

# **Theme Park as Metaphor: Adventures of the Spirit**

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## **Abstract**

**The Virtues Project** was created more than a decade ago as a program to inspire the character education of children and adults. When “being human” is defined from a spiritual perspective, true education reveals and nurtures those aspects of human nature that are, in fact, divine. *The Family Virtues Guide* suggests that the Virtues are those potentialities of our inborn human nature that, with proper parenting, education and focus of personal will, allow us to become radiant spiritual beings, walking in the world with clear purpose, love of God and His creation, and an attitude of service. When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was asked the purpose of life, He stated quite simply “to acquire Virtues.” But many adults, especially parents, are often at a loss to enumerate or define the Virtues which would assist spiritual growth. Using the metaphor of a “virtual theme park”, with its many destinations such as Adventureland, Fantasyland, Frontierland and Tomorrowland, it is possible to define some of the Virtues that are helpful in navigating the “adventures of the Spirit” that await the spiritual traveler.

## **Introduction**

Today I would like to share with you some observations I have made during the past ten years with The Virtues Project, and as a designer with Walt Disney Imagineering. And all of these observations are informed by a lifetime of studying the Bahá’í Writings, and seeing patterns of meaning and organization, or “divine design,” that inform my view of the very purpose of life.

When *The Family Virtues Guide* was conceived more than a decade ago in a cottage on a little island in British Columbia, Canada, my sister, Linda Kavelin Popov, her husband Dr. Dan Popov, and I were focused on

creating a program that could be used by families anywhere to inspire the character education of their children. The premise was that when we define “being human” from a spiritual perspective, we are really talking about uncovering those aspects of our nature that are, in fact, divine.

All the Holy Books remind us that we have been created in the image and likeness of God. *The Family Virtues Guide* suggests that the Virtues are those potentialities of our inborn human nature that, with proper parenting, education and focus of personal will, allow us to become radiant spiritual beings, walking in the world with clear purpose, love of God and His creation, and an attitude of service.

The Bahá'í Writings reinforce the belief that the entire purpose of life is to develop our knowing and loving capacities, to acquire Virtues, and to use our unique gifts in service of the global family. But many adults, especially parents, are often at a loss to enumerate our Virtues, much less to define them. This is why The Virtues Project was born and its materials and programs have now been embraced by families, schools, faith groups of every kind, as well as corporations and government agencies the world over--from Alaska to Guam, from Malta to Papua New Guinea.

During more than 14 years of work for Disney as a designer of attractions in several of our theme parks, I have had a lot of time to observe guests as they experience these carefully designed environments. I have been impressed on many occasions with the special affection expressed toward the Disney family of characters, and I've developed a theory about it that I will share in a moment. I believe that the very layout of Disneyland can be seen as a metaphor for the journey of the soul through the many phases of our earthly existence: from the embrace of our parents when we are infants to the excited dreams of childhood; from the early adventures of adolescent independence to new frontiers of young adulthood; and finally to the satisfactions and challenges of adulthood when we face the future with feet grounded in reality, and spirits educated in the knowledge that, spiritually speaking, the best is yet to come!

I hope you'll enjoy this tour of a virtual, or should I say "virtuous", theme park where we will enjoy the adventures of the spirit!

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If you were to fly over Disneyland, it would become evident that this world-famous theme park, so symbolic of fantasy and adventure, is actually a series of distinct "lands" radiating from a central "hub", with each land representing a unique assortment of rides and attractions. Each land has been given a principal theme in the design of its architecture, costumes, attractions, and even landscaping. (*Show artwork*)

In examining these different lands, each with its characteristic styling and different "experiences", it becomes clear that a full day in the Park includes joys, thrills, and opportunities of various kinds, each stimulated by the intrinsic artistry of the designers of what has been called "the happiest place on earth." That your "guest experience" in Disneyland has been heavily pre-programmed and "Imagineered" makes it no less a vital and enjoyable one.

A handy Guidebook (*Show sample Disneyland Guidebook*) is given to each guest upon entering the Park, and you are free to use it to navigate the many lands in some kind of order, or you may choose to walk freely about in a spirit of discovery and adventure, not knowing what lies around the next curve in the road. Disneyland features many characters who bring a smile to every face and who offer unconditional love – Mickey, Minnie, Goofy, Donald, and all the others. It is my belief that these characters, as icons of goodness, represent a purity of spirit and certain qualities of virtue that attract genuine affection and loyalty from their "fans" the world over. And it is these virtues, regardless of the furry costumes and silly hats that envelop them, that draw guests back to Disneyland time and time again.

From my perspective, there are significant parallels between the design of Disneyland and the journey of the spirit, in both this world and the worlds to come. I would like to present a “guidebook” to these “adventures of the spirit” using the specific “lands” of Disneyland as a metaphor, since I believe there are some significant and impressive lessons to be learned, centered on the Virtues required to “navigate” each of the lands, as well as each stage in the growth of our character, and thus our spirit.

*(Hand out “Guidebooks”)*

I’d like to read just a few words about “Character” from the Bahá’í Writings:

*“...a goodly character is a means whereby men are guided to the Straight Path and are led to the Great Announcement. Well is it with him who is adorned with the saintly attributes and character of the Concourse on High.”* TB36

*“Is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of Mankind...?”* KI 240

### **(1) “Main Street” – The Safety of Tradition**

*(Please turn to this page in your Guide)*

Your first stop at Disneyland is “Main Street”. Here in Tokyo it is called “World Bazaar” and is covered with a glass roof for protection from the weather. The buildings, colors, and character of this “land” were purposely designed to reflect another time and era in America when life on Main Street was slow-paced, familiar, and populated by many charming small shops and restaurants. It was a time when all the neighbors in town knew each other, and when a smile offered to strangers was easy and spontaneous.

Reading from the *Virtues Cards*, I want to share with you some of the Virtues that inhabited the main streets of villages and towns all over the

world, before suspicion and prejudice created false barriers between people. They are still highly valued in Bahá'í communities today.

Sharing these simple definitions will help us achieve a common understanding of their value and spiritual significance.

***Cooperation** is working together and sharing the load. When we cooperate, we join with others to do things that cannot be done alone. We are willing to follow the rules which keep everyone safe and happy. Together we can accomplish great things. \**

***Honesty** is being truthful and sincere. It is important because it builds trust. When people are honest, they can be relied on not to lie, cheat or steal. Being honest means that you accept yourself as you are. When you are open and trustworthy, others can believe in you.\**

Here's what Bahá'u'lláh says about honesty:

*Beautify your tongues, O people, with truthfulness, and adorn your souls with the ornament of honesty. Beware, O people, that ye deal not treacherously with anyone. (Gleanings 297)*

Here is the definition of integrity in the Virtues Cards:

***Integrity** is living by your highest values. It is being honest and sincere. Integrity helps you to listen to your conscience, to do the right thing, and to tell the truth. You act with integrity when your words and actions match. Integrity gives you self-respect and a peaceful heart. \**

We'll move on to another helpful area called:

## **[2] The Hub - Making Choices**

*(Please turn to this page in your Guide)*

Disney designers purposely provided this convenient resting-place, “town square” and garden so that there is always a central, easily found place to return to after traveling to other lands. The most striking design feature of this area is Cinderella’s Castle at the far side of the Hub, an icon of romance and fantasy. What is a central symbol in *your* life that you use as a familiar beacon?

We are told that in the future, when Bahá’í communities have grown much more advanced and populated than at present, a majestic House of Worship will be the physical center of the city, a virtual hub of the encircling “wheel” of the community, surrounded by nine supporting institutions for the welfare and education of the entire population.

In the case of Disneyland, the Hub represents a decision point: do you choose to go from here to Adventureland, or Frontierland (in Tokyo called “Westernland”), Tomorrowland or Fantasyland? Each destination offers unique thrills and opportunities. And each land is a metaphor for different journeys of the soul.

At this point in the journey, some of the Virtues required are **Prayerfulness, Purposefulness, and Determination.**

In *The Family Virtues Guide*, this is how Prayerfulness is described:

*Prayerfulness is living in a way which shows that you are in the presence of your Creator. It is doing simple things with an attitude of gratitude. It is knowing that you are a unique creation of God, and are acting in ways which are worthy of that gift. Prayer is praising God, being thankful for things. Prayerfulness is quiet reflection. It is listening and receiving God’s guidance.*

In the Old Testament, Jeremiah says this about prayer:

*“Call to me and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things which you did not know.” (33:3)*

How many here today have prayed for specific guidance in a time in their lives when they needed to choose a direction, and received the gift of insight?

Here’s a definition of Purposefulness from *The Family Virtues Guide*:

*Being Purposeful is having a clear focus. Begin with a vision for what you want to accomplish, and concentrate on your goals. Do one thing at a time, without scattering your energies. Some people let things happen. When you are purposeful, you make things happen.\**

The last characteristic we need at the Hub is determination, which is defined in *The Family Virtues Guide* as follows:

*You focus your energy and efforts on a task and stick with it until it is finished. Determination is using your will power to do something when it isn’t easy. You are determined to meet your goals even when it is hard or you are being tested. With determination we make our dreams come true.\**

The other significance of the Hub, or center, of this unique universe is that it represents stability, order, beauty, and constancy. The Sacred Writings are the center of individual and community life for Bahá’ís and we constantly return to the Writings to find order, balance, direction, and empowerment in our lives.

The Báb tells us:

*“He Who is the Eternal Truth beareth me witness, whoso followeth this Book hath indeed followed all the past Scriptures which have been sent down from heaven by God, the sovereign Truth.” SB 44*

And ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asks us:

*“...what thing of value to mankind has ever come into being which was not first set forth either directly or by implication in the Holy Scriptures?”* SDC 35

Now that we’ve gotten our bearings in the Hub, the first “land” we’re going to visit is:

### **(3) Fantasyland – Childhood Dreams**

*(Please turn to this page in your Guide)*

Leaving the Hub and walking right through the Castle, we reach a charming land where storybook worlds come alive, and the child in us all gets to imagine ourselves in a world of beautiful princesses and handsome princes, courageous knights, flying elephants and the simple truths of “It’s A Small World”, where images of the world’s children express happiness and -- that favorite Bahá’í value -- unity in diversity.

Yet even here there are darker forces at work: the ghosts in the Haunted Mansion, some evil characters in the Castle Mystery Tour, and the Wicked Witch from the story of Sleeping Beauty. What’s the lesson here? Virtue does not go unmolested, and we need the support of family, community, and the powers of good in order to triumph over evil.

Bahá’u’lláh reminds us that:

*“...the evil one is he that hindereth the rise and obstructeth the spiritual progress of the children of men.”* TB 87

‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that:

*“God has never created an evil spirit; all such ideas and nomenclature are symbols expressing the more human or earthly nature of man.”* FWU 77



In the so-called “real” world, everyone engages in fantasies of a better existence, improved finances, more happiness and deeper unity in our relationships. What we learn is that it takes dedicated and conscious effort to make improvements in all those areas of life, and that, unlike Disneyland, there are no magic wands to make our troubles disappear.

Some of the best tools for educating our spirits and maturing our character are the Virtues of **Love**, **Commitment** and **Excellence**.

Let’s examine a few of these virtues to understand their significance.

Can someone suggest why the Virtue of Love is particularly useful in this stage of our Journey? Love of whom? Of what? From whom?

Here are the definitions of love and commitment given in the *Virtues*

*Cards*:

***Love** is a special feeling that fills your heart. You show love in a smile, a kind word, a thoughtful act or a hug. Love is treating people and things with care and kindness because they mean so much to you. Love is contagious. It keeps spreading.\**

***Commitment** is caring deeply about something or someone. It is deciding carefully what you want to do, then giving it 100%, holding nothing back. You give your all to a friendship, a task, or something you believe in. You finish what you start. You keep your promises.\**

In striving toward Perfection, or the Virtue of Excellence, Bahá’u’lláh says that:

*“in every art and skill, God loveth the highest perfection”*

and

*“the spiritually learned must be characterized by both inward and outward perfections.” SDC 33-4*

Here is the definition of excellence from the *Virtues Cards*:

***Excellence** is doing your best, giving careful attention to every task and every relationship. Excellence is effort guided by a noble purpose. It is a desire for perfection. The perfection of a seed comes in the fruit. When you practice excellence, you bring your gifts to fruition. Excellence is the key to success. \**

The next stage takes us to:

### **Adventureland – Adolescent Independence**

*(Please turn to this page in your Guide)*

Let's head off to Adventureland, where we sample cultures and sights and sounds quite different from our homeland. Among the many offerings at Disneyland are a safari into a surprisingly benign jungle, inhabited by peaceful natives, the Pirates attraction, and many other adventures.

Whenever a young person leaves the comfort of what's familiar, they step into a world of adventures and possibilities. Guided by faith, and the right “guidebook”, their journey can lead to wonderful new opportunities for personal growth and spiritual maturity.

Although there is never a question that our safety will be compromised in this particular land of adventure, in reality whenever we consciously choose to venture past known boundaries and borders, we require a number of important Virtues to navigate along the way, such as **courage, enthusiasm and perseverance.**

Here are the definitions of these three virtues from the *Virtues Cards*:

*Courage is bravery in the face of fear. You do the right thing even when it is hard or scary. When you are courageous, you don't give up. You try new things. You admit mistakes. Courage is the strength in your heart. \**

*Enthusiasm is being cheerful, happy and full of spirit. It is doing something wholeheartedly and eagerly. When you are enthusiastic, you have a positive attitude. Enthusiasm is being inspired. \**

*Perseverance is being steadfast and persistent. You commit to your goals and overcome obstacles, no matter how long it takes. When you persevere, you don't give up...you keep going. Like a strong ship in a storm, you don't become battered or blown off course. You just ride the waves. \**

With those empowering virtues in our Guidebook, the next land we'll visit is:

##### **(5) Frontierland – Young Adulthood**

*(Please turn to this page in your Guide)*

In America, the early settlers arrived primarily from Europe, and landed on the East Coast of that vast unexplored continent. To escape the crowded cities that grew up around the Atlantic sea ports, and to find land for farming and raising families in the “wide open spaces” of the new land, groups of settlers set out in “wagon trains” to journey into the new frontier. Uncertainty, hazards and dangers lurked all along the way.

I believe that when we accept the Bahá'í Faith, we have embarked on one of the great adventures of our lives, and are asked to move past comfortable boundaries into new frontiers of the spirit. Are prayer and meditation not a profound opportunity to break out of the daily realities of our troubled lives to seek communion with God, and to venture into previously unexplored territories of the spiritual realms?

Here are some *Hidden Words* related to the challenge of moving out of our “comfort zone”:

“...didst thou behold immortal sovereignty, thou wouldst strive to pass from this fleeing world.” PHW 41

“...strive then with heart and soul to distinguish yourselves by your deeds.” PHW 76

Some of the virtues needed to empower our journey toward new frontiers of the spirit are **flexibility, self-discipline** and **moderation**.

Here is the definition of flexibility given in the *Virtues Cards*:

**Flexibility** is being open to change. You consider others' ideas and feelings and don't insist on your own way. Flexibility gives you creative new ways to get things done. You get rid of bad habits and learn new ones. Flexibility helps you keep changing for the better. \*

The *Family Virtues Guide* defines self-discipline with a quote from Hebrews, 12:11:

*Discipline, to be sure, is never pleasant; at times it seems painful, but afterward those who have been trained by it reap the harvest of a peaceful and upright life.*

The *Family Virtues Guide* also provides the following explanation:

**Self-discipline** means self-control. It is doing what you really want to do, rather than being tossed around by your feelings like a leaf in the wind. You act instead of react. You get things done in an orderly and efficient way. With self-discipline, you take charge of yourself. \*

To add balance to the spiritual journey, the virtue of moderation is very helpful, as explained by the *Virtues Guide*

**Moderation** is creating a healthy balance in your life between work and play, rest and exercise. You don't overdo or get swept away by the things you like. You use your self-discipline to take charge of your life and your time.\*

With that encouragement, let's move to the last of our "lands":

#### **(6) Tomorrowland – Facing Adulthood**

*(Please turn to this page in your Guide)*

The idea of this "land" is the challenge and excitement of the future, of the unknown, of undiscovered worlds. In our Bahá'í lives, we are often focused on the future, since we recognize that the present time is not reflective of Bahá'í values of unity and a more balanced and equitable global economy.

We know, from this passage in *The Hidden Words* (AHW 51) that what seems like a challenging time in our lives is actually an opportunity:

*"My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is vengeance and fire, but inwardly it is light and mercy."*

For many Bahá'ís, daily life is marked by the effort to express Bahá'í values at home, at work, and in serving our community. Bahá'u'lláh admonished us to *"Let your vision be world embracing."* As Bahá'ís we recognize that the present time, though darkened by the threat of global terrorism, is merely a stage in the unfolding Plan of God. We keep an eye on tomorrow, never losing hope in the capacity of humankind to eventually establish unity in the social, political and religious realms. Our spiritual journey is uniquely our own, and yet shared by the larger Bahá'í community. Who can forget those images of the Bahá'ís of the world gathered in New York for the World Congress in 1992, celebrating our

unprecedented diversity, while unified in the conviction that tomorrow will be very bright.

*“Mankind’s ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous system...”* ASC 27

The virtues we call on to encourage our march toward tomorrow, with faith in the victory of the unfolding New World Order, are **confidence**, **idealism** and **peacefulness**.

In *The Family Virtues Guide* (P.81) the Old Testament is quoted for this advice:

*“Do not, therefore, throw away your confidence, for it carries a great reward.”* Hebrews 10:35

The Virtues Cards define confidence this way:

**Confidence** is having faith in someone. Self-confidence is trusting that you have what it takes to handle whatever happens. You feel sure of yourself and enjoy trying new things, without letting doubts or fears hold you back. When you have confidence in others, you rely on them. \*

**Idealism** is defined this way:

*When you have ideals, you really care about what is right and meaningful in life. You follow your beliefs. You don’t just accept things the way they are. You make a difference. Idealists dare to have big dreams and then act as if they are possible. \**

The last virtue on our spiritual journey is one that resonates with every Bahá’í:

*Peacefulness is being calm inside. Take time for daily reflection and gratitude. Solve conflicts so everyone wins. Be a peacemaker. Peace is giving up the love of power for the power of love. Peace in the world begins with peace in your heart. \**

Well, back in the real world, some of you may be asking yourselves “how do we really create a home or community that reflects the lessons learned from our ‘adventures of the spirit’”? I believe that question may have been answered to some degree in *The Family Virtues Guide*.

I’d like to share with you “The Five Strategies” of the Virtues Project, which were developed to help us to live more reverent, purposeful lives, to raise children of integrity and compassion, develop a culture of character in our schools, and inspire excellence and service in the workplace. These strategies build foundations for safe and caring communities.

### **Strategy 1: Speak the Language of the Virtues**

Language shapes character. The way we speak, and the words we use, have great power to discourage or to inspire. The language of virtues helps us to replace shaming and blaming with personal responsibility and respect. It is a frame of reference for bringing out the best in children and ourselves. It helps us to become the kind of people we want to be.

### **Strategy 2: Recognize Teachable Moments**

Recognizing the gifts and life lessons in our daily challenges helps us to cultivate character in ourselves and others. When we have the humility and confidence to learn from our mistakes, every stumbling block becomes a stepping stone.

### **Strategy 3: Set Clear Boundaries**

Virtues-based boundaries focus on respect, restorative justice and reparation to create a climate of peace and safety. Personal boundaries help us to build healthy relationships and protect our time, our energy and our health.

#### **Strategy 4: Honor the Spirit**

This strategy begins with respect for the dignity of each person and encourages us to make time for reflection, reverence, and beauty. It is expressing what is meaningful in our lives by participating in the arts, honoring special life events, and sharing our stories. Creating “Vision Statements” increases unity and morale in our homes, schools and workplaces.

#### **Strategy 5: Offer Spiritual Companionship**

By being deeply present and listening with compassion and detachment, we help others ‘to empty their cup’. This counseling approach empowers others to define teachable moments and to reflect on their virtues. It supports moral choice, intimacy in relationships, and peaceful conflict resolution. This process is a powerful tool for healing grief, anger, and trauma.

#### *(Time for Questions)*

As a final activity today, I would like all of you to please turn to the last page of your handout, and take a few moments to reflect on these questions:

- a) What virtues are you happiest about in your own character?
- b) What virtues do you most admire in others?
- c) What virtues would you most like to develop in yourself, and what will help you to achieve them?
- d) What three virtues best describe the character of your Bahá’í Community?

Thank you.



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