Empowering Japanese Youth to Contribute to the Achievement of Human Prosperity

Judith A. Johnson

Taking even a brief look at the current conditions of society, it is evident that Bahá'ís must make greater efforts to inform individuals of the reality that, "Only through the dawning consciousness that they constitute a single people will the inhabitants of the planet be enabled to turn away from the patterns of conflict that have dominated social organization in the past and begin to learn the ways of collaboration and conciliation." (Universal House of Justice, *Prosperity for Humankind).* Achieving the oneness of humankind is essential to securing a safe future. Therefore, it is imperative that we devise ways to inform people of this fact, naturally, in the course of our daily life.

This presentation describes the process of introducing Japanese university students enrolled in a Moral Leadership and Ethics course to the contents of the above quotation, and encouraging them to adopt patterns of thought and behavior that promote unity, and individual and collective development. The general instructional objectives were that students would: 1) reconstruct their understanding of the current global society and their roles in it; 2) value and emulate moral behavior and moral leadership, which foster transformation and growth through the practice of virtues such as unity, justice respect, and love; and 3) identify concrete ways to incorporate moral behavior into their daily lives. The course syllabus, instructional methods, examples of students' projects and their responses to the course are presented.

Introduction

The well-being of our children and youth is essential to the attainment of human prosperity, and the principal role of educators is to foster human potential so that this prosperity may be achieved. Consequently, the course described in this presentation was designed with the goals of helping university students comprehend their human capacities, contemplate their roles in local and global societies, and develop a sense of responsibility towards furthering human development. It was developed in consonance with Bahá'í Writings.

Although the Bahá'í Faith provides clear spiritual and practical solutions to the current problems the younger generation and global society are experiencing, a large portion of the adult population is reluctant to accept and put these solutions into action for a myriad of reasons. In 2003, empirical research finally began to catch up with Bahá'í teachings in the exciting and monumental report titled *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities.* This report on the current status of today's youth provides data

that supports the basic premise of the course: Human beings possess the natural capacity and need to have loving relationships with others. Hopefully, the combination of Bahá'í teachings, new data that reveal the current reality of adolescents, and strategies that can help youth mature will finally motivate individuals and communities to take positive action. A few pertinent excerpts from *Hardwired to Connect* will be shared prior to describing the course itself.

The Commission on Children at Risk, a panel of leading children's doctors, research scientists and youth service professionals, has issued a report based on its recent scientific findings which suggest that children are biologically "hardwired" for enduring attachments to other people and for moral and spiritual meaning. The Commission recommends that the best way to ensure children's healthy development is by meeting their needs for enduring attachments and for moral and spiritual meaning.

A decade of unprecedented economic growth has resulted in reduced numbers of children living in poverty. However, large numbers of children and adolescents in developed countries such as the United States, Japan and Australia are suffering from emotional and behavioral problems such as attention deficit, anxiety, depression, conduct disorders, and thoughts of suicide and homicide. In 2002, the U.S. National Research Council estimated that,

> [A]t least one of every four adolescents in the country is currently at serious risk of not achieving productive adulthood. Twenty-one percent of U.S. children ages 9 to 17 have a diagnosable mental disorder or addiction; 8 percent of high school students suffer from clinical depression, and 20 percent of students report seriously having considered suicide in the past year. By the 1980s, U.S. children as a group were reporting more anxiety than did children who were psychiatric patients in the 1950s, according to one study. *(Hardwired to Connect)*

In Japan, reports of anti-social behavior of mentally disturbed and socially isolated Japanese children and adolescents are in the media with increased frequency. In fact, an increasing number of countries are facing similar problems. If the world's youth continue on this path of self-destruction, the journey to human prosperity will be painfully prolonged.

What Recent Research Suggests

In searching for strategies to improve outcomes for children, the Commission reviewed research on the brain and human behavior from the last two to five years. Among the main scientific findings on which the Commission has based its recommendations are:

1. The mechanisms by which we become and stay attached to others have a biological basis and are increasingly discernible in the basic structure of the brain.

2. Nurturing environments, or the lack of them, influence the development of brain circuitry and the way genes affect behavior.

3. The old "nature versus nurture" debate, focusing on whether heredity or environment is the main determinant of human conduct, is no longer relevant to serious discussions of child well-being and youth programming. These findings suggest that strong nurturing can reduce or eliminate the harmful effects of genes that are associated with aggression, anxiety, depression or substance abuse.

4. Primary nurturing relationships influence early spiritual development, and spiritual development can influence us biologically in the same ways that primary nurturing relationships do. For instance, spirituality and religiosity can be associated with lower levels of stress hormone (cortisol), more optimism, and commitment to helping others.

5. Religiosity and spirituality significantly influence well-being.

6. The human brain appears to be organized to ask ultimate questions and seek ultimate answers. *(Hardwired to Connect)*

Humans are born with a natural capacity and drive to ask the ultimate questions about life's purpose: Why am I here? What is the purpose of my life? How should I live? What will happen when I die? This is a distinctively human activity that has been closely connected to spiritual seeking and experience, and to religious belief and practice throughout time and across cultures. Using brain imaging, neuroscientists have found that the same part of the brain that underlies the human need to seek answers to what is true about life's deepest questions also underlies many spiritual and religious experiences. In other words, there seems to be a link between our physiological makeup and our spiritual and religious seeking. *(Hardwired to Connect)*

Large national studies show that religiously committed teenagers are more likely to volunteer in the community, to participate in sports and student government, and to have

Results

Virtues and the concept of unity are used throughout the course. By the end of the course, students are able to explain the need for Moral Leadership and how they can apply it in their own lives. They can identify virtues that are needed in their current stage of personal development, and are essential to the achievement of global unity and human prosperity. They can analyze and propose ethical solutions to moral dilemmas that found in the field of engineering and greater society. They can use consultation and higher order thinking skills to more effectively communicate with others. They know the value of cooperating with others to set and achieve goals. They acquire a sense of responsibility, as future engineers and adults, towards ensuring the well-being of society. The following are some of the students' responses to the written evaluation and course content:

We need moral leadership for:
- *unity of group member[s] and people in the world*
- *improving the bad world condition*
- *for personal and social transformation*

I think 'unity' is the most important. Because if all member[s] of [the] group have unity, all tasks are carried out peaceful[ly]."

I felt very lucky to attend Sensei's class today. Because I learned about the important keywords: Love, Truthfulness, Freedom, Unity, Tolerance, Responsibility, Courage, Wisdom, Hospitality, Obedience and Peace.

I felt these words can change my character and attitude to become better. I need it in relation to do my job in laboratory and to communicate with my Sensei and my friends in the laboratory.