

Spiritual Values and Bahá'í Education

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Educational programs throughout the world are transforming the lives of children, youth, and adults; and on their success, or lack of it, rests the fate of much of the world as we know it. Two vital challenges are whether the excesses of our generations can be corrected and whether, or to what extent, humankind will progress in realizing its potentials. One response to these challenges is offered by the guiding principles of the Bahá'í Faith, particularly with reference to spiritual values and practical action. The subject, however, is too broad and too complex for more than a few small facets to be touched on. Still, like facets of a jewel, perhaps a tiny spark can be somehow captured in words and its light reflected out to blend with other points of light and insight.

These notes touch on three areas: spiritual values, particularly as they relate to Japan; an approach to Bahá'í education in an educational curriculum prepared for children in Hawaii; and a Peace Education and Global Issues course currently taught at Himeji Dokkyo University.

Bridging:

The main purpose of this paper is captured in a recent reference by the Universal House of Justice to "bridging": "... building bridges between the insights of ... disciplines ... and the relevant truths in Bahá'u'lláh's writings." ("Humanity's Coming Encounter with Bahá'u'llah", 10)

A question that teachers face daily is how the scholarship of scholars, not just in disciplines, but also regarding guiding principles such as those found in the Bahá'í writings, can be practically communicated to and acquired by students -- with the emphasis on "practically."

How can a foreign language teacher, for example, effectively guide the students he or she is responsible for to understand and appreciate truths that are vital to not only their own well-being but also that of those around each of them -- indeed, vital to the world in which they are destined to play a role as leaders and parents -- when there are such seemingly insurmountable obstacles as a language barrier which constricts and limits communication, a cultural barrier that is complex and extremely variable, and a fundamental need of individual empowerment that is self-generated and self-directed?

In Japan, one of the first challenges faced by a person raised in a Western culture is an understanding of terms such as "religion" and "spiritual." The word "spiritual" is often used with reference to personal behavior and social responsibility, and when heard by a Westerner connotes religion; however, Westerners are told that the Japanese are not "religious" -- but at the same time, religion is an accepted part of life in Japan: prayers to Shinto deities on important occasions, marriage in a Christian ceremony, and death ceremonies according to Buddhist conventions.

This particular problem of terminology was referred to indirectly in the same Universal House of Justice statement in the following manner: "... if the ecclesiastical systems of our world are religion, then the Cause is not; if it is religion, then they really are not", adding that "it does a disservice to the mission of Bahá'u'llah to the World Order which He has come to establish, to focus our public message in religious categories." (10) The term "spiritual" is not mentioned here; however, the point made reinforces a general view that the term "religion"

is bankrupt, and that it carries with it connotations that are disruptive when associated with Bahá'í guidelines and truths.

Within this frame of reference, the Westerner seems advised to redefine "spiritual" by separating it from its correlation with "religion" and to strive to understand the essence of "spirituality" that exists in the Japanese context. Considering the term "spiritual" as a "way of life", or "path of life", for example, as reflected in the "dō-" of "bushi-dō-", "ken-dō-", "aikí-dō-", and other similar "ways" or "paths" of life, suggests that Bahá'í teaching efforts might emphasize a "Bahá'í-way", a "Bahá'í-dō-". And is this not one of the basic truths of Bahá'u'llah -- to live a "way", according to a pathway, that leads to spiritual progress and by which one continually strives to develop spiritual capacities?

Education Curriculum:

But what are "spiritual capacities"? What is a "spiritual value"? Only with a conscious awareness of what spirituality refers to can these be worked into peace education materials and taught.

The Peace Message proposes two fundamental spiritual pillars as the basis for world peace: "unity" and "diversity." Each is represented in the several concepts of "oneness" and "equality" the Peace Message draws attention to, and in basic Bahá'í principles. In the achievement of "unity in diversity" is premised the promise of peace and harmony, of spiritually oriented development. However, to achieve learning of this nature such barriers as language inability, cultural differences, and inadequate instructional materials must be overcome.

One curriculum prepared with spiritually guided instruction in mind is currently being used on the Big Island in Hawaii: New Tools for International Understanding: A Peace Education Curriculum for Elementary School Students. Developed by Dr. Dale Hudson and endorsed by the Hawaii Chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility, the curriculum focuses on three levels of education: "Peace With Self", "Peace With Others", and "Peace With Mankind." Its theme is "Unity -- the Oneness of Mankind." Hudson's definition of "Peace Education" summarizes this approach as:

. . . education which actualizes children's potentials in helping them learn how to make peace with themselves and with others; to live in harmony and unity with self, mankind and with nature. (1)

In Level 1 lessons, peace with self, learning-tasks focus on spiritual capacities, which are defined as spiritual qualities such as nobility, love, mercy, truth, and justice. At Level 3, peace with mankind, the focus of lessons is on moral education, with learning-tasks defined as encouragement, good language, honesty, obedience, and honoring parents. That is, the curriculum begins with tasks for which there is spiritual universality, development of the inner person; then it shifts to moral values which may be determined somewhat differently in different cultures and different societies, and to relationships between individuals from different world communities.

University Education:

In the Level 3 lessons, Hudson also focuses on "Barriers to Peace"; that is, obstacles to the development of consciousness of the Oneness of Humankind. Some of the problems he targets as barriers are nationalism, racism, sexism, rich-poor disparity, and lack of education.

These and similar issues also form the syllabus of the Peace Education and Global Issues

course at Himeji Dokkyo University. The texts for the Dokkyo course, which is a "reading English documents" course, are the One Country edition of the Peace Message and its Japanese translation. The One Country edition was adopted because it supplements each paragraph with documentation from additional authoritative sources, mostly non-Bahá'í, and with pictures; which is to say, it qualifies as an academic text. Both English and Japanese versions of the Peace Message are necessary because, simply, the language of the Peace Message is very difficult. Class activity is small group discussion of each paragraph (beginning with Part 2) guided by a few questions from the instructor regarding theme and important details; students are requested to bring additional information and details from other sources. The last part of each class is an oral summary by one person in each group (in English) and homework is a written summary of group discussion plus one's personal point of view.

The results of the class are very encouraging. Students talked about issues related to their present-day life and critical to their future, and they considered them from a baseline provided by a Bahá'í approach. While non-Bahá'í approaches tend to focus on physical details and data regarding global issues, a Bahá'í approach tends to concentrate on attitudes and underlying principles. To illustrate, in a recent article in *The Herald of the South*, Edwin Humphries argues that environmental problems are caused primarily by such things as ignorance, indifference, negligence, materialism, and greed. ("Our World: Looking Beyond Band-aids") Other global issue arguments tend to look primarily at results rather than causes, at the number of trees cut down in rain forests each day, the effects of pollutants, the extinction of species, etc.

What is education? It . . . is both a personal and social process", according to Dwight Allen in his 1989 "Education and the spiritual development of mankind" keynote address at the 2nd Symposium on Bahá'í Education. And what should Bahá'í education consist of? At Stanford University many years ago a description was reportedly given of `Abdu'l-Bahá as one who treads a "mystical way" with "practical feet." Might we not think of that "mystic way" as a "spiritual way", a "Bahá'í way", the process of developing one's spiritual capacities? And could not "practical feet" be thought of as the global issues that currently plague societies in every part of the earth, and the process of developing one's practical knowledge to meet the challenges of the world we live in?

Interestingly, the "building block to peace" (Perkins 1991) many of the students considered the most important for Japanese to develop was "independent investigation." This is also a key concept of the Canadian Peace Education Curriculum, where the independent investigation of reality is presented as the way for individuals to:

. . . make their own independent response to the Revelation . . . (and) become part of a unique, beautiful and powerful social system created by God through Bahá'u'llah. (Introduction 7)

and by so doing to discover their own spiritual heritage. The social system thus developed, as David Hofman puts it, is a society " . . . whose motivation power arising from the people remains vested in the people by the institutions and ordinances of Bahá'u'llah." (Introduction 7) It is a world society which through education and the peaceful resolution of critical issues achieves unity while at the same time sustaining diversity, and does so through the expression by individuals of a balance between radiant spiritual values and demonstrated practical knowledge.

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