

# Empowering Moral Development

Marilyn Higgins

## Introduction

The world today is calling for better moral education. Morality is about being “good”—the question is, “good for what?” We need to understand the purpose of our lives, and we need to understand the powers we have to use for the achievement of our purpose so that we can understand the best use of our gift of life and time in this world. One of the best loved prayers of ‘Abdu’l-Baha asks God to, “illumine my powers...”. One approach to moral development concerns the recognition of our powers, how we develop them, protect them, and how we put them to good use.

Virtues are like a language, a coinage which we acquire to use in interacting with the spirit of life itself. Virtues such as love, patience, and truthfulness are fruits of our souls’ development in service to the Creator and His Creation. But we acquire and use these virtues through the exercise of the powers and capacities given by God. Just like the fruit comes through the roots, trunk, and branches, and is sheltered by the leaves of a tree, our virtues come into play through our physical and mental capacities. The better our capacities develop and function, the more virtues can be brought out. If many of these capacities are damaged, blocked, or turned in the wrong direction, our harvest of virtues may be puny and bitter.

What are some of these powers, these “ideal virtues,” in ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s words?

1. Our physical powers—growth, movement, biological functions, etc.
2. Our powers of physical perception—sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell
3. Rational powers or cognition—thought, reason, memory, imagination (also, the common faculty)
4. Affective powers—emotions, affections, moods
5. The power of our own identity—our will, and knowledge of our limitations
6. Higher spiritual powers—to recognize Spiritual Authority, faith, the meditative powers of reflection, intuition and discernment
7. Expression—speech (utterance, language), arts (symbolic), sciences (crafts)

Each of these powers or gifts has a purpose, and has limitations. Each power comes with “instructions” within the Sacred Writings about its proper use and development, and notes about the dangers of abuse and misuse. In studying the development of these powers, while making a program for Institutes, I have found so much in the Writings, and yet the surface has barely been scratched. It is a wonderful subject but more than we have time for today. Baha’u’llah says,

Could ye apprehend with what wonders of My munificence and bounty I have willed to entrust your souls, ye would, of a truth, rid yourselves of attachment to all created things, and would gain

a true knowledge of your own selves, a knowledge which is the same as the comprehension of Mine own Being.”<sup>1</sup>

To look at things this way, the real subject of our education should be ourselves! And if we really knew ourselves, crime and misdeeds would disappear because there would be no attraction or attachment to the “means” of our education, the created things of this world, any more than a student considers the purpose of school as the mere gathering of books and pencils. Our altruistic nature (what one writer has called the unified-self, as opposed to the separate-self) would be developed, because we would know that through developing ourselves in service to others we are achieving the true purpose and real satisfaction of our lives.

These powers are bestowed on us at birth, but how well they grow and manifest themselves and achieve their full potential depends on how they are nurtured or how they may be inhibited and distorted along the way. Think of the physical embryo with its physical “DNA” package, surrounded by the spirit with its own package of qualities that are unique to the individual. This dual package of energies and capacities is then nurtured, first in the womb, then surrounded by the environment of primary caretaker (usually the mother), and the family, which is surrounded by the social environment, the school, wider society—environmental influences going out in concentric rings. Each aspect of the environment generates energy and messages which draw out, contribute to, and enhance, or inhibit, dis-empower or distort our “package” of qualities. Just as a seed may be affected by the quality of the soil, the amount of rain, sun, the harshness or gentleness of the seasons, etc, our powers can be brought out and developed through the powers of love and knowledge or blocked, distorted and perverted by the environmental pollutants of neglect, misuse and mistreatment.

## **Empathy and Inductive Teaching Versus Authoritarianism**

One can hardly underestimate the value of patient, loving empathy and “inductive” teaching in helping a child to label things and to put them in their proper perspective in this process of development. If a child expresses that he doesn’t like peas, for example, an empathetic parent might respond,

You don’t like peas? Do they taste bad to you? They have lots of good nutrition for your body and a lot of people like them, so I cooked them for you. Well, eat them if you can, and next time we’ll find some corn or beans or some other kind of vegetable you might like better.

Here the parent’s power of induction allows for the child’s power of preference and discernment to be validated. The child knows what he likes and doesn’t like. He learns that in this case it is related to his sense of taste. He learns that the parent also has other reasons for giving him an “untasty vegetable”—and that eating the peas at this point is probably not a life-and-death issue, not worth a power struggle. His own authority to choose to eat what he can for the sake of nutrition can be developed to give him a new tool in the building of his own power of choice for himself.

But an impatient non-empathetic, authoritarian adult might say, “Of course you like peas! Now shut up and eat them!” How confusing this is to a child who is learning to use his power of discernment, the ability to distinguish his own likes and dislikes (which only *he* has the ability to tell) and his power of utterance for expressing truth. This is just a minor case of tyranny. It is a drop in the bucket compared to the increasing and extreme environmental influences from nonsense and violence on TV, to outright abuse, bullying, sexual exploitation, disrespect or savage neglect of children around the world. How do children learn to respect their own lives and the lives of others and to use these precious powers that are their birthright? ‘Abdu’l-Baha clearly warns that if not educated properly they will become the source of extreme evil.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the physical, emotional and mental illnesses we see today are now understood to be connected to trauma affecting the powers of the soul that have occurred in the course of growth and socialization. A book published by the US Baha’i Publishing Trust, called *Assisting the Traumatized Soul*, by Phyllis K. Peterson<sup>11</sup>, will help Baha’is and others as individuals and communities to learn how to identify spiritual injury, and to heal, protect and reclaim these powers of soul so necessary for realizing our divine purpose.

Baha’u’llah has told us that “Man is the supreme talisman. Lack of a proper education, hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess.”<sup>11, 12</sup> What, we must ask, is a “proper” education?

## **Knowledge, Volition and Action: Head, Heart and Hands**

We know that the development of anything in the human world depends on knowledge, volition and action. We could say it depends on language, empathy, and service; or head, heart and hands. All knowledge comes down to language development in one form or another—we have to learn how to talk about things in order to work with them. Empathy is the power of the heart to feel, and particularly to reflect what others are feeling or to predict what they might feel if certain conditions are met. And feelings are the motivators of service. Using our knowledge, we act on our feelings to do something that will make this world a better and happier place! This is moral good.

But suppose we have knowledge and action without empathy connected to it? It might be like the case of the boy scouts who were told to go out and help old ladies to cross the street. One boy at the end of the day told the leader that he was able to help four old ladies to cross the street. He was given high praise. And then he disclosed, “The last two were the hardest, because they didn’t want to go!” “Good behavior” without empathetic discernment of timing is no good at all.

If we look at the history of human kind, we find that in the Golden Ages, when people were most creative, productive and happy, the elements of head, heart and hands—knowledge, love and service, were balanced and harmonized in the environment for moral education. In the dark ages, there was imbalance. In Christian Europe, for example, in the 5th through the 9th centuries, a period considered to be the Golden Age of Christianity, educational approaches were based on a balance of learning virtues and knowledge through means based on love and kindness. A few centuries later, however, as Europe slid into the dark ages, it was believed that “knowledge” had to be strictly controlled by the priests, and that

legalistic application of rules was what was needed in order to maintain social order. You can see the distortion of the means! Tyranny and oppression had overtaken the proper education of the powers of empathy, reason and expression<sup>6</sup> (see note).

China and Japan have both had similar “bright and dark” periods in their history.<sup>4,13</sup> Whenever moral education resorts to overemphasis on cognitive knowledge, the acquisition of facts or dogma, or emotionalism and blind imitation (that is, empathy without reason [fanaticism]), or overemphasis on legalistic rules in promoting action, the powers that human beings are given which support the innate development of moral virtues are inhibited and shut down. If we look at the forces in the environment today, the family, school and social environment, we can see that emotional education has been sorely neglected. It is not surprising that many people are morally dis-empowered by the very forces that are supposed to be trying to “make” them good. Moral powers are innate but they depend on balanced support and growth in the individual and in the community. We can’t stamp “good people” out in assembly-line style as if we were producing them in a factory. It is not that kind of process. It is more like a process of creating a fruitful orchard of varying kinds of trees and balancing many nurturing aspects.

## Research on Religion and Styles of Parenting

Is religion helpful in the moral development process? You may be surprised that the answer is “not necessarily.” Some of the largest and most respected research projects on moral development show that religious education can have a negative effect<sup>6</sup>. In my own study in Japan and China, in seven out of the 20 classes studied, students were not known to be involved in religious or moral development activity outside of school. Of the 13 classes in which one or more student was involved in some type of religious or moral development activity outside of school, in only two classes were students noted to have better behavior than those who were less involved or not involved in religious activities. In more than half the classes in the total survey, students involved in religious or moral development activities were as likely or more likely to be demonstrating behavior problems. Furthermore, a shocking study in Europe showed that 60% of the terrorists in Germany are children of Christian ministers<sup>8</sup>.

We must look more closely at the facts. It seems that when religion is tied to an “authoritarian” style of discipline the results are terrible. But then, permissiveness, passive parenting, or teaching without guidance also produces terrible results. Both approaches deprive children of the chance to develop their own powers of discernment of right and wrong. What works is a kind of “educative” or “authoritative style” where adults and children honor a higher authority, or set of principles and beliefs. They consult openly and hold themselves and each other accountable to those principles. “Induction” is the term used to express the way of talking about and sharing understandings about how principles are put into practice<sup>3</sup>. We see from this case or that case, what happens when such and such a thing occurs, and can “induce” what will happen as a result of our choice of future actions. This is where religion works well. This is why the Virtues Project works well. Identifying principles and working in unity toward them is a very important aspect of what Baha’is call “consultation”.

There are several reasons why modern social science is gradually recognizing the positive benefit of religion when it refers to spiritual education in its broadest sense:

1. Religion (not blind imitation, but renewed application of spiritual teachings in daily life) is necessary as a foundation for moral development because the teachings of the Divine Educators encourage knowledge of all aspects of life, the seen and the unseen, clearly offering an eternal perspective on our purpose and providing models for the proper development of our God-given capacities.
2. Religion is necessary because the experience of devotion and worship actually trains our emotions toward unity and empathy, and helps us to avoid emotional extremes. Confucius called devotional ceremonies “rites” and noted their practical value in defining the moderate boundaries of our legitimate emotions such as celebration, grieving and so on<sup>4,9</sup>. Modern psychobiologists are increasingly turning their research focus toward identifying the underlying mechanisms and verifying the long-observed and unmistakable benefits of prayer and meditation for producing emotional health (e.g., Tice, cited in Goleman [7], and Benson, cited in Pert [10]).
3. Religion also gives direct guidance for socialization, and sets the directions for what kinds of services are most helpful in developing a community. This is essential for personal growth as well. Individuals long to find a place for their unique talents within the context of a unified community. But is clear that religion must avoid the poisonous veils of dogma (over-reliance on the cognitive aspect), superstition (over-reliance on the emotional aspect) and imitation (blind traditions which actively disempower the energies of service).

## **Research on School Environments for Moral Growth**

Due to time limitations I will close with a brief discussion of the research I have been doing on how to create an environment for moral growth in schools. I hope this is useful information, since Baha’u’llah recommends that science and religion are to be used in harmony to investigate reality and put good ideas into practice

I surveyed some teachers in middle schools in Anhui, China and Yamaguchi, Japan. These are fairly rural areas. In each area I surveyed teachers in schools that were considered to be “high functioning” in terms of their reputation for moral behavior and attitudes of their students. I also surveyed teachers in schools that were judged as “low functioning” or full of problems.

The results are of interest to us Baha’is because they confirm some of the practical advice we find in the Baha’i Writings. I found that teachers in the high functioning schools are more likely to feel that it is important to,

1. care about student difficulties
2. consult with students about rules, problems and curriculum
3. notice talents and encourage students’ abilities
4. find creative and cooperative activities to enhance lessons
5. provide an atmosphere of spiritual development

6. teach virtues, such as honesty, kindness directly  
(pointing out character traits when discussing stories, literature, etc.)
7. point out role models from many different life-styles
8. and involve the entire school staff as role models for their students.

Moral development, said William Damon, is one of the best researched and least applied fields of social science<sup>5</sup>. This surely is one science we cannot afford to have begin and end with mere words. Our knowledge must be balanced with volition and action. Let us “illumine” these findings with some of the beautiful words found in the Sacred Writings that express these truths most eloquently<sup>12</sup>:

“Be thou a teacher of love, in a school of unity. Train thou the children of the friends of the Merciful in the rules and ways of His loving-kindness. Tend the young trees of Abha Paradise with the welling waters of His grace and peace and joy.”

“These schools for academic studies must at the same time be training centers in behavior and conduct, and they must favor character and conduct above the sciences and arts. Good behavior and high moral character must come first, for unless the character is trained, acquiring knowledge will only prove injurious.”

Regarding consultation with students about advanced studies:

“Let consideration be given to the child’s own preferences and inclinations... Let him be placed in that field for which he hath an inclination, a desire and a talent.”

“If...the child be trained to be both learned and good, the result is light upon light.”

“Children are even as a branch that is fresh and green. They will grow up in whatever way you train them. Take the utmost care to give them high ideals and goals, so that once they come of age, they will cast their beams like brilliant candles on the world, and will not be defiled by lusts and passions in the way of animals, heedless and unaware, but instead will set their hearts on achieving everlasting honour and acquiring all the excellences of humankind.”

Note on Christian history: Augustine (354-430) stressed that the indwelling capacity of a child to learn was to be released through love and encouragement. He believed that empathy, the capacity of one person to dwell within another with sympathetic disposition, was what made moral education possible. The Golden Age of Christianity may be said to have been achieved during the reign of Charlemagne around 800 AD, when Europe was briefly united under this Christian king. Both secular and religious education were taught in schools. Alcuin, who developed the education system during this reign, based his approach

on the goal of gaining virtues. The “seven gifts of the Holy Spirit” to be attained were wisdom, understanding, fortitude, counsel, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord based on understanding. He designated seven liberal arts and stressed that moral education was a by-product of literacy, the road to virtue was through religion and religious knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Baha'u'llah. (1976). *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*. Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust. (pp. 326-327).
- <sup>2</sup> Baha'u'llah, The Bab, and 'Abdu'l-Baha. (1982). *Baha'i Prayers*. Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust. (p. 152).
- <sup>3</sup> Berkowitz, M.W. and Grych, J.H. (1998). Fostering goodness: teaching parents to facilitate children's moral development. *The Journal of Moral Education*. Vol. 27, Number 3 (pp. 371-391).
- <sup>4</sup> Creel, H.G. (1953). *Chinese Thought from Confucius to Mao Tse-Tung*. New York: Mentor.
- <sup>5</sup> Damon, William. (1988). *The Moral Child*. New York: The Free Press.
- <sup>6</sup> Elias, John. (1989). *Moral Education Secular and Religious*. Melbourne, Florida: Krieger Publishing Co.
- <sup>7</sup> Goleman, Daniel. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books. (p.75).
- <sup>8</sup> Miller, Alice. (1983). *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. (p. 65).
- <sup>9</sup> Novak, Philip (ed.). (1994). *The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions*. San Francisco: Harper.
- <sup>10</sup> Pert, Candace, (1997). *Molecules of Emotion*. New York: Scribner, (pp. 242-243)
- <sup>11</sup> Peterson, Phyllis (1998). *Assisting the Traumatized Soul, Healing the Wounded Talisman*. Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust.
- <sup>12</sup> Research Department of the Universal House of Justice (Compiler). (1976, revised 1987). *Baha'i Education*. London: The Baha'i Publishing Trust.
- <sup>13</sup> Roberts, J.M. (1983). *History of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press.