

Incorporating Arts into the Ruhi Institute

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"To develop the ability to work with one's hands is not a secondary educational objective. It is an imperative in the overall training of an individual" (Ruhi Book 7).

This presentation will begin with a short introduction to the mind-body connection and what part working with one's hands plays in the creative process. The Arts are seen as an "essential element enhancing the spiritual development of the participants" in the Ruhi Institute and as tutors we are urged to "include artistic endeavours in the activity of every study circle" in order to make "a significant contribution to the capabilities of service" of the collaborators (Ruhi Book 7). It will be pointed out that "The task being asked of you does not require you to be an accomplished artist" (Ruhi Book 7). The exploration of enhancing spiritual development and increasing capabilities of service will draw from the many writings on the Arts compiled by the Universal House of Justice and will document expressing the Creative Word through the arts. Where possible, examples of including artistic endeavours will be drawn from Ruhi Book 7 and related to the Arts in Japan, however, the presentation will also include relevant examples from other Baha'i communities. The incorporation of the Arts into the Ruhi study circles is a fundamental yet elemental part of the Ruhi Institute. Rather than narrowly prescribing ways in which to incorporate the Arts into the Institute, the presentation will end with ways in which to change our perspective so that we become channels "through which can flow inspiration and the force of attraction to beauty" (Ruhi Book 7).

I

This presentation is dedicated to Amund Kvam

Djimbe

Palms plunge to meet the heart
Bass resounds
Closed fingers pat the rim
Middle sounds
Hands' bases whip edges
Tips lash forth, then hover
High notes.

Now beat the drum
Don't burst its tight-bound skin
The dancers, taut
Are ready to begin

Row after row surges
Learns from Djoniba
Leaps
Twirls
Falls.

Segments, cadences, rivulets of sweat
Calabashes whirl, rattling their beads

Beating hand bloodied
Bound quickly by rag
Rhythm?
Undaunted.

Beginnings

I start my presentation with my first poem ever to be published because it is always thrilling to hear a drum roll and, more importantly, because incorporating arts into the Ruhi Institute is about beginnings.

Setting the stage

In a letter to all Continental Counsellors from the International Centre, dated 5 November, 2001, the study circle is described as a natural channel through which the friends can express their artistic talents and sentiments.

Ruhi Institute's *Book 7* describes artistic endeavours as an essential element enhancing the spiritual development of the participants, says that we can make a significant contribution to the capabilities of service to those who take part in a study circle, and thus urges us to encourage the development of artistic expression. In His *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, Baha'u'llah wrote, "Arts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being, and are conducive to its exaltation," (*Compilation on the Arts*, Quote 1), thus indicating how we are spiritually elevated through our knowledge of the arts, crafts and sciences. Baha'u'llah also says that "The craft of every craftsman is regarded as worship" (*Compilation on the Arts*, Quote 6), which draws a parallel with His teaching that "work done in the spirit of service is worship" and suggests that rather than being a secondary or extracurricular activity, the arts constitute an essential element in one's spiritual development.

In another Tablet Baha'u'llah wrote,

The purpose of learning should be the promotion of the welfare of the people, and this can be achieved through crafts. It hath been revealed and is now repeated that the true worth of artists and craftsmen should be appreciated, for they advance the affairs of mankind (*Compilation on the Arts*, Quote 5).

Thus, not only does Baha'u'llah rank the value of artists and craftsmen very highly, he also states that learning should have a purpose and not "begin and end with words". Our beloved Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, expanded on this, writing, "What Baha'u'llah meant primarily with 'sciences that begin and end in words' are those theological treatises and commentaries that encumber the human mind rather than help it to attain the truth" (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, contained in *Compilation on the Subject of Writers and Writing* as quote 2224).

Working with one's hands

Almost at the end of Ruhi *Book 7* we read that. "To develop the ability to work with one's hands is not a secondary educational objective. It is an imperative in the overall training of an individual" (p. 130). Baha'u'llah implores God that we take the acquisition of a craft seriously, writing in a Tablet, "God grant that thou wilt exert thine utmost to acquire perfections, as well as proficiency in a craft" (*Compilation on the Arts*, Quote 3).

The need for the practical application of the arts is echoed in the following words by our Beloved Master and Shoghi Effendi.

Every person must have an occupation, a trade or craft, so that he may carry other people's burdens, and not himself be a burden to others.
(‘Abdu’l-Baha, *Compilation on the Arts*, Quote 11)

. . . shorthand and typewriting are both most useful talents, very necessary in our present social and economic life.

”(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, quoted in *Compilation on the Subject of Writers and Writing* as quote 2224)

However, Ruhi *Book 7* says that, “a study circle is not the occasion to prepare individuals for earning a livelihood through arts and crafts” (p. 130). So, how do we explain that developing the ability to work with one’s hands through engaging in the arts is a vital element of the Ruhi Process?

Possible explanation

Baha’u’llah says, “Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame, if ye be of them that comprehend this truth” (*The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith – A Compilation*, Quote 4).

Let us consider the typical study circle. The collaborators are studying the word of God and are interacting with one another in a friendly atmosphere, and an introduction of the arts and crafts opens up a natural channel for the outward expression of the words they have internalized. It is like a workshop where there is encouragement rather than competitiveness. Sometimes there is consultation through the arts. Other times, the artistic expression is presented at a Feast or a Holy Day celebration, so participants often take it upon themselves to perfect their reading or acting for the event. Thus, the Creative Word leaves the page, and, grounded in the soil of practice, takes root in the souls of the collaborators giving rise to our new race of men.

Strengthen the force of attraction to beauty

Another reason for incorporating the arts in study circles is explained in Ruhi *Book 7*: “By being a promoter of arts and crafts at the grassroots . . . you will be opening up creative channels through which can flow inspiration and the force of attraction to beauty” (p. 131).

The following passage from the Writings of Baha’u’llah (*Lawh-i-Maqsud*) indicates how it is possible, through art, to sever oneself from the world and to draw nearer unto God:

Every word of thy poetry is indeed like unto a mirror in which the evidences of the devotion and love thou chrishest for God and His chosen ones are reflected . . . Its perusal hath truly proved highly impressive, for it was indicative of both the light of reunion and the fire of separation.

‘Abdu’l-Baha indicates how it is possible to see beauty in the ordinary, and yet still, through these objects, to be drawn by the forces of attraction to perfection:

It is natural for the heart and spirit to take pleasure and enjoyment in all things that show forth symmetry, harmony, and perfection. For instance: a beautiful house, a well designed garden, a symmetrical line, a graceful motion, a well written book, pleasing garments—in fact, all things that have in themselves grace or beauty are pleasing to the heart and spirit—therefore, it is most certain that a true voice causes deep pleasure.

(‘Abdu’l-Baha’s words to Mrs. Mary L. Lucas, as quoted in *A Brief Account of My Visit to ‘Acca*, pp. 11-14; contained in *Compilation of Extracts from the Baha’i Writings on Music*, Quote 1422).

Exposing participants to various forms of art

Tutors are encouraged to expose the collaborators to a variety of art, to bear culture in mind and to select artistic expressions which appeal to the higher nature.

Craftsmanship is given a high station in the Baha'i Dispensation. Baha'u'llah wrote: "Craftsmanship is a book among the books of divine sciences, and a treasure among the treasures of His heavenly wisdom" (*Compilation on the Arts*, Quote 7).

The potency of the arts is expressed in another quotation from the Writings of Baha'u'llah:

Of all the arts and sciences, set the children to studying those which will result in advantage to man, will ensure his progress and elevate his rank. Thus the noisome odours of lawlessness will be dispelled, and thus through the high endeavours of the nation's leaders, all will live cradled, secure and in peace.

(*Tablets of Baha'u'llah Revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas*, pp. 168 -169)

Taking arts and crafts seriously enables us to be of service in our communities in different ways. The Universal House of Justice, in its letter to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors dated 27 December, 2005, wrote, "A graceful integration of the arts into diverse activities enhances the surge of energy that mobilizes the believers."

Japan

In Japan, it is natural to be asked what your hobby is soon after you are introduced to someone new. At first I found this strange, but now I realize that it is another way of identifying you, i.e., where you fit. I have found that people can have a hobby which they have practiced for many years, which they have excelled at and yet they still modestly consider themselves as mediocre.

Now I'd like to consider one of the traditional Japanese arts: Bonseki. The following explanation was adapted from a pamphlet produced by The Hosokawa School of Bonseki Tokyo Kuyo-Kai:

Consider the ancient art of Bonseki. Bonseki is the art of portraying natural scenes by arrangement of white sand, pebbles and rocks—shaped like mountains—on a black lacquer tray. Tiny tools—feathers, small flax brooms, sifters, spoons and wedges of wood—are used to create the scenes' features: i.e., trees, the sun, mountains, waves or shore lines.

The white sand and pebbles are classified into nine sizes. Once sand and different sized pebbles have been used to make one scene, they can be separated by sifting and used again. Sometimes miniature ornaments, such as houses, bridges, boats and figures, all made out of painted copper, are included in the scenes.

One does't have to know how to draw to study Bonseki. The text book provides sketches of scenery to follow. The importance of the art is the peaceful feeling and satisfaction derived from creating a scene and not the result of the work.

There are many lessons to be learned from the the arrangement of a Bonseki scene, i.e., the attraction to beauty, the meaning of the word "fashioner", how the created is not the creator, man's ephemeral nature—even life after death (in the recycling of the materials). Now, let's imagine that we add one of the *Hidden Words* to the arrangement, as suggested in the following quote from a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice dated 21 July, 1982: "A quotation from the Sacred Writings or description of the art piece as it relates to the Writings may provide the

viewer with an understanding of the source of this spiritual attraction and lead him to further study of the Faith.

Unlike in the West, in Japan, there is no distinction between art and craft, which provides for some discourse that might appeal to some artists. I think it is always important to relate the arts to the study circles, as some seekers might be motivated to join them.

Bernard Leach made his observations about Japanese society in 1914, and commented that "If a new Japanese life should be evolved, a new characteristic art will arise" (*Spinning the Clay into Stars*, p. 52).

In *Ruhi Book 7* we are encouraged to invite artists to demonstrate their skills to us. I think there are great opportunities to teach the Baha'i Faith to the groups of artists in Japan who respond to the invitation. Shoghi Effendi says,

"It is certain that with the spread of the spirit of Baha'u'llah a new era will dawn in art and literature. Whereas before the form was perfect but the spirit was lacking, now there will be a glorious spirit embodied in a form immeasurably improved by the quickened genius of the world."

(From a letter written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 3 April 1932 to an individual, included in *Compilation on the Arts* as Quote 44)

Seeing the end in the beginning

That there is a connection between the Creative Word, meditation upon It and service is encapsulated in this excerpt from a prayer by 'Abdu'l-Baha.

O Lord, help Thou Thy loved ones to acquire knowledge and the sciences and arts, and to unravel the secrets that are treasured up in the inmost reality of all created beings. Make them to hear the hidden truths that are written and embedded in the heart of all that is . . . Make them to be leaders unto Thee, guides unto Thy path, runners urging men on to Thy Kingdom.
(*Baha'i Education*, excerpt No. 27)

Visual presentation

I'd like to conclude my presentation by sharing with you some pieces of jewelry that I have made based on inspirations from the Writings.



Pebbles and Pearls, 12th November 2007

The plain is covered with pebbles, but precious stones are rare.
One pearl is better than a thousand wildernesses of sand,

Especially this pearl of great price,
Which is endowed with divine blessing.
Erelong thousands of other pearls will be born from it.
When that pearl associates and becomes the intimate of the pebbles,
They also all change into pearls.
‘Abdu’l-Baha, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, p.95

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