

the Faith, develop conviction as to its truth, and finally become Bahá'ís. The reason is simple. People who come in contact with the Faith and feel themselves being transformed by it have an experience that is self-validating. No one can take that experience away from them and no intellectual argument can make it appear insignificant or unreal. Feeling oneself becoming the best of what one can potentially be constitutes the highest joy. It promotes a sense of self-worth, obviates the need for expressing hostility, and guarantees a compassionate social conscience — all prerequisites of world unity and peace.

The Nature of Human Potential

But what is the "best" of what one can potentially be? Bahá'u'lláh teaches that the highest expression of the self is servitude. The degree to which this highest station of servitude can be achieved is commensurate with the degree to which the basic powers or capacities of the human being can be released. The process of becoming one's true self, then, is synonymous with that process of developing basic capacities and dedicating them to the service of humanity. The daily decisions and actions which reflect this "becoming" are essentially religious in nature, for Bahá'u'lláh equates work of all kinds performed in a spirit of service — in the spirit of that highest station of man — with worship. The person who begins to see the religious nature of "becoming" will not only recognize a profound new dimension in work and worship, but will also see religion in a new light. He will begin to understand that when the force which continually enables one to grow disappears from any religion, it is time for it to be renewed, for religion devoid of that force is little more than empty rituals, meaningless dogmas, and social conventions which block the expression of the human spirit and impede social progress.

Service to mankind is given quality by the depth and character of the capacities of the human being rendering it. What are these capacities? Bahá'u'lláh identifies them in His statement of the animating purpose behind man's creation: to know and to love God. Here the two basic powers or capacities of knowing and loving are clearly specified and linked to our purpose — our reason for being. Thus, for a Bahá'í, becoming one's true self means the development of one's knowing and loving capacities in service to mankind.

This understanding gives substance to the notion of spirituality. A spiritual person is one who knows and loves God and who is committed to the struggle of developing those knowing and loving capacities for service to humanity. By definition, then, being closed-minded about something, refusing to look at new evidence — blocking the knowing capacity, or reacting to others in unloving ways — are all signs of spiritual immaturity or spiritual sickness.

All other virtues can be understood as expressions of different combinations of these basic capacities of loving and knowing as they are applied in different situations. The loving capacity includes not only the ability to love but also the ability to be loved — to attract love. We cannot have lovers without loved ones. If we do not know how to be loved or cannot accept it, then we

frustrate others who are struggling to develop their capacity to love. Not accepting someone's love is very frequently experienced as rejection and does untold amounts of damage, particularly in young children.

The knowing capacity also includes a knowledge of how to learn and how to teach. Teaching and learning are reciprocal aspects of the knowing capacity. No teacher is a good teacher who cannot learn from his pupils, and no good pupil fails to question his teacher so that both teacher and pupil learn.

Each capacity supports and facilitates the development of the other. In order to know, for instance, we must love learning; if we are to love, we must know how to love and how to be loved.

These two capacities constitute the basic nature of human potential. From a Bahá'í point of view, true education refers to a drawing out or a development of potential to the fullest extent possible. Unfortunately, much of contemporary education is concerned only with a presentation of information rather than a drawing out of potential. For this reason, schools are primarily a place where facts and ideas are dispensed by the teacher and stored by the pupil. Consequently, diplomas and degrees do no more than certify that certain kinds and amounts of information were dispensed and that the recipient of the diploma was able to demonstrate at various points during the course of his formal education that he had stored the information long enough for it to be retrieved and written down on an examination. Such degrees or diplomas say nothing about the loving or feeling capacity of the student and therefore say very little about character — a word which refers to the person's ability to apply his knowledge constructively and express his love for humanity.

Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that if the loving capacity is blocked in any way, there will be learning problems and the development of the knowing capacity will be impaired. That is why a school system based on the narrow "dispensing-of-information" view of education can never adequately serve the needs of society. True education should foster development towards the achievement of the highest station — servitude — and must therefore be concerned with the whole person and his character rather than just a small part of him.

Faith and the Release of Human Potential

It is one thing to describe the nature of human potential and another to be able to release it. The Bahá'í Faith does both. The nature of human potential has already been briefly discussed. Let us now explore the ways in which the Faith initiates and sustains the transformation process by releasing human potential.

The basic source of the power for transformation is the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. Exposure to his Writings nurtures the development of faith — the first prerequisite for transformation. Basically, faith refers to an attitude towards the unknown or unknowable which ultimately enables one to approach it in a way that something more of it becomes known. It thus

represents a special interplay of the two basic capacities of knowing and loving. In essence, faith means a loving of the unknown or unknowable — an attraction to whatever is unknown and a capacity to approach it. Since, as Bahá'u'lláh affirms, God is unknowable, it takes faith to become attracted and related to Him.

We all have a kind of cosmic hunger, a need to be related to all things including the infinitude of the Universe. This is a natural by-product of consciousness. Since we experience ourselves as beings distinct from all other things in the universe, we feel compelled to find out how we stand in relationship to every other thing, and this includes being related to those unknown or unknowable things which also exist in the universe. The ultimate unknowable mystery of the universe is called by many names: Allah, Jehovah, God, Supreme Being. Now, because man has the capacity for faith — a particular attitude toward the unknown — he has, down through history, responded to the Founders of the world's great religions Who came to manifest the attributes of that unknowable mystery in the universe — God — and satisfy our cosmic hunger. Thus, faith is one important expression of our purpose, which is to know and to love God.

It is interesting to note that, if our basic capacities are knowing and loving, and if we are created in the image of God, then knowing and loving must be among the attributes of God. In *The Hidden Words*, Bahá'u'lláh indicates that this is so. He says, "O Son of Man! Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty." (#3 Arabic, online at bahai.org/library)

Further, if God is unknowable and if we are created in His image, then we may expect something in ourselves also to be unknown. This unknown is the as-yet unexpressed potential within us — latent capacities for knowing and loving. In a very dramatic way, Bahá'u'lláh points to that vast unknown in ourselves when he quotes in the *Seven Valleys* the verse of a well-known Persian poet: "Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form / When within thee the universe is folded?" (*Valley of Wonderment*, online at bahai.org/library)

None of us knows his capacity for love or how much he can learn. Just as we had to have faith before we could learn about the attributes of God, so must we have faith before we can know something of ourselves. We must love — be attracted to, have a particular attitude towards — that unknown in our own selves if it is to become released. If we relate satisfactorily to the unknown in ourselves, we will be able to relate to the unknown in others. In other words, we have to accept others not only for what they presently are but also for what they can become; otherwise, we impede their process of transformation and keep them from becoming their own true selves.

This is why a person who has given up on himself, who has stopped becoming and has therefore betrayed his potential, will find all his relationships with other human beings disturbed, unsatisfying, and even painful. To accept and

relate to another human being just as he is at a particular moment in time precludes the development of anything more than a superficial relationship. To achieve deeply meaningful relationships with other human beings, we have also to accept the unknown possibilities within them, for that acceptance constitutes one important source of their courage to become. In more personal terms, if you do not accept the unknown possibilities in yourself, you will not be able to establish anything more than superficial relationships with other human beings, and you will not be able to help them to develop their potential nor yourself to develop your own.

Since a human being's potential is an extremely important part of his reality — in fact, the basis of his future growth — it must be accepted by others and play a part in human relationships before he can feel totally accepted. Total acceptance on the part of others constitutes a special kind of trust that is very difficult to betray. It is one very important source of benevolent pressure to become and one of the most significant criteria of real love and friendship. This kind of pressure reciprocated between two human beings will spiritualize any relationship, but has particular significance for marriage. It forms the spiritual basis for marriage.

The necessity for reciprocity in this kind of relationship is clearly expressed by Bahá'u'lláh in *The Hidden Words*. He states, "O Son of Being! Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee. Know this, O servant." (#5 Arabic, online at bahai.org/library) In this verse, God commands, through His Manifestation, that we love Him and accept Him in spite of the fact that he is unknowable. Being attracted to the unknowable is the essence of faith. If there is no faith, no attraction to that primary mystery — God — then we become alienated from the mystery in our own selves and cut off from the power to grow and develop. The statement quoted above started with "O Son of Being" and ends with "know this, O servant." Thus, in that very short verse, the two basic capacities of loving and knowing are again emphasized in the context of being and serving. It connects the process of being or becoming with that highest station of servitude.

Anxiety and the Unknown

Facing any unknown is not easy. The prospect of it, particularly when facing the unknown in ourselves, is always accompanied by anxiety. An extrinsic unknown is nearly always perceived as a potential threat to our security for it brings up a question that represents an intrinsic unknown — do we, or do we not have what it will take to deal successfully with that extrinsic unknown?

Anxiety has all of the qualities of a fear reaction, except that it usually has no clear-cut object. Both fear reactions and anxiety reactions are characterized by a rapid energizing of the system which prepares it to deal with an emergency situation. One can handle the fear reaction more easily, since the threatening object is identifiable and can be removed or avoided. In the case of anxiety, the system goes into a state of preparedness for an emergency when it is not clear what the emergency is. Without any object, it is

difficult to know what action to take and the system is never quite certain when to declare the emergency over. Anxiety may thus be seen as energy without a goal.

The only successful way to deal with anxiety is to treat that energy as a gift and find a concrete goal for it which will serve the more basic goal or purpose of developing capacities for loving and knowing. Determining what that goal should be in specific terms is perhaps the most universally creative act of man. It entails assuming a risk and stepping into the unknown, bearing the burden of doubt, yet always hopeful of discovering some new capacity or some new limitation (which is also part of one's reality). Being attracted to that unknown in ourselves is faith; being able to utilize the energy from anxiety by formulating a goal and taking steps toward it is courage. Thus, faith, doubt, anxiety, and courage are all basic aspects of the process of transformation — the release of potential. If there were no unknowns, there would be no doubt or anxiety; and with no doubt or anxiety there would be no need for faith and courage.

The Spiritual Matrix of Transformation

The power of the Bahá'í Faith to transform human beings by releasing their potential stems directly from the fact that it keeps doubt and anxiety from reaching unmanageable proportions and provides an incentive and motivation to deal with them constructively through faith and courage. Bahá'u'lláh himself indicated that the primary source of the power for transformation comes from an acceptance of his Word — the Word of God. His Writings are often referred to as "the creative word" precisely because human beings have felt themselves being created anew as they have become more and more exposed to it. Bahá'u'lláh clearly affirms that if you want to become transformed, you must "immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words."

Immersion into that ocean begins the process of transformation by creating an awareness in us of the essential nature and purpose behind our creation. Nobody can read Bahá'u'lláh without feeling his own loving and knowing capacities being awakened and developed. As we continually explore the Writings, we begin to see ourselves differently and to see the environment differently. As we begin to see ourselves and the environment differently, we begin to feel differently about things. As we begin to feel differently, we begin to behave differently. Behaving differently is the tangible manifestation of one's having embarked upon the adventure of becoming what he potentially can become.

The Writings therefore serve as that intervening force which enables us to become free from all of those attachments and fears which keep us imprisoned and unable to take that risky but creative step into the unknown. We know that human beings are often changed by intense experiences of one kind or another. Immersion in the ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's Words is not just reading; it is an experience for the whole man which can become intense enough to free him from ties to the status quo and to set him forth on the pursuit of his destiny. As we are freed from crippling attachments to what other people think of us, we

are less likely to be manipulated by them — imprisoned by them — and develop instead a source of intrinsic motivation.

The Writings also reduce general anxiety and doubt to manageable proportions by making sense out of human history and the world's present state of perpetual crisis. This means that we need not pretend the crises do not exist or refuse to face them. Thus understanding something of the problems which face us not only reduces anxiety but attracts courage.

A further source of courage stems from Bahá'u'lláh's indication, in general terms, of what kinds of goals are legitimate and in keeping with the purpose of our creation. That gives us some guidance in taking that creative step of defining a goal which can be achieved by utilizing energy from anxiety. We have an option here. We can either take that creative step of defining a goal and facilitate the transformation process or we can refuse to do that, in any conscious way, and hope that the anxiety will finally go away by itself. Obviously, persons who have a great deal of guidance in what kind of goals to establish will be more apt to make conscious decisions in regard to defining goals. In the absence of such a definition, energy from anxiety is likely to be expressed in aggressive and hostile acts towards other human beings, whose reactions to the attack will very likely further impede growth and development not only in themselves but in the persons to whom they are reacting.

Thus, the Writings stimulate our knowing and loving capacities in a unique way which we may call faith and courage. That, in turn, serves to guarantee a continued growth and development of those two basic capacities. In other words, knowing and loving used in the right way through faith and courage will increase the knowing and loving capacity — will release human potential.

The Social Matrix of Transformation

But this is not all of the picture. Bahá'u'lláh has made provisions for the formation of communities whose institutions may safeguard and promote the transformation of humanity. The Bahá'í Community becomes, then, the social matrix of transformation.

Because of Bahá'u'lláh's affirmation of the principle of the oneness of mankind, all Bahá'í Communities are composed of human beings from diverse linguistic, racial, national, and religious backgrounds. This diversity in the Bahá'í Community represents to every member many unknowns — or, in less euphemistic terms, the Bahá'í Community is made up of human beings many of whom one would not ordinarily be attracted to or choose to be one's friends. It is well known that we tend to choose for our friends others who think the same as we do, who feel the same way about other things as we do, who have similar tastes, and who like doing similar things. Within such a homogeneous group, one's transformation can easily come to a halt, for a set repertoire of responses is developed and there is no stimulus to develop new ones. That is why one of the most precious attributes of a Bahá'í Community is its diversity.

When one joins a Bahá'í Community he joins a family of extremely diverse human beings with whom he will have to work and establish meaningful relationships. The first thing he finds out, is that his old repertoire of responses is no longer adequate. So many different human beings represent a great many unknowns, and trying to relate to those unknowns creates energy (anxiety) which sets that reciprocal process of knowing and loving through faith and courage in motion. Defining a legitimate goal which will constructively utilize the energy from that anxiety will call forth a new repertoire of responses. Each new response is a bit of one's latent capacity made manifest — a release of human potential. Another way of saying it is that the Bahá'í Community offers more opportunities for knowing and loving under growth-fostering circumstances than can be found anywhere else.

Typically, a Bahá'í moves through a pattern of spiritual evolution starting with tolerance for the diversity of his fellow community members. As knowledge is added, that tolerance grows into understanding. When love is added, understanding blossoms into appreciation. This appreciation for diversity is the spiritual and social opposite of ethnocentrism. The journey from ethnocentrism, through the stages of toleration and understanding, to a state of appreciation always entails many anxieties and doubts. We are often put in the position of not quite knowing what to do or if we do know what to do, we do not feel like doing it. These are tests which are prerequisite to our transformation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh's son, states unequivocally that without tests there is no spiritual development.

Here we come to a very critical issue. Tests can many times destroy an individual. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that if we turn away from God for the solution, the test may indeed destroy us. If we turn to God for the solution and if we have the loving support of other members in the Community we can pass the test successfully. Thus the Bahá'í Community, because of its diversity, provides many of those tests which are essential to our spiritual development. At the same time, guidance from Bahá'í institutions and the commitment of the members of the community to accept each other for what they can become provides the courage to turn those tests into vehicles for spiritual development — for the release of human potential.

In brief, that is the spiritual meaning of adversity. Bahá'u'lláh states, "My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy. Hasten thereunto that thou mayest become an eternal light and an immortal spirit. This is My command unto thee, do thou observe it." (Hidden Words #51 Arabic, online at bahai.org/library)

Thus, for a Bahá'í happiness is not a life free from anxiety or tension. That is the Bahá'í definition of boredom. Happiness for a Bahá'í is having tests and knowing how to summon the courage to pass them in such a way that his knowing and loving capacities are further developed in service to humanity. Living in the community provides the tests which become the opportunities to acquire experience in translating abstract principles into concrete realities, and this gives faith a foundation of conscious knowledge. It is this

ever-expanding conscious knowledge of how to apply the principles of the Faith in real situations that consolidates the gains in spiritual development and provides the base for continued growth.

Prejudice — a Block in the Path

Unification of all peoples of the earth cannot take place if individual human beings are not united within themselves. Bahá'u'lláh indicated that he could find no human being who was inwardly and outwardly united. If one's knowing and loving capacities are in conflict, then one is not inwardly or outwardly united. The consequence is that one's words and deeds will not be in harmony.

The conflict of these capacities is reflected outwardly on another level. Science, for instance, may be regarded as an expression of man's knowing capacity and religion as an expression of his loving capacity. Bahá'u'lláh taught that science and religion must go hand in hand, or the conflict will cause destruction. Today we see how knowledge of nuclear energy without love creates a constant threat to our survival.

In a very basic sense, the word prejudice refers to conflicts in the way these two capacities are expressed. A prejudice is a belief (a kind of knowing) in something that is not true coupled with an emotional confirmation (a kind of loving). In other words, a prejudice is an emotional attraction or commitment to falsehood or error. Actions based on that commitment are nearly always damaging to the person who is the victim of the action as well as to the one who is carrying it out.

On a personal level, prejudice represents a definite blockage in the expression of human potential because the loving capacity has been used to impede the knowing capacity. In a fundamental sense, almost all neuroses and psychoses can be understood in terms of this kind of conflict. The goal of therapy therefore always has to be a removal of the blockage towards becoming one's true self by enabling the person's loving capacity to support his knowing powers and vice versa.

On the social level, prejudice in action results in massive injustices ranging from discrimination and segregation to open violence and hostility organized in the form of wars. In like manner, this represents a definite blockage in the expression of society's potential.

Every barrier to the unification of mankind is sustained by a prejudice — by widespread culturally determined emotional commitments to a falsehood. For this reason, Bahá'ís see the process of unification of mankind as being synonymous with the progressive eradication of prejudice. Before the barriers to unification can be torn down, the prejudices which support them must be abolished.

Why is prejudice so difficult to eradicate? One reason is that human beings often are unaware that they have a prejudice. Fundamentally, this is what bigotry is — being ignorant of one's ignorance while making bold and confident assertions of the rightness and truth of one's position. Bigoted

persons are in a tragic position because they always avoid exposing themselves to any situation which would confront them with the fact that they may possibly have a prejudice. How would a person know whether or not he did have a commitment to an error in the form of a prejudice if he were never exposed to the experience which would reveal it? In concrete personal terms, how would you know that you had a prejudice against somebody who spoke another language or had a skin color different from your own, if you never had the opportunity to be with such a person — an experience which would help to reveal the error?

This is precisely why the Bahá'í Community is so essential to the progressive eradication of prejudice. It provides an opportunity at every turn for everyone to have the kinds of experiences which will let him know where his prejudices are. It is for this reason that the struggle for world unity takes place more within the Bahá'í Community than outside it. Outside the community, people can insulate themselves from those experiences which will reveal their prejudices to them while continuing to hear only those experiences which enable their perceptions to remain distorted and their commitment to falsehood strong.

For a Bahá'í, discovering a prejudice in himself is always a test, and the moment he recognizes it he knows that he must struggle to eradicate it, not only because it will make him be unjust to other people if he does not, but also because his own spiritual development absolutely depends upon it.

What happens to a person with a blocked potential — a person who for whatever reason has not been able to find out how to become his true self? If he is a passive or introverted kind of person, he will escape into a fantasy world, withdraw into a world of drugs and alcohol, and will probably eventually become so dysfunctional that he may have to be institutionalized. If the person is action-oriented and extroverted, he will be hostile and aggressive and may eventually have to be institutionalized for committing crimes. The point here is simple: the person who is in the process of becoming, whose loving and knowing capacities are being continually developed, does not want to escape responsibility into a world of fantasy, nor does he want to fight, hurt or kill. It is impossible for human beings who feel their human potential being released to engage in a war of any kind. Under such circumstances there is absolutely no motivation for hostile action. It is for this reason that Bahá'u'lláh claims that His Faith and the Bahá'í Community will be that agency through which world peace will be ultimately established.

The Image of God and the Kingdom of God on Earth

That unknown in ourselves which the unexpressed potential represents has been referred to as the image of God. Becoming our true self means relating to that unknown in such a way that more and more of it becomes expressed. This always involves finding a goal for the energy from the anxiety that comes from facing that unknown.

This entire process has a social counterpart. What the image of God is to the individual human being the Kingdom of God on earth is to human society. That kingdom represents what society can potentially become just as the image of God

represents what the individual can become. When there is transformation of individuals on a massive scale through the release of human potential — when the latent capacities for loving and knowing are organized and expressed on a social level as the progressive eradication of prejudice — we advance towards the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation did not deal only with the transformation of the individual in a vacuum, for this would be extremely difficult if not impossible. He also provided a blueprint for building a new world order. That building process is directed and guided by Bahá'í institutions in a way that will enable society to become its true self — the Kingdom of God on earth. The response to anxieties and tests on an individual basis also has a social counterpart. Social institutions have their tests too; and their development depends on whether or not they can take that creative step into the unknown and form new kinds of legislation sustained by new kinds of judicial supports.

Bahá'ís accept the Kingdom of God on earth as a reality ultimately attainable, not through a passive waiting for it to happen to us in an instant by some miracle, but through dedicated efforts over a long period of time to become what we can become in the face of many trials and tribulations. Those who make these dedicated efforts feel themselves to play an active part in the greatest miracle of all — conscious acceptance of the responsibility to become knowing and loving servants of mankind for the glorification of God.

Thus, as greater and greater numbers of human beings find a way in the Bahá'í Faith to become their own true selves — to reflect the image of God in their lives, society will also be in the process of becoming its true self — the Kingdom of God on earth.

In the Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

"If the travelers seek after the goal of the Intended One ... this station appertaineth to the self — but that self which is 'The Self of God standing within Him with laws.'

"On this plane, the self is not rejected but beloved; it is well-pleasing and not to be shunned. Although at the beginning, this plane is the realm of conflict, yet it endeth in attainment to the throne of splendor...

"This is the plane of the self which is well-pleasing unto God. Refer to the verse: 'Oh, thou soul which art well-assured / Return to thy Lord, well-pleased, and pleasing unto Him ... Enter thou among My servants, / And enter thou My paradise.'" (The First Valley, p 50, online at bahai.org/library)

"O My servants! Could ye apprehend with what wonders of My munificence and bounty I have willed to entrust your souls, ye would, of a truth, rid yourselves of attachment to all created things, and would gain a true knowledge of your own selves — a knowledge which is the same as the comprehension of Mine own Being. Ye would find yourselves independent of all else but Me, and would perceive, with your inner and outer eye, and as manifest as the revelation of My effulgent Name, the seas of my loving-kindness and bounty

moving within you." (Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CLIII, pp 326-327 online at bahai.org/library)

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