

In his book *Forging a Real World Faith*, Gordon MacDonald notes that when Christians are confronted with dissonance between their faith and their daily lives, they either become critical of the outside world and withdraw from it, or develop a “two-track style of living” involving a church-time and non-church-time life-style. In either case, they do not share Christianity with “real world” people.

Keeping Faith in the Real World

by
Ann
Gibson

These roles are easy to play. I have played them. Perhaps you have too. The first role—withdrawal—I played deftly as an accounting teacher at Walla Walla College in the northwestern United States. It was easy to do in a small town dominated by a Seventh-day Adventist college. I recall one morning in Sabbath school when the teacher asked: “How many of you invited a non-Adventist over for a meal this week?” Hardly seeing a show of hands, he extended the question to “this month” and finally “this quarter”. With a start, I realized that I didn’t even know the *names* of any non-Adventists, let alone being acquainted with any well enough to invite them home for a meal.

Initially, I played the role of the two-track style of living while in graduate school, working on a Ph.D. in business at Washington State University (WSU) in Pullman. I moved to WSU fully aware of its unique reputation as the “No. 1 Party

School in the U.S.A.” as listed by *Playboy* magazine. What this would mean in terms of atmosphere didn’t occur to me until I actually arrived on campus. The first evening, my friendly next-door neighbor invited me to share a meal—with the main course of oysters Rockefeller! I realized that I was a lot farther from the small Adventist community than the 120 miles of road that separated the two educational institutions.

I also discovered that my new associates came from totally different backgrounds, with different experiences and views than mine. I was dumbfounded when my officemate, upon learning that I was a Christian, told me she had never met one before. I hadn’t realized that anyone in the United States had never before met a Christian! I also discovered that my faith as it stood was not the kind that could thrive, or even survive, in the atmosphere of WSU. I wanted to apply my faith to my new surroundings, but I didn’t know how.

Although I made friends with some of my classmates and teachers, I really didn’t understand them or their culture, which was so foreign to mine:

- Dana, a graduate student who lived with a faculty member and who one day asked me what was the meaning of life;
- Joe, the economics professor whose every illustration was on the utility of beer and who ended every Friday lecture with the hope that the weekend parties would be good;
- Doug, a faculty member whose research interests in sexual harassment led him to believe that the primary legacy of Christianity to the world was the demeaning of women;
- Bob, a faculty member whose drinking habits were extensive enough that one never knew which day was hangover day—resulting in great fear for the students, for one never knew whether he or she would be met with harsh or friendly tones when entering his office;
- Anne, my neighbor whose life-style made her apartment a revolving door—I finally gave up learning the names of the current man living next door, lest I call him by the name of a previous occupant;

- John, who once couldn't take a test because he drank too much at a fraternity party, jumped out a second-floor window, and ended up in the hospital with a concussion.

In the university's secular atmosphere and under the influence of the panic, stress, and deadlines that graduate programs can produce, it was easy to do everything possible to fit in, and leave religion to Saturday mornings at the church in the next town. But ultimately it is not possible to live with such dissonance. I had to seek a real world faith or opt for no faith at all. I chose to seek.

I reasoned that Jesus knew how to live faithfully in the real world. The truth He spoke was understood by those of the streets. In fact, it was so well understood that He was accused of associating with "sinners and tax collectors" and not paying attention to the religious leaders of the day (Luke 5:30). Jesus met with "real world" people, many of whom were similar to those I met every day. For example, Zacchaeus, the businessman (M.B.A. student), the woman taken in adultery (whose life showed similarities to my neighbor's life-style), the 10 lepers, the demon-possessed men, the blind men on the road to Jericho, the woman at the well, the man by the pool at Bethesda, the Syro-Phoenician woman, and the rich young ruler.

The New Testament portrays Jesus in many situations—but never does He appear to be withdrawing to isolate Himself from the world or leaving His "church" life-style behind Him as He goes about His daily business.

My seeking occurred in three steps. First, I made friends with God. This doesn't mean that I did not have a relationship with God prior to graduate school; the friendship I had merely took on a different meaning. Initially there was an element of panic as I viewed my situation. There was also loneliness as I sought for someone who understood my plight. I began to talk to God about many things: (1) the people I met, (2) the questions for which I had no answer, (3) my questions about my own faith, and (4) the role and power of Christianity in a secular world. Answers didn't come quickly or easily, but some did come over time. Most importantly, I became convinced that God cared about

the people I met every day, and was eager to show me how to develop a real-world faith.

Something else also happened: I made friends with other Christians. Perhaps some Adventist graduate students at public universities are blessed with strong local Adventist churches that count spiritually like-minded students among their members. I have heard of such situations, and know that the friendships formed under those circumstances stand the test of time. But I was not so blessed. There were few Adventist graduate students at WSU, and I began missing the Christian fellowship I was accustomed to. So I sought out Christian friends by attending Christian churches on Sunday. I found that there were Christians in other departments at the university. It was affirming to just stop and say "hello" during the week. From these friends I learned how to be more open about my own faith in a non-offensive manner. In my Adventist education, I had been taught how to share my faith in a Christian world; my non-Adventist Christian friends showed me how to share

my faith in a secular world. In doing so, they also taught me how to strengthen my convictions.

Third, I made friends with the secular people around me. At first, it was easy to conform to their pattern of thinking and acting, because I did not want to be different and I was seeking friends. It was also easy to go to the opposite extreme by associating primarily with other Christians because I felt so much more comfortable with them. I finally realized that the "real world" was composed primarily of people for whom Christianity had no real-life meaning, and that only by seeking their friendships could I earn the right to share with them what I knew.

Graduate school changed the way I look at the world, my faith, and the people I meet. By the grace of God, I am no longer satisfied to either withdraw from the world or to carry on a life-style that relegates Christianity to Sabbath morning. I left WSU with a host of friends—some who still are on their way to meeting God, some who have met Him and know Him well. But most importantly, I too have a deeper friendship with God. And to think I received all that, plus a degree! □

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The cafeteria is 50 yards ahead. There are 653 students eating lunch. You have exactly 12 minutes to share Christ with each one on a deep, personal level. Ready, set . . ."