Pursuing Excellence

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The Bahá'í writings are full of reference to excellence. But what is excellence? How do we know whether or not something is excellent? And how are we to achieve excellence, always assuming we know what it is. This paper will offer a few thoughts about excellence, its ineffability and how we might pursue it.

'Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of fact and calculations.' Thus Dickens's character in Hard Times introduces himself. In the schoolroom he demands of girl number twenty, Sissy Jupe, whose father 'belongs to the horse-riding' a definition of a horse. She, who lives her life with horses, is thrown in 'the greatest alarm by this demand'. Gradgrind reproves her lack of 'facts in reference to one of the commonest of animals' and calls upon the boy, Bitzer, to give the required definition. Bitzer obliges: 'Quadruped. Graminivorous, Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.' Thus (and much more) Bizter.

'Now girl number twenty,' said Mr Gradgrind. 'You know what a horse is.'

I have the strongest suspicion that excellence is as indefinable as Sissy Jupe's horse. No recitation of facts or definitions really gives us an understanding of what excellence is. We may be able to know it when we see, hear, smell, feel, intuit it, but we cannot reduce it to an exercise of ticking the boxes on a list of criteria. No such list could capture the spiritual reality of excellence.

The Bahá'í writings are replete with references to excellence. Even the most superficial glance at the tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings and utterances, or at the letters of Shoghi Effendi makes it clear that the pursuit of excellence is an essential part of the struggle to realize one's divine qualities and thus become fully human.

Let me start with a story from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wonderful book, Memorials of the Faithful. Really every Bahá'í should read Memorials of the Faithful. It is full of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's tenderness even for the very simplest and least educated of the believers. It has flashes of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's humour and it shows, unequivocally, that the personal qualities that the Master values are not necessarily those that Bahá'ís might consider important for a 'good Bahá'í life'. Not all of those souls whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes about are outwardly pious, for example, but they are all devoted and seek excellence in their own ways.

Here is an excerpt from the story of Hájí Muhammad Khan:

'Another of those who left their homes and came to settle in the neighbourhood of Bahá'u'lláh was Haji Muhammad Khan. This distinguished man, a native of Sistan, was a Baluch. When he was very young, he caught fire and became a mystic – an arif, or adept. As a wandering dervish, completely selfless, he went out from his home and, following the dervish rule, travelled about in search of his murshid, his perfect leader….

'Far and wide, he carried on his search. He would speak to everyone he met. But what he longed for was the sweet scent of the love of God, and this he was unable to detect in anyone, whether Gnostic or philosopher, or member of the Shaykhi sect. All he could see in the dervishes was their tufted beards, and their palms-up religion of beggary. They were "dervish" – poor in all save God – in name only; all they cared about, it seemed to him, was whatever came to hand. Nor did he find illumination among the Illuminati; he heard nothing from them but idle argument. He observed that their grandiloquence was not eloquence and that their subtleties were but windy figures of speech. Truth was not there; the core of inner meaning was absent.

'For true philosophy is that which produces rewards of excellence, and among these learned men there was no such fruit to be found; at the peak of their accomplishment, they became the slaves of vice, led an unconcerned life and were given over to personal characteristics that were deserving of blame. To him, of all that constitutes the high, distinguishing quality of humankind, they were devoid'.1

'Abdu'l-Bahá shows us what excellence is not – clearly any kind of hypocrisy is, ipso facto, not excellent – and condemns as pointless learning that leads only to idle argument, grandiloquence and windy figures of speech and which is devoid of the pursuit of excellence. 'True philosophy,' says 'Abdu'l-Bahá, produces rewards of excellence, and I am sure that none of us here would wish to become 'slaves of vice' or be given over to 'personal characteristics that are 'deserving of blame'.

In another life and many years ago, when chalk was considered a wonderful new invention, I taught history and English in secondary schools. Assessment was – probably still is – an important part of the teacher's life. How well is young Naysan doing? Should Joan be in this maths set? Will Will be ready to take A levels this year? Should Alison be going on to CSYS? The marking of exams and the giving of grades, the writing of reports and the unavoidable tension between giving encouragement to children and giving a 'realistic' – whatever that might mean – evaluation of their prospects higher up the school or in other parts of the educational system are all part of the trade. As a teacher I was constantly engaged in making judgments, from the outside, of other people's relative excellence.

I started what might laughingly be called my 'teaching career' in an old-fashioned grammar school for boys in the carpet town of Kidderminster. In King Charles I School, excellence was judged by the teacher's instinct (how wonderful to be able to write 'excellent work' on an essay; what fun to scribble angrily 'do this again by Friday'!) and by performance in exams. When I moved to Shetland I found that excellence was, apparently, distributed on a Bell curve – most children were expected to receive grade C, fewer received Bs and Ds, and even fewer A and E grades. No matter how much I might wish to reward effort and improvement, the system was rigidly applied. This was so-called 'norm referenced assessment'. In an egalitarian society like Shetland's this merely encouraged children to give average performances. And then the bright new dawn of 'criterion referenced assessment' arrived; once we understood what the phrase meant, we had to begin to think in terms of learning targets and whether children had attained them or not. More complex to work with, but rather fairer to the children.

There's a serious philosophical point here. Who judges excellence and how? As in all such matters there are two views: that from the outside and that from the inside. Teachers, critics, university examiners, football crowds, TV audiences are all judges of excellence. We are all judges of excellence.

You are sitting there now judging the excellence or otherwise of my performance here. And, make no mistake, we are quick to judge in our daily lives. It doesn't take much to know that the English cricket team lacks excellence, that Henman is the best British tennis player but not the best in the world. OK, sport is fairly easy. What about the arts? What is the greatest symphony orchestra in the world? Is Damien Hirst's work 'better' or 'worse' than Rachael Whiteread's? Do you prefer to read a Jeffrey Archer or a Martin Amis? And so on and so on.

Do you see? We cannot help ourselves. We have to make judgements about other people's excellence. Yes, most of these judgements are superficial, ill-considered and unworthy – and they are often proved wrong – but it's an ineluctable part of the human condition to make these judgements. It may even be a moral duty to do so. In judging excellence we may often be going beyond the technicalities of skill and achievement to speak of a person's moral worth, as did 'Abdu'l-Bahá. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá praised the excellence of the Bahá'í women of Persia:

'Today among the Bahá'ís of Persia there are many women who are the very pride and envy of the men. They are imbued with all the virtues and excellences of humanity. They are eloquent; they are poets and scholars and embody the quintessence of humility. In political ability and acumen they have been able to cope and compete with representative men. They have consecrated their lives and forfeited their possessions in martyrdom for the sake of humanity, and the traces of their glory will last forever. The pages of the history of Persia are illumined by the lives and records of these women'.2

'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly links these women's abilities with their spiritual and moral qualities, their virtues. Excellence is not just a matter of being able to study and speak and write well; it is also a matter of humility and consecration and detachment. We should also note that 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes a comparative judgement about the women's excellence, commenting as He does that they are 'the very pride and envy of the men'.

Parenthetically, it is interesting indeed to take note of the fields of activity in which the Persian Bahá'í women excelled: poetry, political ability, scholarship. And the fields of excellence are interesting not just because 'Abdu'l-Bahá is speaking of Persian women.

I mentioned that there is also an inside view on excellence. Not only do we judge the excellence of others, we also judge our own. Frequently we experience tension as we try to reconcile the judgements of others with our own feelings about how we are doing. I may think I'm doing a grand job standing here reading this paper, but you may think that I'm not doing so well. Or vice versa.

If we are effectively to pursue excellence we have to take personal responsibility for our own spiritual reformation and, at the same time, we must consider how to establish a society that nurtures excellence. Our growth in spiritual virtues – through our reading, prayer, meditation, fasting, service, learning through tests – develops the spiritual acuity we require to recognize and nurture deep excellence in ourselves and others. Excellence is based upon a spiritual attitude, a recognition of our essential nobility, and upon our taking as our noble goal what is set out for us in the Sacred Texts. We have a spiritual and moral duty to strive for excellence no matter what the rest of the world is doing. From this personal commitment all else follows: our striving for excellence in all the fields of human activity and our willingness to work collectively to establish a civilization that nurtures and thrives on excellence. It is clear that spiritual reformation is a prerequisite of reformation in other areas of life. 'Abdu'l-Bahá comments:

'In the unmistakable and universal reformation we are witnessing, when outer conditions of humanity are receiving such impetus, when human life is assuming a new aspect, when sciences are stimulated afresh, inventions and discoveries increasing, civic laws undergoing change and moralities evidencing uplift and betterment, is it possible that spiritual impulses and influences should not be renewed and reformed? … If spirituality be not renewed, what fruits come from mere physical reformation? … There must be reformation in the kingdom of the human spirit; otherwise, no result will be attained from betterment of the mere physical structure'.3

Shoghi Effendi, writing to the Local Spiritual Assembly of Tehran in 1924, gives this exhortation:

'The chosen ones of God ... should not look at the depraved condition of the society in which they live, nor at the evidences of moral degradation and frivolous conduct which the people around them display. They should not content themselves merely with relative distinction and excellence. Rather they should fix their gaze upon nobler heights by setting the counsels and exhortations of the Pen of Glory as their supreme goal. Then it will be readily realized how numerous are the stages that still remain to be traversed and how far off the desired goal lies – a goal which is none other than exemplifying heavenly morals and virtues'.4

This is a clarion call to strive for the nobility which is our birthright as human beings. It also contains a salutary reminder that we can never reach the uttermost perfection.

That's the vision, then. What about the 'how'?

Speaking in Washington DC in April 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá commended education in music.

'What a wonderful meeting this is! These are the children of the Kingdom. The song we have just listened to was very beautiful in melody and words. The art of music is divine and effective. It is the food of the soul and spirit. Through the power and charm of music the spirit of man is uplifted. It has wonderful sway and effect in the hearts of children, for their hearts are pure, and melodies have great influence in them. The latent talents with which the hearts of these children are endowed will find expression through the medium of music. Therefore, you must exert yourselves to make them proficient; teach them to sing with excellence and effect'.5

He had previously, in Secret of Divine Civilization, commended not only education, but also the development of 'useful arts and sciences':

'Let us consider this justly and without bias: let us ask ourselves which one of these basic principles and sound, well-established procedures would fail to satisfy our present needs, or would be incompatible with Persia's best political interests or injurious to the general welfare of her people. Would the extension of education, the development of useful arts and sciences, the promotion of industry and technology, be harmful things? For such endeavour lifts the individual within the mass and raises him out of the depths of ignorance to the highest reaches of knowledge and human excellence'.6

Clearly our efforts have to be both personal and social. Society and the community must also shape and reform themselves and make it possible for the individual to grow in excellence:

'Make every effort to acquire the advanced knowledge of the day, and strain every nerve to carry forward the divine civilization. Establish schools that are well organized, and promote the fundamentals of instruction in the various branches of knowledge through teachers who are pure and sanctified, distinguished for their high standards of conduct and general excellence, and strong in faith; scholars and educators with a thorough knowledge of sciences and arts'.7

Here 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls for a systematic and structured approach to nurturing excellence. Again He links excellence in personal virtue with excellence in learning and knowledge. He exhorts the people of Bahá to strive to surpass all others, not – presumably – with a sense of their own superiority, but to help to elevate humankind in general:

'Make ye then a mighty effort, that the purity and sanctity which, above all else, are cherished by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, shall distinguish the people of Bahá; that in every kind of excellence the people of God shall surpass all other human beings; that both outwardly and inwardly they shall prove superior to the rest; that for purity, immaculacy, refinement, and the preservation of health, they shall be leaders in the vanguard of those who know. And that by their freedom from enslavement, their knowledge, their self-control, they shall be first among the pure, the free and the wise'.8

Notes

1. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Memorials of the Faithful, pp. 91-2

2. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, PUP, 136

3. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, PUP, p. 278

4. From a letter dated 30 October 1924 written by Shoghi Effendi

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