

For opium fasteneth on the soul, so that the user's conscience dieth, his mind is blotted away, his perceptions are eroded. It turneth the living into the dead. [Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, page 149]

Under this category one could also perhaps include "social disability," e.g. shyness or lack of communication skills leading to isolation and loneliness. A pupil at my school suffered greatly in this regard (I use the word suffered advisedly). He was highly intelligent but his social disability dictated that he could not help but flaunt it. He came over as arrogant and superior with the result that he was the probably the most unpopular pupil in the school. This was no minor matter, he was forever being bullied and, I would imagine, he looks back on his school days with horror.

NB It has to be said that the above categorisations into physical or mental disabilities can only be useful labels. For many a mental ailment has a physical or a spiritual origin and, indeed, many a mental or spiritual affliction has a physical manifestation.

Verily the most necessary thing is contentment under all circumstances; by this one is preserved from morbid conditions and from lassitude. Yield not to grief and sorrow: they cause the greatest misery. Jealousy consumeth the body and anger doth burn the liver: avoid these two as you would a lion. [Cited in "Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era", p. 108]

A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones. [Proverbs 17:22]

I gained a traumatic insight into mental disability when my mother - Kathleen Booth - succumbed to the stresses and strains of a difficult life; suffered premature senile decay and died in a mental institution just outside Canterbury at age 61. The polio virus that had struck down both myself and my sister, killed my father. My sister, thankfully, recovered almost unscathed but my newly widowed mother was presented with the dire condition of her children and the medical prognosis that I would never sit up and certainly not live beyond the age of 5.

As I look back at age 50 and wonder why I am still here - happily sitting, I conclude that it is primarily because my mother refused to give up. She could, as many might under the circumstances, just have accepted that it was hopeless and seek only to make my remaining months as happy as possible. Instead she went to the hospital physiotherapist and asked to be taught massage. The therapist refused explaining that, done incorrectly, it could do more harm than good. My mother's argument that I was dying anyway, won the day! My earliest memory is laying on the kitchen table being exhorted by my mother to do my exercises in sight of a large stick that I was, reliably, persuaded would be applied to my posterior anatomy should I fail to comply!

My mother had to strive every step of the way working as a school cook during the day and selling "Avon" during the evening to keep us fed and in pocket money. It may be no exaggeration to say that our mother lived for us and when I

eventually left a boarding school for the disabled (at age 20) and got a job, it was as though something in my mother said "the battle is won - your children will be fine now" and there followed a swift decline into premature senility.

I would regularly visit her in the mental hospital. In a ward of 50 people, I rarely saw another visitor. She could no longer speak and I used to wonder if she even knew of my presence, there being no sign of recognition. We were not the most demonstrative of families - we knew we all cared so rarely felt the need to say it. On one visit, however, as she sat there seeming totally oblivious to me and all around her, I said: "I do love you, you know". She looked up into my eyes and tears streamed down her cheeks. She was still in there?> On the one hand I felt happy that my mother was still present, on the other great anguish that she was trapped in this barely functioning body and mind. I was much comforted later on finding these words of Bahá'u'lláh:

"Know thou that the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose themselves between his soul and his body, for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments. Consider the light of the lamp. Though an external object may interfere with its radiance, the light itself continueth to shine with undiminished power." [Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh]

Can you imagine what that meant to me? The soul of my mother, the real person who myself and all who knew her, loved: was "unaffected by any bodily ailments." Her brain could be likened to a radio receiver whose circuits are malfunctioning; only a small part of the signal from the soul is getting through amidst all manner of interference and static!

The temple of man is like unto a mirror, his soul is as the sun, and his mental faculties even as the rays that emanate from that source of light. The ray may cease to fall upon the mirror, but it can in no wise be dissociated from the sun. [Bahá'í World Faith, pages 346-347]

It was whilst visiting my mother one evening that I experienced one of the more dramatic answers to prayer. Every time I visited, there was always a particular woman crying loudly non stop, every time and all the time I was there. On this occasion, I sat at my mothers bedside and suddenly the woman in the next bed, looking at me with what I can only describe as haunted eyes, pleaded: "Please stop that lady crying!" I felt totally helpless. I found her constant crying distressing even for the hour or so a week I heard it, it must have been torture indeed to hear it twelve, or for all I knew, twenty-four hours a day! I felt so sorry for all the patients - not least the tortured soul in such distress - that I closed my eyes and offered up a truly heartfelt prayer: "Dear Lord, PLEASE give that lady peace."

It was instantaneous, as though someone turned a switch. The moment I said the word "peace" the crying stopped. I was both amazed and truly grateful. I never heard her cry again that evening or on any subsequent visit.

Spirit has influence; prayer has spiritual effect. Therefore, we pray, "O God! Heal this sick one!" Perchance God will answer. Does it matter who prays? God will answer the prayer of every servant if that prayer is urgent. His mercy is vast, illimitable. He answers the prayers of all His servants. [Promulgation of Universal Peace, page 246]

Spiritual Disability

Without question it is spiritual disability that is the most devastating. For it is this that causes us to hate; lack compassion; strive only for self; ignore the guidance of a loving providence and so allow our beautiful world to degenerate into hell instead of reflecting heaven. It is also the most important because, whereas our physical/mental disorders last but three score years and ten, our spiritual health is what we take with us as we are launched into eternity at the close of our earthly lives.

Universal Condition

Anybody can be happy in the state of comfort, ease, health, success, pleasure and joy; but if one will be happy and contented in the time of trouble, hardship and prevailing disease, it is the proof of nobility. ['Abdu'l-Bahá - Bahá'í World Faith, page 363]

I would argue that everyone is disabled in one way or another - indeed in a multitude of ways. Whether we suffer from debilitating shyness; whether we have such paucity of spirit that we only seek personal gratification; whether we struggle in poverty and hunger in the third world; whether our joints stiffen due to arthritis or our mind stiffens due to prejudice, we are all disabled to a greater or lesser degree.

Why disability? Why suffering? What I do know is that when I consider those people in my life who have most struck me as being "special" — the people who, having touched my life, have left me richer for it; they, without exception — have at some time, been through hell. Whether through illness or tragedy they have had the rough edges knocked off exposing the jewel within.

The Purpose of the one true God, exalted be His glory, in revealing Himself unto men is to lay bare those gems that lie hidden within the mine of their true and inmost selves. [Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, page 287]

Regarding such suffering and tests Bahá'u'lláh's son and exemplar of His teachings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá' (1844-1921) explains:

Tests are benefits from God, for which we should thank Him. Grief and sorrow do not come to us by chance, they are sent to us by the Divine Mercy for our own perfecting...

Men who suffer not, attain no perfection. The plant most pruned by the gardeners is that one which, when the summer comes, will have the most beautiful blossoms and the most abundant fruit. The labourer cuts up the earth with his plough, and from that earth comes the rich and plentiful harvest. The

more a man is chastened, the greater is the harvest of spiritual virtues shown forth by him. A soldier is no good General until he has been in the front of the fiercest battle and has received the deepest wounds." [Paris Talks Pages 50-51]

Bahá'u'lláh says:

"My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy." [The Hidden Words - Bahá'u'lláh]

A poet friend of mine, Paul Bura, observed in one of his books that polio was the best thing that ever happened to him! He explained (and I paraphrase) that because of it he was perforce, less active than his fellows which meant he spent more time on the sidelines watching others. This served to enhance and develop his powers of observation; an attribute so vital to the art of the poet.

If we just look at this world, the disabilities people suffer can indeed seem like the "fire and vengeance" referred to in the above quotation. However, from the perspective of the life of the soul which, the Bahá'í teachings state, continues to progress for all eternity, we can see that it is indeed, "light and mercy" if we use it as God intended.

There are two ways of looking at things: one that results in futility, one that brings hope action and progress. Three quotations sum this up for me:

Two men looking out through bars, one sees the earth, the other sees the stars.
[anon]

The pessimist sees the glass as half empty, the optimist sees it as half full.
[anon]

'Everything in life ministers to our development. Our lesson is to study and learn. Money and difficulties are alike advantages to us. Tests are either stumbling blocks or stepping stones, just as we make them.' ['Abdu'l-Bahá. Cited in: Ten Days in the Light of Akka]

My foster brother, Paul Hodge, has stumps instead of arms and legs. For a number of years he was the conductor of the Snowdown Colliery Choir who, under his baton, made records and appeared on TV. He now teaches music - including the piano (which he plays with his stumps. Don't ask - you have to see it to believe it!)

Now one could bemoan "What a shame, what a brilliant musician he might have been if only he hadn't been disabled." But what an inspiration such folk are to others. Irrespective of the eternal dimension referred to above, what a blessing from God they are to the world; inspiring us too to make the best possible use of what we have. Imagine how much better the world would be if more people utilised the gifts and talents they had been given instead of existing apathetically in pursuit of short term pleasures and the fast buck.

Don't get me wrong, I am not saying it is pie in the sky we'll be fine when we

die for the disabled person. One of my mothers oft quoted aphorisms was: "when one door closes another one opens". Judging by most of the disabled folk I know - and that is a fair few - one of the doors that opens tends to be an advanced sense of humour and a will to live.

How often do we see a man, poor, sick, miserably clad, and with no means of support, yet spiritually strong. Whatever his body has to suffer, his spirit is free and well! Again, how often do we see a rich man, physically strong and healthy, but with a soul sick unto death. ['Abdu'l-Bahá -Paris Talks, page 65]

Maybe because some of us live a bit closer to the edge survival wise, we tend to appreciate what we have got more than some of our able-bodied fellows. Have you noticed how people who have had near death experiences often change their lives completely? Having glimpsed eternity, they determine to make this life count for something. It pains me then to see folk with healthy bodies abusing them. It is a tragedy that so many are unconscious of their worth and potential that they see no purpose in their lives other than hedonism and dull their wits with alcohol and drugs to avoid really living.

We are SO much more than just flesh and blood:

A man should pause and reflect and be just: his Lord, out of measureless grace, has made him a human being and honoured him with the words: "Verily, We created man in the goodliest of forms" - and caused His mercy which rises out of the dawn of oneness to shine down upon him, until he became the wellspring of the words of God and the place where the mysteries of heaven alighted, and on the morning of creation he was covered with the rays of the qualities of perfection and the graces of holiness. How can he stain this immaculate garment with the filth of selfish desires, or exchange this everlasting honour for infamy? "Dost thou think thyself only a puny form, when the universe is folded up within thee?" ['Abdu'l-Bahá - Secret of Divine Civilization, page 19]

And of the next stage of our journey?

As to the soul of man after death, it remains in the degree of purity to which it has evolved during life in the physical body, and after it is freed from the body it remains plunged in the ocean of God's Mercy. ['Abdu'l-Bahá - Paris Talks, page 66]

Life then is an adventure; a race to develop our spiritual capacities and sensibilities before we cast off this mortal coil and these qualities are all we have left. We can't take with us our money, our property, our physical beauty, our trophies, titles or crowns. Whether we are given, clogs, running shoes or skis; whether we are given brightness, health and wealth OR dullness, illness and poverty is - in the great race of life - totally irrelevant. What is important is that we do the best we can with what we have and try and achieve our potential while helping others achieve theirs.

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