

Spirituality and Its Implications for Education

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I have been asked in this talk to relate spirituality to its implications for education. The title supposes the existence of a significant link between human nature and the selection of both content and methodology in formal and informal learning situations in the home, the school and in the broader context of education as a life-long process. The underlying questions to this discussion might therefore be defined as:

- What is our spiritual nature as human beings?
- What are the subsequent implications for education?

In addressing these central questions I will be endeavouring to substantiate the view that the terms Spirituality and Education are, or at least should be, synonymous. They are in reality, though not in current practice perhaps, interchangeable terms. In fact, the Latin derivative of the word “educate” is *educare* which translates as to draw out the existing gems of divine virtue.

Perhaps the most useful starting point is to tie the discussion of spirituality and its implications for education to the threads of thought provided in the opening remarks by Bill Barnes and ABS chair Hiroshi Tsunoi. First, they challenged us to consider the proposition that spirituality is the generating force of the universe, a force which manifests itself, through the human form, in the expression of virtues. In effect, they also challenged us to reconsider our often resistant views about the phenomenon of change which Bahá’u’lláh describes, in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, as a necessary quality and an essential attribute of this world, and of time and place. (I hope this means that we can look forward to escaping the stress of change in the next world.)

And as to the final thread, I make the observation that whilst we seem to have a pretty good grasp of content, that is, how we should behave in a spiritual or moral sense, the real challenge is in finding methodologies which effectively impart this knowledge. It implies the need for methodologies which are consistent with the spiritual principles we espouse. This is to suggest that in addition to providing us with knowledge, the Writings of the Faith are also a source of guidance and inspiration as to how this knowledge should be applied.

It follows that the relationship between the knowledge and the application of spiritual principles is largely determined by our own spiritual perceptions or insights and I’d suggest that the making of such connections is the main potential of the forum offered by this ABS Conference. It is a process of enrichment that will hopefully lead to changes, not only in understanding, but also in practice and action.

One common tendency in the field of education, and I’m referring to it here in its broadest sense, (so perhaps it is a common tendency in life) is the assumption that the future is an extension of the past. Yet we know from the latest Ridván message that what is needed and what is therefore possible in the Bahá’í community, and subsequently in society at large, is a new state of mind, a new paradigm of thought and action. Dr. David Ruhe, former member of the Universal House of Justice describes Bahá’í education as a “new paradigm waiting to be created” and it is with this notion of doing things differently than they

have perhaps been done in the past, in mind that I would like to build the following thoughts around. Even those of us who proclaim a need for change, a need to do things differently, are inclined to assume that all will be solved if we return to doing them the way they used to be done.

Yesterday we heard of the Daystar student who compared the past with the present and observed that children no longer contribute to family life what they did in the past. This observation illustrates the shift in society from a time of dependence, when children had a subservient role to play, to the present era of independence. Society now puts moral autonomy and the right to be an independent human being on a pedestal. But was this student implying that we need to totally return to the past or is it possible that in her observation she also spied scope for a new paradigm of belief and action?

What I'm suggesting is that this shift from dependence to independence is a reactionary one and in many respects represents a full pendulum swing. But should the pendulum swing all the way back or is there a middle ground to find between the oppression of dependency on the one hand and the disuniting influence of independency on the other. In his best selling book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey promotes the view that humankind now urgently needs an age of interdependence and it is this need for an integrated, holistic approach which underlies the processes I'd like to suggest. These processes have outgrown a linear, Newtonian view of life and are being transformed by quantum realizations.

The first question I posed was, "What is our spiritual nature as human beings?" This question is very much entwined with even bigger questions: "What is our reality?" and indeed, "What is the meaning of life?" There appears to be two basic schools of thought related to the question of our spiritual nature.

One proposes that by our nature we are human beings who are trying to be spiritual. It is a view which suggests that along with our social, emotional, intellectual and physical development, we also have a spiritual character which must be addressed. The aims of education in the secular system in which I have taught for many years in Australia, for instance, include spiritual education as a valid area of the curriculum. It is interesting to note, however, that it is an area which has essentially been put in the "Too hard basket" due to the frustration and conflict caused by the question of whose spiritual values are the right ones.

The other view of spirituality is that by our nature, rather than being human beings who are trying to be spiritual, we are in reality spiritual beings who happen to be having a human experience. It is a subtle but fundamental shift in perception which has major implications for the process of education. It proposes that rather than spirituality being an adjunct, on a par, at the very best, with other areas of developmental growth, it is in fact the core of our very being. Is it possible that our physical existence is only a mirage, a fleeting stage of being designed to facilitate our spiritual growth? Does it suggest that the purpose in life is to have a *life of purpose* - a life of purpose in which we are developing spiritual attributes - spiritual arms and legs - necessary in some other plane of existence.

The view of spirituality which maintains that, in our highest state, we are human beings trying to be spiritual, assumes that children are born as empty vessels waiting to be filled and constantly corrected. It perpetuates a belief in a duality between "good" and "bad", "right" and "wrong", "light" and "dark". An alternative view is that the only reality is goodness and right action. In other words our reality is our

spiritual characteristics and wrong action is simply the absence of good, just as darkness is the absence of light. You can walk into a room and turn on a light switch but have you ever found a switch for the dark?

The view that we are primarily human beings justifies the right of parents, teachers and other educators to impose spiritual attributes on children, to label them, and leads to such common practices as implied by the term “do as I say, not as I do.” This is the “jug to mug” theory. The jug—in this case the adult—fills up the little mug, the child, who eventually becomes a jug filling up other little mugs. In Australia, a mug is someone who does something stupid and I’d like to suggest that the “jug to mug” theory is for mugs only.

But, unfortunately, it represents a dogmatic approach all too common in our homes and in our schools. It is the reason why so many youth reject religion, reject the authority of parents and reject the education being offered to them in search for answers that ring true with their reality as spiritual beings born full of potential.

Bahá’u’lláh affirms the view that, in reality, we are spiritual beings having a human experience when He tells us to “regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value.” And He goes on to emphasize that, “Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasure and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.” (*Gleanings*, p. 260) Furthermore He assures us that, “Upon the reality of man . . . (God) hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self.” (*Gleanings*, p. 65) and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá observes, “How many a child, though young in years, is yet mature and sound in judgment! How many an aged person is ignorant and confused! For growth and development depend on one’s powers of intellect and reason, not on one’s age or length of days” (*Selections*, p. 42).

The second question, given the two schools of thought I have endeavoured to identify, is to ask, what are the subsequent implications for education? That is, what does this tell us about the way we learn and therefore about the way we should teach children, whether it be in the home, the school or in our informal interactions with them including at community gatherings? I would also like to emphasize the point that there are some obvious implications here not only for teaching children but also for the way we teach the Faith in imparting it to others.

Once again it may be useful to use a framework that compares and contrasts traditional approaches to those that are beginning to emerge from the understanding, however dim, that we are in reality spiritual beings having a human experience, an experience which though temporal has eternal implications. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* Bahá’u’lláh reveals that His Message “. . . hath been sent down in a manner which amazeth the mind. . . So vast is its image that it hath encompassed all men ere their recognition of it.” This requires us to recognize that Bahá’ís don’t have a monopoly on doing things in a Bahá’í way. This is certainly true in the field of education, where many Bahá’í principles are being put into practice, and, to be honest, at this stage it is often being done by others more effectively.

But what we do have access to as Bahá’ís is the Creative Word of God. Without it other approaches can only provide a Band-Aid for a failing and flailing world. This re-emphasizes the point made earlier that the Writings are not only a source of knowledge (the WHAT) but also a guide to new methodologies (the HOW) that Bahá’í educators need to evolve. Whilst we are still very much in our infancy in this regard some of these principles and practices are already beginning to evolve. The comforting thought that we have 1,000 years to

get things right is worth keeping in mind as I'd suggest that evolving methodologies worthy of being identified with the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is a very challenging, often frustrating yet very exciting process.

It is clear that Bahá'u'lláh puts the ball for learning very much in our court. In the *Book of Certitude* He challenges, "strive thou to apprehend the meaning of the questions thou hast asked, that thou mayest become steadfast in the Faith of God" (Bahá'u'lláh. *The Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p.178). This is the principle of independent investigation in action. It confirms the importance of a metacognitive approach to education whereby learners are aware not only of what they are learning but why they are learning, how this learning will take place and where it will lead to. Isn't this principle also reflected throughout the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh? Doesn't He not only tell us what we need to know but also how we can best learn it and what the consequences will be? This is a major shift from the traditional view that teachers teach, learners learn, and never the twain shall meet, which translates, at least in the culture I'm from, to mean that "children should be seen and not heard." There is a Chinese saying which states, "He who asks a question may be a fool for a minute, but he who doesn't ask is a fool for a lifetime." In other words, education must equip students to ask questions and to analyze the answers they receive effectively.

Another traditional myth that I'd suggest is challenged by the realization that spirituality is inherent, and there to be drawn out, rather than something to be imposed or external to human nature, is the belief that learning is only genuine if it is arduous. In fact, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of the ideal state for learning suggests that the opposite to be true and that, in order to be effective, learning must be a joyful process. He says, "Joy gives us wings! In times of joy our strength is more vital, intellect keener and understanding less clouded. We seem better able to cope with the world and to find our sphere of influence." Isn't this what learning is all about—a keen intellect, clear understanding and finding our own sphere of influence?

There are many other implications for education that result from this analysis of our spiritual character. Due to the constraints of time it is only possible to touch briefly on some of these but suffice it to say that the implications for education are quite revolutionary . . . but this should not come as a surprise to those of us who accept Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, for what it is—a spiritual revolution.

In a recent address given to youth at the World Centre Dr. Peter Khan, member of the Universal House of Justice, spoke of a shift that needs to take place in the Bahá'í community which very much relates to education. He indicated that a new mindset was needed in the way we approach the development of the Faith. This challenges our linear assumptions about the way things happen. To date we have been event-focused, primarily concerned with the completion of important but isolated tasks. The challenge, as Dr. Khan puts it, has now become far more concerned with process, or the way things happen, and how they are related to other developments. He describes this as an integrated, holistic approach and it has major implications for the process of education. It is a principle implied in the process of development of institutes which need to be ongoing and directly related to the needs of the Four Year Plan.

This need for an holistic view of life is also reflected, for instance, in current understandings in education. The traditional view of human nature has led to a fragmented approach to learning whereby subject areas are placed into separate, isolated boxes and treated as such. This fragmentation is even more significantly reflected in our assumptions about how we learn. This has resulted in a learning hierarchy that places greatest emphasis on the intellect as reflected by intelligence tests. The verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical areas are typically given the greatest importance by schools and society. Current

research (and maybe it is actually ancient research resurfacing) suggests that there are multiple and equally valid ways of knowing in addition to these symbolic areas. This falls into place when we accept our reality as spiritual beings and leads to an appreciation that we also possess what might respectively be described as concrete and personal intelligences. Concrete intelligences typically include the visual (e.g., art), the auditory (e.g., music) and the kinaesthetic (e.g., dance) as important ways of knowing and it is more than coincidental, I'm sure, that the Four Year Plan calls for a greater focus on these areas especially amongst youth. Similarly, our interpersonal intelligence which is to do with our relationship with others (e.g., consultation) and the intrapersonal, relationship within ourselves (e.g., prayer and reflection) are also valid ways of knowing and evolving our spiritual core.

Perhaps the most refreshing dimension that the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh bring is the understanding and acceptance that learning is a trial and error process. This challenges the traditional view, especially in the field of moral or spiritual education, that you have failed unless you get it right the first time. Dr. Farzam Arbab, also a current member of the Universal House of Justice, in his book *Lectures on Bahá'í-Inspired Curricula* describes the process of education as a spiraling one. Throughout life we constantly return to themes at different, and hopefully more advanced, stages of growth. It can be likened to mountain climbing . . . the higher you ascend, despite slipping back from time to time, the wider the vision. I'm not sure, though, that we can ever reach the peak to this mountain!

Speaking of mountains I would like to conclude with reference to a very important valley. In this case the first of the *Four Valleys*, companion to the *Seven Valleys*, written by Bahá'u'lláh. In this stage of the quest for spiritual enlightenment He emphasizes the importance of the acceptance of self as a prerequisite for spiritual growth. "On this plane," He affirms, "the self is not rejected but beloved; it is well pleasing and not to be shunned." This acknowledgment of the importance of self-acceptance in the learning process brings the discussion to the question of self-esteem which in western education systems is now recognized as critical to the learning process.

In a culture which places so much emphasis on positive character development, I'm wondering how much significance the issue of self-esteem also plays in Japanese society. In Australia, there are a myriad of special programs designed to build the self-esteem of students. This is a positive response to an epidemic of low self-esteem amongst students. In fact, Australia and New Zealand have the highest suicide rates amongst youth in the world and little has been achieved in combating this trend. It raises the question of whether such programs of support are not succeeding because they fail to strike at the core of our reality, our spiritual identity. An alternative Bahá'í-inspired program, the Virtues Project, which is gaining momentum in Australia, takes a different approach to the concern for improved self-esteem. It maintains that high self-esteem is a natural outcome from living by spiritual principles. Again it is based on the belief that we are spiritual beings with potential which only has to be drawn out—not imposed. This suggests that many, if not all, social and emotional dilemmas can be effectively addressed through programs that recognize the central role that spiritual principles play in education.

'Abdu'l-Bahá plays the greatest tribute to the teachers of children describing their service as "the same as service to the Sacred Threshold and waiting upon the Blessed Beauty" (*Education*, p. 274). However He qualifies this acknowledgment with the proviso that it is conditional on doing it in His words, "in the right way" (*Education*, p. 272). It is clearly our role as parents, teachers, members of Spiritual Assemblies

and those simply interested in the process of education to discover “the right way.” We have a mandate to do this—one which allows scope for new ideas, trial and error, a sense of adventure and great excitement. The paradigm is there waiting for us to create it. In his opening talk, Bill Barnes described spirit as the energetic, unifying and generative power of the universe. Is this not also true of education?

And finally we might ponder the significance of these words, also from the *Four Valleys*, in considering spirituality and its implications for education:

The lover’s teacher is the Loved One’s beauty
His face their lesson and their only book.
Learning of wonderment, of longing love their duty
Not on learned chapters and dull themes they look.
The chain that binds them is His musky hair
The Cyclic Scheme, to them, is but to Him a stair.