

Virtues and Education

Kathleen Riggins

Relating virtues in education to the Universal House of Justice statement, *The Prosperity of Humankind* is a broad topic. No doubt this will become an extensive area of study, research and experimentation in the future. This presentation examines a few passages from the statement and discusses their implications for virtues in education.

Paragraph 2 refers to “*the age-old dream of global peace*.” How do virtues in education help this process of realizing global peace? The virtues themselves are universal. They are found in all the sacred texts of the major religions throughout the world and throughout history. Patience is patience at any time, in any place. Trustworthiness can be recognized in any country, at any time in history. The same goes for respect, flexibility, forgiveness and all the other virtues. However, people do not clearly understand the names of the virtues and their precise meaning automatically. Also people are not used to thinking and speaking in light of the virtues. It is not like learning how to walk. It requires formal study, training and practice.

Using virtues in education would provide a frame of reference for students, and thus future generations, to understand more about themselves. They would be able to see themselves and others in more than just materialistic terms. They would begin to understand their spiritual dimension.

Every culture, organization, and family emphasizes different virtues. They each have a different set of values. Though the reality of a virtue is constant from culture to culture, its relative importance is not. Knowledge of the virtues gives students, and future generations, a common basis for relating to people of other cultures. Paragraph 8 states,

We are being shown that, unless the development of society finds a purpose beyond the mere amelioration of material conditions, it will fail of attaining even these goals. The purpose must be sought in spiritual dimensions of life and motivation.

We must look to our spiritual dimension to find the purpose of the development of society. The virtues provide the language to think about and express “*the purpose of the development of society*.” Presently most people have not been educated to be able to discuss spirituality. As we all know, education does not take place in a vacuum. There is the larger setting of society and its processes. The Prosperity statement discusses universal education and outlines the larger setting in which it would develop. Of course, we all understand the need for universal education. Perhaps some of you shared my understanding that the Baha’i concept of universal education was that a universal curriculum would be created and then made available to all students in the world. This was a very “top down” vision. However, let’s look at paragraph 35:

Universal education will be an indispensable contributor to this process of capacity building, but the effort will succeed only as human affairs are so reorganized as

to enable both individuals and groups in every sector of society to acquire knowledge and apply it to the shaping of human affairs.

The emphasis has been added. Let's look again: "*acquire knowledge and apply it to the shaping of human affairs.*" "*Acquire knowledge*" is expected, but "*apply it to the shaping of human affairs*"? Everyone acquires knowledge. But how many people of the world are able to "*apply knowledge to the shaping of human affairs*"? Remember that this applies to "*both individuals and groups in every sector of society.*" This is a very profound statement. It completely changed my vision of universal education. Paragraph 38 elaborates on this theme and goes a little further:

Apart from the creation of programs that make the required education available to all who are able to benefit from it, such reorganization will require the establishment of viable centers of learning throughout the world, institutions that will enhance the capacity of the world's people to participate in the generation and application of knowledge.

Again the emphasis has been added: "*the generation and application of knowledge.*" In present day society, how many of the peoples of the world have the opportunity to generate and apply knowledge?

After reading these two passages, we have to ask ourselves, what would schools look like if the purpose was to produce people that could both generate knowledge and apply it? What virtues would it take to establish such schools? What virtues would need to be developed in the students and the teachers?

Finally, we come to the most far-reaching process in which universal education will develop. Let's look at paragraph 43:

Since, then, the challenge is the empowerment of humankind through a vast increase in access to knowledge, the strategy that can make this possible must be constructed around an ongoing and intensifying dialogue between science and religion.

Here we also find the broad outline of how this dialogue between science and religion would proceed. The first concerns separating "*fact from conjecture.*" Science needs to develop the capacity to separate "*fact from conjecture.*" Here is the quote: "*People need, for example, to learn how to separate fact from conjecture—indeed to distinguish between subjective views and objective reality.*" However, this capacity requires two conditions. Actually, the two conditions are virtues. Here is the quote:

(T)he extent to which individuals and institutions so equipped can contribute to human progress, however, will be determined by their devotion to truth and their detachment from the prompting of their own interests and passions.

The two virtues named are devotion and detachment. They are further qualified. Devotion to truth, not devotion to something else. Detachment from individual interests and passions, not detachment from the welfare of others. To use a rough analogy, this is like learning how to drive a car. A person who only learns to drive a car could drive safely or recklessly, using the car for good purposes or bad. However, if the driver possesses the virtues of devotion and detachment, he/she will drive safely and use the car for a good purpose.

The second concerns process. "*Another capacity that science must cultivate is that of thinking in terms of process, including historical process.*" The study of history must be more than just memorizing names and dates. Students need to develop an understanding of historical process. Again, this second capacity has conditions. A little further in the paragraph we read, "*its (understanding of historical perspective) must be unclouded by prejudices of race, culture, sex, or sectarian belief.*" To be "*unclouded by prejudices of race, culture, sex, or sectarian belief*" requires detachment, tolerance and justice. Perhaps you could think of other virtues this requires. A person may have a deep intellectual grasp of historical process, but be hampered by prejudice. Only a person with both an understanding of historical process and a strong sense of detachment, tolerance and justice could effectively contribute to human progress.

"*Thinking in terms of process*" would also apply to other areas of learning. Virtues in education also would need to be viewed as a process rather than a new set of facts to be studied, memorized and mastered. There are two processes that the educator would need to instill in students. One process would be selecting the virtue or virtues a person would want to work on in his/her lives, recognizing the well-developed virtues the person already has. This could be for one particular situation, a day, a week or a year or longer. The process would never cease. People are always changing, entering new stages in their lives, and their situation is always changing. Selecting virtues would be one process.

A second process would be balance. Over 500 virtues have been identified in the Sacred Texts. Developing virtues in ourselves implies maintaining a balance among the virtues we are working on at any given time. One virtue greatly overdeveloped in relation to the others in an individual would result in inappropriate or even detrimental behavior. Balancing virtues would be the second process. These are just two processes. The study of virtues and every other subject in an educational curriculum would need to be put into terms of process, rather than just information.

In conclusion, the virtues are universal. Very often they can be observed and described. It is the writer's observation that the virtues are like the periodical chart of the soul. They give us structure for looking at our spiritual dimension. Finally, educators of all cultures can use the virtues to empower students to integrate scientific knowledge and spiritual development, and thus contribute to the realization of "*the age-old dream of global peace.*"