problems of living amidst the strains of the American culture. I have only made a slight beginning of discovering the wisdom of Mrs. White.⁶



Helen Chen-Chung



Dr. Clive M. McCay

Were Dr. McCay still alive, he probably would have no cause to change his final assessment of Mrs. White's writings on nutrition: "No better overall guide is available today." For just in the decade of the 1980s, science has overwhelmingly corroborated her advanced health concepts.

Modern Corroboration

In July 1980 the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health, Education, and Welfare (today, Health and Human Services), jointly issued their recommended "Dietary Guidelines for Americans": (1) Eat a variety of foods (2) Maintain ideal weight (3) Avoid too much fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol (4) Eat foods with adequate starch and fiber (5) Avoid too much sugar (6) Avoid too much sodium (7) If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation.⁷

These guidelines sound "old hat" to us in the early 1990s, although they were fairly new ideas a decade or two ago. But Ellen White was talking about these concepts nearly a century before modern researchers arrived at these conclusions.

In June 1982, a report was jointly released by the National Academy of Sciences and the National Research Council, entitled *Diet, Nutrition, and Cancer*. This significant document resulted from a two-year study on the link between diet and cancer. Its conclusions were similar to those of the report cited above: by making certain changes in one's diet, a person may substantially reduce the risk of various forms of cancer. Suggested reforms included eating largely fruits, whole grains, and vegetables, and reducing consumption of fats, sugar, salt, and alcohol.⁸

If Ellen White were alive today, her instinctive reaction would probably be, "So what else is new?" She was presenting these ideas in the period 1863-1890!

In February 1983 Walter S. Ross, editor of the American Cancer Society's *Cancer News*, published an article, "At Last, An Anti-Cancer Diet." In the very first paragraph, Seventh-day Adventists in California were reported as having a much lower rate of colon/rectal cancer than other Americans. Later in the article he stated:

According to studies made in different parts of the world, the incidence of breast, colon, and prostate cancer is significantly lower among people who eat lots of vegetables. This "startling finding," says Walter Troll, professor of environmental medicine at New York University, suggests that vegetables contain substances "capable of inhibiting cancer in man."⁹

Five months later the wonders of fiber were touted in another article that summarized Audrey Eyton's book, *The F-Plan Diet*. In brief, its message is: "By increasing your intake of dietary fiber from fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain cereal foods—and eating fewer fats and refined sugars—you will feel more satisfied on fewer calories," a significant factor in weight loss.¹⁰

In 1985 the message was beginning to reach an increasing number of Americans. A Gallup poll that summer showed that 24 percent of Americans were eating less meat than formerly, adding that "Americans are becoming semi-vegetarians"—40 million adults! Other statistics of interest: 52 percent of Americans agreed that "no one really needs to eat meat more than once or twice a week," 37 percent believed that "vegetarians are probably healthier than most Americans," and 72 percent agreed that vegetarianism is not "just a fad that will pass."¹¹

But there was still considerable room for improvement. Three years later, two National Cancer Institute researchers, Blossom H. Patterson and Gladys Block, reported in effect that "the American diet is lousy and people are dying because of it." As the San Bernardino, California, *Sun* interpreted it under a banner headline: "Americans Dying Because of Diet." The study reported that nutritionally impoverished and/or defective diet is estimated "to contribute to about 35 percent of all cancer deaths."¹²

Four months later, in July 1988, C. Everett Koop released the "first ever nutrition report by a U.S. surgeon general." Based upon more than 2,500 scientific articles, his prescription was: "Less fat, more vegetables and fruit."¹³

The big news had to wait until 1990, when Dr. Dean Ornish, researcher at the University of California, San Francisco, announced that a largely vegetarian diet could actually reverse arterial blockage built up by cholesterol. One of his patients, earlier placed on the American Heart Association's program, which reduces fat in the diet to 30 percent of total calories, actually *increased* arterial blockage from 37 percent to 77 percent in one year! Then, with a change to the Ornish regimen, the blockage was reduced to 59 percent. Commenting on a landmark study of 6,500 persons conducted by Cornell University in 1990, Ornish wrote: "Meat. Real food for real death."¹⁴

When it comes to tobacco use, Dr. Alton Oschner, professor of thoracic surgery at Tulane University Medical School, was among the first to make the definitive link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer in 1954.

In 1990, the first detailed study of cigarette smoking and heart attacks in women found that smoking more than triples their risk. However, if they quit, the risk declined to that of a nonsmoker within about three years, according to a report in the December 1990 *New England Journal of Medicine*. More than 10 studies have shown a similar pattern in male subjects.

Heart disease, the leading cause of death in both sexes, "and the biggest cause of death in smoking-related deaths," now accounts for approximately 115,000 of America's annual 390,000 deaths attributed to smoking.¹⁵

In 1863 Ellen White characterized tobacco as a "slow," "deceitful," and "malignant" poison.¹⁶ By 1886 she had slightly modified the statement to read: "A

slow, insidious, but most malignant poison."¹⁷

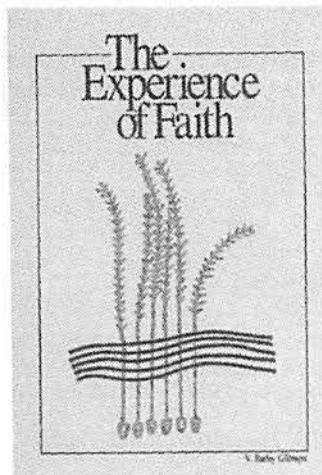
With regard to lung cancer, the physiologists and pathologists tell us it takes about 20 years to incubate a full-blown case ("slow"); those who are saved are not smokers who wait until symptoms develop, but rather those who have routine chest X-rays ("deceitful," "insidious"). Mrs. White's characterization of tobacco as a "most malignant poison" needs no comment today.

The Adventist Life-style

Between 1958 and 1965 a study of 50,000 Seventh-day Adventists (with 50,000 non-Seventh-day Adventists as a control group) was conducted in California by researchers from Loma Linda University. As compared with the general public, Seventh-day Adventists suffered only:

- 20 percent as much lung cancer.
- 5 percent as much mouth, throat, and larynx cancer.
- 32 percent as much bronchitis and emphysema.
- 28 percent as much bladder cancer.
- 34 percent as much esophageal cancer.
- 13 percent as much cirrhosis of the liver.
- 72 percent as much breast cancer.
- 65 percent as much digestive tract cancer.
- 62 percent as much leukemia.
- 61 percent as much ovarian cancer.
- 54 percent as much uterine cancer.
- 66 percent of all other cancer.
- 55 percent as much coronary heart disease.
- 65 percent as much other heart disease.
- 54 percent as many strokes.
- 55 percent as much diabetes.
- 42 percent as much peptic ulcer.
- 31 percent as many suicides.

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The Experience of Faith, by V. Bailey Gillespie (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1988; 263 pp.; paperback).

Reviewed by Ronald Strasadowsky.

Drawing upon an amazing number of publications on faith development, Gillespie manages to reduce the precise language of research and scholarship into an easy-to-read introductory book on this

important subject. Anyone who wishes to know more about how faith grows through the stages of life or who wants to help others to see the faith experience as part of life—instead of seeing it as an academic topic for seminars or as an emotional high in charismatic meetings—will find the book useful.

Gillespie's premise is valid: "All of life has religious significance for the person who can see this significance ... To talk of religious experience is to talk of life itself ... We sense God's presence because we bring an attitude of expectation to the events of life" (p. 39).

By extending our understanding of what faith is, the author encourages young people with a very narrow view of faith to realize that faith is not entirely lacking in their experience. By stretching his definition of faith into every direction, Gillespie persuades me that I am not as far away from that special kind of religious experience, which is more than "just a cognitive worldview" (p. 75). For him, faith is seen in relationships, but is "also a feeling, an experience, an attitude" (p. 73).

While there has been a lot of literature on the development of faith as an ongoing quest for intellectual orientation, this book draws attention to the emotional and social dimensions of faith. Gillespie tells a personal story to illustrate his conviction that the presence of God and the "religious experience [are] often perceived in relationships and in contact with others":

Once after flying from Portland, Oregon, to Atlanta, Georgia, I was whisked away to a mountain retreat where members of a Christian community were spending four days away from the

anxieties of living and creating an environment for a few days of complete meditation and fellowship. After some days of study and prayer, the retreat closed with a Lord's Supper service and a sharing time of testimony. The fellowship, the isolation, the environment, and the meeting itself created an "experience." We sensed God's presence even though what was occurring could be explained by mere psychological terms if one wished. We renewed friendship with each other and with God. (p. 55)

Following three introductory chapters that deal with the theological, philosophical and psychological assumptions of his study, Gillespie turns his attention toward the practical. He devotes one chapter to each of the seven typical periods in our lives in which we are invited to explore and expand our own faith experience. He attaches a descriptive adjective to the kind of faith that characterizes them: borrowed, reflected, personalized, established, reordered, reflective, and resolute.

Dialogue readers in the 18-28 age bracket would fit into the situation that Gillespie calls "established faith." Some readers, however, may still find themselves experiencing the features of the "personalized faith" which characterize the previous stage: "sudden enthusiasms," "outright rejection," and "personal upheaval and reorganization" (pp. 80, 81). Quoting Cobble, the author suggests that teens have a tendency to see faith less "associated with some creed and ... more as a personal relationship." During this period the adolescent separation from parents and teachers is followed up by either a new interest in religion or by greater distance from the religious views of childhood. (Readers interested in a more detailed study of the 18-28 age group may want to turn to Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years*, or, those who read German, to Friedrich Schweitzer, *Lebensgeschichte und Religion*.)

While this book can rightfully claim that faith is "multicolored and multivariied" (p. 73), thus justifying its panoramic view of the faith experience, it would be difficult to do further research on so many aspects at once. Perhaps one day the author will explain more fully how the deficiencies in Christian education, as listed in the last chapter, could be remedied.

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• 59 percent as many deaths attributed to other medical causes during the period of the study.¹⁸

Concerning life expectancy, a 1988 study revealed that the average 35-year-old Seventh-day Adventist male in California might

expect to live to 82, nine years longer than a non-Seventh-day Adventist male, with female life expectancy being 7.6 years longer than their counterparts.¹⁹

Two studies conducted in Europe a decade ago confirmed the accuracy of the results from the American studies of Seventh-day Adventist life-style. In Nor-

way, after a 17-year study covering all Adventists in this Scandinavian nation, researchers concluded in 1981 that the national budget for health care could be substantially reduced if the general population were as motivated to take care of themselves as were Seventh-day Adventists.²⁰

In neighboring Denmark, in

1982, the state Cancer Registration Office in Copenhagen, which had kept track of 750 Seventh-day Adventist males over a 35-year period, reported that only one in 10 Adventists developed cancer, whereas the rate for the general Danish population was one in four during the same period.²¹

More Scientific Confirmation

Norman M. Kaplan, professor of internal medicine and head of the hypertension section of the University of Texas' Southwestern Medical School, in Dallas, is considered one of the world's foremost authorities on high blood pressure.

Speaking to more than 1,000 health-care professionals at a "Life-style Medicine" convention in Loma Linda in the summer of 1983, Dr. Kaplan interrupted himself to address the Seventh-day Adventists in his audience and, making an oblique reference to Ellen White, said:

You as Adventists may have espoused a certain dietary lifestyle on the basis of faith, in the past; but now you can practice it on the basis of scientific evidence. Hopefully you will not [go back and re-] join the midstream, but [rather] adhere to your health heritage.²²

The following March 5 delegates to another medical convention in Loma Linda heard from William Herbert Foege, M.D., M.P.H., director of the Centers for Disease Control of the U.S. Public Health Service, in Atlanta. He declared, emphatically, "You Seventh-day Adventists are now the role model for the rest of the world."²³

And so we, along with Dr. Clive McCay, may well inquire, "Where did she get her information?"

Added longevity didn't come to Seventh-day Adventists by accident. Ellen White, herself, wrote in 1897:

I have had great light from the Lord upon the subject of health reform. I did not seek this light; I did not study to obtain it; it was given to me by the Lord to give to others.²⁴

With Peter we may say with confidence and surety, "We have not followed cunningly devised fables." On the contrary, "we have also a more sure word of prophecy, whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:16, 19, KJV).

NOTES

1. Letter, Camarillo, California, December 6, 1982, p. 1.
2. "Clive Maine McCay (1898-1967)—A Biographical Sketch," *The Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, vol. 53 (July 1968), p. 69.
3. "Biographical Notes From the History of Nutrition," *Journal of Nutrition*, vol. 103 (Jan. 1973), pp. 1-10.
4. Francis D. Nichol, *Why I Believe in Mrs. E. G. White* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1964), pp. 57-59.
5. See Roger W. Coon, *A Gift of Light* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1983), pp. 43-51. Dr. McCay's material was published as a series of three articles in the *Review and Herald*, "A Nutritional Authority Discusses Mrs. E. G. White" (February 12, 19, and 26, 1959); reprinted in *ibid.*, with slight abridgement, January 8 and 15, 1981.
6. Cited in Coon, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
7. U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Human Services, *Nutrition and Your Health: Guidelines for Americans* (Home & Garden Bulletin, No. 231, 1980), p. 1.
8. Committee on Diet, Nutrition, and Cancer; Assembly of Life Sciences, National Research Council, *Diet, Nutrition, and Cancer* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1982).
9. *Reader's Digest* (February 1983), pp. 78-82; this quotation is on p. 79.
10. Audrey Eyton, "The Amazing F-Plan Diet," *Reader's Digest* (July 1983), pp. 83-86.

11. Reported in the General Conference *Communique* (September 12, 1985), p. 1.

12. San Bernardino, California, *Sun*, (March 13, 1988), p. A-6.

13. "A Call to Get the Fat Out," *U. S. News & World Report* (August 8, 1988), pp. 59-61.

14. "A New Menu to Heal the Heart," *Newsweek* (July 30, 1990), pp. 58, 59. Dr. Ornish's statement was quoted in "For a Better Life, Don't Eat Any Beef," *U.S.A. Today* (int. ed.) (December 19, 1990), p. 5-A.

15. "Heart Attack Risk Tripled by Smoking, Women Told," *Washington Post* (January 25, 1990), p. A-3.

16. Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts* (Battle Creek, Mi.: Steam Press, 1864), IVa, p. 128.

17. Manuscript 29, 1886, pp. 1-4.

18. "Summary of Results of Adventist Mortality Study—1958-65," unpublished report, Loma Linda University School of Health, undated, 2 pp. See also Roland L. Phillips, "Cancer Among Seventh-day Adventists," *Journal of Environmental Pathology and Toxicology*, 3:157.

19. "The Healthful Lives of Adventists," *Washington Post*, weekly Health Section (November 22, 1988), n.p.

20. H. J. Smit, "Norwegians Study Seventh-day Adventists," *Adventist Review* (June 25, 1981), p. 32.

21. Thorvald Kristensen, "Danish Research Supports Seventh-day Adventist Lifestyle," *Adventist Review* (December 2, 1982), p. 23.

22. Cited in Far Eastern Division *Outlook* (August 1983), p. 12.

23. Cited in Roger W. Coon, "The Health Reform Vision—'The Cure,'" unpublished monograph, Ellen G. White Estate, Silver Spring, Maryland (February 27, 1991), p. 8.

24. Manuscript 29, 1897, cited in Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Diet and Food* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assoc., 1938), p. 493.

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