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In his book *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*, surgeon Richard Selzer tells of the night

he stood by the bed of a young woman recovering from facial surgery. Her mouth was twisted with palsy. Almost clownish. There had been a tumor on her cheek. To remove it, Selzer had had to cut a tiny twig of the facial nerve—the one to the muscles of her mouth. Her mouth would have this awkward twist the rest of her life. A young man was in the room with her, standing on the opposite side of the bed. Together, this couple seemed to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from the surgeon, private.

Who are they? Selzer asked himself. He and this wry-mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily?

“Will my mouth always be like this?” she asked, looking his way.

“Yes, it will. It’s because the nerve was cut,” Selzer explains.

She nods and is silent.

But the young man smiles. “I like

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it,” he says. “It’s kind of cute.”

All at once Selzer knew who the man was. He understands and lowers his gaze.

Unmindful of the surgeon’s presence, the young husband bends to kiss his wife’s crooked mouth, Selzer so close he could see how he twists his own lips to accommodate hers—to show her that their kiss still works.¹

One wonders how God twisted His mouth to breathe into Adam’s nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7).² Can you imagine it? The gift of life is conferred on humanity in an intimate face-to-face encounter. Like a creative artist, God forms a work of art out of moist reddish clay. A bond with this piece of art begins to grow in the gentle process of making. Then comes that incredible moment. The final touch. Who would have thought it? Only God! Living lips are placed against cool earthen nostrils. A silent puff of life giving breath moves from God’s mouth to His lifeless clay sculpture. Earthen lips flush with life. Cold expressionless eyes open to see God’s dancing eyes, God’s smiling face still

very close, God's hands still cupping either side of his face? It's Adam's first experience—face-to-face encounter with God. What a moment! What intimacy!

Genesis was good news for the generation of Israelites preparing to enter the Promised Land. People uncertain of their identity and what purpose there was in life or in their future. They were a people who needed to get their spiritual and moral bearings in the midst of an immoral God-denying culture, a people struggling to believe that the Promised Land was far better than Egypt or any home they might make for themselves in the wilderness. They needed to stand apart and be different from their pagan neighbors.

So do we, God's end-time people! You and I! What better image can be given us than that of God cupping Adam's face in His hands and His twisting His lips against Adam's earthen nostrils to bring life? That God made us in His image? After His likeness? That our spiritual and moral identity come directly from God?

It makes me think about the different theories of human nature envisioned in our world today (and our recent faith and science dialogue as an Adventist community). Evolutionists, sociologists, psychologists, New Agers, and Marxists, Buddhists, Muslims, and varying shades of

Christians have each dressed human beings up with this or that form of being. Marxists tell us we are made by our society. Evolutionists tell us we are the high end of natural biological development where the fittest survive. New Agers tell us we are gods and part of a larger cosmic consciousness. Existentialists tell us we have an open road ahead where each of us determines our selves by our choices and the things we value. French existentialist Jean Paul Sarte writes that "man is like a bubble of consciousness in an ocean of nothingness, bobbing around until the bubble pops."

If we don't have a clear sense of inner identity, we can feel lost and anonymous amid the billions of people with whom we share this planet. The future can seem absurd, empty, meaningless. Much of the moral breakdown in our society today and the dysfunction in our families comes because there is confusion about who we really are.

But the good news of Genesis is that we have been made in the image of the God who loves us and is at work to redeem us! This mouth-to-nostril awakening from inert dust is unique, significant. Very few biblical scholars today would say it really happened. Nevertheless it is the centerpiece of biblical teaching about who we are—our purpose in living, our accountability, our rights, dignity, and moral character.

Naomi Rosenblatt writes that, "being made in the image of God invests us with a portable spiritual center."³ Wherever we go, that portable spiritual center goes with us. "If we define ourselves as being made in the image of God, no one else can ever define us to ourselves."⁴ With this sense of spiritual identity firmly embedded within us, no one can ever usurp it or whittle it away—even when we are undergoing difficult life passages. That's what Israel needed to hear so long ago. That's what we need to hear today as God's remnant people on the verge of the heavenly Promised Land. It must ever be part of our end-time gospel message to our confused and lost world.

Genesis' mouth-to-nostril awakening tells us that not only does God have the power to bring something out of nothing—including the nothingness of our lives—but He also has the heart to do so. This has been affirmed at Calvary where the lips of Jesus were shaped with words of woe, anguish, and forgiveness. Revelation promises us that in the new creation the face of God will

once again be intimately seen by human beings (22:4). Lips will be shaped with words of blessing and a joyful smile (Zeph. 3:17). We will wonder at that face (2 Thess. 1:10). Right now in the midst of our hurt and trials and angst, we are invited to ponder those three incredible moments of divine love: creation, cross, consummation.

Praise God with wonder! Who are we that God thinks of us so? □

REFERENCES

1. Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), pp. 45, 46.
2. Genesis states that God breathed into Adam's "nostrils" rather than "mouth-to-mouth." This is significant in that it displays the Creator's respect for the intended intimacy, which kissing would express, between man and woman. Adam's first kiss would be with his wife, Eve. God would not intrude on that privilege in any way. The tenderness and intimacy experienced in kissing is an integral dynamic of human sexuality which God gifted humans with, a gift belonging to the human realm and not the divine. It would also mitigate against implications of male-to-male sexual contact.
3. *Wrestling With Angels* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1995), p. 15.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

