

The Significance of the ABS Conference on Moral Education

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Abstract

As the introductory presentation at the 10th Annual Conference of the Association for Baha'i Studies in Japan, this speech conveys hope for enhanced and widened understanding of the processes of moral education. Taking a cue from Bahá'u'lláh's analogy of man "*as a mine rich in gems,*" (1) the author suggests the need to go beyond outdated "authoritarian" methods of moral education, toward broader approaches to discovery, development and exercise of the gifts and powers latent within each person. The concept of "moral authority" is reconsidered from the perspective of the highest hope, or highest good that can be identified. The concept of "good" broadens as a person or group's understanding of purpose enlarges from the physical, personal or local level toward the spiritual and universal. Other presentations on the program are introduced. The various topics can be seen as complex facets shedding light on a path toward realization of a moral perspective reflected in the words of 'Abdu'l-Baha: "*...man's supreme honor and real happiness lie in self-respect, in high resolves and noble purposes, in integrity and moral quality, in immaculacy of mind.*" (2)

The theme of this 10th Annual Baha'i Studies Conference is Moral Education. The focus is on the question, "What brings out the best in us?"

The word "education" in English comes from the Latin roots - to lead out. In Japanese the Chinese character suggest that we are "raising something" - *Kyou-iku* (raising a teaching). In either case, it suggests a power that moves from inside to outside. And this is an important fundamental point: Moral education is not so much about what we put in, but rather what we bring out of ourselves.

For quite some time, it seems that moral education has gotten a "bad reputation." First, there was the problem that "moral authority" was confused with "authoritarianism" and tyrannical approaches to

“inculcating” - that is, “pushing in” - moral teachings to the minds of children and youth. This was associated with the thought that children were at best, blank slates to be “written on” or at worst, “wild creatures” in need of “taming” through stiff restrictions. As “material development” became the focus of society, and as communities diversified as internationalization took hold, “moral pluralism” became the trend. Then such “moral education” of the “authoritarian” kind became extremely unpopular. However, although people widely agree that moral education of some kind is needed, the field of education is generally paralyzed at the thought of how to go about it.

If I could have one wish for this conference, it is that every one who participates here, will take away a refreshed and gladdened vision of the process of moral education. I hope that each you will clean out to cob webs of any old, dried, and brittle ideas of moral education and gain a new understanding of the challenge and the adventure of what it can mean to raise and bring out the best in ourselves, to illumine our powers, to expand our consciousness and to reflect and fulfill in our lives our highest reality, the qualities of heart and soul within us.

Last year at the ABS conference, when Dr. Kelly Snooks of NASA spoke of space science and its relation to religion, she gave a thought-provoking review of the kinds of questions that space scientists explore: Who are we? What is the Universe? What is our place in the universe? This year we focus, in a sense, on “inner space” with similar questions, “Who are we?” “What is our purpose?” “What are our powers?” “What are we effectively to do with them?” “Who or what will lead us to living the most fruitful and pleasing life possible?”

The Founder of the Bahai' Faith bids us to “*Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education alone can cause it to reveal its treasures to enable mankind to benefit therefrom.*” (1) This statement itself turns the process of moral education into a treasure hunt! We have gems within us and our purpose is to reveal them and cause others (all of mankind, not just ourselves or our families) to benefit from them.

Our friend, William Barnes, writer, scholar, former principal of Daystar International School made note that moral education is about

“turning ourselves inside out.” We learn about moral education by making *ourselves* the subject. We might start by taking a conscientious look at the powers we possess. What are they? Our physical powers include the powers of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. We also have some power of movement and physical expression. We have learned to extend all of these powers through the use of our cognitive or “rational” powers - the powers of comprehension, memory, reason and imagination. There is also an integrative power, some ability in us that connects and unites the workings of these powers. Abdu'l-Baha referred to it as the common faculty. (These days brain researchers are doing most interesting studies on this faculty which acts like a switching unit to our other functions.) We also have the powers of the heart - our emotions which give momentum and direction to our actions - up, down, toward, away from. We have a power of insight - the ability to reflect on what we are aware of. We can discern truth from falsehood, beauty, justice, wisdom. This power of discernment is our inner eye, or ears, our power to recognize the “divine” - or the highest good and a whole array of unseen “energies” or “virtues” - love, justice, patience. These are the powers we are concerned with in moral education. We have the power to know our own limitations and the power to limit ourselves so that we don't go beyond that which is beneficial to us. And we have the all-important power of will to direct our actions, or thoughts our expressions in any given direction. Without adequate development of our powers of insight, discernment and will, our powers of knowing and reasoning can as easily be used for evil purposes as for good.

Some powers that need to be educated for moral development:

Physical powers: sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste

Mental powers: comprehension, memory, reason imagination

Powers of the heart: emotions, reflection, insight, discernment,

recognition of “highest good,” will, boundary (limit) setting, virtues (love, patience, truthfulness, etc.)

The question of using these powers in a MORAL way, brings us to the threshold of deciding what is good! The question of good cannot be answered unless we ask, “good for what?” That is, what is the purpose we are trying to achieve? If we simply view ourselves from the animal perspective - physical survival, gaining pleasure and avoiding pain are good enough. Our physical senses will tell us all we need to know. Our rational powers, though, help us to build on our security over time and in cooperation with others. With powers of memory, reason and imagination we can become architects of groups working together in cooperation to increase our chances of survival, and pleasure, while hopefully minimizing pain. However, in a social organization if one person’s pleasure causes another person’s pain, this is not good. The thief may use his reasoning and imagination to bring himself greater gain, but the loss of social foundations of trust robs everyone, including the man himself of safety, dignity and honor.

Abdu’l-Baha has noted in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*:

...man’s supreme honor and real happiness lie in self-respect, in high resolves and noble purposes, in integrity and moral quality, in immaculacy of mind. They have, rather, imagined that their greatness consists in the accumulation, by whatever means may offer, of worldly goods.” (2)

Here we have a suggestion that there is even a greater good to be gained - “self-respect, high resolves, noble purposes...” not simply accumulation of material pleasures. This perspective suggests that our real purposes involve developing and exercising our higher powers - knowing and respecting the powers of insight, of will and of discernment. If development of these powers along with our physical and rational powers (that is, integrity) is the purpose of moral education, then we must consider that moral education is not simply having ourselves or our children memorize and follow a list of social rules.

We must, in developing our concept of moral education, deal with the issue of “moral authority”. As mentioned above, the idea of “moral

authority” has recently been tarnished by its association with “authoritarianism”. It may help to reset our context of “authority” if we recognize that the root meaning of authority is the same as the word “augment” - that is, the power to increase. What has the power to increase our spiritual and moral potential? We may observe that everyone has some sort of view of moral authority - whether it is the person that believes his honor and happiness is limited to his own self-centered good, whether it is working for family name, or material gain, or within the context of groups or governments or ideologies. Developing our moral powers is about seeking and recognizing the highest good we are able to, and then connecting our will to the discipline and training that “Higher Good” requires of us. What do we believe will bring about our highest honor and greatest good? That is our moral authority.

Development of moral powers, then, involves numerous aspects that are to be explored here: Our powers, our sense of purpose, our faith in the authority of that which we believe will bring out in us our highest potential. These are among the topics that will be explored in this gathering.

Consider the moral effect of exposure to BEAUTY as we share Dr. Sonda’s experience of the Terraces on Mount Carmel at the Baha’i World Center in Haifa, Israel. Abdu’l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi both mentioned that the heart of the Japanese are affected more by Beauty than Truth. I have observed this to be true. I recall the words of a student of mine who was describing her experience of seeing a beautifully lighted city. She remarked, “In the face of that beauty, I could do nothing bad.” She meant, I think, that when experiencing the pure delight of something beautiful, we are motivated to hold that experience in all purity, not polluting it with anything the least bit dark or negative or selfish. This response of awe and upliftment as one experiences the joy of beauty is true not just of the Japanese but I believe true of many other cultures and peoples.

Dr. Sonda also offers a presentation on “Heroism” - the important theme of moral example.

Mr. Brisdon’s presentation on “Moral Education in Community” includes the following points.

1. Standards of moral education articulated by Baha'u'llah, Abdu'l-Baha, and Shoghi Effendi;

2. The Terraces Projects as a metaphor for moral development;
3. The challenge of the UHJ has given for moral leadership;
4. Moral education in the Maxwell community;
5. The basis for moral education..

Mr. Tsunoi's presentation offers his perspective on religion's role in moral education. A joint presentation with Mr. Otsubo Mitsuaki of the Konkonyou Airaku Kyoukai and Marilyn Higgins shares a case study of the effects of their religious community program on youth.

A panel of Baha'i mothers from the Yamaguchi area offer their perspective on the challenges of raising children in this time of moral confusion.

Following that is John Kavelin's unique and interesting explanation of "Theme Parks as a Metaphor..." for the moral/spiritual adventures of life.

Five panelists from different professions offer perspectives ethics in their professions - nursing, economics, education and religion.

Three more offerings shed light on future directions in education that represent great strides forward in global education with better moral foundations: Dr. Michael Higgins, on the Global Curriculum available and being adopted in a school in Sakhalin and in other places by schools in search of a broader curriculum, Yayoi Akagi sharing the endeavors she has been making to raise world citizenship through language education, followed by Mr. Brisdon's final talk on the experience of the Maxwell International Baha'i School.

As stated earlier, it is our hope that every one who partakes of these comments and presentations, will take away a refreshed and gladdened vision of the process of moral education. I close by repeating one of the previous quotations, and adding two more brief, but potent remarks from Abdu'l-Baha, the son of the Founder of the Baha'i Faith and its authorized interpreter:

“...man's supreme honor and real happiness lie in self-respect, in high resolves and noble purposes, in integrity and moral quality, in immaculacy of mind.” (2)

“...unless the moral character of a nation is educated, as well as its brain and its talents, civilization has no sure basis.” (3)

“Old trees yield no fruitage; old ideas and methods are obsolete and worthless now. Old standards of ethics, moral codes and methods of living in the past will not suffice for the present age of advancement and progress.” (4)

Notes

- (1) Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, (CXXIII), Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976, p. 260.
- (2) 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Secret of Divine Civilization*, Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1990, p. 19
- (3) 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1972, p. 31.
- (4) 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Foundations of World Unity*: Compiled from the Addresses and Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Baha, Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1972, p. 10.