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Advancing the process

The following analogy looks at the relationship between effort and progress,
 and
 how sometimes we chastise ourselves for the wrong thing. We link progress to

the

result of our effort, rather than to advancement of the process.

Take for example a thirty-speed bicycle. If we get on when the bicycle is in 1st

gear, then no matter how much we struggle we will never get anywhere. We simply don't have the capacity to overcome the static friction involved with gear ratios of

that kind. So instead, we start out small. It's best to start with the smallest gear first,

because that is how a bicycle is meant to be ridden.

Effort on a bicycle should be gauged in revolutions of the crankshaft per minute—

not the distance traveled. This is because fifty revolutions per minute in first gear

results in a much smaller distance traveled than fifty revolutions in 10th gear. However, it takes the same amount of effort in both cases to turn the crankshaft.

I think we are too hard on ourselves if we equate progress to distance traveled.

This frustration leads to us pedaling furiously in the lower gears, while constantly

berating ourselves because we aren't traveling fast enough. Then we try to pedal even

harder, or stop in desperation. But even if we reach 1000 revolutions per minute,

there's simply a fixed limit on how fast we can go in first gear, and therefore how far we can travel.

The answer is to shift gears, but only when our pedaling has exceeded the capacity of the lower gear. Shifting before that time actually degrades the quality of our

effort, because we waste energy competing against inertia. It's better to stay in the

lower gear until the advantage of that gear is used up, and then shift. Just because

we're in a higher gear, doesn't mean we're doing better. Unless we're ready for that

gear, we only waste precious energy. The proper course is to start out in first gear,

pedal until the potential of that gear is fully met, then shift and continue.

After a while, we will finally reach 10th gear, and our pedaling will achieve the

maximum efficiency possible. But this only happens after having advanced the process

of riding a bicycle for a very long time. Pedal, shift, pedal, shift: that is the process.

The only thing we as riders can do is to advance that process. We have no

control

over the speed of our bicycle other than pedal and shift.

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The key is to reward ourselves for consistency of effort. Keep pedaling. When we reach the limit of one gear, shift, and then keep pedaling at the same rate. If twenty revolutions per minute is too easy, and we know that we have a greater capacity than that, increase the rate. Keep pedaling at your highest possible rate, but gauge your progress on the consistency of your pedaling, rather than how far you have gone, or how fast you are going. Consistency of pedaling is the thing we control.

Speed

cannot be changed directly, but only indirectly, as a result of an ongoing process.

Bemoaning our slowness has no effect on the speed of the bicycle. There is no other

way to ride quickly except to ride slowly at first, and then to advance the process

over time.

The purpose of bicycling is to travel. But the process of bicycling is to turn the pedals, and change gears when the time is appropriate (and not before). We should keep our sights on the destination, and constantly pedal to attain it, but all

the while gauge ourselves on our pedaling, because it is by pedaling that we reach

the goal. God might remove obstacles, or present shortcuts, or maybe even lift our

bicycles off the ground for a little while; but unless we pedal, we will reach nowhere.

Pedaling and direction should occupy our full attention, but certainly not how far

we have gone, how far we have to go, or how fast we might have been going in another gear.

Adventures in Poetry

After many years of writing poetry, the experience has greatly changed for me.

I

would like to note down some of these changes, and a bit of what caused them.

In the beginning, I wrote poetry because it was fun to be clever with words.

Since “poetry” seemed to connote rhyme, everything I wrote rhymed. It is a good

thing that almost nothing from those days survives. . .

Not knowing what made poetry “good”, I neglected to realized this also meant

I did not know what was “bad”. Like most beginning poets, since my own verses

were nothing like the famous poets, I assumed they were terrible. I wrote trying to

imitate, if not the exact sound, at least the “ring of authenticity” those poems had.

Which of course achieved nothing of the sort, and just made me more frustrated.

A few lines from one of the poems of those days is:

Seven men, with seven needs, but fourteen wants and half the time,
sit mindlessly before their doors, waiting for the set-down chime;
that signifies the mothership’s arrival on her destined course:
the mission of that fated crew, a correlated Trojan Horse.

A society bereft of evil broke apart from common ways,
founded on the Io moon, distant from the mind decay.

Named themselves the LES: Society of the Leading Edge,
their need for money, law and doubt falling into voids of age.

This mode of writing continued for several years, in which I knew that I was not

writing with “my voice”, but I did not know how to find it. It is funny, now knowing

how simple it is, that despite every effort it escaped me. For the real blockage was

not in finding my voice, but accepting the voice that I had.

Once all the bad rhyming started to sound too awful, I avoided the ugliness of the problem by moving to free verse. It was many years before I started to write rhyming poems again. Free verse seemed to have an air of originality that was attractive—and also deceptive.

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It continued that I wrote bad free verse several years, not knowing how to progress. I strove for lines that had something of greatness in them, that sounded as

if they could be great. But what is great? By why standard do we measure it?

Knowing that greatness often defies the standards of the day, I was sometimes impressed

by lines that did not sound good at all, but because they were odd or unique.

Yet

none of those poems could stand the test of time. I read them today and they appear

lifeless, as though grasping at something they could not achieve.

After thirteen years of sporadic writing, nothing much changed. Then came a time when I started to think about quality, and about what makes good things good. It would lengthen this essay too much to cover those ideas here. The basic

summation is that something is good if you find it to be good. That is, does it please you?

This turned out to be revolutionary in terms of my writing, because it undoes the need for a standard entirely. Instead of writing verses that longed for something

outside myself, I begin to pen whatever it made me happy to write. This in turn made the experience of writing enjoyable, and I learned my first genuine lesson about poetry: that it satisfies the soul in its own way.

Here is the first poem I ever wrote without reflecting on how it might sound to others. It was a joy to write, and changed my experience of poetry from that day

forward:

Without the light
it would not be seen;
without eyes
it would not be seen.

Between these two forms of nothing
a being of phenomenon
neither in the object
or the eye or the light.

But there. . . a subtle shading of rose
shaped into a smile
beneath eyes
like my own hope given form.

There. . . what is that shaft
pushing its way into the labors of my heart?
ruining the moment's peace
and offering something
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I would live without peace for
day upon day again.

Between two different kinds of void:
a thing to die for.

After this poem, I learned what "voice" is: Whatever gives expression to your soul. Now I write, think, edit, rewrite, until each line rings like a bell. When it resonates with my state of being, I consider it complete. Sometimes I cannot

find

the words I need to make a poem ring. Sometimes it is not hard at all. It seems to

depend on a great many factors. But the quality of “ringing” has to be there, or the

experience of writing does not fulfill itself. It feels like not being able to express a

thought clearly.

With the freedom of this idea, I realized quickly that free verse is just one way

of writing, and that in fact I prefer rhyme most of the time. Most of what I write

now has some sort of rhyming structure, because it makes the poem more enjoyable

to me. I even started to play with rhyme, to experiment in different ways, seeking

an ever richer “tone”.

The first experiment along these lines was inter-line rhymes, in addition to rhymes in the usual places. These are unexpected rhymes that add music to a verse

without creating too much of a pattern. For example, from an excerpt:

The seals below bump their heads,
the bears in white coats rumble their hunger;
against the black night, the white fox howls
and the rabbit hears him in the echoes of sleep.

Here “rumble” and “hunger” are tied by the vowel in the stressed position;

“night” and “white” in the second line; “hears” and “sleep” in the last. The creation of such rhymes is not always done consciously, but I do notice and improve them while editing, trying to achieve a musical feel without burdening the poem.

The next kind of rhyme is done using assonance and alliteration in much the same way:

A family of ill ones
still tucked in their beds,
sipping coughsyrup cocktails
to lighten their heads,

Here, “ill” and “still” are rhymed, as well as the expected “beds” and “heads”.

The sound of “sipping” is meant to fit with “still”, making the verse feel more co-

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herent when read. “coughsyrup” and “cocktails” are obvious, while the “to” of the last verse is paired with the strong “tucked” in the second verse. It is harder to make these rhymes than end-of-line rhymes, because they must be subtle. I give up if a word cannot be found that both contributes to the meaning and the song; but already I have been surprised by the flexibility and richness of the English language, and how many things may be done with it. Being surprised by one’s own poetry has been one of the best parts of writing it. The next type of rhyme is much more difficult. I call it “hidden rhyme”. British and Australian readers will recognize it, due to their “rhyming slang”. Basically it consists of finding a word that rhymes with another word not present in the poem, but unconsciously obvious because of the poem’s meaning. For example:

The lilt of your gentle voice,
its dulcet tones,
its warm, mellifluous sound. . .
to a man’s ears, what balm,
what anodyne peace;
I linger there in memory
until the pain of absence
grows profound.

This poem is about the sound of a woman’s voice, and the pain I feel when she is not around. That is, the pain is due to her silence. It would be poor (or rather, too perfect) to write:

I linger there awhile
until the silence
grows profound.

Written this way, “in memory” is changed to “awhile”, to balance with the syllable count of the middle line and to construct a rhyme between “awhile” and “silence”. But the new verse is too obvious in its meaning: Of course there is silence if I’m writing a poem. Since silence is often described as “profound”, the mere fact of using that adjective is enough to suggest to an educated reader that silence is meant.

This frees me to use a different image, while still portraying the painful silence:

I linger there in memory
until the pain of absence

grows profound.

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Now “absence” is rhymed with “silence”—even though “silence” appears nowhere in the poem. “memory” is used to better describe where I am lingering, and because

it has a softer vowel, allowing the strong sound of “pain” to come through.

But none

of these sounds are so sharp as to obscure the final “profound”, which refers clearly

to the earlier “sound”—the subject of the poem. This verse is also a bit overful,

which makes it seem to falter a bit. This effect is talked about later.

There are other hidden rhymes in my poems, but I soon forget them, and the experience becomes unconscious for me as well. But what they add is a suggestion

of depth and richer meaning than is presented by the words themselves. I find this satisfying.

The most recent technique has been to play with broken rhythm. This is when I intentionally use a less perfect syllable pattern to make a line seem more “humble”

with respect to another.? For example:

Recall me to myself, for I soon forget
once thoughts of you have cast their net.

The first line of this couplet has too many syllable (four more than the following), and when scanning the verse feels awkward. Yet this awkwardness is intentional: because the first line talks about me, and the second about the one I love.

When read slowly, the weakness of the first line makes the writer seem awkward, troubled, unsure; while the brevity of the second line drives home exactly what is

making him feel that way: “thoughts of you”.

Making the language used reflect the emotional content of what is written causes

parts of the poem to seem imperfect, in order that the poem as a whole can achieve

a higher perfection. The goal is that the reading of the poem provokes a sighing,

wishful quality—so I play with techniques to give the poem more of this.

Dissonant

rhymes can help that effect, by emphasizing or enhancing the beauty of a contrasting

euphonous line. It is like the effect of placing a flower in an empty room to heighten

one's awareness of space.

Some of these latter techniques I borrow from looking at life, and the ways nature and man-made creations achieve a greater effect than the individual parts. A

poem with perfect lines is fine, and sometimes had a coherence and overall effect

that is quite pleasant; but other times too much perfection is stilted and lifeless:

just as real people are never so perfect. Little smudges, combined with invisible or

? A few days after writing this I learned about the Japanese idea of "wabi-sabi": "Wabi-sabi is the

quintessential Japanese aesthetic. It is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. It

is a beauty of things modest and humble. It is a beauty of things unconventional. . . A related term

in literature and the arts is "clinamen", the act of deliberately breaking a stylistic rule to enhance the beauty of an otherwise perfect whole."

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other structures in the poem, present a texture and richness that defy the reader's

perception, but all the moreso affect his soul.

Lastly, I am finding that love for the subject of a poem—whether nature, a person, or an idea—contributes more than anything to its final quality. If the heart

that writes a poem is lifeless, often in my case the result is lifeless.

Writing about

a beloved subject is like pouring that love into a vessel of words. They come more

easily, and the various techniques I've learned can be applied without as much conscious effort. Like mastery at anything, once you have the basics perfected, your

mind understands how to follow the bidding of your heart.

I leave with one of my favorite couplets, recently written:

Where banners once flew in proud disdain
a king now weeps for his kingdom's bane.

There is a vowel rhyme between "proud" and "now", and a very subtle consonant

rhyme between "flew" and "weeps". The basic rhyme of "disdain" and "bane" is

pronounced, with the effect that it makes the wistfulness in the other syllables more

pronounced, as if to convey the image of an airy castle under attack.

Similarly, the “banners” that once flew (a strong word) are insensibly compared to the new-found weakness of the “king” (a weak word). “king” is also repeated to emphasize the plaintiveness at what has been lost. But the loss is not so terrible: the king has fallen in love with his conqueror; and so the final “bane” is the word that sticks in memory. There is even a subtle pairing between “banner” and “bane”, to suggest a transformation of interest on the king’s part. Not all of these correspondences were made consciously. But as I mentioned above, the more one writes—and especially about a beloved subject—the more his mastered techniques will come into play without thought. However, I do notice many of these things in the intermediate results, and use that consciousness of them to ensure the effect is right, and that the poetry “sings”. At the end of it all, it matters only that what you write makes you happy, or expresses your soul and relieves it of its solitude. Some of my recent verses I have even started to memorize, because it causes me joy to recite them. That, I think, is the true test of one’s poetry.

The aim of religion

Although it is true that every religion upholds the “twin pillars of reward and punishment”, yet this is not the purpose of religion. To consider it so would reduce religion to a mere code of ethics, in which the whole aim revolves around our development.

Schools use reward and punishment to create an atmosphere of learning. And while the progress of each child is the reason for the school’s existence as an institution, the aim of schooling is the pursuit of knowledge—not solely earning the marks of progress. Many pursue that knowledge for its pragmatic value, while a choice few will fall in love with Knowledge herself, and find themselves natural-born philosophers, distracted in their love of the Abstract. Likewise, religion is about awakening the soul to its Creator, that it might know and worship Him. Insofar as moral rectitude conduces to this (especially in a group setting), religion preaches ethics. . . . it is the relationship of the individual soul to God and the fulfilment of its spiritual destiny that is the ultimate aim of the laws of religion.?

In this sense, the acquisition of perfections is functional, not essential.
That is,
the aim of life is not the acquiring of perfections, but the consciousness of
God that
such an acquisition facilitates. Should we really spend our time worrying about
our
own development? It would be like a lover practicing how to love so ardently,
that
he forgets his Beloved standing right next to him.

As the Sufi mystic 'Attár describes:
God from on High said to David: 'Say to my servants: "O handful
of earth! If I had not heaven for recompense and hell for punishment,
would you ever think of me? If there were neither light nor fire, would
you ever think of me? But since I merit supreme respect you must adore
me without hope or fear; and yet, if you were never upheld by hope or
fear would you ever think of me? Since I am your Lord, you should
worship me from the depths of your heart. Reject all that which is not
I, burn it to ashes and cast the ashes to the wind of excellence."'

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And the Báb wrote:

Fire and paradise both bow down and prostrate themselves before God.
That which is worthy of His Essence is to worship Him for His sake,
without fear of fire, or hope of paradise.

Although when true worship is offered, the worshipper is delivered from
the fire, and entereth the paradise of God's good-pleasure, yet such
should not be the motive of his act. However, God's favour and grace
ever flow in accordance with the exigencies of His inscrutable wisdom.?

We should not be anxious over the question of how to judge our progress. The
real aim is to find God, a search we are aided in if we undertake it sincerely.

We will

find the confirmations we need, and be given knowledge to continue on the Way.

In this, prayer and meditation are essential, and the most valuable tool:

For the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling which unites Man
with God. This state of spiritual communion can be brought about and
maintained by means of meditation and prayer. And this is the reason
why Bahá'u'lláh has so much stressed the importance of worship. It is
not sufficient for a believer merely to accept and observe the teachings.
He should, in addition, cultivate the sense of spirituality which he can
acquire chiefly by means of prayer.

Lastly, concern over our future state is one of the forms of attachment that
actually hinders our search! The Bahá'í Writings call it "attachment to

the next

world". Whereas to forgo everything in our search for God is what is called for.

For when the true lover and devoted friend reacheth to the presence of the Beloved, the sparkling beauty of the Loved One and the fire of the lover's heart will kindle a blaze and burn away all veils and wrappings. Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend.?

? Báb, Selections from the Writings of, p. ??

? Bahá'u'lláh, The Seven Valleys, p. ??

Analogies of relationship

There are many analogies which have been used to portray the soul's relationship to

God. The following is a brief summary of some of them, highlighting features that

offer an insight into this basic spiritual relationship.

A servant and his Lord

A true servant serves his Lord selflessly, without any thought for himself.

If the Lord is entertaining someone, he acts invisibly, coming and going, tending

to the guest's needs before he is himself aware of them. The guest feels loved and

cared for, without realizing the cause of this care. He is aware only of the Lord's

graciousness.

The servant is ever watchful to see what his Lord will need, and strives to act before the command is given.

Usually he has very few possessions, only enough to maintain his health and ability to serve, and is not occupied with a private life.

He lives to serve, and finds joy in fulfilling his Lord's desire.

The lover and the Beloved

The lover is devoted to his beloved, and seeks at every moment to be with her, or

pay her some service.

If the beloved should speak to him, or write a letter, or give him a gift, he relates

everything to the beloved. That is, he sees in her words a proof of interest: in truth

he does not care which words are used, only that they confirm the bond. If she writes

him a letter, the words are secondary to their meaning, which likewise is secondary

to the significance of the letter itself—did she write it to say goodbye, or ask him to

return? And if she gives him a gift, the gift is ignored next to the fact that it was a gift given to him by his beloved. He hardly notices the gift itself, seeing in it only the token of his beloved's favor.

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When apart, he dwells only on the next time they will be together. He cannot help but mention her to everyone he meets. His longing to see her is not from duty, or obligation; in fact, any other activity is painful since it means being away from her.

The valley and the Mountain

The valley magnifies the grandeur of the mountain; that is, by its lowliness it emphasizes the height of the mountain.

It gathers all the waters that flow down from the mountain, since it dwells in the lowest place.

Anyone who wishes to make a pilgrimage to that mountain, their way is made easier by entering through the valley.

The drop and the ocean

A drop has independent form and substance, while the ocean is a vast reservoir of this substance. When the drop merges with the ocean it disappears, yet its substance remains.

The Father and his son

A father is forever anxious for his son's growth and well-being. He would never do anything to harm him. And any harshness he shows is always for the son's future benefit.

The mirror and the Sun

A mirror reflects the light of the sun faithfully. When one looks at a perfect mirror, they cannot see the mirror itself—only what is reflected in it.

The painter and his painting

The painting reveals the genius of the author, and allows others to see the products of his imagination. Yet, the painting does not excel the author. Its essence is of

another kind entirely, and serves always the painter's fame, not its own.
Are we abhorrent to God?

Nay! When the earth is pounded to powder,
And thy Lord cometh, and His angels, rank upon rank,

And Hell, that Day, is brought face to face—
on that Day, man will remember,
but how will that remembrance profit him?

He will say: "Ah!
Would that I had sent forth good deeds for this, my Future Life!"

For, that Day, His Chastisement will be such as none else can inflict,
And His bonds will be such as none other can bind.

Yet to the righteous soul will be said:

O thou soul who art well assured,
Return to thy Lord, well-pleased, and pleasing unto Him.

Enter thou among My servants,
And enter thou My paradise.?

Many people that I know would shy away from ever attributing the end of this
quotation to themselves. And this brings up a certain point, which I am not
sure

stems from scripture: that to a certain extent we believe we are abhorrent to
God,
and worthy of destruction.

In the sense of pure justice, we know that the Qu'rán says, "Should God
punish
men for their perverse doings, He would not leave on earth a moving thing! But
to
an appointed term doth He respite them. . . "?

Yet we are not held accountable to pure justice. This is evidenced by the
following:

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Do Thou graciously forgive me for the things that I have wrought in
Thy holy presence, and look not upon me with the glance of justice,
but rather deliver me through Thy grace, treat me with Thy mercy and
deal with me according to Thy bountiful favours, as is worthy of Thy
glory.?

If we were doomed to a full culpability for our actions, we could never hope
for
grace, such as the Báb implores in the above prayer. Therefore, since "He is
in truth

the Omnipotent, the All-Powerful, He Who is wont to answer the call of men;”? I

imagine our focus should not be to dwell on the precepts of justice, but to ask for mercy.

Consider a parent: how willing they are to overlook every fault in a child, and to focus on and develop whatever good qualities may begin to appear. They found all their expectations in the hope that this good quality will develop, rather than deploring the fact of the bad. In fact, the bad may be completely forgiving, and even written off as childish ignorance, if only the good will prevail in adulthood.

Why is it that we cannot say to ourselves that we are “well-pleased, and pleasing unto Him”? Perhaps we cannot know this. But doesn’t this also mean that we cannot honestly know whether or not we are *dis*pleasing? God has not sent destruction upon us, and the events of our lives are constantly seen as improving us and helping us to become better. Yet, if we look down upon ourselves, or castigate our past actions, then aren’t we presuming to know the feelings of God? We have no knowledge of His mind; at best, we should leave that subject alone.

So this underlying feeling many of us have imbibed during our upbringing—that we are constantly displeasing to our Creator— seems now ludicrous. There are several factors that I believe relate to this:

None of us acts from malice, except for an extreme few. Malice means to commit evil, in the full knowledge of, and desire to, act against the good. How often have we ever been cruel or hurtful, and then exulted in the cruelty itself? When we are angry, usually this stems from a feeling of justification, not from a lust for hatred.

We judge ourselves too harshly if we think that we are evil to that degree.

Malice

is a soul-destroying thing? , and I’m not sure many people could even tolerate it without some sort of breakdown.

So, considering that we are rarely so evil as this, it must mean that we are to some extent ignorant when we act wrongly: we are unaware of the significance of our actions, or what they imply. This is evidenced by the fact that as we grow older, we often look back at our lives and realize how foolish we had been a different points in time. The discrepancy here is not one of goodness, but of maturity.

? Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. ??

? cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, pp. ???–???

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There is no reason to believe that we are not pleasing to our Creator; merely the fact that we are alive, and appreciative of His gifts, must account for something.

If we go back to the analogy of the parent, just think how pleased a parent would

be if his or her child expressed their joy at being alive. In that moment, it would

not matter what they had done, or who they had become; the mere fact of their gratitude could inspire forgetfulness in even some of the most difficult cases.

True,

the past must be reckoned with, but in the sense of that parent's relationship to the

child's being, rather than their behavior, we might say that a parent's love is a hard

thing to destroy—sometimes even in the face of malice.

Why, then, would we ever imagine that God is waiting, ready to condemn us?

All of us here on earth are like children. Whenever I read the following biblical

quotation, it makes me think that our task here on earth is more to realize who we

truly are (both individually, and as a species), rather than to achieve some particular

feat of glory:

At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, "Verily I say unto you, except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven."?

Our striving is what is productive of our advancement, so that the fruit of our labors is not solely outward conquest. Similarly, if we strive, but do not completely

fulfill the picture of a glorious result, yet it cannot be called worthless.

Is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's universal Manifestations would be apparent.?

Further, it often happens that a more subtle thing, even though it may not produce an immediate result, will effect a change in our soul which might ultimately

yield very great results. Plato writes:

I am amused, I said, at your fear of the world, which makes you guard against the appearance of insisting upon useless studies; and I quite

? Bible, Matthew, ??:??-?

? The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. ??

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admit the difficulty of believing that in every man there is an eye of the soul which, when by other pursuits lost and dimmed, is by these purified and re-illuminated; and is more precious far than ten thousand bodily eyes, for by it alone is truth seen. . . ?

The reason I bring this up is to attack the idea that we should constantly berate

ourselves for not playing an active part in the world in the way that others imagine

the word "activity" to imply. No one can judge the effects of our actions, unless

he possess a truly timeless vision? . What appears to have an effect today may dry

up and wither away, while another thing, far more subtle and quiet, may actually

achieve the real result.

Only simple and quiet words will ripen of themselves. For a whirlwind does not last a whole morning, nor does a sudden shower last a whole day.

Who is their author? Heaven-and-Earth! Even Heaven-and-Earth cannot make such violent things last long; How much truer is it of the rash endeavors of men???

Society holds up to us a certain ideal of "success" and achievement. And we measure ourselves by this ideal, accepting blindly what they in turn accepted blindly,

from parents who may have never questioned the meaning of this success.

At the present day, we evaluate our activities according to the plans and purposes

of the Cause of God. Somehow, duty has lost the sense of glory that usually accompanies it when speaking of a great cause; and instead, it has become a burdensome

thing to fill us with grief at our own lack of accomplishment.

Though, I am not writing this to dissuade people from action. But we must come to terms with what we feel success to be: with the fact that we cannot rely on

our own sense of God's evaluation of our success, and that sometimes, the result of

an action may be far-distanced from its beginning. If we can escape from this

destructive notion of being hurried continually toward some external goal,
perhaps we
might rediscover that part of ourselves which God loved at the time of our
creation?? ,
and which I believe He will always love. And then, warmed by the sunlight
embrace
of that realization, relaxed such that we become as deep pools of water, which
our
friends must wade through to reach us, other people—the
non-Bahá'ís—will notice
our peaceful happiness, and will want to become a part of that life.
? Plato, The Republic, Book VII
? cf. Bahá'u'lláh, The Seven Valleys, p. ??
?? Lao-Tse, Tao The Ching
?? cf. The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh, p. ?
??

But if they look at us and see only a guilt-ridden community, beleaguered at
all
times by our own sense of failure, and never really reaching that station of
being
“well-pleased, and pleasing unto Him,” then why in the world would they
want to
become part of that? To an atheist, although that life may be unsatisfying if
they
focus on it with due introspection, yet it still offers a certain freedom and
lightness
of soul that would be hard to give up for a typically “religious” life.
I think the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, instead, presents this idea:

In this world we are influenced by two sentiments, Joy and Pain.

Joy gives us wings! In times of joy our strength is more vital, our intellect
keener, and our understanding less clouded. We seem better able
to cope with the world and to find our sphere of usefulness. But when
sadness visits us we become weak, our strength leaves us, our comprehension is
dim and our intelligence veiled. The actualities of life seem
to elude our grasp, the eyes of our spirits fail to discover the sacred
mysteries, and we become even as dead beings.

There is no human being untouched by these two influences; but all
the sorrow and the grief that exist come from the world of matter—the
spiritual world bestows only the joy!??

We only water the earth overmuch by our tears of self-grief, and make the
ground muddy and hard to navigate. Pulling up our feet wearily from the mire,
we are aware only of how tired and difficult life has become. But if we dry
these
tears, and invite the sun to shine upon everything in our lives, the terrain

will once
again become firm and easily navigable. This, I believe, is the key to
fulfilling our
duties: not to continue adding on to our sense of responsibility until our
backs creak,
but to realize through our joy and sense of glory that the load is not at all
difficult to
bear. So many things become easy through love, that seem almost
unaccomplishable
without it.

The idea that we are abhorrent to God should be erased from our minds. It
makes no sense in the world of nature; I can find no correlate in this plane of
existence, nor in the language of Revelation. Instead, I find words like these:

O Son of Spirit! With the joyful tidings of light I hail thee: rejoice! To
the court of holiness I summon thee; abide therein that thou mayest
live in peace for evermore.

?? ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Paris Talks, pp. ???–???

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O Son of Spirit! The spirit of holiness beareth unto thee the joyful
tidings of reunion; wherefore dost thou grieve? The spirit of power
confirmeth thee in His cause; why dost thou veil thyself? The light of
His countenance doth lead thee; how canst thou go astray???

And:

Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form
When within thee the universe is folded?

Then we must labor to destroy the animal condition, till the meaning
of humanity shall come to light.??

And:

If any man were to meditate on that which the Scriptures, sent down
from the heaven of God’s holy Will, have revealed, he would readily
recognize that their purpose is that all men shall be regarded as one
soul, so that the seal bearing the words “The Kingdom shall be God’s”
may be stamped on every heart, and the light of Divine bounty, of grace,
and mercy may envelop all mankind. The one true God, exalted be His
glory, hath wished nothing for Himself.??

If the intent of this essay is unclear, allow me to restate it: at some point
along

the way we seem to have developed a degrading, self-defeating idea that we are
forever unacceptable, and perhaps even abhorrent, to God; and we wear away our
lives striving for this acceptance, but never quite feel that we reach it. But
this model

offers little joy, and much anxiety; rather, we should permit our soul’s

exuberance at
the thought of rejoining our Creator to propel us forward. Then, we would find
the
ordinary life jejune beyond degree, and would discover ourselves naturally
racing
toward that far-off goal. . .

O Son of Justice! Whither can a lover go but to the land of his beloved?
and what seeker findeth rest away from his heart's desire? To the true
lover reunion is life, and separation is death. His breast is void of patience
and his heart hath no peace. A myriad lives he would forsake to
hasten to the abode of his beloved.??

?? The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. ??-??

?? Bahá'u'lláh, The Seven Valleys, p. ??

?? Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. ???

?? The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh, p. ??

An argument for the soul

The world we live in is one of transience, flux and malleability. Yet the
ideals we
hold are the opposite of this: our sense of virtue, for example, is meant to
hold
absolutely—in all cases—or we must acknowledge its merit as incomplete.
How it is that human beings can spend their life immersed in one quality
(transience), and yet dearly wish for things of an opposite quality
(permanence)? It is
puzzling friction between the life we live and the hopes we cherish.
How this friction came to be, and what it signifies, is my question.
Our consciousness is invested in a body torn by storms of change. Our physical
being, emotions, life—nothing is certain to last even till the end of the
day. One
would think our thoughts would also be characterized by this trait, since it
constitutes the fabric of our existence. I mean, if change is the dominant
reality, why
consider other modes of being? Animals deal capably with constant change, and
focus on no goal but the task at hand.
Yet human beings spend life seeking the opposite of their “natural”
condition.
We want uninterrupted peace, unalloyed blissfulness; we shrink from thoughts of
death; the need for change is constantly debated. It would seem that inwardly,
we
strive to erect structures wholly incompatible with life as we know it.
Even our awareness of the transience of material existence is an indication of
something unique in humans, since consciousness requires distinction. But what
else is there, not caught up in the impermanence of the world? Concepts are
only
mental. We cannot say that “one plus one” is a constant, as nowhere in the

world

do we find an instance of “one plus one”. There are only objects, differentiated by

their physical characteristics. The association of count or quality is something later

superimposed by human reckoning. There is nothing inherent in the formless flow of things to suggest law or lawfulness.

Our impulse is to deny the lack of general rules. This very inclination shows how strongly our motivation for perfection drives us. It is strong enough, that when

faced with the idea that our “knowledge” is but a fiction—relative to the current

state of our ignorance—the natural reaction is to view this with absurdity, to reflect

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upon our understanding of the matter, and quickly convince ourselves that sufficient

evidence exists to prove the rule. The “rule”. Our hearts long for the rule.

Imagine a world with no rules, where every “known” is but a crystallization of

ignorance around a certain subset of unreasoning chaos. The further we reach into

the depths of this chaos, the more profoundly our assumptions collapse and founder.

Soon, we come to doubt existence itself, or our capacity to know anything at all. The

mind advances toward a realm with no name—as any term used to describe it would

be caught in the same prison of non-meaning.

Faced with this, we seek a way to step out of the problem. We take a moment, reflect on the chance happenings of the world (in a manner removed from their immediate occurrence) and arrive at a pronouncement to describe them and how they relate to our past and future.

What is the agency that can remove itself from the circumstances of the one experiencing the removal? It would seem impossible, like an unaided man jumping off the surface of the Earth. Can a fish think of a world without water? The

world

it experiences, by its nature, would make such a place impossible to conceive.

One

could more easily understand his own non-being, than dwell mentally in a realm which for him does not exist.

But somehow, the mind does go to this place where the mind cannot be. The finite, limited, ephemeral experiencer, “man”, casts his line beyond the

shores of the
infinite, and comes back with concepts to defy all common experience.
How he accomplishes this is impossible, if we deny any part separate from the
contingent world. Do the animals conceive of absolutes? Human beings expect
them! We grow upset if our plans for the future fail, even though no future
exists
for a being whose only experience is of the rapidly changing present.
It is perhaps, as Plato thought, by our likeness with the eternal that we are
able
to contemplate eternal terms. By some unknown association with the single, the
perfect and the indivisible, we are able to recognize similar patterns in the
indeterminate world of change around us.
A mind who contemplates absolutes will find them more akin to his nature than
not. This is not said as a truth, but from observation. People experience
emotional
difficulties when faced with change, finality, indeterminacy or
unpredictability. On
the other hand, we take great comfort in the “known”, in general rules that
predict
future behavior, in things that are bounded and follow an orderly pattern.
Order
appeals to our aesthetic sense.
The only conclusion, it would seem, is that we are actually strangers to the
world we live in; or at least, estranged by an inward inclination. Perhaps this
is the
footprint of our “soul”.
Backbiting

The Writings are fortunately very clear on what back-biting is:

If any individual should speak ill of one who is absent. . . ?

It simply says “speaking ill”, not whether what is being said is true or
not,
whether it is already known to the hearer or not, whether it is a public figure
being
spoken of, etc. It is just “speaking ill”— the opposite of “speaking
well”.

Further, back-biting is speaking ill of one who is “absent”. It does not
clarify if

this refers to deceased persons, simply people who are not “present”.

As an example of this, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá counsels us not to discuss even the
faults of
our rulers:

Except to speak well of them, make thou no mention of the earth’s
kings, and the worldly governments thereof.?

Additionally, the House of Justice has provided clarification which makes it

possible to engage in necessary consultation (this is found in Lights of Guidance, page ??):

You ask in your letter for guidance on the implications of the prohibition on backbiting and more specifically whether, in moments of anger or depression, the believer is permitted to turn to his friends to unburden his soul and discuss his problem in human relations. Normally, it is possible to describe the situation surrounding a problem and seek help and advice in resolving it, without necessarily mentioning names. The individual believer should seek to do this, whether he is consulting a friend, Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í, or whether the friend is consulting him.

'Abdu'l-Bahá does not permit adverse criticism of individuals by name in discussion among the friends, even if the one criticizing believes that he is doing so to protect the interests of the Cause. If the situation is of

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such gravity as to endanger the interests of the Faith, the complaint, as your National Spiritual Assembly has indicated, should be submitted to the Local Spiritual Assembly, or as you state to a representative of the institution of the Counsellors, for consideration and action. In such cases, of course, the name of the person or persons involved will have to be mentioned.?

When considering if something you might say is back-biting or not, I ask whether it is important enough even to risk it. Back-biting is so horribly destructive to community life, it is often wiser just to leave the opinion unsaid, rather than express it and find out afterwards it is indeed "speaking ill of one who is absent". The Guardian's secretary wrote on his behalf:

On no subject are the Bahá'í teachings more emphatic than on the necessity to abstain from fault-finding and backbiting, while being ever eager to discover and root out our own faults and overcome our own failings.

The Writings refer to back-biting as "the worst human quality and the most great sin"; Bahá'u'lláh gives its prohibition in the same sentence as murder, theft and adultery; states that it "quencheth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul"; 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes it as "the leading cause among the friends of a disposition to withdraw"; and labels it and fault-finding "the

destroyers of the
foundation of man”.

Finally, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes in Bahá’í World Faith:

It is particularly important to refrain from making unfavourable remarks or statements concerning the friends and the loved ones of God, inasmuch as any expression of grievance, of complaint or backbiting is incompatible with the requirements of unity and harmony and would dampen the spirit of love, fellowship and nobility. . . Whoever sets himself to do so, even though he be the very embodiment of the Holy Spirit, should realize that such behaviour would create disruption among the people of Bahá and would cause the standard of sedition to be raised.

I have not found anything in the Writings that links back-biting with intent. That is, back-biting is the action of complaining about others, and it does not depend on why you complaining, unless you are consulting about an issue of serious concern and refrain from using the individual’s name.

For example, in this quote:

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It is obvious that if we listen to those who complain to us about the faults of others we are guilty of complicity in their backbiting.?

It does not refer to the heart of the complainer, but his action. But how, really, could there be a spiritual way of mentioning the faults of another? What use could that possibly serve the spiritual life of the Faith?

How couldst thou forget thine own faults and busy thyself with the faults of others? Whoso doeth this is accursed of Me.?

Question: The other problem I have is when we mention peoples faults on this public forums is that backbiting? If so why?

As for “backbiting”, if they aren’t absent, I don’t see how it could be. However,

avoidance of backbiting and fault-finding are very often expressed together:

O ye Cohorts of God! Beware lest ye offend the feelings of anyone, or sadden the heart of any person, or move the tongue in reproach of and finding fault with anybody, whether he is friend or stranger, believer or enemy.?

The friends must overlook their shortcomings and faults and speak only of their virtues and not their defects.?

On no subject are the Bahá’í teachings more emphatic than on the necessity to abstain from fault-finding and backbiting, while being ever eager to discover and root out our own faults and overcome our own

failings.?

. . . Each of us is responsible for one life only, and that is our own. Each of us is immeasurably far from being 'perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect' and the task of perfecting our own life and character is one that requires all our attention, our will-power and energy. If we allow our attention and energy to be taken up in efforts to keep others right and remedy their faults, we are wasting precious time.?

I see the tendency to complain as a desire for perfection of the material world.

However, our goal is not efficiency, or accuracy, or well-orderedness: The goal of the

faith is to promote love and harmony amongst men.

Once such a love exists, sincere and strong, this world will take on the attributes

of heaven. If this is truly our goal, it can be seen how much criticism and complaint,

however "true" or "appropriate", are ultimately counter to our goal.

They should be applied like a powerful medicine, too much of which will harm far more than it heals.

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When love is the rule, with its sin-covering eye, then, mystically and mysteriously,

solutions will present themselves.

I have found this to be true in my personal life, where I thought for certain the

only way to solve something was direct confrontation. But, after much thought, and requiring tremendous sacrifice of my hopes, I chose a different path. I can only

describe as miraculous the way things worked out. "And whoso maketh efforts for

Us, in Our ways will We guide them."

I'd like to share with you a nice story from 'Attár on this subject:

A young man, brave and impetuous as a lion, was for five years in love with a woman. In one of the eyes of this beauty was a small speck, but the man, when gazing on the beauty of his mistress, never saw it. How could a man, so much in love, notice a tiny flaw? However, in time, his love began to dwindle and he regained his power over himself. It was then he noticed the speck, and asked her how it had come about. She said: "It appeared at the time when your love began to cool. When your love for me became defective my eye became so for you."??

Question: In addition I would like to hear some input from the friends on whether

an Assembly member is backbiting in bringing to the Assembly a report of a

community

members violation of laws or other bad behaviors?

Perhaps this will help clarify the point:

There is a clear distinction between, on the one hand, the prohibition of backbiting, which would include adverse comments about individuals or institutions made to other individuals privately or publicly, and, on the other hand, the encouragement to unburden oneself of one's concerns to a Spiritual Assembly, Local or National (or now, also, to confide in a Counsellor or Auxiliary Board member). Thus, although one of the principal functions of the Nineteen Day Feast is to provide a forum for "open and constructive criticism and deliberation regarding the state of affairs within the local Bahá'í community", complaints about the actions of an individual member of an Assembly should be made directly and confidentially to the Assembly itself, not made to other individuals or even raised at a Nineteen Day Feast.??

Question: Person A has a dastardly deed done to them by person B, confides in person

C and maybe D, because it helps them to talk about it. Is this backbiting?

We are permitted to consult with others after trauma if we keep it nameless.

If we say that the above is not backbiting (even though B's name is being mentioned), where does it stop? What if person A feels the need to talk to E, F, G, H, I,

??

J and K as well? What if they never feel "resolved", and keep spreading news of B's

misdeeds for years to come?

The Bahá'í standard is not an easy one. Nor is the eradication of backbiting

easy. It requires sacrificing some of our cherished sources of emotional comfort, like

retelling the wrongs done to us by others—usually to a spouse.

Yet this is a noble sacrifice we're called to: An effort we'll someday lay at the

feet of our Beloved as a token of our love and faith. Each time you must swallow

the pain, realize you are sharing Bahá'u'lláh's pain, as He suffered untold indignities

heaped upon Him by a cruel and corrupt nation.

Question: Person X warns person Y about dealings with Person Z because Person X has had very bad experiences with person Z and wouldn't like personal harm to come to person Y.

We are permitted to bring issues of concern to an Assembly or Board Member, not to individuals.

In the case of individuals, the above is backbiting. Remember: If no exception

is given to a Law, no exception exists. Unless the Writings allow us to relay the misdeeds of a person for the protection of another, we cannot. I am certainly open to anyone pointing out such an exemption, but in my studies have not found one. Again, take it to the extreme degree: If Z has harmed X, and we allow X to complain to Y, where does it stop? Wouldn't X start warning everyone who gets close to Z? Pretty soon, the whole community starts hearing about the misdeeds of Z, "for the protection of the community". But such protection is the Assembly's job, not the individual's.

Furthermore, who gets to decide how "bad" a bad experience must be before it is shareable? If we take the issue to an Assembly, they can consult and decide; but if we allow ourselves that latitude, where does it stop? Here is an example of how my community dealt with a similar issue: Apparently, someone was slighted in the matter of a loan or debt. I never learned which. I only know because the Assembly, at Feast, announced that anyone considering a loan to or from another Bahá'í should consult with the Assembly first.

Why would they say this? Because someone had acted unjustly, but rather than point out the injustice, they asked everyone to clear their financial dealings with the Assembly, allowing them to protect the community from unwise agreements. I thought this was an excellent way of protecting the community from injustice, without having to bring up anyone misdeeds. There are ways to cope with even difficult issues that do not involve accusation or retelling of faults. It requires patience, love, faith to find them, but they are there.

Statement: When it comes to backbiting, I do not believe that structure and rules are of much use. I believe backbiting is more about sincerity than it is about tangibles.

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Motivation and intentions I believe are very key. I believe this subconscious is very important in backbiting.

I would be interested if you would present guidance which supporting this view. I have heard it suggested before, yet nowhere have I read that back-biting is defined by one's motivations and intentions.

Murder is certainly not, nor theft or adultery, or any other of the crimes listed in the Aqdas. Perhaps there is a tendency toward leniency with backbiting, because it is easier to fall into and harder to stop? And yet, the damage caused by backbiting is terrible:

For the tongue is a smouldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison. Material fire consumeth the body, whereas the fire of the tongue devoureth both heart and soul. The force of the former lasteth but for a time, whilst the effects of the latter endure a century.

Here are the quotes I see as denying us such speech:

If anyone should speak ill of one who is absent. . .

The tongue I have designed for the mention of Me, defile it not with detraction.

Speak no evil, that thou mayest not hear it spoken unto thee, and magnify not the faults of others that thine own faults may not appear great; and wish not the abasement of anyone, that thine own abasement be not exposed.

How couldst thou forget thine own faults and busy thyself with the faults of others? Whoso doeth this is accursed of Me.

Breathe not the sins of others so long as thou art thyself a sinner. Shouldst thou transgress this command, accursed wouldst thou be, and to this I bear witness.

Ascribe not to any soul that which thou wouldst not have ascribed to thee. . .

That seeker should also regard backbiting as grievous error, and keep himself aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting quencheth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul.
??

These quotes, to my eyes, describe actions, not intentions.

In our speech, we have been asked to eschew: conflict, contention, strife, harm to the feelings of another, excess criticism, detraction, slander, harsh words, unfavourable remarks, speaking ill of the world's leaders, grievance against another. . .

Instead, Bahá'ís are called to remark to the world the bounties and attributes of God, and share that Light which alone can resuscitate the fortunes of the world.

The Great Being saith: One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which both exert is manifest in the world.

Therefore an enlightened man of wisdom should primarily speak with words as mild as milk, that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility. And likewise He saith: One word is like unto springtime causing the tender saplings of the rose-garden of knowledge to become verdant and flourishing, while another word is even as a deadly poison.??

Of course, the observance of these Laws is ultimately determined by the conscience of each believer, since there is not—and I hope will never be—a police force

to guard against backbiting. After all, obedience is one of the precious things we can

offer God, to One Who is already the Possessor of All.

I leave this discussion with the following thought: When determining whether backbiting is forbidden, there are numerous quotations from each of the Central Figures on this matter. But as for justifying what appears to be backbiting, have you

noticed that no quotations are ever given? Did no one pose these questions in the

past? Or is it that the answer has always been the same?

Common sense is an excellent tool, and I hope we accord it the respect it deserves: but neither more nor less than this.

The believers are like an ocean

The aim of the appearance of the Blessed Perfection—may my life be a sacrifice for His beloved ones!—was the unity and agreement of all the people of the world. Therefore, my utmost desire, firstly, is the accord and union and love of the believers and after that of all the people of the world. Now, if unity and agreement is not established among the believers, I will become heartbroken and the afflictions will leave a greater imprint upon me. But if the fragrance of love and unity among the believers is wafted to my nostrils, every trial will become a mercy, every unhappiness a joy, every difficulty an expansion, every misery a treasure and every hardship a felicity.?

After thinking about the meaning of “ego”, an image came to mind of a vessel

filled with water, afloat on a gigantic ocean. The purpose of the vessel is to keep the

water contained within it separate from the rest of the ocean—even though they are

of the same substance. No matter how long the vessel might drift upon the water, it

will always remain separated from the rest.

Human society today has bottled up the spirits of men and women, just as though the waters of the ocean had been separated into individual containers.

Imagine what it would be like if the whole Pacific were divided into one gallon

and one
pint jars; not the whole ocean in one huge tank, but divided up into millions
of tiny
vessels, each separating one part of the water from the rest.
Every attribute we know the ocean to have would disappear. Without the union
of the water, there would be no surging waves and no currents. The fish could
not
swim, and reefs would be impossible. It would become a dead place; or at least,
if the fish still lived, it would hardly be called an enviable existence. The
waters
they were used to roaming in freely would become tiny, cramped spaces, where
each
could only hear his neighbor moving—but never see him.
The Pacific would become utterly still. Looking out, we would see endless rows
and columns of vessels—perhaps of many shapes and colors—but without
motion.

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The sea would be stilled, because the currents which once flowed through it
would
have lost their course-ways.
I think such a sight seems horrific. The most wonderful attribute of the
Pacific,
or of any ocean, is its amazing fluidity: the way that the waters ceaselessly
press upon
and caress the shores. It gives me great peace to watch the waters move,
knowing
that beneath the waves a whole other world takes place.
Yet despite the horror, isn't this what our world has become? We seclude the
most sensitive part of ourselves within a boundary that might be called
“ego”. This
prevents the ocean of human life from surging in the vast waves of progress
that we
all long for.
If one's spiritual nature could be called the fluid and dynamic aspect of his
person—that essential “being” which survives any sort of mental or
physical change—
then by releasing ourselves from the prison of self we would allow our communal
essences to commingle and blend.
In the ocean there is no concept of a fixed amount of water. A gallon poured in
is immediately irretrievable. But a gallon jug thrown in can be pulled out with
that
same gallon intact, down to the last molecule.
Perhaps we seclude ourselves in order to preserve what we perceive to be our
individuality. Yet this seclusion only prevents the waters from joining, and

precludes
the appearance of those very aspects which make the ocean livable. Imagine what
it
would be like if the souls of all men became blended in such a way that we were
not
just united, but even as one soul: just as one does not point to a certain part
of the
ocean as say, “see, that part of the ocean is separate from the rest,”
rather every part
of the ocean is considered “the ocean”. When ships drown at sea we do not
blame a
particular part of the sea—the sea as a whole is held responsible. The waters
of the
ocean are viewed as a single body of water, and likewise the souls of men would
be
regarded as one soul.

What the surging of the human sea would look like, I have no idea. The days of
global unity are not yet here—although it promises to be glorious.

Once when I was watching a film on the desert, they showed a water tower
standing in the middle of an wide open plain. Around the tower were thousands
of
mirrors, each tracking the light of the sun in order to aim it at the tower.

Above the
tower was a cistern, filled with water, which would then boil and produce
electricity
by the pressure of the steam. Thus, by employing the simple principles of unity
and
reflection it was possible to produce energy using nothing more than mirrors,
water
and sunlight.

It would seem that we are like those mirrors and at the center stands the goal
we
are all looking toward: lasting peace. This peace is held up by the latticework
of a
sound administration, awaiting each of our individual rays to heat it up and
bring
out the energy that is latent within it.
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Above, the sun shines down its rays bountifully and without discrimination. But
the rays alone are not enough to activate the cistern. The task involved—and
indeed
this is the only real problem to be solved—is how to get the mirrors to align
unitedly
toward the tower.

When we, as a race of spiritual beings, are turned firstly toward the Sun, and
secondly toward the tower; that is, when our reflective nature is aimed

primarily
at the Sun, and our orientation is such that we reflect the light of that Sun
on our
appointed task; then an energy will be produced such as we have never seen
before—
though it was always present—since we had never realized it until that
moment.

It would seem that when the barriers of self that separate us from one another
and Our Beloved are finally dropped, and when the divided waters of the Ocean
are
finally merged into a single sea, I think humanity will witness the very thing
which
all the Prophets of God have professed as Their ultimate goal and purpose. It
would
be a society in which the waters need never be separated again—not separate
from
one other, nor from God, neither from happiness nor tranquility. In such a
world
we would never feel alone again. Instead of seeking to preserve our
individuality to
the exclusion of such a reality, we would work towards bettering the condition
of
the entire sea itself.

Such a state of being could only be described as the Kingdom of God on earth.
Now, while I have no certainty that this is the way such a thing will come
about,
it seems to me that the Writings stress very greatly the importance of harmony
and
unity. Religion, a Latin-derived word stemming from “re-ligare”—which
means
literally “to bind or fasten together again”—has been called by
Bahá’u’lláh, “the
highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its
peoples.” The Guardian declared, “. . . the purpose of religion to be the
promotion
of amity and concord.” He said of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that “. . . The Master
often denied
Himself any station just to maintain the unity of the friends for that was His
primary
object.” We have often heard the quote that, “If religion proves to be the
source of
hatred, enmity and contention, if it becomes the cause of warfare and strife
and
influences men to kill each other, its absence is preferable.”
Bahá’u’lláh likewise
commands us: “Ye have been forbidden in the Book of God to engage in
contention

and conflict, to strike another, or to commit similar acts whereby hearts and souls may be saddened. . . ” He tells of the Báb that “. . . A fine of nineteen mithqals of gold had formerly been prescribed by Him Who is the Lord of all mankind for anyone who was the cause of sadness to another. . . ” And in the ninth Ishráq of the Tablet of Ishráqát (Splendors), Bahá’u’lláh reveals that “The purpose of religion as revealed from the heaven of God’s holy Will is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world; make it not the cause of dissension and strife. The religion of God and His divine law are the most potent instruments and the surest of all means for the dawning of the light of unity amongst men.”

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With this in mind, perhaps the reason why religion has been given that very name (i.e., to bind together again), is because, for whatever reason, we have somehow become separated and through the agency of God’s Will we will be enabled someday to join together again in spiritual harmony. If the laws of nature were allowed to prevail, I am sure we would end up bathing in each other’s blood. However, it is powerfully cogent to me to think that since we are beings of such tremendous capacity, then as a race there would also exist some as yet unrealized potential—a treasure which the key of God’s Word has been destined to unlock in the hearts of men. Perhaps the existentialists believe that life has no purpose beyond the evident happenings that we see, but isn’t it more appealing to the mind to think that we are all moving toward something definite and spectacular? Perhaps toward a pattern of existence which defies all current models of human interrelationship. The design of the pattern has been laid down by the Manifestations of God; the raw material has been handed us by Providence; and the yearning to build it has been fused into our very core. I think the most fulfilling thing any one of us can do is to throw down everything we hold dear, embrace one another, and discover a wealth stemming from unity that far exceeds any possession we could ever own.

On this note, I would like to close with a quote that a fellow Bahá'í shared with me which I had never seen before. It certainly seems to indicate something wonderful awaiting us in the coming age.

O ye friends of God! Today is the day of union and this age is the age of harmony in the world of existence. "Verily, God loveth those who are working in His path in groups, for they are a solid foundation." Consider ye that he says "in groups," united and bound together, supporting one another. "To work," mentioned in this holy verse, does not mean, in this greatest age, to perform it with swords, spears, shafts and arrows, but rather with sincere intentions, good designs, useful advices, divine moralities, beautiful actions, spiritual qualities, educating the public, guiding the souls of mankind, diffusing spiritual fragrances, explaining divine illustrations, showing convincing proofs and doing charitable deeds. When the holy souls, through the angelic power, will arise to show forth these celestial characteristics, establishing a band of harmony, each of these souls shall be regarded as one thousand persons and the waves of this greatest ocean shall be considered as the army of the hosts of the Supreme Concurrence.

What a great blessing it is when the torrents, streams, currents, tides, and drops are all gathered in one place! They will form a great ocean and the real harmony shall overcome and reign in such a manner that all ??

the rules, laws, distinctions and differences of the imaginations of these souls shall disappear and vanish like little drops and shall be submerged in the ocean of spiritual unity. By the Ancient Beauty, in this case and condition, the blessings of the great ocean will overflow and canals shall become as spacious as an endless ocean and each drop shall become as a boundless sea!

O ye friends of God! Strive to attain to this high and sublime station and show forth such a brightness in these days that its radiance may appear from the eternal horizons. This is the real foundation of the Cause of God; this is the essence of the divine doctrine; this is the cause of the revelation of the heavenly Scriptures; this is the means of the appearance of the Sun of the divine world; this is the way of the establishment of God upon the bodily throne.?

But perhaps the theme of my post isn't very clear. I apologize if it seems to ramble. The basic idea is that unity is by far the most important goal for our community to strive toward. Even knowledge, though it may appeal to us all, is little more than a tool to be put to use by our spiritual natures. And like any tool, such as knives or the like, its usefulness is only worthwhile so long as no one gets harmed in

the
process. Otherwise, abandoning it entirely is far better than some kind of
Pyrrhic
victory, when the road to our dreams has been paved by the broken hearts of our
loved ones and friends.

Black and white

People say that life is not black and white, but is made up of varying shades
of gray.

If we imagine that between black and white there is a line dividing the two,
perhaps

“gray” is just our drawing that line in a different place than Truth does.

If what we

call white is really black, or black, white, the two overlapped appear gray.

Grayness is then a consequence of incomplete knowledge. In terms of the
absolute, perhaps everything is clearly separated between good and evil, though
to our

eyes, or the eyes of others, understanding that difference can often be
difficult.

This does not invalidate morality, however. Some believe that “grayness”
overreaches the apparent simplicity of any moral code; that the complexities of
real life

makes morality a thing of church and children’s schools. But the proper
course

is to take a humble stance, and never cease trying to comprehend where the line
may actually lie. Each step we take clarifies, but does not solve, the problem
of

incomplete knowledge.

Since each person draws their line in a different place, not only does there
exist a gray area between ourselves and Truth, but also between each person in
the

world. This lesser grayness has a different size and shape between every two
people,

according to how much the individuals differ in their understanding of right
and

wrong.

From this it is easy to understand why the world appears complex. If everyone
took their “black and white”, and overlaid it upon everyone else’s, and
then placed

this against the backdrop of Truth, there would be such an amazing gradation of
hue that every shade of gray is represented.

Does such a gradation imply that Truth is imperfect? If we understood life,
we could adjust our line appropriately, but as it is we base what we know on
our

schooling, our family, our beliefs, etc.

When we match our image of black and white against another person’s, we see
that there will appear a zone of gray. Intolerance begins when we accuse the

other

person for the existence of this grayness. Since we feel right in our beliefs, we assume it is their fault that grayness has crept into the picture. And they, for their part, think the same of us, which leads ultimately to argument and misunderstanding.

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With respect to one another it is useless to ask who is responsible for the gray areas. The only constructive inquiry is to compare ourselves with the True image, and discover how to correct our own understanding. If everyone does this, naturally we will reach agreement some day. Until that time the existence of grayness should indicate that there is much yet to be learned from life. None of us knows how close he is to a full understanding of Truth. Not until the day all grayness has finally vanished.
The Cause of Joy

I have heard a sentiment from many people over the years which I would like to respond to in a clear, concise way. It boils down to people's feelings about the purpose of life. In many ways, I hear it said that our goal in life lies in preparation for the future. This might mean a life after death, the future of society, or a future state when our higher self is perfected. Whatever the form, the essential statement is: "The purpose of living in the present is to prepare for the future." Now, if this kind of purpose leads to joy, happiness, and a better world, I am nothing if not for it a hundred percent. But after all seeing all the burnt-out, tired, weary people, and hearing them tell me that joy is not a valid goal, but rather working for the future is where it's at. . . to this, I respond. I have nothing against progress whatsoever; I even feel it is the natural outcome of joy. Does a musician, in love with music, just sit before his guitar and do nothing? Joy makes our potential real. So I do not mean to confuse these ideas with noble goals of progress. It is only when progress is made primary, and joy secondary, and preparation for the

future the dominant view, that I have seen problems come about. “Preparing” has been expressed as: building structures, developing programs, extending the reach and depth of knowledge, improving ourselves, making ready for changes in society, etc. It can be very much a “hurry up and get there” state of mind, because none of the preparations can happen too quickly. Being so involved with a “better future”, one can begin to view the present less favorably, because it doesn’t contain these improvements. Hope for the future even interferes with our relation to the present. If, for example, one spends all their time working toward a better society (a fine thing, if built on the right foundation), every kind of present failing becomes irksome, because it proves the hoped-for future to be unreal. Everything in the present is seen as “not yet” that future. It so is always disappointing. How can we learn to love what is, if we spends all our time dreaming about what isn’t? But the future never arrives, because there’s always further to go down the path of perfection. The more ardently we hope for perfection, the more imperfect the present must seem. Until the present is rather hated for its stubbornness in frustrating the ideal.

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And what if the imagined perfection were achieved? What then? If all the structures were built and flaws removed, what would the resulting life be? The path of “perfecting” cannot answer this, because imagination can never have the same quality as what is real. It is not alive, in the same way as the present. And if the present relates to what it means to be alive, then perhaps the purpose of life must be looked for in relation to the present. When the mind dwells longingly on the future, it departs the present, leaving behind only a body—and that often unwillingly. People with such ambitions might have no time for the now, since their imagined future never ceases to demand more

and more of their time and energy. Ultimately, because they have eyes only for what will be, they give everything to that unreal future. They sacrifice the present that a different present might be. Because they have no time for the present, they have no time for what is in the present: namely me. Relationships can suffer, families, society—all in the name of creating a better social order! People who work strenuously for mankind, but who haven't time left to spare for the actual man.

I used to espouse this philosophy, always wondering why happiness remained elusive. I built and built, perfected and perfected—but nothing changed. Nothing fundamentally changed. Because there was always more to build, and just as far to go on the path of perfection. I lived the life of one who hunts the Will o' the Wisp, with the constant promise that it was worth the cost, which was the very essence of my life.

It took a long while to find a different goal, one that is actually achievable because it can be found in the present: happiness. This past year, all my writing has been on this theme: that the goal of our lives is to know happiness, to worship it, to communion with its essence. It is that which cannot be named, forced, or planned. One can only head in the direction of joy, and by that very fact, there it will be found.

I often use the word "joy" to explain this philosophy. By "joy", I do not mean pleasure, or just what puts a smile on your face. I do mean "joy" in that, where there is no smile, there is no joy. Joy is the proof of happiness. Even if there is sorrow, on the other side there is joy again. Where there is perpetually little joy, there is little happiness. Joy is the standard. Joy is the tangible, irrepressible response of a happy life. It is what to aim for, because what brings joy—true joy—will lead to happiness.

With joy as a personal goal, it also becomes a universal goal. What we want for ourselves, we wish for everyone. It is a goal which concerns people and their lives.

Abstract goals concern abstractions. If the goal of life were progress, the

sight of
decay would prompt me to action. The goal of progress is a negative life,
because
it lives for fixing what should not be. And it is never finished. The goal of
progress
cannot find its fulfillment in this world.
The goal of joy, however, is self-realizing and self-serving. If it encounters
sad-
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ness, it wants to replace it with itself. It strives to make more of itself in
the world.

The life of joy is a positive life, because instead of undoing wrong, it
creates right.

It even fuels its own undertaking: an increase of joy leads to more joy. It
spreads

naturally, easily, willingly. It is the easiest thing in the world, since it
provides the

very energy needed to sustain it. Ask any mountain climber if they force
themselves

up the mountain; rather, joy gives them wings.

The goal of progress always lies in the future; joy is only and always in the
present. Joy is something I can succeed at, right now, under any circumstances.

It
depends only on me, my attitude and my understanding, not on what other people
choose to do. Quantity is not even a factor. A little joy is as much a triumph
over

sadness as a lot of joy. Every bit is cherished, and “enjoyed”.

What happens in the plan of seeking joy in the world? As I become joyful, I
want others to know joy. It creates a natural surplus of energy, and the desire
to

share it. Isn't that our mission: to see the people around us smile, to
improve their

lives whatever way we can. Isn't this the truly religious life? Where there
is joy,

aren't people more willing to cooperate, to overlook faults, to be more
patient, to

act lovingly toward each other? Doesn't joy aid progress more than the fight
against

decay? Joy is creative. It shines light into the dark places. It is warm
against the cold,

and energy against torpor. It provides fuel for our spirits to soar; and thus
soaring,

better able to see and understand our problems.

What else is as creative as this, that fills the present with a palpable
radiance,

undeniable in its effect on the heart? Progress as a purpose feels very cold to

me;

joy is warm and immediate. Joy is universal, and universally available. It depends

on nothing—though everything may serve it. It is the life of the world of man; it is

what makes us love being alive.

I see joy as very much connected to love. If joy is the adjective and happiness the

noun, I would call love the verb. We love what brings us joy, and to be happy is to

love. All that is good in the world— beauty, brotherhood, unity, quality—are what

bring us joy, and are what we love. If you see something in life and begin to feel

happiness spreading over your soul, you are loving something in the present which is

causing you joy.

The more we adventure in life, the more deeply we plumb the well of joy.

Deeper and deeper, until we approach certain realities that can only be felt, not

explained. Deeper and deeper—until we start to sense a common Source to these things, Whose very nature might be the reality of all happiness, love, and joy.

.. of

all that is Good and Most Glorious.

There are higher and deeper forms of joy, but all of them are real and alive, and

all of them are good in the present, if not always in the future. The purpose of

education becomes to seek out these fuller causes of joy, to make them more easily

accessible. And every new height that we achieve is always the current best we've ever

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known. In this scheme, the movement of life is always from best to best! There is no

“not enough” or “too much”. Compare this to the life where imagined perfections

are forever sought, but not a one of them lastingly achieved.

I think the path of joy contributes most to the well-being of mankind. I never want a person to feel that I overlooked their present being because I was too busy

working for their future benefit. Only if people are happy now do I consider myself

successful. I want a world, not of perfection, but where people are happy. It is

their souls that matter to me, and what will uplift those souls. Can the pursuit of unattainable perfections do this? It hasn't for me. But joy. . . Joy is the one thing which, if I had naught else for all eternity, I could ask for nothing more. Look for joy in your life by listening deeply to your heart, and to what makes it sing. The soul knows the response of joy intimately. Prayer can help to make this voice more audible. Find joy where it is natural, spontaneously, self-increasing.

Joyful friendships are those that endure for their own sake, and not for any imagined ideal. Ideas are what make the waters seem so cloudy, and our lives so complicated and difficult. Stillness, meditation, awareness: The cause of joy is so simple and direct—even childlike—that it is more a matter of discarding false ideas, than of learning anything new.

Change is natural

Change occurs naturally. It has always, and will always occur. The direction of change is something we can participate in, of course. At the same time, we cannot help BUT participate in change. There is no way we cannot become a part of the changes in the world around us.

Thus, how we participate in change is the only variable. Clearly, the change itself is not significant, because change will happen whether we are alive or dead; in fact, even if there were no humanity, the world would still change. It has been doing so for five billion years, according to the scientists, and will continue until it changes into something else entirely.

To my thinking, this underscores the fact that change is not significant. In fact, change is free; change is unavoidable. Change is a natural condition that results from the passage of time.

So for us to desire change is to desire what we already have. Some will say, then, that we must desire a particular kind of change. But given our limited ability to conceive the limitless interconnections between things, how can our minds truly architect the kinds of changes we want? Even after ten minutes, so many billions of lives have interacted, that we can never predict the outcome of what we do. This is much like prayer. In many prayers, people pray for two things: ?)

what
they want, and ?) how they want it. Praying for the first is understandable
and
expected. God will answer every urgent prayer. But the world is complicated by
nearly infinite interactions, and only God understands how they fit together.

Only

He has a mind qualified to conceive an answer to ?. When we pray for our
desires
to be achieved a certain way, we almost certainly never get what we asked for,
even
if ? is answered!

Desiring change in the world is very similar. When we say, “we want world
peace”, we often envision what this will look or feel like. Example: Muslims
prayed
for hundreds of years for the Mihdí. God answered them. The Muslims killed the
Mihdí.

Our own life is a microcosm of movements at large in the world. We are praying
for our own Mihdí, usually in the form of wishing for a certain change in the
world.

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But at the same time, we desire this change to take a certain shape, flavor, or
course;
maybe a certain speed, manner, or approach. And when the desired change
arrives,
it’s never exactly what we desired.

Look at people who want a certain wife, husband or career. The number of
truly happy people that I know is zero. All of them complain in some way about
the next set of changes they want. Even those who have accomplished what they
set
out to do! Because at the moment of accomplishment, it’s never exactly what
they
envisioned.

Why do I bring this up? First: to say that change itself has no merit. It’s
everywhere, as free as the wind. Second: intending to direct change is
impossible, due to
our finite nature. Third: hoping for a particular outcome of change is
impossible,
since we cannot anticipate the unknown.

And yet, change is a necessary, fruitful part of life. This all leads me to one
conclusion: the focus of our life should be something other than change! This
means living intensely in the present.

Lest someone suggest that this attitude precludes effective change, I will ask,
what does it mean to live in the present?

If I am living in the present, I am acutely aware of my current circumstances,

and what is around me. If cricket is trapped indoors, I see it, feel its pain
echoed in
my own heart, and release it. Not because I desire a different world, one in
which
the cricket does not suffer; but because his suffering is my suffering, and so
I respond
naturally, much as I might have scratched an itch.
If I meet someone starving for love, do I give them love to change their
unloved
state of being? Do I hate their unloved state so much that I must destroy it,
to
create a loved state? After all, God's creation, at that moment, included an
unloved
individual. Whatever the past may have been, it is natural that right now this
person
is experiencing no love. Therefore, it is what it is.
Perceiving this, I feel a natural desire to respond to their need. Their need
is my
need, since we are both human, both creatures of God, both hungry for love. I
offer
them love not because they need it, but because the situation brings it forth
from
me. Loving the present, the shape of my love flows to fit the needs of the
moment,
and at this particular moment, the response is one of caring. At other times,
it may
be appreciation, excitement, respect, etc.
Change will always happen; but seeking change is empty. Merely by allowing
my own being to exist naturally, positive change will occur around me. It
cannot
happen otherwise. If you poke me, I will exclaim. If I see suffering, I'll
desire to
undo it. If I hear a question, I'll want to answer it. Not because of a
certain future I
wish to uncover, but because your question is my question; we are both walking
on
the same path.
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Then, there is change for the sake of change, and change that is the natural
outcome of responding to one's circumstances. Is it an invasion to be myself?
If so,
then everything is an invasion: time, the sun's light, everything. An
invasion is when
a foreign element seeks to enter something unnaturally. Like when I want to
create
love as a response to hate, without love being the origin of my motive. It's

like trying
to force a pill down the throat of the present, in order to win a better
future. This is
fruitless, hopeless.
Also, the present is perfect as it is. We will always exist in the present.
This is
where our trials occur, our joys, our opportunity for perceiving the divine.
When
people describe it as “immature”, or “undeveloped”, I think to myself:
people will
always see it that way. In a thousand years, people will still castigate the
present
the way we do now. People were doing this a thousand years ago. The present
never
seems perfect to us. Always, always, always, people look to the future for
fulfillment.
Either in their life, their job, their spirituality, whatever.
That’s the flaw. Civilization is not going to become perfect, or better.
Because
no matter how long we wait, “better” keeps getting redefined at every
stage. Compared to half a million years ago, we are the ultimate society! So
why aren’t we all
dancing and having parties? Because comparative judgment suffers from the flaw
of
arbitrary selection: you can pick whatever view of the present you wish,
depending
on whether you look forward or backward. People who do this will continue to do
this. The present will always appear the same in a relative way. Its details
may alter,
but it remains essentially the same to the person who looks at it.
The only way to break this cycle is to fundamentally alter our relationship to
the present. Not to the past or the future, but the present. Change is bound up
in
time, and does not exist in the present. Neither does love or light exist in
the past or
future. Love is our spirit’s response to the world we see before us—period.
We don’t
become more loving by waiting for better circumstances.
Let me reword that last point: Change happens in time, but love happens outside
of time. Therefore, love occurs before change. Change cannot bring about love.
If we love, change will happen from that love; if we hate, change will happen
from
that hate. Change itself is ambivalent, universal, impersonal.
To create true change, then, we must love the present that we see before us.
This
present is perfect, and without flaw; only our perceptions make us think
otherwise.

And if we love the present unreservedly wonderful changes will flow naturally
from
that love. Not as an invasion, but as a mystic dance in partner with everything
around us.

Accepting the present is the hardest thing, because it doesn't happen in the
mind
or heart. Only spiritual change can affect the way we view the present; only
eyes of
faith can see beyond what is apparent, and perceive the mystic unity of
opposites
that our body's eyes can never see.

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So, how do I love existence? To me, that is most fundamental of all questions.
Here I am, one who has listened to religion. Religion tells me: love all that
is. I ask

it right back: how do I love all that is? Because from this, every other thing
precedes.

If I love all things, there is nothing that will not solve itself in time. If
people loved

all things, war would be impossible; social inequality would be impossible,
prejudice

would be impossible. The world's transformation occurs when people learn to
love,

which is the purpose of religion.

If this is religion's purpose, then maybe religion is necessary for it to
occur. If

a philosophy, drug, or experience could make me love all things, it would be
the

easiest thing to do. My mind works well enough to read any book in time; I
could

easily swallow a drug, or seek an experience.

But love is the hardest thing, the most basic thing, and yet somehow the
easiest thing. Because the possibility of accomplishing it is in the present.

It's always

right here. There's no book I need to read, or experience I need to have. All
of the

ingredients are right here, right now. Time is not required for such a change,
nor

wealth nor ability nor circumstance. Somehow, I exist "but one step away".
"Swift

as the twinkling of an eye ye can, if ye but wish it, reach and partake of this
imperishable favor, this God-given grace, this incorruptible gift, this most

potent and

unspeakably glorious bounty."

Then the answer must be something marvelous, glorious—beyond time and

space and future and change and argument. Something that requires only a timeless moment of realization. A call to God, a moment of quiet, a single effort—who knows what will burn up the veil?

What I am certain of is this: if my energy is bled away seeking a change whose ramifications I could never master, which would more likely than not cause more sorrow than joy, then I will have no heart left to seek this ineffable path.

The desire

for change is the beginning of all suffering, says Buddhism. To be freed from this

desire causes the heart to awaken, and when it does, the love proceeding from this

realization washes over everything around you.

Christianity and damnation

Christianity has always seemed to me to offer religion as an alternative to damnation. Follow Christ, because through Him your sins will be forgiven. This is a very

welcome message to anyone who feels inherently guilty. The doctrine of original sin

then seems to make complete sense. And so we are carried into the organization, to

be baptized, and to breathe a great sigh of relief for now we are saved.

But please read this for what it is: the initial perceptions of a child of fourteen,

who could not understand the whole concept of latent sin, and therefore gave up the entire prospect of religion. This is the time when I became an atheist.

The doctrines of honesty and kindness were easy enough, because as long as one follows them (and they are quite simple in their rules), one is justifiably beyond

reproach. Violating them means that the scales of justice must be rebalanced, but

once that is done, again one is OK.

Against such a model, religion seems to set up an incredibly complicated system,

where honesty, kindness and the other virtues are merely part of some larger game,

whose rules we were never meant to understand. Somehow we accept the fact that we are by default “in the wrong,” that the scales can never be rebalanced by our own

efforts, and that we therefore stand in need of an All-Powerful, external Being Who

will allow us to escape the punishment we were otherwise destined for.

Yet even this is not guaranteed—at least in the brands of Christianity I was familiar with growing up. Consorting with the wrong kind of people could just as easily send you to hell as giving up the church. Faced with this impermanent salvation, I again discovered that the scales were forever off-balance, and

that the omnipotent deity who was to secure my rescue demanded constant propitiation in order to keep up his end of the bargain. In this respect modern “ecclesiastical” religion is no different from the ancient cultures who make sacrifices to the gods each year in order to ensure a steady crop. If we let down our guard, the deities are immediately going to return to the realms whence they came, and then we are left on our own. Completely on our own. And needless to say, because of our imperfection, and the fact that the scales of Justice forever demand rebalancing, it’s no longer possible to continue living without that deity’s protection.

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This is such a simple, “pray for the rains” theology that it is surprising how inveterate it has become, even in the belief systems of modern day. With the advent of Christ, it became more glorified, and more intricate, but at heart the formula is identical. Man is bad, and does not deserve. God covers for man, and now man can live acceptably. But man must continue to implore God, or God will leave man, and man will perish. Isn’t this the idea of those street-corner preachers who say, “Repent, for the end is near!”? The idea of expiating guilt is so attractive for anyone who feels guilty (and I am certain that many of us feel guilty about something, for life is a thing of mistakes), that it becomes a very strong selling point. And perhaps this is why the current generation has become so heedless: because they are aware of this “moral economics” and are disgusted by the fact that the only real result is that the church gets fatter every year. Now that their sins are forgiven, so what? They have to live in constant apprehension of drawing all those sins back again with the least transgression. It’s like a judge who suspends one’s sentence at court. The individual feels somehow lucky, but now he is afraid that on the next occasion he will have to pay for both the old sin and the new one. This is not a very complete

salvation. At

least not given the time and money that it costs.

Some sects offer permanent salvation. Once you have accepted Christ as Lord, this is both the beginning and the end. Do what you like, for your faith has saved

you. Of course, you should still try to be good, but it doesn't really matter all that

much. The only catch here is that you have to accept Him through a particular church, and remain a member of that church. I'm not very experienced with these

kinds of churches, but it surprises me that they aren't more popular.

The thing to notice here is that all of the focus is on the suppliant. Where is God mentioned, except as the Saviour of the otherwise hell-bound soul? Isn't He,

after all, the Creator, the Source of all Good, the Knower and the Seer? It would

seem that if religion were anything, it would be a source of knowledge about Him,

since no other science or art can tell us anything about Him directly.

This is the special purview of religion, this authoritative knowledge of God.

Church is where one goes to discover the mysterious fact that there is another world

beyond this world, one based on love and fellow feeling, rather than brute force

and power. All these things were created by God, Who has placed more capacities within us than we are yet aware of, and Who has much more in store for us than we have witnessed so far. The key is to make ready our perception so that we might

be capable of comprehending the deeper mysteries of life. This requires a purifying

our mind, turning our sight away from baser things, directing our inquiry to the

soul and its needs, and providing it with the nourishment it requires to develop the

capabilities it has been endowed with.

Nothing but religion can educate us about the needs of the soul, for only God ??

understands these needs, and so only God can tell us about them. This He does through the mechanism of His Messengers, or Prophets, sent in just such a fashion

that only those who are truly interested will listen long enough to find out what

they have to offer. This is done because Beauty is only for the eyes of those who will

appreciate it. Think of something astonishingly beautiful, and special, in your own

life. Maybe this would be a sunset viewed from a particular spot, or the enveloping silence of a certain grove at a nearby beach. Now consider who you would bring there, to share your special place. Would it be just any one, no matter how crass or insensitive? Or would you reserve those places for only those people who possess the sensibilities necessary to apprehend what was being offered? God, too, has something wonderful to share with us something that is open to all. But only those whose hearts are ready can enter, because otherwise it would be waste, like a painting created for a blind man. This He achieves by tailoring His message with exactly the right amount of craft, such that it be ignored, or cherished, based on the predilection of the hearer. But my point is that religion is about God, and not about the question of our salvation. This plays a part, but not as expiation of our sins; rather it is about removing those obstacles which would prevent from perceiving His beauty. This is what is meant by salvation; to be awakened from a slumber which would have caused you to miss all the wonderful glory of life.

The Destiny of the Soul

The soul's origin

At the moment the soul was created, it knew of its Creator. Some Muslims refer to this pre-existent relationship with God as “rúz-i-alast”, or the day when God asked us, “Am I not your Lord?” The Bahá'í Writings likewise mention an earlier time when we knew of God:

O My Friends! Have ye forgotten that true and radiant morn, when in those hallowed and blessed surroundings ye were all gathered in My presence beneath the shade of the tree of life, which is planted in the all-glorious paradise??

Our soul is said to be “the first among all created things to declare the excellence of its Creator, the first to recognize His glory, to cleave to His truth, and to bow down in adoration before Him.”? In essence, the soul of man is a lover, created in a state of primal adoration. We became thus because the Loved One deserves a lover. There is an Islamic tradition that says, “I was a Hidden Treasure. I wished

to be made known, and thus I called creation into being in order that I might
be
known.” In this sense, we are part of a divine cycle of going and returning,
in which
the Beloved casts out His lovers, and then summons them to return according to
their own desire. This “expulsion from paradise”, from our original state,
is so that
each lover may demonstrate himself by proving his devotion through trial and
longsuffering.

His purpose, however, is to enable the pure in spirit and the detached in
heart to ascend, by virtue of their own innate powers, unto the shores
of the Most Great Ocean, that thereby they who seek the Beauty of the
All-Glorious may be distinguished and separated from the wayward and
perverse.?

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That we began in the divine world, and subsequently “fell” into a condition
of material existence—with all its potential for distraction and error—is
not only
referenced many times in Scripture, but also by some philosophies. Plato
describes
our original state in quite poetic terms:

. . . Beauty it was ours to see in all its brightness in those days when,
amidst that happy company, we beheld with our eyes that blessed vision,
ourselves in the train of Zeus, others following some other god; then
were we all initiated into that mystery which is rightly accounted blessed
beyond all others; whole and unblemished were we that did celebrate
it, untouched by the evils that awaited us in days to come; whole and
unblemished likewise, free from all alloy, steadfast and blissful were the
spectacles on which we gazed in the moment of final revelation; pure
was the light that shone around us, and pure were we, without taint
of that prison house which now we are encompassed withal, and call a
body, fast bound therein as an oyster in its shell. (Plato)

Since our parentage is divine, being that we were “created in His image”,
we

long for the divine; since we are lovers, we pine for reunion with our
long-lost Love.

This is our constant state of being, and all our fundamental motivations stem
from

it. What differs between individuals is the understanding of how to find what
we

seek, and whether our vision is clear enough when we do come across it.

The medium of the world

From my own meditations, the soul would seem to be a creature of pure awareness, not having a separate reality to call its own and focus its attention upon. It is aware only of what is real, and this determines the measure of its experience. That is, if our attention is directed toward things that are vain and imaginary, the soul will starve; whereas whenever it comes into contact with reality, it breathes deeply. What it breathes in is brought to it through the medium of perceived existence, just as the sun's light is brought to the eye reflected from physical objects. The Source is too bright to be seen—beholding it would blind the soul, figuratively speaking—but it remains possible to perceive it in the form of its many reflections, or manifestations. Each created thing alters the character of those manifestations according to its own quality, just as a red flower makes the light appear red, or a yellow flower, yellow. What both reveal to the soul, however, are differing attributes of a single Light, one Reality. This reality is the soul's Beloved, and as such causes us joy whenever we see it.
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Now the reason wherefore the souls are fain and eager to behold the plain of Truth, and discover it, lies herein—to wit, that the pasturage that is proper to their noblest part comes from that meadow, and the plumage by which they are borne aloft is nourished thereby. (Plato)

If our eyes are closed or confused, even the clearest manifestations of the divine cannot reach the soul. In that state it reaches spiritual death, because it receives no nourishment; for if the soul is to flourish, it must derive sustenance from its Creator. To do this means learning how to commune with the Divine through the medium of life's experience. Take beauty, for example. Beauty is an attribute of the One we love, and for this reason beauty seizes us, causes us to pause and wonder. This is a sign that the soul is recognizing its Love, and longing for reunion. Now, it is quite possible not to see “through” this experience: to think

that an object is beautiful by its own power and not because it reflects from another Source.

In this case, the individual will attempt to satisfy his desire from the object alone, and will find it worthless and empty. Bahá'u'lláh expresses this phenomenon in these terms:

Break not the bond that uniteth you with your Creator, and be not of those that have erred and strayed from His ways. Verily I say, the world is like the vapor in a desert, which the thirsty dreameth to be water and striveth after it with all his might, until when he cometh unto it, he findeth it to be mere illusion. It may, moreover, be likened unto the lifeless image of the beloved whom the lover hath sought and found, in the end, after long search and to his utmost regret, to be such as cannot “fatten nor appease his hunger.”?

The world itself, then, is not the Beloved—but the image of the Beloved is seen in it, as if reflected from a mirror: “The whole universe reflecteth His glory, while He is Himself independent of, and transcendeth His creatures.” This image allows us to connect, as if sunlight reflected from a mirror were to nourish plants sitting in an otherwise dark room.

The bond of communion
This light that reaches us—the living quality beauty has when we experience it—
establishes a link between the lover and his Love, a form of communion. Plato describes this dynamic using the metaphor of growing wings when he talks about how we experience beauty. Note his description of our “vision of the mystery”,
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which for him relates to the time of our pre-creation, when there was no impediment between ourselves and God:

Now he whose vision of the mystery is long past, or whose purity has been sullied, cannot pass swiftly hence to see beauty's self yonder, when he beholds that which is called beautiful here; wherefore he looks upon it with no reverence, and surrendering to pleasure he essays to go after the fashion of a four-footed beast, and to beget offspring of the flesh, or consorting with wantonness he has no fear nor shame in running after unnatural pleasure. But when one who is fresh from the mystery,

and saw much of the vision, beholds a godlike face or bodily form that truly expresses beauty, first there comes upon him a shuddering and a measure of that awe which the vision inspired, and then reverence as at the sight of a god, and but for fear of being deemed a very madman he would offer sacrifice to his beloved, as to a holy image of deity. Next, with the passing of the shudder, a strange sweating and fever seizes him. For by reason of the stream of beauty entering in through his eyes there comes a warmth, whereby the soul's plumage is fostered, and with that warmth the roots of the wings are melted, which for long had been so hardened and closed up that nothing could grow; then as the nourishment is poured in the stump of the wing swells and hastens to grow from the root over the whole substance of the soul, for aforesaid the whole soul was furnished with wings. (Plato)

Bahá'u'lláh also uses a bird metaphor to describe our earliest condition, and how our capacity to fly requires purity in order to recall that proper state:

Ye are even as the bird which soareth, with the full force of its mighty wings and with complete and joyous confidence, through the immensity of the heavens, until, impelled to satisfy its hunger, it turneth longingly to the water and clay of the earth below it, and, having been entrapped in the mesh of its desire, findeth itself impotent to resume its flight to the realms whence it came. Powerless to shake off the burden weighing on its sullied wings, that bird, hitherto an inmate of the heavens, is now forced to seek a dwelling-place upon the dust.?

The fatal error occurs because the mind mistakes symbol for reality, thinking that raw gold, for example, holds the true meaning of value. From this ignorance it will pile up great stores of wealth, never realizes that it cultivates a long and vitiating poverty.
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If the individual recognizes, however, that the signs and tokens of earthly life are like the lines of a love-letter waiting to be read, it completely changes the character of living. If we “read from the attributes the riddle of the Essence”?, as if a communication received by a lover, then there can be an experience of connection. It does not matter, for example, that the sun can never descend to Earth—or it would consume it—the medium of its rays still allows for plants to be nourished by its light. And even if these rays must reflect from various objects to reach the inhabitants of a dark cave, it would still be light and still be nourishing.

What lies beyond

I think this initial life is a place of confinement, like a cave; not because we are not meant for greater places, but because our souls are so tender that a direct revelation would blind them. This blinding would occur because we would have no option but to love Him, to be awed by His glory, and we would never have the chance to prove our devotion by overcoming great doubt in the course of our search.

. . . were the glory of this station to be revealed unto men to an extent smaller than a needle's eye, thou wouldst witness them gathering before the threshold of divine mercy and hastening from all sides to the court of nearness in the realms of divine glory. We have concealed it, however, as mentioned before, that those who believe may be distinguished from them that deny, and that those who turn unto God may be discerned from them that turn aside.?

So we start out in this darker place, slowly becoming accustomed to the light, before we step out. We can only have a self during this initial stage of the journey,

and so it is only here that we have the chance to sacrifice it for His sake.

Once

the Beloved becomes clear to our consciousness, there will be no consciousness of

anything but:

How can a true lover continue to exist when once the effulgent glories of the Beloved are revealed? How can the shadow endure when once the sun hath shone forth? How can a devoted heart have any being before the existence of the Object of its devotion? Nay, by the One in Whose hand is my soul! In this station, the seeker's complete surrender and utter effacement before his Creator will be such that, were he to search the East and the West, and traverse land, sea, mountain and plain, he would find no trace of his own self or of any other soul.?

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I am not even sure if by "this initial life" I mean our physical life, or the life of

unbelief which precedes faith. We might pass through several lives similar to this

one before being ready to enter into the full sunlight. But when we do reach that

place, the whole scheme will become clear, and the purpose for God's concealment

will be revealed:

And when the sanctified souls rend asunder the veils of all earthly attachments and worldly conditions, and hasten to the stage of gazing

on the beauty of the Divine Presence and are honoured by recognizing the Manifestation and are able to witness the splendour of God's Most Great Sign in their hearts, then will the purpose of creation, which is the knowledge of Him Who is the Eternal Truth, become manifest.? The distorting effects of time

Time can play funny tricks when we look at the world. Seen today, it is true that there are many faiths, and they all profess ultimately the same goal. In fact, as I look at things through the eye of "now", I think Bahá'ís have just added one more piece to an already overly complicated puzzle. As I dilate my view, however, and comprehend the entire span, I see that there are not several faiths, but a progression marching steadily through history. The appearance of "many" today is the result of past rejection. If all of these faiths—any of them—are true, there would be fewer now. If Muhammad were true, the Christians should have accepted Him when they encountered the Muslims. Already that would have made the world simpler today. If Christ were true, the Jews would have acknowledged Him. If Buddha were true, the Hindus surrounding Him would have listened more closely, etc. Bahá'u'lláh says, "This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future". Our mistakes are what fracture truth, just as Muhammad said, "Knowledge is a single point, but the ignorant have multiplied it". When I look at the world and see so much contention of belief, I realize I am not looking at Divine truth, but instead I'm seeing the nature of our own psyche at this time: divided, separated, clinging to past ways and patterns. As we grow toward inner health, isn't it natural we will come to recognize one truth? "Bahá'í" is not the name of this truth; as Lao-Tzu wrote, "The name which can be named is not the Eternal Name." We are always, always midwives of a future truth, endlessly unfolding in pace with man's ability to comprehend. This is true of my own education; I think it's also true of the world at large. The question is, are Bahá'u'lláh's writings what we need to continue our progression? I don't think humankind has plumbed the depths of its spiritual potential—no matter the actual nearness of God—nor is such development by any means

universal. Watching the evening news proves this to me every time. Where is the plan, the path, the means for this to happen?

Acceptance works well on an individual basis, but alone it cannot lead to education. If I had a room full of children under my care, would leaving them alone to

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choose their own way ever lead to unity and mutual understanding, or inner growth?

Instead, lack of guidance would cause whatever is strongest in their character to become dominant.

The world's people are at varying stages of growth; they need a parent, a guardian,

to oversee its needs and provide direction. It needs genuine authority! This is what

the words of God offer, for the time in which they are revealed. And this is why

Bahá'ís see a special place for Bahá'u'lláh writings, since they are especially suited to

the requirements of world unity, and address humanity's problems on a global scale.

And when we've finally conquered that problem—a situation poets have begged and longed for for thousands of years already—our growth will simply continue from there. Always under a different name, but always with the same theme and spirit: unfoldment of human potential, personally and collectively.

Likewise, reflect upon the perfection of man's creation, and that all these planes and states are folded up and hidden away within him.

Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form

When within thee the universe is folded?

Then we must labor to destroy the animal condition, till the meaning of humanity shall come to light.

What's with Dominique Francon?

There have been a lot of people asking about the character of Dominique Francon in the book *The Fountainhead*, by Ayn Rand. This essay will attempt to clarify her

character in the context of that story.

For lack of a better term, let us talk about the characters of *The Fountainhead* in terms of power: Not derivative power, but real power: the power to create—not

simply the role of directing utilizing others' power to create.

There are six major characters in *The Fountainhead*, each of which demonstrates a different archetypal relationship to the creative potential of human beings.

Howard Roarke is the pure creator, independent: He has the power to create and uses it, and does not allow that power to be directed by anyone but his own will.

Peter Keating is a wielder of others' power: he is derivative and dependent: he

can only work with what others gives—including opinions about his own self-worth.

This is emphasized by the fact that Keating must consult with Roark each time he

attempts to create a building that must not be based on someone else's plans, or on

history's designs.

Guy Francon is just like Peter Keating, except that Peter was gradually turned from being a creator to being a user. For Peter, it began when his mother wanted

him to be an architect rather than an artist; from that point on, he lost his will to

create by degrees, until he had no capacity left. For Guy, he has allows accepted the

role of user, and feels no attraction to any other state of being.

Ellsworth Toohey wants to make everyone dependent, so that they must turn to him for whatever they need. He, like Roark, is also a wielder of power; but instead of

using that power to create, he focuses his energy on removing everyone else's will to

create, so that in the end they must follow his will. This is not strictly the opposite

of Roark, but it does oppose the fact that Rand would like all humans to be like

Roark, whereas Toohey wants no one else but himself to have that power (and thus

he hates and fears Roark, since Roark's existence runs counter to his plans).

Gail Wynand is also a creator, like Roark, who realizes that people need his power to create—they must feed off of him. He hates this, and in reaction, plays on

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this need to punish his enemy. Roark's character does not need to punish anyone,

because Roark does not care about people's need to use his power: he just doesn't

offer it for sale. But Wynand had sold his power to society in order to gain what

he believed was the upper hand. It is this realization which undoes him toward the

end, though Roark constantly tries to get him to see that there is no reason to care about his past, so long as he gives up on his plan of revenge, and turns his attention to creating.

And last, Dominique Francon: She sees that people need her to create, and she also hates this need. Her response is not to give people what they want. By removing her power from the world, it cannot be misused. In this way she expresses her hatred for the world: by starving of it of the very thing it needs most. Wynand believed he was causing the world pain by misusing the needs of people, and yet this still allows them to survive; Dominique wants to see the world die, by depriving it of what it needs to continue. Of course, she is also depriving herself, and so there is a kind of suicide implicit in her course of action.

Dominique knows that Roark has this power too, and that the world wants it; and because of the world's need it will try to harness Roark according to their desires. She tries to stop Roark because she doesn't want to see this happen. She tries to defeat him because she loves the power he wields so much (which is also an expression of love for herself, because she recognizes this same power within her).

So whatever she does to Roark, she is also doing to herself. For this reason, the relationship between Howard and Dominique can best be understood if they are viewed as one person acting toward itself.

This is why Dominique wants to be dominated by Roark: because the will to create is sublime and her heart wishes it to triumph—even if that means overcoming her aim of withholding that power from the world. When Roark “takes possession of her”, this is like Dominique's soul re-taking possession of her destiny, and not letting the world's needs dictate a pattern of inaction (which has caused Dominique's life to become the antithesis of the world—an exact negative—which means it still has the very form she abhors).

Roark sees that Dominique subjugates herself to world in this reverse fashion, and He shows her the way out: Not to care. Follow the creative urge wherever it leads, and what the world does in response is its own problem. When Dominique

finally understands this, she is able to stop living in terms of the world, and this is when she allows herself to marry Roark, and join him in “his world” (the world of power, rather than the world of dependence).

At one point in the book, Dominique helps Toohey to attack Roark. This is not because she wishes to see Roark made dependent, in the way that Keating is dependent (which is Toohey’s real plan). Rather, she wishes Roark to understand the evil of the world, and since Toohey is actively promoting this evil, he is its ??

clearest and most direct representative. If Roark sees this, she believes, he will join her in her crusade to starve the world (which becomes the task of John Galt and company in Atlas Shrugged). Partly this cooperation with Toohey is self-defense, because by not creating Dominique has made herself bitterly unhappy, while she sees that Roark is doing the very things she will not allow herself to do. If Roark can exist in the world, she can too; but if Roark cannot, then she has been right not to try. In this way, attacking Roark can answer for her the question of whether it is safe to develop one’s power in a world filled with people who want to take advantage of it. Roark’s triumph over Gail (which not really a triumph over Toohey, but answers the question for Dominique) answers this internal question for Dominique. How does Roark undo Gail’s plan of destruction? Whereas Dominique wants to destroy the needy world by starving it, Gail tries to destroy it by forcing it to wallow in its own squalor. Gail does this because, fundamentally, he makes the error of believing that everyone feels the same way about human beings as he does. However, the world is just fine with degrading itself, so long as Gail continues to provide them with what they need to survive. This fact is what tires Gail to the point of suicide, just before he meets Roark. Since the world cannot be shown how disgusting its choices are, and since it’s only desire is to feed off the power of the creators—no matter how abasing that position of servitude becomes—Gail has chosen for himself a pointless crusade.

Dominique's approach would actually succeed (as Galt shows in Atlas Shrugged),

although it must come at the price of her own self—a cost Galt avoids by banding together all the creators in a separate society.

But since Gail cannot achieve what he seeks, and realizes his impotence before his enemy, ultimately he does not want to live among them anymore. But then he finds Roark, and discovers in him someone who represents a different kind of life.

This life is what Gail and Dominique were born for. (Rand often calls this world

“the world we saw in our youth”, because at that time people are unaware of the

needy structure of society). When Gail sees this vision, incarnate in an individual

(Roark), it gives him hope. He struggles with his hope, at times defending it, at

times attacking it, until he sees that his own actions (that is, giving over his creative

power to the world's desires) has been the very reason why this perfect world does

not exist for him. This realization ruins him, despite Roark telling him that the past

does not matter: only how we use our creative power matters.

This is what conquers Gail Wynand, in that Roark proves to him the futility, and the wrongness, of his task. And when Dominique, too, sees that the world does

not need to be “beaten”—because it is a non-entity which those of power needn't

consider—she is able to join Roark in his world and free herself of her hatred. Gail

remains in his hatred, however, because he now hates the world for what it has ??

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tricked him into pursuing all his life—or rather, he hates himself for having allowed

the world to draw the lines of battle.

The character of Peter Keating's girlfriend, incidentally, is a minor one, because

she simply represents another version of Keating himself: Someone who started out

innocently, but due to parents and society convinced herself that being a user is

better than being a creator— until in the end she becomes exactly what

Keating is:

a hollow shell, to be given a purpose by others who in turn seek their purpose from

others (a chain that ends in people like Toohey).

All of these themes are also to be found in Atlas Shrugged : where Galt's group

is Roark using Dominique's plan to weaken the world and force it to grant them

more freedom; where Francisco d'Anconia is Roark using Wynand's plan to hasten

the world's destruction so that it must accede to Galt's demands; and Dagny Taggart

is a "proto-Roark" who unwittingly allow the world to control her power, because

she has yet to realize that the creator need answer only to her own desire to create.

And the reason Galt's group still responds to the world (in Atlas Shrugged) by

withdrawing from it? Because of the extent to which the lawmaker's actions have

made it impossible for them to create freely. I believe Rand took this approach because she saw legislation and the patterns of society leading us more toward a world of dependence than independence, in the years that followed the publication

of the The Fountainhead. Otherwise, I think she would have focused more on Galt's

character independent of the world, rather than give the world she despises a second

thought. In that sense there is a strange irony, in that Roark's character would never

have written a book like Atlas Shrugged —even though it is the beauty and viability

of Roark's manner of living that Rand is trying to promote. I can only understand

this as her way of reaching out to a later generation's youth, who had become so

distanced by the mid-1930s from Roark's world, that she felt it necessary to present

her ideas in terms of theirs.

Duty and recognition

What does it mean to have a duty to recognize God's Messenger?

If I told you there were things about astronomy you did not know, it's pretty easy for an honest person to recognize that indeed, you do not know them.

Perhaps

it might require a little proof, but ignorance is easily uncovered by the willing seeker.

Let's say you want to be an astronaut. I claim it's your duty to familiarize yourself

with those details of astronomy, otherwise there's no chance of your heading

into
space—or at least, you'd have to be extremely lucky (blessed?) to reach
where you
wanted to go.
Bahá'u'lláh tells us that God's creation is ordered according to
spiritual laws,
and that our own reality, being spiritual in nature, cannot grow or become
fulfilled
except through acting within the sphere of those laws.
Thus it is the duty of anyone who wishes to become a servant of God, to
recognize the fact of his own nature, and that no truth he finds is genuine
unless it be
encountered within the confines of His Law (of which there are both general and
specific aspects).
The analogy does go further, since it's quite possible for someone to obey a
physical law without understanding it. But the perfection of nature cannot be
unveiled
without close attention to the laws governing it. It's one thing to discover
fire; it's
another to reach out bodily toward the heavens.
So while God's grace is liberally diffused over all human kind, and no one is
threatened by extinction (according to my reading), it is another question
entirely
who will make the choice to plumb the hidden Depths.
To sum: A student who would attend a school must realize that his teachers are
there to teach, and he is there to learn. Thus a recognition of station takes
place,
followed by an obedience of the laws existing between those two spheres of
being.
Ignoring that duty leads to expulsion from the school (albeit, not from life,
or from
trying again). So if we wish to be heedless beings, it is our choice. But there
is Door
waiting to be opened, a door whose key one must turn with the hand of endeavor,
and not just a hopeful wish.

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Eastern methods of instruction,
and the Valley of Search

This morning I finished re-reading Eugen Herrigel's lovely little book, *Zen and the Art of Archery*. It takes no more than an evening or two to read. In it he describes his attempts to learn the Zen art of archery in Japan, and his experiences along that path.
Which led to an interesting correlation with the Seven Valleys. In Western

thought, education is a matter of imparting knowledge, and sometimes also imparting the wisdom to apply that knowledge in life. In the East, the approach is radically different. The Master seeks to develop a particular condition of receptivity in the pupil, at which point he introduces experiences designed to take advantage of that receptivity. Sometimes developing this condition can take years of seemingly pointless exercise (from the seeker's point of view), coming to a head like a thunderclap in a single moment of unexpected clarity.

The Valley of Search describes a developing of the seeker's heart that is decidedly Eastern. To understand this from a Western perspective, consider what is like, as a youth, to want to fall in love with someone. Most people very much want to fall in love with someone special, and they spend a great deal of time thinking about it and dreaming about it. Yet, the advice most often given is to stop thinking about it! To just "let it happen" in its own natural time. The only thing the prospective lover can "do" is open himself for that moment when it comes. And when it does come, it is like thunder on a clear day. Unexpected, yet undeniable. The lover need not ask anyone, not even the Master, if he has fallen in love. It is a proof unto itself.

Yet, there is nothing that can be "done" to hurry the process. For some it takes a few months, for others it takes years, and for some, never.

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There is no telling when, or why, or how. The best approach one can take under such circumstances is to be patient, and use the time allotted to develop themselves, the purity of their heart, so that their their spirit may be most attractive to whomever one day chances by. When combined with faith, we are saved from melancholy by the assurance that if we undertake this self-preparation in search of Him, then "In Our ways will We guide him". The seeker is guaranteed not to be disappointed, though the wait may be indefinite and seemingly interminable.

The Eastern Masters regard everyone as capable of understanding what they teach, but not everyone is capable in their current state of appreciating it. To "tell" is to push the desired goal even further away. Instead, the seeker must be kneaded like dough, made easy and pliable, and then struck at just the right moment with a jolt from the unknown.

Reading Herrigel's book helped me realize that a Western approach can make the Valley of Search seem more difficult than it really is. If the parallels are accurate, the segue into Love will be sudden, unquestionable. But it cannot happen ". . . unless he sacrifice all things. That is, whatever he hath seen, and heard, and understood, all must he set at naught. . . ." The seeker who has any preconception of his goal may wind up chatting away with Him and never knowing it. He must become like a child waiting for milk, not understanding the hows or whys,

but only the certainty of its arriving. He truly cannot judge whether he has made progress or not, or even which way will lead further along his chosen path. For the seeker there is only “purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit”. There is neither knowledge nor experience to guide his way, only a hopeful expectation of clemency.

In a way, this is both profoundly frustrating and immensely relieving. It is frustrating to Western habits, because there is nothing to “do”, nothing to “know”. There is no aid or technique that can help in the least. At the same time it is relieving because it is a matter more of relaxing than of tension, of letting go than of receiving. “Love is a light that never dwelleth in a heart possessed by fear.” We are invited to let go all our fears—clasped to the Breast of our true One—and as Rumi says, “lay his head on a person’s chest and sink into the answer.”

It is at once so much easier, the easiest thing, yet immensely more difficult since it does not admit of expectations, hopes, or predictions. Must we wait one year or ten? Am I closer now or was I closer then? These ??

are nonsensical questions. To a soul who lives an eternity, what does it matter if the answer comes in one year or a thousand? And that the time is hard to bear is directly addressed by His statement:

The steed of this Valley is patience; without patience the wayfarer on this journey will reach nowhere and attain no goal. Nor should he ever be downhearted; if he strive for a hundred thousand years and yet fail to behold the beauty of the Friend, he should not falter. For those who seek the Ka‘bih of “for Us” rejoice in the tidings: “In Our ways will We guide them.”

“Regard your enemy as your friend...”

As nearly everyone has found, this principle cannot be applied brute force. Enemies

are enemies, and no tweaking of your eyes will see them differently. It’s like pain:

there’s no way around the fact that it hurts.

However, as with pain, the context determines our underlying response. People who train at a sport endure pain constantly—by choice. If you ask them,

“Does practice hurt?”, of course it does. But they willingly submit, again and again, and in

many cases look forward eagerly to the next time they encounter this pain.

They do that because it’s fun; because the pain is part of something bigger that

they love; and when love is involved, pain becomes transmuted into something that

feels the same, but is perceived differently.

Back to enemies: They are a kind of pain that is part of the practice of spiritual

life. The soul must learn how to love in this world, so that it may use that love to

participate in the next world to the greatest extent. Yet it is too natural to love our

friends; that's automatic, and even animals do it. Yet to love our enemies, that is

special. Only spiritual maturity can manifest love toward pain and hatred.

So we can't do it because the Writings say "we should". No one plays sports and

enjoys the pain of it "because they should". Spirituality makes sense only if it's always

about God, and not about the individual. Thus, when one has fallen so deeply in love with the True One that he yearns and prays for any and every access,

suddenly

pain is seen as a doorway: since it is by pain that our spirit's faculties increase.

To see such pain, and our enemies, as propelling us toward our Goal, makes us happy because through them we near that Goal (" . . . rejoice not, save that

thou art

drawing near and returning unto Us.") And when this knowledge fills our heart with joy, that joy overflows and makes us thankful to the ones who had helped

us

the most to get there: our enemies.

Then there is no one more helpful in our yearning for God than our enemies; as Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

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God is my witness! Had it not been in conflict with that which the

Tablets of God have decreed, I would have gladly kissed the hands of whosoever attempted to shed my blood in the path of the Well-Beloved.

I would, moreover, have bestowed upon him a share of such worldly goods as God had allowed me to possess, even though he who perpetrated this act

would have provoked the wrath of the Almighty, incurred

His malediction, and deserved to be tormented throughout the eternity of God, the All-Possessing, the Equitable, the All-Wise.?

The soul who does evil hurts himself, but he aids those who strive for God.

In the compilation *Crisis and Victory*, Bahá'u'lláh says: "Even if all the losses of

the world were to be sustained by one of the friends of God, he would still profit

thereby. . . ." The concept of fire transmuting base iron into a glowing,

liquid heat,
is a metaphor that explains why the circumstances favorable to the iron will never allow it to reveal its luminous potential. For that, trials, tribulations, pain—and even enemies—are necessary.
For this reason I think we should love our enemies: because they are in truth our spirit's best friends. I even wonder if, in the next world, they will not occupy a very special place in our hearts— because whatever place we reach to there, in terms of our spiritual station, will have been made possible largely through their influence.
Enjoying what the world offers

Recently I have been thinking about one's attachment to the world, and what it is proper to enjoy, and when enjoyment leads to excess.
In the Bahá'í Writings, Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that everything in heaven and earth has been created for us—except the heart. The quote from the Hidden Words is:

O Son of Dust! All that is in heaven and earth I have ordained for thee, except the human heart, which I have made the habitation of My beauty and glory; yet thou didst give My home and dwelling to another than Me; and whenever the manifestation of My holiness sought His own abode, a stranger found He there, and, homeless, hastened unto the sanctuary of the Beloved. Notwithstanding I have concealed thy secret and desired not thy shame.?

Does this mean that it is wrong for us to enjoy the good things of life? Certainly we know that asceticism is not allowed. But sometimes, if we take great pleasure in the material, it causes us a sense of guilt, like we were being forgetful or allowing ourselves to be carried away.

In the sayings of the Buddha, He says we should be like the lotus flower, which dwells in the middle of the pond without getting wet. Or that we should regard this life and its concerns as a wound, which we care for gingerly but without loving it.

This morning I thought of another analogy. Often when I am trying to understand the relationship between the believers and God, it helps to imagine a similar human relationship which serves as a symbol of the spiritual relationship. In this

case I thought of two people who were enamored of each other.

The boy, having romantic intentions toward the girl (and believing there to be some reciprocity), buys her a fantastic gift. He goes to great lengths in order to

purchase the finest gift he can, so that he can prove his interest to her.

The day comes, and he presents her with the gift. She of course is overwhelmed and flattered. She becomes so involved with the wonders of the gift, however, that

she pays greater attention to it than she does to her suitor.

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Ultimately the boy realizes that she has become fully absorbed in the gift, and now it is as if he did not exist for her anymore. Their time spent together is strained,

because she is longing to return to the gift (perhaps it is a car, or something involving like that).

So the purpose of the gift was to improve the relationship, to draw her closer, and to give her something beautiful as a token of love. But the result of the gift was to drive her further away.

This is how I see our relationship with the good things of this world. God has given us the Gift of Life so that we might enjoy and appreciate it. After all, it was

a gift of love: “I loved thy creation, hence I created thee”. The only tragedy is if we

turn away from the Giver in order to turn toward the gift, since the gift was only

meant to draw us nearer. But if received in the right spirit, I can imagine that it

would only bring delight to the Giver for us to enjoy it, since the gift was one of

love and not of self-interested motive.

Some existentialist ideas relating to

Bahá'í metaphysics

The being of the world, and the non-being of consciousness

Existentialism, as given in “Being and Nothingness” by Jean-Paul Sartre, defines

being as that which is—also called the in-itself — and awareness as the consciousness

of such being, termed the for-itself.

In order for consciousness to be aware of being, it must not have being in the same sense as the in-itself. If it had, then being freely and independently aware of the

in-itself would require a separation between the being of awareness and the being of the world. What would be the being of this separation, and what would separate its

being from the being of consciousness and the world?

Rather, in order to be perfectly free and aware of being requires that our essential

reality not share the same essence as the being of the world. It must not have being

of the same kind to any degree, since otherwise it would be part of it, and carried

with it, and no longer freely aware.

This implies that consciousness can never possess qualities or objects, nor hold

power, since these are attributes of the in-itself. Whatever power our “self” of awareness seems to possess is in fact the world’s complicity with our free choice, our will.

If the world were never to comply, we could have no power over it. Power is not inherent in our awareness, but is an attribute of being that via complicity becomes

*related *to our consciousness.

The same applies to possession. In the case of objects, possession results from a

complicity on the part of the world not to cease regarding objects as belonging to us.

In the case of attributes, these are maintained by the awareness of others, in comparison with what they observe throughout the rest of the world. If all others were to

cease attributing qualities, qualities—as different from other qualities—would cease

to appear to be. To this end, awareness can only say that it is or is not aware of

certain aspects of being, but no such statements can be made about awareness itself.

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Our will, then, which is nothing other than the evidence of our conscious freedom, chooses among the field of its awareness, and in so choosing garners the complicity of others, granting out will the effective qualities of power and possession. But

these are functional, role-based qualifications; they are not existential. In the existential sense, being is (whatever its mode), while consciousness is only the awareness

of such being.

The contingent existence of both being and consciousness
Awareness does not self-subsist; it is perpetually an awareness “of ”
something. It
cannot be said to exist at all, except as the awareness of being, evidenced by
the fact
that it cannot become aware of itself per se. For example, an awareness of my
city
leads to an awareness of my awareness of the city; which then leads to an
awareness
of an awareness of, etc. Notice that every element in the sentence is completed
by
“of ”. The moment awareness becomes aware of its being aware, it ceases to
be aware
of its awareness, but is now aware of its awareness of being aware of being
aware. Ad
infinitum, awareness escapes every attempt to reveal its essence, since in fact
it exists
only contingently, in its relationship to being aware of being.
How is it that something non-existent can be aware? This is a mystery of the
soul.

Thou hast asked Me concerning the nature of the soul. Know, verily,
that the soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most
learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute,
can ever hope to unravel.?

Yet, if it is true that we do not exist—that we have no being— how can we
live
eternally? One possibility is: Because our role in creation is maintained by
the Will
of God. Hence the statement, “It [the soul] will endure as long as the
Kingdom of
God, His sovereignty, His dominion and power will endure.”
Consider a dark room, a man sitting on a chair, spinning a black wire with a
bright light at its end. If he spins quickly enough and constantly enough, a
bright
circle will appear. If he spins very fast indeed, this circle will become
bright and
solid, and have all the apparent attributes of a circle. Students and
mathematicians
could come and study this circle, and learn from its circularity. Architects
could use
it to judge the arcs of their protractors. In short, this circle qua circle, in
the eyes of
the world, would be fully valid and complete. And yet, it does not exist.
If the man should stop spinning the circle, it would instantly cease to be. The
“being” here is in the wire and the light. But in the world of man’s
awareness,

the spinning wire takes on the contingent being of a circle. And if the man had ??

infinite strength, time and wakefulness, he could maintain the contingent being of

this non-existent-yet-purposeful circle indefinitely.

Now consider the structure of the atom. It is mostly space; a nucleus of protons and neutrons that, through electrodynamics, keeps a set of electrons whirling

in space. Within the sphere of the atom, nearly all its volume is empty space.

But

owing to the forces involved, and the speed at which the electrons orbit the nucleus,

resistance to other atoms appears. And when trillions of these atoms are combined

together, the effects of that same electrodynamic activity serve to create the appearance of a solid object.

If the spinning of atoms were to stop, most of the solidity in the universe would

vanish (with the exception of super-dense objects). The region of space occupied by

the Earth and its moon would suddenly become practically empty space. That is how little mass is present in an atom. If you imagine a tennis ball in the center of

an empty cathedral, and a cherry pit rolling on the roof, it would approximate the

relationship between an electron and its parent nucleus.

In this sense, everything we know—even the in-itself —is like the spinning circle. This is contingent existence. If God's will were ever to cease, such existence

would cease, and our awareness of it would cease. Like the man spinning the wire,

God maintains the form of the universe and our experience of it through a constant

manifestation of His decree.

Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world. It is a dispensation of Providence ordained by the Ordainer, the All-Wise. Were anyone to affirm that it is the Will of God as manifested in the world of being, no one should question this assertion. It

is endowed with a power whose reality men of learning fail to grasp.

Indeed a man of insight can perceive naught therein save the effulgent splendour of Our Name, the Creator.?

Our attraction to and fulfillment through being

Because our awareness is an awareness of, we experience an ongoing love affair with

being in all its forms. To be aware of something heightens our sense of

fulfillment,
for awareness is our essence. We can also be aware of nothingness, of what is
not,
such as being aware of the disappearance of the circle once the spinning has
stopped.
We are aware of what was, what no longer is, and of many things that might have
been but which are not. Yet even these objects of negation are founded upon
being,
says Sartre, since without being to act as the foundation for nothingness, how
could
nothingness become an object of our awareness? So we say that awareness is
always
an awareness of being, or of that which is founded directly or indirectly upon
being.
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We exist insofar as we are aware, and since we are forever aware of something,
then it is what we are aware of that fulfills our existence. The truer such
being, the
truer our awareness. Sartre says, “We are haunted by being”. Awareness of
being,
since it is our existence, means that we dote on being; we long for it. But we
are not
it, we cannot possess it or have power over it. In a fundamental sense, we are
ever
separate from it. We relate to it through being aware of it, but we cannot
become
like it.
Resignation and acceptance of this state is by no means comfortable. Our
instinct is to acquire the attributes of what we love, so that we can become
what we love,
and thus be satisfied and bring an end to our questing for all time. We cannot
have
attributes, yet we struggle furiously to acquire them—not functionally, in
which
sense they do have a purpose; we seek to acquire them existentially, as
possessions of
our supposed selfhood, so that we might prove to ourselves that we have
acquired
being. Inwardly we are aware of this impossibility, of our futility and
despair; but
we deny and suppress this fundamental dichotomy between the being we long for
and our wish to resolve the situation by becoming this being. We “are not”,
but
since we long for being, we seek “to be”. But we cannot be. So we adopt the
pose

of being, we imitate what we love most about it, and then deny that we have not in essence become this being. We know that we have not become it—we have not even touched it, we are merely aware of it— and yet we will ourselves not to know

this fact, since the illusion is less painful than our anguish at being a nothingness

that cannot become aware of itself.

Acceptance of our role as awareness of Being

How can we resolve this? We struggle for being, yet forever it escapes us. We think

we have gained it, but then we find we were duping ourselves into that belief.

At

every moment we are aware, we have an instinct toward being, but we can never touch it, never connect with it, never share its essence.

“God was alone; there was none else besides Him.” So lofty is this station that no testimony can bear it witness, neither evidence do justice to its truth.?

The resolution lies in detachment and resignation: in accepting that happiness is found only in our awareness of God, not in emulating God. He is the Master, we are servants. He commands, we obey. He speaks, we listen. We cannot long to possess, or hold sway, over the being around us. This attempt is what perpetuates

our constant cycle of hope and denial. Once we consume this hope, and let ourselves

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fall into the perfect abyss of non-being, we will find ourselves rescued by His promise

“in Our ways will We guide them”.

This is the plane whereon the vestiges of all things are destroyed in the traveler, and on the horizon of eternity the Divine Face riseth out of the darkness, and the meaning of “All on the earth shall pass away, but the face of thy Lord. . . ” is made manifest.?

Accepting this station begins with acknowledging our utter poverty; that the essential nature of our relationship with God is to exist in awareness of Him.

“I

testify, O my God, that thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee.”

That is, all that he hath seen and heard and understood, all must he consume in the denial “no”, until he achieves the City of Life, which is the Median of “but”.?

“There is no god”—implying any idol that captures our fancy except the True

One—“but God”. We fulfill our role in creation through our awareness

(“to know and worship”) of our Creator. Then we hear Muhammad’s statement “My poverty is My glory” ringing true, in that we find ourselves immersed in the sea of the perfection of His creation, no longer hindered by our absorption in the idols of our distraction and craving for what is not ours to be. Then there is nothing of which we are aware that is not an awareness of Him. Don’t we seek to possess being in order to ensure a constant awareness of what fulfills us? Discovering that God is manifest in all things: This is our paradise.

I therefore reveal unto thee sacred and resplendent tokens from the planes of glory, to attract thee into the court of holiness and nearness and beauty, and draw thee to a station wherein thou shalt see nothing in creation save the Face of thy Beloved One, the Honored, and behold all created things only as in the day wherein none hath a mention.?
Exploring the unknown

Every set of laws describes a system. The extent of each system— all the possible expressions within the scope of its laws—is its domain. Everything within the domain pre-exists, in that it potentially exists within the possible interactions of the laws. These are all the things that can be imagined, and become manifested, if the laws are fully understood.

Even with a small number of laws, due to the combinatorial expansion of possibilities, any domain can seem vast beyond conception, and practically infinite.

Certainly we can never cause every possibility to be made manifest.

Without regard to the psychological impact, I define knowledge as awareness, not of pre-existence, but of the actual existence of any particular possibility within a domain. To know a linguistic term, knowledge always relates to a sequential form of the laws.

Everything not embraced by such knowledge is the unknown. There are unknowns whose potential is conceived to exist, and which are proximate to our knowledge, while the rest (the vast majority) is truly unknown, without any relationship

to anything but the laws themselves. This sub-domain I will refer to with a capital

U, to signify the uncharted depths of the possible, those things which are simply not

accessible via any previous experience.

With humanity there enters the fact of needs in an actual world, which are not satisfied with the potentialities of pre-existence. This introduces the idea of

relevance, that some sentential forms are more practical to our needs at different

times than others.

So humanity becomes, within every system, an explorer searching for anything with a meaning that will add to his life in any way. To this end he is like a miner,

delving into an unaccountable mountainside for whatever he may find.

Since the field is so large, man must develop strategies to assist in his search—to

keep the future safe and free from error. If one tunnel should produce a motherlode,

you will find shrines there a century later, with the entire mountain condemned as

“holy ground”, to the frustration of the young.

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Bless the young who do not take our histories too much to heart, and who sometimes realize their stewardship of humanity's continuing awakening. We grow by

fits and starts, caught millennially between fascination and fear. The dark is an awful

place, but can be awesome as well, if we brave our path to the other side. But who

can in good conscience send his child to brave the way? So we hold to our duty, and

hold them back, until the point that defiance is the only healthy answer.

Need it be so? Is there a possibility that an inward detachment is possible, in service to a higher good than stability, that will cause us to welcome death, and

march steadfastly upon the imagined spears of Come What May? For God, an idea uncaptured by all our current theories, must lie out there somewhere, in the

unknown, the unseen, the unexplored. Even our own reality can never be captured by words, though humanity is often captivated by them.

This way, this Straight Path which does not meander like a twisted and tortured river through the history of mankind—I leave its discovery to the reader.

What is

more within my grasp is to ponder on the nature of this unknown, since I seem to

discern its evidences in everything around me.

So, we not only face the unknown, we live beside it, within it. Our visible

spectrum is the needle in an unaccountable haystack whose reaches we will never fathom. In the past, after many many years, we stumbled upon many veins of ore within this mountain of our pre-existent domain (it could be any one of innumerable mountains I reference here, examples will be given later). The mountain is so huge, but we know by cognition it must contain wealth. Some dug in random places and found ore, others developed ideas to explain the distribution of ore, but these ideas only appear to work, since successful ones have succeeded more than the failed ones failed (for the simple reason that we stopped trying them right away, whereas we will doggedly pursue a successful idea until by chance or favorable circumstances it is successful again).

These ideas are our strategies, attempts to provide maps based on the minute territory we've seen so far. These strategies are quite helpful, they serve us well, because they dramatically increase the chances of our success among such vastness and so many dangers.

But memory and history have a strange way of mythologizing the practical, promoting to a meme what was once perhaps only a suggestion. After that point humanity takes on the shackles of servitude, forgetting completely the old relationship between thinker and thought. As these memes settle, the one who would venture anew again into the mountain must combat tradition, taboo, moral stricture, and every kind of fence which minds make would seem to make perfect sense, but it is a terribly difficult task. Everyone seems to grasp the immensity of the problem, and that random wandering is too often fruitless to the point of despair. How many writers look for completely fresh ideas by striking random words down onto the ??

page? Having a strategy seems the only sane way to bypass an unpredictable decades or centuries of utter failure, without even a derivative benefit to show for it. Who in modern society is willing to accept such an approach, when most generally frown on new explorations of any kind? Like a timid diner, we repeat the restaurants and dishes we know to be safe, or can trust by recommendation. But for one who would try something new beyond relating, new beyond vision—to them history is never

a

grandmother with happy tales to tell.

Otherwise, excepting the obvious, he would be forced to cast about randomly, hoping for a catch in a sea that is near infinitely larger than the fish it contains.

These rewards those that succeed, and encourage others that come after to try the same route, hoping that with just slight variation they will produce similar results.

Of course, the vein runs dry, but this usually does not strike people as favorably as the memory of success and its rewards. To the extent that we may even bury the former.

When we reach a state of ensuing impoverishment, someone must—by natural inclination or motivated desire—strike out into the territory of the unknown. To explore the unknown is a place without precedent. It is unknown, foreign, unpredictable. Sanity shies from such a place. We deny even its existence, although

it sits next to us at every moment. To anyone who claims such a desire, then you must also wish for death, for its character is the same.

Yet it is also, truly, the undiscovered country. All our future riches and possibilities are there. Soon we will exhaust the present, and must allow the future to come in its wake. Not the “near present”, of which we speak when we imagine that we foresee the future’s course, or at least the general shape of events, but the genuine future, whose content is a mystery until the moment it appears. Even then, it takes

all of the moments the present offers us to behold this onrushing future, and be

witnesses, without any moment to spare for speculation forward or back.

Unless we experience this intensity of novelty, we are not venturing forth, but reducing mere patterns of the known, further and further, until the experience of

time becomes automatic. I mention this evidence of real future to suggest both the

difference between “merely not yet seen” and “unknown” and the character that the

real future has, which we hold at bay by mapping near futures for ourselves, and

trying to pave the way before we reach it. This, to acquire the safety, predictability,

security, which the unknown certainly does not possess. Nor the future.

The unknown is always the unexpected, even if it makes complete sense the moment afterwards. The unexpected defies every attempt we can make to “map

out
the unmapped” before it is reached. This manifestation of the constant
unexpected
is a proof that we are doing this very thing, of attempting to foreknow the
unknown,
“to cut its teeth”, so to speak.

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The unknown seems not only real, but the real dreamworld of our unconscious
fantasy, where all possibilities might come true. It is grand and rich, and
horrifying
and unspeakable, beyond words to tell (since the system of words is a
sub-system of
that in which they exist). For anyone with courage, I would think this is where
the
real part is at.

The unknown. Every hope possible, every fear possible. No more clear decisions,
but added dimensions that defy even sight itself. Any mind would go mad
here, grasping for air on those few islands of sanity it may (never) find. But
the rest

of that world is ocean, whose depths challenge our every resolve to dive in.
No wonder our past champions in this field were not uncommonly unhinged.
A bit of madness would be needed to open that Door, which it would seem to
self-limiting to shut again thereafter. And would they receive any support for
having
done so, any thanks, any rest after such a mind-wearying journey? No wonder,
then,
that most died crazy too.

This must actually be a manifest of madness, then, the height of begging for
society’s disapproval. In fact, courting the unknown is positively
destructive, unforgivable to “society”, though ultimately beneficial to
those who live in it. But the
current generation cannot see that, as their walls topple, except for the
minutest few.

So let us recede for a bit, take a moment from our respectable lives, and look
more comprehensively at how such strategies manifest themselves today, in the
various systems we find time to relate with. (Show examples in: music, chess,
poetry,
science, religion, etc.)

This all has the nature of a game, in fact, because we “play” it for its
value—its
resulting benefit to ourselves and our world, these systems are not life
itself, but a
way of enriching life. Yet this game, like any game, has the potential to draw
us in
to the point of losing ourselves, when the completeness of our identification

has left
us blind to what exists outside that one system. Life is a system for our
spirit, that
we might find those things which will develop our souls.
Faced with a Puzzle

When I'm at Feast, I'm almost always with the "active" believers,
people who come
to Feast even if it's not their favorite thing to do (the number of
complaints I hear
about Feast, constantly, underscores this). So I feel justified in thinking
that "active"
Bahá'ís are Bahá'ís whose sense of duty is strong enough to act as a
sole motivator,
at times when no other motivation exists (joy, gladness to be there, meeting
friends,
etc).
With these Bahá'ís—the only Bahá'ís I see in groups—I've often
asked about
how to spiritualize the community, how to make it a place that's attractive
to everyone. Because in the end, the Faith is attractive to everyone, although
it's outward
appearance doesn't always reflect its inner reality.
When I ask this question, these same Bahá'ís—for whom duty is so much a
part
of their life, that I don't know if they've experienced other ways of
relating to the
Faith—make suggestions that really are only applicable to those of kindred
spirit.

This past Feast, when asking this question, I heard four suggestions:

- ?. Devotional gatherings (which has the potential to be fun, I admit)
- ?. Study circles
- ?. A service project for the community
- ?. Creating committees and having the Assembly assign people to them, as a
way
for people to get to know each other by working together

These were suggested in such a way that I felt the "conventional" mode of
each of
these activities was being presented. The problem is, however, that these
suggestions
will only attract those who are already attracted to them! Yes, they are
valuable, yes,
they are even necessary to community health, but up to this point, the
duty-driven
sector of our community has focused on activities that appeal only to that same

group.

I know that reading the Writings more cannot but help, and yet, this won't work for those who are not attracted to reading more. They read perhaps a single phrase,

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and this IS sufficient, according to Bahá'u'lláh. So a different solution is needed,

one that does not sound all-over-again like the dreaded message of "Do More".

In my eleven years as a Bahá'í, the Faith in America has been very much a "do

more" religion. At every conference, in every Feast, every letter, every message,

every book, every person, when I boil down what they're saying to me, it's always

"do more". How do we attract inactive believers? Do more. How do we teach more

people? Do more. How do I become more spiritual and loving? Do more.

At times, I feel I've joined a renewal of the Communist state, not the peerless

Faith of God. A faith which, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts it: ". . . should cause you to soar

in the atmosphere of joy forever and ever."

I am not soaring, when I hear this incessant command. It does not ease my burden, it does not lighten my spirit. God's assistance should make life easier than

living without Him, not more difficult! And I mean easy in the sense of lightening

your heart, and enlivening your spirit—not just physically more easy.

Yet, in all these burdensome, joyless words, I sometimes find a precious gem of a human being who says something different. He or she says to me, "John, I love you even if you do nothing at all." This acceptance warms me, and prompts

me spontaneously to want to give something back to them in return! I find myself

wanting to do things for them, to be around them. It fans the flame at the center of

my being that had grown so cold before.

Then I turn to the Writings, and I find that same message there. That without love and harmony between the souls of the believers, no progress can be achieved.

That this love and acceptance IS the foundation of the New World Order, it's very

life and breath. Then I realize that these people, by putting their love for me first, are going about things in the most pragmatic way, by healing my tired limbs before putting them to work—by addressing the illness before making further demands on my health.

I feel a deep, inner response to this message of love without having to think about it. The difference is like night and day. One meeting will make me feel like

lead, another like spirit personified. So it must be that the latter is closer to God's

intent; it must be that this message of love is superior to the call of duty.

For love

begets loyalty, whereas duty without love is a tiring thing.

Then I turn to the community I live in, and realize my attitude toward them has to be the same as that person's was toward me. It's OK if my community does

nothing, ceases all activity, stops moving. Only let us kindle love and joyfulness,

centered around our devotion to God, and all things will grow from there. We have

TIME in which to do this. As my Auxiliary Board member constantly reminds me, the Kingdom of God does not have to appear next year. Even Shoghi Effendi, in devising his plans, waited decades long for things to near fruition, before he

would implement the next stage of his plan. He spent his whole life preparing the

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Administrative Order to be the foundation of the Universal House of Justice, but it

took so long that he never saw the fruit of his labors with his own eyes.

So even with all his energy, and vitality, and urgency, still he did things in their

proper order, and did not rush the growth of anything before its time. I've been

learning a lot about this lately from the book "Planning Progress".

So too in my community, we talk about having a center, study circles, devotional

gatherings. . . but no one's heart is really in it for the duration. Even when talking

about devotional gatherings, one person said, "Well, it's going to end up being just

us coming anyway." What is this about?? We're tired, we know we're tired, and we

feel alone. The promise of world transformation is just around the corner, and

yet

it feels so far away.

To Ashley and Kathy, my only thought so far is to focus on building bonds of fellowship between myself and other members in my community, to the point that we feel like brothers and sisters. Then we'll have fun doing things together, and the

idea of serving can be exciting. I simply have to see these people outside of the "do

more" philosophy—just to feel like they're real human beings!!

Everyone seems so super-human most of the time, so unreal, that it's like a fragile barrier has interposed itself between everyone. I never know that someone

is having trouble in their marriage until it dissolves. I don't learn that sometimes

finds something I do irritating. I rarely hear about it when I hurt someone's feelings.

There is so much concern about creating a perfect world, rather than growing one

from a foundation of candor, mutual respect and closeness.

Much of this stems from frustration, I feel. We know what we want, and what the world needs, so we're trying to fashion it. Only, all this effort only helps the

outward image of things. You can have study circles until you're blue in the face, but

I still don't know who you are, nobody comes over to my house to say hello, no one

calls me unless it's to schedule a meeting. Is this religion a business, or is it a home

for my soul? Home can get things done too, you know. There is no fault in putting

fellowship before activity. How can a group of practical strangers expect to present

a New World Order to the rest of humanity?

Recognizing that ??strangers to me (we've never been angry at each other, never

shared intimate experiences, never learned each other's fears and hopes, etc), I see

that this must be remedied before spirituality can spread, and before our plans will

have life in them. I don't want to be part of another study circle just to fulfill my

duties. The state of affairs right now is: I do my duty and go home. That has got to

end. The Faith has to BE my home before it can be anyone else's home.

To be my home, I need to know everyone in that home just as well as I know my own family members. Is there time to get to know people AND do all these duties? Not to the same extent, no. So I've canceled it all, everything

except explicit

appointments, in order to save the rest of my time for getting to know people.

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Which I want desperately. To some it may seem that I'm "abandoning the vision", but when I read the Writings I see a different vision, a primary

vision, that

must come before all other things:

Turn to your Bahá'í brothers and sisters, who are living with you in the kingdom. Indeed, the believers have not yet fully learned to draw on each other's love for strength and consolation in time of need. The Cause of God is endowed with tremendous powers, and the reason the believers do not gain more from it is because they have not learned to duly draw these mighty forces of love and strength and harmony generated by the Faith.?

E-mail is no way to really know people, so I can't connect here like I can locally,

hence my redistribution of time lately. Also, this is a SLOW process. I meet at most

two different people in the course of each week. But so far it is working. At first

we just played games, but now we start to discuss our thoughts and ideas too.

We

share our desire for joy, our hope for joy, our gladness to have someone to talk to.

We start to feel impatient to spread this joy, and include others in our circle. A fire

has begun to burn in my heart, in Ashley's heart, in Kathy's heart, everywhere. It is

that essential fire which Manifestation brings every thousand years or so, a fire that

spreads until it enflames the whole earth.

Edifices are built to serve and to fan this flame, but without regeneration from

the hearts of the believers, it will lose all its fuel. We are the salt of the Earth, and it

is in our very hearts— wherein dwells the love of God, the seat of His throne—that

the future of humankind lies.

I think our task is to feed this flame however we can, whatever it takes, allowing

the natural processes of maturation and guidance to direct blaze, slowly, into more

and more effective channels. But the opposite does not work. Developing standards

and then exhorting people without regard for the vitality of this flame only serves to quench it at its beginning, since such exhortation expresses only the voice of rejection, the voice of “you’re not good enough yet”, the voice of “do more”.

Armed with acceptance, may you relax, and breathe a sigh of relief. You’ve already reached the cherished goal. Bahá’u’lláh wrote that, “heaven is my Revelation”.

I think once you notice this, you’ll grow anxious to explore that wonderful place, which in turn will lead to action, since action is the opposite of stillness. Then you’ll want to share what you find, which will intrigue or repel others, and they too will realize that perfection exists in the moment, right now! All of us, twirling together, reveling in this joy, forgetting our hatreds, dissolving falsehood through education and realization—I can’t see the Faith of God as intending anything else but this.
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Were men to discover the motivating purpose of God’s Revelation, they would assuredly cast away their fears, and, with hearts felled with gratitude, rejoice with exceeding gladness.?

The Faith Dynamic

Quantum mechanics indicates that for all physical events on the subatomic level there exist multiple probable outcomes, and that each of these outcomes exists simultaneously until interference with an outside observer causes one of those possibilities to become the outcome observed. We are always aware of only a single outcome; but since other outcomes were also probable, what caused the choice of one over the other?

Classical physics offered a deterministic model in which all effects follow from the previous state according to physical laws: that the reason for every effect is explained by its cause. The nature of subatomic particles, however, is that multiple probable effects can occur from a single cause. The fact that only one is observed implies some sort of selection.

How does this selection occur? Probability indicates a purely random basis for selection, in which it is as equally likely for one outcome to occur as another. This precludes both determinism and free will: the former because we can no longer determine what the observed outcome will be, and the latter because we cannot

choose the outcome selected. We are like a boat caught in a stream that leads us whichever way the waters go; and while we can steer the boat in the general direction of the flow, we cannot go wherever we wish.

If the process of selection among quantum states is random, then we live in a random universe governed by laws that constrain the randomness enough that large-scale concepts of continuity are possible. Although the motion of an electron follows no predictable path, yet the laws of electromagnetic attraction keep it bound within the atom's structure. The randomness of its movement does not prevent the atom from interacting consistently with other atoms to create the impression of a solid object. The selection of one state over another happens at fine enough a level that we fail to perceive our universe as being built upon a framework of chance. It seems to be chance happening within a scheme of laws that make one outcome as likely to produce a viable world as another. The world we see, then, is a consequence of untold happy accidents; neither determined by an initial set of events, nor governed by any intention it follow a specific path. Even if the probability of any event could

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be influenced by external interference, the final choice is still random, and might be the same as if there had been no interference at all. Our universe was simply likely to occur, and because we now see it, is proof that it did occur. Considered as a physical system, the underlying randomness of events has selected a universe in which beings exist who strive against randomness. Random selection implies an even distribution of probabilities, so that even if occasional interference alters specific probabilities, the overall, net effect is still random. It favors an entropy in which rare outcomes remain rare and are never more likely to be selected than what is less rare. Life, however, consistently makes choices that follow a specific plan, and thus counteract the random nature of the universe that spawned it. We fight against entropy by creating order, even though we say that entropy led

to our creation. If life creates order, and randomness creates entropy, then how did the universe select life? Although a random system is bound to make a rare choice, how it choose something which begins to make its own choices in a fashion directly opposed to its parent? How did randomness come to offer the gift of intention? It is obvious that our current universe was possible. Whether it was improbable or not depends on whether selection actually chooses one state among others, or if all possible states occur in separate universes, each one imagining its own outcome as the one chosen. If this is the case, and we are equally conscious in all possible worlds, probability has no meaning. Even though one outcome be extremely remote, still it will occur, and the inhabitants of that universe will be as conscious of their result, as we of ours. Probability could not mean that we rarely see any one outcome, as we would see all possible outcomes, always. It only means that the history of any universe— revealed by its probability patterns—indicates how often it chose among certain possibilities.

An example of such revelatory patterns is the stock broker's con: A group of thirty-two people are picked, with sixteen told that certain stock will rise, and the other sixteen that it will fall. After the stock moves, the sixteen who were rightly informed are again divided, with eight told it will rise, and eight that it will fall.

This is continued until one is person is left who perceives the broker as having a flawless understanding of the market.

If each person in this example is a universe, consider how he sees the broker: to the first sixteen people who were given bad information, the broker appears no worse off than anyone else: a fifty-fifty chance of giving the right advice.

But as the broker chooses among the group of people, others begin to alter their perception of him. Each time the broker chooses the odds remain the same, but the history of his choices seem to weight the probability that his next choice will also be good. What's more, in setting up the con this way, it is always guaranteed that at least one

person

will experience the broker as always having made the correct decision. He is likely

then to conceive a higher probability of continued success.

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If we too are also following multiple worldlines at every turn, we should be experiencing a similar thing with regard to physical laws. Consider a quantum event

with a low probability, such as proton decay. In one worldline the proton did decay,

and in that worldline another followed in which another decayed, etc. Since it is

always possible for a proton to decay, there is always a worldline in which it did

decay—no matter how many times previously it had already been seen to decay.

In such a worldline, proton decay is not improbable at all, but common; in fact,

in at least one worldline, proton decay must always occur, since this exists as a

possibility. There proton decay is not only likely, but a constant phenomenon; while here it is so improbable as to remain undetected. Though improbable is the

wrong word to describe this: The perception of probability is the quantum history

for each particular universe.

This applies to physical laws, where certain possibilities are given a probability

of zero: Here, those possibilities never occurred, giving rise to a law explaining their

absence; but if probability has no meaning, then other universes exist which violate

that law, where the law does not exist and is replaced by an expression of probability,

the way we describe other events in terms of probabilities. There cannot be absolute

physical laws if there are multiple worldlines: only descriptive histories that reflect,

in the form of physical law, the continued non-occurrence of certain possibilities.

Even if consciousness does not carry into multiple worldlines, and some process of selection, random or otherwise, constantly chooses one reality over another, the

implication still holds: It is the function of that choice creating the history of our

universe from which we derive the concepts of stability and law ascribed to physical

phenomena. Whatever we term as law or constant is but a description of what was chosen before us.

The improbability of certain outcomes gives rise to question now of why they are improbable, since quantum mechanics computes their probability by using physical laws. It is only a problem in the single worldline model, where randomness is randomly choosing between alternatives whose distribution is not random at all. Physical law seems to fix the probability of specific occurrences, allowing the choice to be random but claiming that the context of choice is not. However, if physical law is an outcome of the selections experienced by our universe, it cannot be used to describe the nature of the selection process itself. This leaves a selection process that appears random in its choices, while being non-random in the distribution of those choices. Physical law describes these preferences in terms of probabilities, but other than accept them as universal constants, it does not explain why a random process should be constrained in a non-random way. If the multiple worldlines view holds, the reason is purely historical; but if one worldline is being selected, it would seem that the physical laws have been chosen by whatever process now chooses randomly under their aegis.

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This discrepancy of behavior in the case of a single worldline is enough to suggest the possibility of an intention to create the universe now experienced—framed in what we call physical laws, and constantly directed by the aggregate choices made at the subatomic level. And if there is intention behind these choices, it implies a conscious framework directing them for whom one outcome is better than another for reasons entirely specific to that consciousness. What we know as the universe was created, and has been constantly maintained and directed, to the end of yielding a place where independent wills have the capacity to add their own intention to the mix.

The idea that our present universe was created by an active will making choices at the quantum level would give such an agency absolute freedom to act without respect to what we know as laws. Further, if the appearance of life in our universe was a gift of this agency—imparting the intention to counteract entropy in a system that by-and-large operates by expressing itself through probabilities—and if perfect awareness exists on the part of that agency, which is indicated by its ability to effect universal scale results by operations in the smallest domain, then perhaps our intentions are read by this agency and effected by means of cooperative changes on its behalf. For example, if one intends to raise his arm in the air, it raises; but while the process of raising can be explained by medicine, the relationship of pure thought to the physical events necessary to move an arm cannot be. But if intention is heard by the same agency that selects the worldline we experience, the motion of one's arm is explained as a chain of possible events beginning with some quantum-scale choice that would not have been made had one not expressed the intention. This relationship between our contingent will, and an absolute Will Who governs the course of the universe, would explain the mechanism of prayer: By expressing our intention, we call upon the willingness of that Agency to select a worldline in which our prayer is answered. From this point forward I will simply call that agency God. For whatever reason, God has willed a universe in which the physical laws seem to hold, though this does not mean that any such laws exist in any other form than a consistency of choosing on His part. This explains miracles, since although God seems to prefer consistency in the matter of physical laws—a plain induction—it seems the intentions of saints are cherished even more. Religious scripture indicates that the greater one's faith, the more one attracts unworldly powers to himself. If these powers are a willingness on the part of God to select improbable outcomes within our worldline, then faith can be viewed as the fulfillment of intention, which functions on the basic level to move the limbs of our body, and on the highest to

cause the selection of improbable quantum states, such as Christ's promise of the ability to move mountains.

Further, there is no difference other than choice, and acceptance of the choice by God, between the changes that move mountains, and those that move an arm. Be-
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cause we tend to think of physical law as inviolate, and physical mobility as resulting from our own, private volition, we find it difficult to imagine events arising without reasonable causes. Quantum mechanics allows for such possibilities however, even within our scheme of physical law, such that acts of faith are more improbable than they are impossible. And if something is merely improbable, then it falls upon the process of selection to choose whether we experience in our worldline. If God wills it, we shall; and so it becomes as likely that an individual of faith will influence that selection, as for it never to occur if no one asks. The key element is that the world we experience is brought into being, moment to moment, by the intention of a Will Who hears our thoughts. The faith dynamic is that our thoughts and prayers can influence the same decision making process by which this creation was brought into being. It does not run counter to physical law, but appeals to the common parent of law and miracle both.

An individual of pure intention, then, with complete faith in God's ability to effect whatever outcome He desires, and fulfilling whatever criteria God considers when granting a prayer, has the conditional ability to shape our worldline. This ability is the utmost, consummate power, since it draws upon the same agency Who created the universe. The power of faith is limited only by God's willingness to heed its call; and since His power is not in any way limited, there is no reason to put a limit on faith. Insofar as a thing is possible, whether or not it is probable, it may be granted, since there is no law God must adhere to in considering its

fulfillment.

If God stands behind the chain of events, with our universe the direct expression of His will in the modality of physical creation, then the faith dynamic add another element to human consciousness in this creation: To affect the shaping of the worldline through acts of will, the degree of effect being proportional to one's faith. The more one has faith—which includes trusting God, and keeping faith in the covenant by which God may trust him—the more one's contingent powers will be, and the more fully they will exist as a being of spirit, than merely the physical carriage of that spirit. “O My Servant! Obey Me and I shall make thee like unto Myself. I say ‘Be,’ and it is, and thou shalt say ‘Be,’ and it shall be.”?

The Fear of God

The clearest way I have ever understood the fear of God is this: Pain is to the body

what the fear of God is to the soul. Do any of us enjoy pain? Do we seek it out? No.

When something is painful, we avoid it. We naturally seek to lessen the pain in our

lives, which has the effect of promoting our health.

Nor does one need to obsess about pain for it to be effective. It is the body's

guardian, and a helpful friend, when you think about it. The damage done to the body of a leper is exactly because they feel no pain (the nerves are damaged by the virus).

In a similar way, the Fear of God is like the soul's guardian. The Bahá'í Writings

call it a “shield”, and an “assurance of victory”. Do we like it, or seek it out? Of

course not. But when we're in a situation that could turn out bad for us, at times

when our own understanding is not fully developed, it is fear of God that keeps us

safe. As with pain, it's not something that needs constant attention. If one is healthy,

and not endangering his spirit, he needn't feel it at all. It only comes into play when

needed—if it has been cultivated.

This is utterly different from anxiety or terror, which have no true basis, and

occur at unnecessary times. The fear of God, on the other hand, is based on our respect for God's authority, and should come into play only when it is required: at those moments when we are tempted to ignore God's command. Then the fear of God is like a friend, preserving the future against unwise choices in the present. We fear God for our own sakes, just like fearing a doctor. Without such a fear we might take his counsels lightly—at our own peril. Having a deep respect for authority, such that it engenders fear if we consider defying it, can be an excellent thing if: ?) The authority is a true one, with our best interests in mind; and ?) if we are not yet mature enough to understand its decisions. In those cases, fear is the only thing to keep us on the right track when sorely tested.

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Fear of God like spiritual inhibition

Picture you're in a ?-??, and the clerk steps out of the store (unlikely, but just humor me). There you are, with all that candy in front of you and nobody watching. Do you pocket any? I can imagine you saying, "No". Ok, let's say I'm asking you to do it anyway. Would you still say no? Where is the limit, when would you finally do it? Would you ever do it? This agency, whatever it is that prevents you from taking what is not yours, is the fear of God. It stays your hand from violating His Will. It's deeper even than conscience, which most people feel only after they've committed a crime. This kind of fear is a protector, a guardian, against one's own insufficiency of understanding. Take the Fast for example. Many people don't comprehend the wisdom of the Fast, but they observe it anyway. Why? What about when no one is around, why do they still not eat? Some shrink back from shame, or fear of being punished. But most are simply averse to breaking their Covenant with God. It's not emotional terror that strikes them, but a fear much deeper, and much stabler. It's like being afraid of violating your own integrity. Emotional terror can be countered by sufficient will, but the fear of God is a true fortress for the spirit: The fear of God is the shield that defendeth His Cause, the buckler that enableth His people to attain to victory. It is a standard that no man can abase, a force that no power can rival. By its aid, and by the leave of Him Who is the Lord of Hosts, they that have drawn nigh unto God

have been able to subdue and conquer the citadels of the hearts of men.? When one comes to appreciate the Fast, they can observe it for love of God and admiration of His beauty. But until then—and this is true of any of the Laws—the believer is stuck between mystery and enlightenment, and the fear of God is their only refuge. Since obedience itself is one of the means by which we grow spiritually, it is paramount that we understand this concept. In formulating the principles and laws a part hath been devoted to penalties which form an effective instrument for the security and pro-

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tection of men. However, dread of the penalties maketh people desist only outwardly from committing vile and contemptible deeds, while that which guardeth and restraineth man both outwardly and inwardly hath been and still is the fear of God. It is man's true protector and his spiritual guardian. It behoveth him to cleave tenaciously unto that which will lead to the appearance of this supreme bounty. Well is it with him who giveth ear unto whatsoever My Pen of Glory hath proclaimed and observeth that whereunto he is bidden by the Ordainer, the Ancient of Days.?

There are many times in my past when I saw myself as a “Bahá'í for lack of opportunity”. I used to bemoan this, wondering how I could be true to my Lord when circumstances determined my faithfulness. The answer is the fear of God. If I wed myself to that ideal, and properly fear God, I will learn true faithfulness, despite my frailty and lack of comprehending the wisdom of all of His laws. By working on this one area, I give myself the freedom and time to develop my understanding, without worrying that I will fail due to lack of knowledge. I no longer have to depend on agreement with the Law to abide by that Law! Does this mean I crush my mind under a weight of obedience? Think of it this way: If one believes in the truth, they would never want to betray that truth. Some believe in truth, but lie under pressure. How can one be true to the truth, in defiance of their own emotional frailty? The fastest way is to identify one's self, psychologically, with the ideal of truthfulness, making dishonesty appear as a destruction of their self. This is what the medieval knights did, when they accepted the code of

righteous conduct: death before dishonor. Did they have to fully grasp the meaning of honor, in all its implications? No, they merely recognized that without honor, they were comprising their existence as men. This is the fear of God, to realize that obedience to the Covenant is the foundation of our soul's well-being, and that to violate it is no less tragic than for a knight of the Round Table to accept dishonor. The foundation of our spiritual life is our recognition of God and our obedience to the Covenant. When a transgression is as fearful as plunging a knife into our own heart, I think we've begun to fear God properly. But do we cower in fear at the thought of stabbing ourselves, all day every day? No, we never think of it at all. In fact, the healthy fear of authority we all possess—which causes us to obey traffic lights and not shop-lift—never occurs to us as an emotional fear. I don't think the fear of God should either. So it remains true that “Love never dwelleth in a heart possessed by fear”—the kind of fear that worries or terrorizes, not the kind that protects one from willful self-destruction. Freedom to investigate truth

Someone asked: Suppose someone investigates a matter, sincerely and honestly, to the best of her ability and with what resources are available to her. After considering things, she forms a conclusion as best she can. What happens if her honest investigation leads her to a conclusion which is not in accord with what most Bahá'ís believe, or which even seems to conflict with some statement of one of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith? Should she investigate the truth as best she can, even if she reaches non-Bahá'í conclusions, or should she renounce her investigation of the truth and take things “on faith”?

The paradox seems to be this: If a person is granted the free right to seek, but only if that seeking leads to one place, isn't it all a lie to make the Faith seem open, when in reality it's the same as any other system of belief on the planet? How can

one search for an assumed truth? Isn't that like looking for something already in your hands?

Since I study and practice philosophy, this question is dear to me. I hope I can

offer something to your query.

First, I wish to distinguish the common sense usages of religious truth and

Bahá'í belief.

Bahá'í teachings describe many attributes of God, such as love, peace, forbearance, abstinence from contention and conflict, etc. I presume that a possession of

the truth would be indicated by the presence of all these things. Therefore, "believing" in the tenets of the Faith is not "truth", because one can hold such beliefs and still violate all of its principles.

In support of this, I find that 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "If religion becomes the cause

of enmity and bloodshed, then irreligion is to be preferred, for religion is the remedy

for every ailment, and if a remedy should become the cause of ailment and difficulty,

it is better to abandon it."

And Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "The purpose underlying the revelation of every heavenly

Book, nay, of every divinely-revealed verse, is to endue all men with righteousness

and understanding, so that peace and tranquillity may be firmly established amongst

them. Whatsoever instilleth assurance into the hearts of men, whatsoever exalteth

their station or promoteth their contentment, is acceptable in the sight of God."

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Again, the emphasis is on actual behavior, not profession. That is, religion relates

to an essential reality, not an outward form.

I do not believe religion's purpose is for us to have fixed ideas about things. The

stated goal is union with God, and the stages of that union are described in the

"Seven Valleys". Unless I see the signs of such a transformation, either the person

has gone nowhere or I was too blind to notice.

“Holding Bahá’í beliefs” can even be a stumbling block to progress in some cases, because it can lead to an arrogant assumption of superior knowledge.

“We’re

the most recent Faith, and you aren’t.” This is not knowledge, but a bolstering of

self by illusions of righteousness. It should not be confused with the Faith, since it

is distinctly abhorred by it:

Verily I say unto thee: Of all men the most negligent is he that disputeth idly and seeketh to advance himself over his brother. Say, O brethren!

Let deeds, not words, be your adorning.

Second, considering the idea of an undirected, pure search, where the only goal is a deeper understanding of reality.

There is a verse in the Qur’án which says:

Whoso maketh efforts for Us, in our ways will we guide him.

Also, Bahá’u’lláh in one place quotes an Arab proverb which says, “He who

seeketh out a thing with zeal shall find it.”

It seems to me from these, and other sources, that sincere effort will produce results, no matter the direction, since purity of the effort attracts God’s aid. “At

every step, aid from the invisible realm will attend him, and the heat of his search

for grow.” So the question here is: What is her motive, and what is she really seeking?

Bahá’ís or not, people who employ religion for a sense of security are totally missing

the boat. Do they really think the journey ends with acceptance? The Qur’án says:

“Do men think when they say ‘We believe’ they shall be let alone and not be put to proof?”

Third, the Writings state that freedom of spirit is integral to understanding religious truth, and not the outward assumption of a set of beliefs—and that such

a spirit, if it love God, will transform in its journey toward Him. It is the spirit

of religion which is significant, not its dogma. And this is attained not through

assumption, but purity, chastity, freedom and effort:

The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human

learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit.

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Fourth, I see the “Bahá’í Faith” not as the truth per se, but a portal leading to truth. Bahá’u’lláh even states that what has been revealed to Us is according to our capacity (i.e., related to Us), not a full expression of His reality:

By My spirit and by My favor! By My mercy and by My beauty! All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the pen of might, hath been in accordance with thy capacity and understanding, not with My state and the melody of My voice.

So the Faith may spring from the source of Truth, but ten thousand years from now, will not our forbears be amused at our ignorance? For us, the Word of God is truth unalloyed (relative to our state); but even if we repeat the words, we have done nothing but exercise our vocal chords. To experience the truth contained in those words, we must immerse ourselves in that ocean:

Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths. Take heed that ye do not vacillate in your determination to embrace the truth of this Cause—a Cause through which the potentialities of the might of God have been revealed, and His sovereignty established. With faces beaming with joy, hasten ye unto Him. This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future. Let him that seeketh, attain it; and as to him that hath refused to seek it—verily, God is Self-Sufficient, above any need of His creatures.

Do you see the difference? Someone can say to me, $E = mc^2$, and I can nod back at him and say, “Yes, I heard you just fine.” But a world of difference exists between those who merely hear, and those who understand. To go into the problem, to root out its implications, to nestle it within your heart, and mix its ingredients with the essence of your own being. . . THAT is seeking after truth. Anything else is pale mimicry. Lastly, if your friend seeks after truth earnestly, I believe she will find it. I do not know what it will look like, and I must say I’d be surprised if she found it without ever considering—even indirectly—the revolutionary ideas found in the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh. Who before Him suggested that all Faiths had one source, that science is the supporter of religion, that the mind is the mightiest pillar supporting the

Faith

of God, that women and men and all the races are equal in their spiritual reality,

that evil is but an illusion before the reality of good, and that all souls continue to

develop eternally in their quest for God? Where else are all the Faiths described as

intrinsically united in their purpose, and what else delves into the idea of unity with

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such depth and completeness? I wonder if what she finds will be the product of a

True Mind, and not simply the elaborations of a fellow seeker.

At some point, possibly, her outward behaviors and beliefs may come to coincide with the members of our Faith. But we are not all equal in the status of our search;

every human is unique in his condition. To say that seeking will result in following

a mold, is like saying that God's purpose in making people with free-will, was only

to transform them into automatons.

In conclusion, I think "truth" is essentially something people do not, and will

never, know, because there is infinitely much that is unknown, and truth includes

all. Hence the notion of eternal progress and discovery.

It may be "true" that Bahá'u'lláh is a Messenger of God, and that His words

contain the wisdom needed by humanity at this stage of its spiritual evolution.

But

we are not seeking after "true things". If we were, learning that

?+?=? should make

us satisfied. To truly seek is to go where no one else has gone, because how can

another person's experience of life be identical to yours?

I suppose the ultimate dilemma we still come to is: Will her search necessarily lead her to the Bahá'í Faith?

I guess it will or it won't. In fact, that would be a pretty good test of its truth,

wouldn't it?

The Fund is the base

In computer engineering-particularly chip manufacturing-there is a concept called

a "substrate". A substrate is a medium for design; that is, it is the actual substance

that a computer chip's design is imprinted upon.

The whole idea of a computer chip is that it directs the flow of electricity coming

in through one or more of its input pins, to a variety of locations situated elsewhere

in the computer. This flow is governed by a design, which is very much like the flowing of water along canals. Canals have to be dug somewhere, however;

without

dirt, even the best of architects cannot create anything.

Dirt is to the canal builder what a substrate is to the chip builder. The most common substrate is silicon, but there are others. The main point is that even if

if

there are huge amounts of electricity and the best of designs, without a substrate,

neither can influence the affairs of men. It is then only an idea, or a lofty concept.

The rubber does not meet the road until a substrate is provided.

In like manner, so it seems to me, the Fund is to the spiritual designs of Bahá'u'lláh

what a substrate is to the chip manufacturer. Bahá'u'lláh has fashioned a New World

Order, and provided for our lasting peace, but unless the physical mechanism for

conveying this vital energy is erected, humanity will not receive its benefit.

By giving to the Fund we offer exactly that material ingredient. Our money goes toward the expansion and maintenance of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, of which

Shoghi Effendi wrote, "Bahá'u'lláh has given to the world institutions to operate in

an Order designed to canalize the forces of a new civilization."

These forces are spiritual in nature, and hence intangible, in the way that water

is intangible and will slip through our fingers if we try to hold on to it. If we wish

to bring that water to someone, a vessel is required. This is how the material serves

the spiritual. And this, I believe, is how the fund relates to the communication of

those energies latent in the Bahá'í Faith to the rest of the world.

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God's intent in creating us

Someone on soc.religion.bahai wrote: "It doesn't make sense to me that he had an

'urge' like a biological clock, that would require need on 'his' part.

. . . and isn't God

beyond that? Which may leave us to be an idle past time. . . something along

the
lines of a child's toy truck—hmm. . . can't really buy that either. . .
boredom seems
to be beyond God too. . . any thoughts, ideas, writings?"
I don't have any writings to share, but just a thought:

If God is perfection
and God exists
then perfection would be discernible—(weak point)
thus it would have attributes
these attributes would manifest themselves
hence we come into picture.

There is a sense in which we are not individual beings, but merely reflections
within the material world of spiritual perfections. How else would glory and
honor
become manifested in the world if not for human souls?
In this respect we were not "created", as if there were nothing one day and
then
we appeared. I mean, in one sense. For example, humanity as a species probably
did start at some definite point in the past, but that is not to say that the
concept of
"human" has not always existed in some form.
For example, there are many roses in the world, and each rose began growing at
a definite point in time, but "roseness" is far more ancient and is being
continually
manifested through the centuries as each seed produces the potential for more
roses.
Perhaps we are narrowing our focus too much: to human life on this go around;
perhaps the role humans play has always been a part of existence. If God is
love, we
are the lovers. The existence of love presupposes the existence of a lover
(otherwise
the virtue would be naught), and hence the two co-exist. If He is light, we are
the
rays; if light had no rays, what would it be then?

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Yet this relationship exists only on one level. Since God is All, there is
another
level in which the lover and beloved are not separate. But I suspect your
question
concerns this world, and why we perceive a difference between ourselves and
God.

Of the "greater unity" Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

In this Valley, the wayfarer leaveth behind him the stages of the “oneness of Being and Manifestation” and reacheth a oneness that is sanctified above these two stations. Ecstasy alone can encompass this theme, not utterance nor argument; and whosoever hath dwelt at this stage of the journey, or caught a breath from this garden land, knoweth whereof We speak.

Here I would guess that “Being” is virtue, and “Manifestation” is that which causes virtue to become realized—such as love and the lover. Since these two are co-existent there is a certain oneness between them, like the two sides of one coin.

And yet there exists another realm, in which perception leaves off and God is related to by other means.

Take light for example, in the physical world. We are able to perceive the sun’s rays because they take time to arrive, and there is space in which they travel.

But we know that for objects traveling near the velocity of light, the value of space and time becomes less: that is, the faster we go, the less real time and space become. The limit of such a progression would result in the non-existence of space and time, and hence the elimination of perception because there would be no time and space in which to perceive things.

It is for this reason that objects can never meet or exceed the velocity of light, because doing so would put them beyond the pale of physical laws. The math equations seem to suggest to such an object would simply cease to be—defying the law of conservation of mass and energy. Hence it is “impossible” according to what we know about physical principles so far.

Perhaps there is a spiritual correlation here: that we are even as material beings trapped within the limitations of physical laws—in this case related to our perception—but that if we apply to God, and grow in the mysteries of faith, we can actually transcend by the grace of God what would seem to be a permanent limitation of our being.

Maybe it is our task to learn how to overcome these limits, and to see via “faith” with the eyes of Truth, rather than using our ordinary eyes. Maybe all of these perceptual distinctions exist in order to see whether we will make an effort to

free
ourselves from them.
The Greatest Name

Glory be unto Thee, O Lord of the world and Desire of the nations,
O Thou Who hast become manifest in the Greatest Name whereby
the pearls of wisdom and utterance have appeared from the shells of
the great sea of Thy knowledge, and the heavens of divine revelation
have been adorned with the light of the appearance of the Sun of Thy
countenance.?

Living as Bahá'ís, we hear the syllables of the Greatest Name pronounced
very
often. Either in the greeting “Alláh'u' Abhá”, or the phrase “People
of Bahá”, or even
in “the Abhá Kingdom”.

Exactly what is the Greatest Name? “Bahá” translates for us into the word
“Splendor” or “Glory”, but just by changing the form of the word from
one language
to another, I don't think we approach any closer to understanding its
meaning.

I was thinking of this in connection with the ninety-five recitations of the
Greatest Name, mentioned in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. To utter something so many
times,

which has so little meaning for me, can be a very troublesome thing.

Translating the word from “Bahá” to “Glory” put me no nearer to
grasping the

power of this word—after all, Bahá'u'lláh designated it as the Greatest
Name. This

implies that there is a deep, spiritual mystery surrounding the use of this
word,

which we must delve into to discover what it truly means.

Even the English word “glory” holds little meaning for me. I remember a
Persian

friend telling me once that the key difference, for him, between Persian and
English

words was that he could feel the meaning of Persian words. That is, if someone
were

to say “roshan” (meaning “bright”), he could feel his heart immediately
flooded

with the brightness of a white light. But the English word, “bright”,
conveyed to

him little more than an abstract sense of something being bright, as opposed to
its

being dim.

This is very close to my own experience. Merely uttering the words, “God is
Most Glorious”, does not cause my heart to thrill; so it must be something
else. The

glory here intended must refer to something entirely different: alive,
transforming,

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vibrating with power in the very heart of existence. This is the meaning I
would like

someday to understand.

Perhaps it would be worthwhile to begin by trying to grasp what the word is
directly, without referring it to English. That is, let us not think of Bahá
as meaning

glory—and from that try to understand what glory is—but rather, let us
accept this

word “Bahá” as an independent creation, and develop with it an entirely
separate

relationship in our minds.

Bahá, then, seems to me to be possibly something like this: When the
philosophers of old determined that life held a greater meaning than the
commonalty often

assumes, they decided it was worthwhile to give up all attempts at gratifying
physical desires in pursuit of this higher meaning (since that was the only way
that could

keep their minds clear, and centered on the task). Their desire to pursue this
course,

and their faith that some prize lay at the end of it, seems to have originated
with the

influence that love has on the human soul when it apprehends beauty.

Let us imagine a youth, living in the city of Athens, who is gifted with a
sensitive

heart. He is “fresh from the mystery”—as Plato would say—his soul
having only

recently descended to Earth from the heavenly mansions (the Greek philosophers
believed in the transmigration of souls, and hence those who were predisposed
to

appreciating fine virtues must have only just come from the processions of the
gods).

This lad finds that he is enamored of all beautiful forms. Whether of a man
or woman, he finds in the perception of physical beauty something to delight
his

soul. He therefore endeavors to spend great lengths of time with the objects of
his

affection, and spares no cost in setting aside as many days as possible for
this pursuit.

However, in the course of time and education, he becomes aware of other things,
by nature more intangible than physical forms, which he perceives as being more
truly beautiful than human figures. That is, he graduates to seeking beauty in

the
images of art, or the sounds of music; or he searches out the great poets of
the city,
and sits by with wondering eyes as they remind him of the mansions from which
he
has only just arrived.

Yet this too, after a while, begins to pale. Now he looks for beauty in the
complex
interrelationships of life, or in the marvelous structures of nature. After
this, he
seeks beauty in the primacy of thought, and strives after education in the
fields of
geometry, language and philosophy.

Finally, by “scaling the ladder of beauty”, he passes beyond mere words and
thoughts, and wings his way to the domains from which such lore proceeds. He
becomes an acolyte of the subtle mysteries, wandering distracted in the plane
of
search, and roaming far beyond the skill of any language to recount his
far-flung
journeys.

Coming back to our discussion: We see there is a common thread here attracting
the youth. It is this essential quality that is the true object of his search.

At first he
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finds this aspect apparent only in physical forms, and then in less tangible
works,

and finally in just such nether regions as only the mystics tread.

Although the Greeks were predisposed to calling this quality “beauty”, they
also
gave it other names, such as Truth, Love or Virtue. In fact, it was a thing so
aweinspiring to them that they could not contemplate continuing life without
it.

The name I would give to this essential quality of creation is “Bahá”. It
is the
generating heat that flows even as a life-blood into the nature of all
wonderful things.

Consider that in this same era the greatest fate for any man was to “die a
glorious
death”. Yet the act of dying itself was not what was desired, but a great,
noble beauty
in the act of dying.

This same attribute, ascribed of a worthwhile death, can likewise bring tears
to
our eyes when we witness an act of complete and loving sacrifice by one human
being for another. Such as when, in times of war, a person is willing to lay
down his

or her life in order to save the lives of others. Do not such actions stir something deep within us that causes us to “believe in the human spirit” again? This attribute I would call Bahá: a sort of incomparable luster that attends anything great, noble and beautiful. Not just the glory of a valorous death, but also the beauty of long friendship, the delights of knowledge, the peacefulness that comes from “following the Right Path”, the joy we experience when it seems that God’s presence is near. There is an aspect to all of these experiences which appears connected by a unifying thread; it is the culmination of everything splendid and glorious that human life has to offer.

If Bahá is such a quality, then what must be Abhá? For in the Arabic language, Bahá is the attribute, and Abhá is its superlative expression. It is the difference between Glorious, and Most Glorious.

The phrase “Alláh’u’ Abhá” literally means “God is Abhá”. What would it be like if the greatest manifestation of the name Bahá that we knew were to become magnified, in respect to that quality, by a thousand or a million-fold? And if, beyond that, after our souls had already expired from attempting to reckon it, this quality were to multiply yet more, and still infinitely more, until nothing whatsoever could possibly reflect the brilliance of such light?

Perhaps it is clearer, then, what might be signified by the cry “Ya Bahá’u’l-Abhá”—that is, “O, Bahá of the Abhá”. Herein the relationship of the Manifestation to the Unknowable Essence of God is clearly laid down. Note the use of the indefinite word Bahá, paired with the definite “al-Abhá” (that is, Bahá may appear severally, but only one Abhá is signified). Men can never know Abhá, even though it caused the foundations of creation to come into being. Bahá, then, is the reflection of that Essence as it appears to us in the world of the knowable.

Even the title, “Bahá’u’lláh”, fits into this mold, for it signifies Him as the Bahá of God (Bahá’u’lláh), while God is Abhá (Alláh’u’ Abhá): “Manifold and mysterious is My

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relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.”? .

So, when I attempt to recite these foreign words ninety-five times in the privacy of my home, I think to myself that Alláh’u’Abhá is telling me something incredibly significant. It is informing me that God is the Ultimate Goal of my soul’s yearning; that everything I incline to in life is due to some attribute of His obtaining within it. Yet we can have no direct intercourse with His Essence. Hence the indescribable grace vouchsafed to us through the Manifestations of that Essence, Who exist in a form we can perceive (albeit dimly) through Their lives and works. Alláh’u’Abhá is then a statement which represents the very essence of faith, since we can never verify it through our own understanding. Thus we direct our prayers toward the shrine of Him Who is the Remnant of God. He represents our only knowledge of Him, and our only access into the Kingdom of Abhá. This would seem to indicate that the word Bahá signifies everything that our heart might desire in this world, for our aim in pursuing them is the fulfillment of some craving for God within us. Just as the moth, who was created with an inborn need to follow the light of moon, becomes distracted by the flickering candle lights from continuing its journey, so too we, who were molded from the “clay of love”? , whose very being is that of the “lover”, are asked by God: “how dost thou busy thyself with another?” It seems we have become distracted by these paler lights, and yet I think it only verifies that it is the essence of the light we seek, and not the poorer expressions of it we find here on Earth. So we crave the attribute of Bahá, in whatever manner it express itself in the world of being. Whether it be the pleasure of relaxing in the sun, or the delights of fine music, or the self-immolation we experience in times of love—all these things attest something that is ultimately primary, and which has been fused into the very

core of our being.

In this manner, Alláh'u'Abhá is a token of grace, for if it were a question of our

own merit, we would never be permitted to approach such holy precincts. Then again Alláh'u'Abhá is an expression of the primal mystery, the “meaning of life”,

the fundamental, unifying equation that all men of learning have sought. Or Alláh'u'Abhá indicates our essential unity with one another; that nothing exists outside of God; and therefore all things are rightly “merged into nothingness before the

revelation of Thy splendor”. For who are we, of ourselves, alone? “How can utter

nothingness gallop its steed in the field of preexistence, or a fleeting shadow reach

to the everlasting sun?”

Through the words of Bahá'u'lláh, everything that is possible to our understanding here on Earth is made known to us. Or, that is to say, the potential for our

learning it has thereby been created. Thus We have been invited through this gift

to pursue as far as we can an appreciation of those subtle mysteries which have been

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enshrined by Him in the realms of divine creation.

Yet this is only my own, too simplified, preliminary glimpse into the deeper meanings which perhaps may lie within the Greatest Name of God. I hope your own attempts to bridge the gap of language separating us from the homeland of our

Beloved are far more fruitful than mine have been.

Yes! This is the day of Bahá'u'lláh, the age of the Blessed Perfection, the cycle of the Greatest Name. If you do not smile now, for what time will you await and what greater happiness could you expect? This is the springtime of manifestation. The vernal shower has descended from the cloud of divine mercy; the life-giving breeze of the Holy Spirit is wafting the perfume of blossoms. From field and meadow rises a fragrant breath of thanksgiving like pure incense ascending to the throne of God. The world has become a new world; souls are quickened, spirits renewed, refreshed. Truly it is a time for happiness.?

Thoughts on homosexual acts

We know for certain the Bahá'í Faith disallows homosexual copulation. What I

cannot see is how this implies anything except that He found such an act incommensurate with the needs of our age. Whether it will always be so is not within our knowledge.

Muhammad forbade His followers to eat pork. Did this make pork eaters “sick”

(no pun intended), or evil? It was a commandment made at the time, which was later repealed. The Manifestation has full authority over such matters.

Morality is

defined in reference to His Law, not by our personal feelings of what is

“good” or

“right”.

After some simple-hearted thought on this matter, I came to the following conclusions:

?. A practicing homosexual is no more deviant than anyone else who disobeys the Law. If any of us failed to read from the Writings this morning, hey! we just entered the same boat. I have no quotations to back up this statement.

I make it from the negative, since the only statement of “doing this is worse than doing that” I have ever seen has to do with murder and backbiting.

?. Do I shun my friends who drink, or who have sex before marriage? Do I even think about such things, unless they choose to do them in front of me?

?. The matter is one of personal decision, unless it affects the name of the Faith,

in which case administrative sanctions might be employed. Even then, it is ultimately an individual matter. It is not like murder, or theft, which harms another’s livelihood.

?. If there is any wrongness, it will be addressed between God and that individual

at the time of reckoning. Unless we ourselves have nothing to fear from that day, we should seriously avoid debating the goodness of other people.

We are all human. Things we personally abhor, when we find that God has also disallowed them, we have a tendency to become vigilant against—whether we do so

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consciously or not. It as though the Law gives us justification for our judgmental attitudes.

But such attitudes are manifestly false according to Bahá’í teachings. The fact

that this issue is so controversial among us shows only our own immaturity: not the

“sinfulness” of those people who have a bent toward lovers of their own gender.

O Children of Men! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even

as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light! Heed ye this counsel that ye may obtain the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous glory.

If someone wishing to participate in homosexual sex also wishes to obey Bahá'u'lláh, they have a dilemma on their hands; and I don't think any of us should underestimate the displeasure of that situation. If anything, what is needed is support, and a constant remembrance that such abstinence is not without purpose. This is perhaps what makes this issue so difficult: we focus on it out of context.

The Law is our guide and our light in the darkness. The wisdom of it we may never learn until the final moment. But why is it a part of our lives at all? I would think this is a much better question to ponder and debate. I leave with the sentiment of these words written by Bahá'u'lláh, revealed in the Sufi tradition of insight into the mundane—in this case the letters of the word Gunjishk (G N J SH K), meaning “sparrow”. They seem to point to the very heart of morality: not that some are evil, and some are good; but that in order for our souls to fly free, we must unload ourselves of all encumbrance.

Kaf or Gaf (K or G) referreth to Kuffi (“free”), that is, “Free thyself from that which thy passion desireth; then advance unto thy Lord.”

Nun (N) referreth to Nazzih (“purify”), that is, “Purify thyself from all else save Him, that thou mayest surrender thy life in His love.”

Jim (J) is Janib (“draw back”), that is, “Draw back from the threshold of the True One if thou still possessest earthly attributes.”

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Shin (SH) is Ushkur (“thank”)—“Thank thy Lord on His earth that He may bless thee in His heaven; albeit in the world of oneness, this heaven is the same as His earth.”

Kaf (K) referreth to Kuffi, that is: “Take off from thyself the wrappings of limitations, that thou mayest come to know what thou hast not known of the states of Sanctity.”

Wert thou to harken to the melodies of this mortal Bird, then wouldst

thou seek out the undying chalice and pass by every perishable cup.

Peace be upon those who walk in the Right Path!

Introducing the Seven Valleys

The Seven Valleys was written by Bahá'u'lláh near the 1860s. In

it He responds to

questions from a certain Shaykh Muhyi'd-Din, who at one point was a judge in the town of Kháníqih. This Shaykh was a member of the Qadiri order of Sufis, who follow the mystical teachings of Shaykh Abdu'l-Qadir Jilani and his spiritual

descendants. We know only that he asked Bahá'u'lláh about the meaning of certain

mystical poems, to which the Seven Valleys was Bahá'u'lláh's response.

The actual

questions he asked are not known.

This text is a mystical composition of the highest order. Singled out by Shoghi

Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, as Bahá'u'lláh's "greatest

mystical composition", it provides a commentary on an earlier work of

Sufi poetry, The Conference of

the Birds, by Farídu'd-Dín 'Attár.

The style of the Seven Valleys is highly poetic, though not composed in verse.

Nearly every line of the text contains rhymes, and plays on words, which are mostly

lost in translation. In addition to these subtleties there are also historical and religious connotations that are equally difficult to translate. It was a common practice

for Sufis to communicate by using only one or a few words to refer to

Qur'anic

verses, traditions, and well-known poems. The language of the Seven Valleys refers

to this wealth of knowledge possessed by its recipient without stating its meaning

verbosely. As a result, those reading the text who have no background in Islam or

Sufism will find many of its references confusing, and some of the sentences

perhaps devoid of meaning. Each word, however, is rich with shades of meaning that

become apparent upon deeper examination.

The recipient of the text was a Sufi, conversant with the doctrines of Qádirí

Sufism, and possessing knowledge of the previous works Bahá'u'lláh

responds to.

It is no wonder that an economy of words is used between two men who knew their subject matter in depth. This implied knowledge, however, is greatly lost

to the Western reader— even more so when rendered in the English idiom. It

would require constant footnotes to alert the reader to all the key phrases

that appear

in this text. In English, these phrases have no more significance than others;

yet

where Bahá'u'lláh uses a term like “maqaam-i-tuwhiid”, it is no less important than

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“resurrection” or “salvation” would be to a Christian. Specific words conjure whole

bodies of context—yet this conjuration is absent in translation.

Briefly, Sufism is a branch of Islam which seeks to know of God directly, through

ecstatic, mystical union.

Wouldst thou that the mind should not entrap thee?

Teach it the science of the love of God!

“The purpose of the Sufi is to seek union with God through ecstasy.”? The nature of this union differs among Sufis, some believing they become co-eternal with

God’s essence (Hulúlis), others that they merely become absorbed in the immanence

of His Manifestation (such as when a drop merges with the sea).

The Sufi discipline is one of purification (tazkíyyih) and remembrance (dhikr).

Prayer, meditation and fasting are key. Some also practice asceticism. The purpose

of these practices is to draw the interests of the self away from the world and toward

God. In this way, divine love is enkindled:

“Show us the right way, that is, honor us with the love of Thine Essence, that we may be freed from turning toward ourselves and toward all else save Thee, and may become wholly Thine, and know only Thee, and see only Thee, and think of none save Thee.”

By this love all things are burned away, leading to state of self-annihilating ecstasy. This condition is increased until the lover loses all consciousness of self (faná),

and becomes “nothing in God”. When this is achieved, the seeker experiences eternal union (baqá), which is an abiding, conscious experience of the Divine.

During this process, the seeker’s vision and experience of the world change dramatically. The way he perceives and understands events progressively deepens:

Thus it hath been made clear that these stages depend on the vision of the wayfarer. In every city he will behold a world, in every Valley reach a spring, in every meadow hear a song.

Sufis are guided along this journey by their joy. As they experience happiness

and

ecstasy, they believe themselves to be moving in the right direction. It is sometimes

referred to as a science of taste (dhawq), where actions are measured by the visceral

experiences they produce.

Sufism might be called the Way of Love, as expressed by one of its more famous teachers, Rabi'a:

I love Thee with two loves: love of my happiness and perfect love— to love Thee as is Thy due.

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This love produces a spiritual heat, which is fanned into flame to consume the veils of self, allowing the soul to transcend its limitations and achieve union with

God. Once found, the soul has attained “the next life”, and thus Sufis speak more

about the distinction between self and God than they do this world and an afterlife.

For them, both worlds are wrapped up in the seeker.

Bahá'u'lláh introduces many changes to this scheme. The path of Sufism, as a

Way of Love and approaching God through ecstasy, can be found in Bahá'í teachings, but with these differences:

?. Religious law (shari'ah) is never optional. They are necessary even to those

who can “taste” the nearness of God. This is partly because the importance of

society's welfare is never beneath that of personal enlightenment. Both social

and personal progress must be given full attention.

?. The union with God that is achieved in baqá does not imply identification with God's essence.

?. The bliss of baqá is not the final stage of the mystic's Path, but “the first gate of the heart's citadel”.

?. A shaykh is no longer needed to walk the Path. Just as religious laws are given

full importance, the role of guidance is returned to the Revelation itself and those who hold authority. This connects the individual back to the religious community, rather than to other mystics.

?. The role of the Manifestation is raised to the role of “God” in mystical practice. That is, the seeker's remembrance and prayer are directed toward the

Manifestation. A letter on behalf of the Guardian says: “We liken God to the Sun, which gives us all our life. So the Spirit of God reaches us through the

Souls of the Manifestations. We must learn to commune with Their Souls, and this is what the Martyrs seemed to have done, and what brought them such ecstasy of joy that life became nothing. This is the true mysticism, and the secret, inner meaning of life which humanity has at present, drifted so far from.”

?. The practices of devotion and remembrance are laid out in clearer detail so

that particular differences between individuals do not become contentious, and thus the greater society is able to remain in harmony with the practices of the individual.

?. The Baha’i concept of the unity of being (wahdat al-wujud) is clarified, since

this has been a major point of conflict between Sufi orders and within Islam.

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The seeker’s path is mainly one of vision, in which the veils are burnt away and

the heart purified until the lights of the Divine are clearly reflected in it.

This leads

to a stage where the seeker “believes the being of the created world to be the same as

God’s being”. However, this doctrine is identified with neither monism nor pantheism. There is a oneness of being which embraces both Oneness of Being (tuwhiid-i

wujuudii) and Oneness of Manifestation (tuwhiid-i shuhuudii). As

Bahá’u’lláh says

of the seeker:

In this Valley [of faná], the wayfarer leaveth behind him the stages of the “oneness of Being and Manifestation” and reacheth a oneness that is sanctified above these two stations. Ecstasy alone can encompass this theme, not utterance nor argument; and whosoever hath dwelt at this stage of the journey, or caught a breath from this garden land, knoweth whereof We speak.

The Seven Valleys was written to a member of the Qadiri Sufi order. Since he was a follower of Sufism, Bahá’u’lláh revealed the Seven Valleys in that language,

using those concepts, though without fixing those concepts into absolute realities.

Since the Manifestation uses whatever language will best reach our understanding,

it is helpful in grasping the message of the Seven Valleys to understand a bit of the

Sufi scheme.

All effort begins with the self who desires to know God, and who recognizes that

its remoteness is due to its own ignorance and negligence (the blaming soul).

Such

a soul knows only that it is thirsty, but little else.

The Sufis view the self as having four different aspects: nafs, qalb, ruh and sirr.

Some also see a fifth part, the aql, or rational intellect. All Sufi “practice”, in so far

as it concerns the seeker himself, is concerned with purification. The remainder of

Sufi practice, which deals wholly with God, is given to remembrance and the ecstasy

of contemplation. However, since this ecstasy is impeded by impurities, the self is

given some degree of attention.

Each of the four parts of the self is purified by different means:

The nafs is mostly viewed as the individual self, and the lower self. It is that

part which turns away from God, or desires to become a partner with Him. The

nafs is developed by aligning its will with the will of God, and as this happens, the

development of the other parts is made possible. The nafs is seen as progressing

through up to seven stages, which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá expands to nine.

The maturation of the nafs along these stages happens in two phases: the momentary vision of states (haal) and the achievement of a permanent consciousness

(maqaam) which cannot regress. It is these stages which the Seven Valleys describe.

The qalb, or the heart, is where the divine realities appear in the human being.

The qalb can be dominating by the nafs, or it can serve to reflect the ruh (spirit).

???

The sirr (secret) is viewed as “the centre of inner consciousness where perceptual

contact with the Divine is accomplished.”? This may be compared with the “third

eye”, or inner sight.

Some Sufism hold to two higher spiritual faculties: Khafi (the arcane), which is

the bond between the ruh and God; and Akhfa (the most arcane), which is complete

immersion in the Absolute.

These aspects of the self relate to the “divine worlds”:

The nafs, related to the lower and physical self, is in Nasut, the mortal world.

The qalb, the seat of inspiration and the dawning place of divine attributes,

is in

Malakut (the realm of God's lordship). The ruh, which emanates like a ray from the perfect Sun, is in Jabarut (the realm of God's dominion). The sirr, which is the higher self, and khafi, the arcane, are in Lahut (the realm of the Divine). And the Akhfa is in Hahut (the realm of God's own being).?

“So, in these four ”organs“ or faculties: Nafs, Qalb, Sirr and Ruh, and the purificative activities applied to them, the basic orthodox Sufi psychology is contained. The purification of elementary passionate nature (Tazkiya-I-Nafs), followed by cleansing of the spiritual heart so that it may acquire a mirror-like purity of reflection (Tazkiya-I-Qalb) and become the receptacle of God's love (Ishq), fortified by emptying of egoic drives (Taqliyya-I-Sirr) and remembrance of God's attributes (Dhikr), gloriously ending in illumination of the spirit (Tajjali-I-Ruh)- this is the essential Sufi spiritual journey. Other spiritual faculties, like Khafi (the arcane) and Akhfa (the most arcane) are employed in other Sufi orders like Naqshbandi, but this is beyond general basic consensus.”?

In summary: The nafs is purified by the governing of our passionate nature; then the qalb may be purified and cleansed, and become the receptacle of God's

love; then the inner eye may be opened and directed toward God; then the spirit becomes illumined and manifests Godly attributes:

?. First, 'Purification of the Self ' (tazkiya-e-nafs). This means cleansing the sensual self from its worldly qualities, and embellishing it with laudable and angelic attributes or qualities.

?. Second, 'Cleansing of the Heart' (tazkiya-e-qalb). This means erasing from the heart its a) love for the short-lived world and b) its worry over griefs and

sorrows, and establishing in their place an ardent love (ishq) for God alone.

?. Third, 'Emptying of the Sirr' (takhliya-e-sirr) from all thoughts that would

divert attention from the remembrance of God. Sirr is an organ of mystical vision.

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?. Fourth, 'Illumination of the Spirit' (tajliya-e-ruh). This means filling the spirit with the effulgence of God and the fervour of His Love.?

In addition to using specific terminology, the language of the Seven Valleys is highly stylized. It creates a tone that would have a strong resonance to a Muslim ear.

For example, though a very small fraction of words in the Arabic lexicon are used

in the Qur'an, Bahá'u'lláh makes frequent use of words of Qur'anic origin. When He speaks of the "seeker", He does so using several different terms, all of which can be found in the Qur'an. This might seem insignificant, except that although Arabic claims over a million unique words, the Qur'an only uses about two thousand of them.

Muslim writers have compiled the thematic words of the Qur'an—such as those that refer to "seeking"—and ranked them according to their frequency and context of use. Some commentators have attempted to refine the definition of these words based on their patterns of usage within the Qur'anic. That Bahá'u'lláh would choose so many terms from the Qur'an must have had quite an impact on his reader, who would have known these terms and their history well.

Some words in Sufism are so specific that differing schools within Sufism cannot entirely agree on their meaning. One of these is "nafs", a word Bahá'u'lláh uses often in the Seven Valleys. It can be translated into English as "self" or "soul", but without the same difference in meaning that English places between these two. Of real significance is the Sufi's relationship to his nafs, and how he has spent decades struggling to purify and conquer the nafs. Countless stories and illustrations exist to depict the nafs; whole treatises describe the stages of defeating the nafs. The battle against nafs has to do with the greater jihad, or the believer's battle over himself. Yet none of this richness is conveyed in either of the words "self" or "soul".

"Self", by conjuring psychological and religious history, has similar gravity to "nafs", but the two bodies of reference only partially overlap. When "nafs" is translated as "soul" in other places, it makes it hard to reconcile with "self". The two meanings are not so contradictory in the original. Although "self" often contrasts with "soul" in English, "nafs" contrasts with "ruh" in Sufism—even though "ruh" can be translated as "soul" as well (though more often as "spirit").

Since translation cannot replace years of study and experience, and since the Western reader cannot steep himself in a nineteenth century khaniq—to capture the feelings it must have evoked in its original audience—we are left with a work whose density can only be appreciated through loving attention and time. Its spiritual message is free from the barriers of language, but the specifics of its language are not free from historical context. To appreciate the text, in addition to its import, we must transport ourselves mentally to another place and time. ???

First, it is important to realize that Sufis envisioned the soul as passing through several perceptual stages before reaching its goal of union with God. At each stage, the seeker must purify and focus himself in order to pierce the veils surrounding him and thus succeed to the next stage. One of the values of using “stages” is that they offer a way to measure progress, and ensure that the seeker does not blithely imagine he has seen all there is to see. Bahá’u’lláh uses a seven-fold scheme in His book, but does not confirm that there are in fact seven stages. He says only that the valleys “are said to be seven”, and makes other equally indirect statements. In some of His other books He even expands on certain stages beyond the Seven, or explains similar truths using other schemes altogether (cf. The Four Valleys). He goes even further to say that placing emphasis on such stages, rather than on God, is to miss the mark:

Much hath been written in the books of old concerning the various stages in the development of the soul, such as concupiscence, irascibility, inspiration, benevolence, contentment, Divine good-pleasure, and the like; the Pen of the Most High, however, is disinclined to dwell upon them. Every soul that walketh humbly with its God, in this Day, and cleaveth unto Him, shall find itself invested with the honor and glory of all goodly names and stations.?

The focus is meant to be solely on God, the Beloved—all good proceeds from this. Some Sufis writers believed this also, berating others for becoming too occupied

with “spiritual stations”. They can be a useful tool to find the Path, but are not to be confused with the Goal.

Since the Seven Valleys follows a somewhat traditional Sufi scheme, some understanding of Sufism will aid in understanding the language and progression of the

Valleys. First, Sufis divide between two types of spiritual movement: states (hál)

and stations (maqám). A state is a momentary experience, prompted by the grace of God, taking the believer to unexperienced spiritual heights for a short time. The

purpose of these states is to inspire the soul to seek God more ardently, and to prove

to him he still has further to go. Stations, on the other hand, are a direct result of

the seeker’s striving and do not regress. These are perfections which, once attained,

cannot be undone, since they constitute an extension of vision. Once the eyes are

opened and behold a certain reality, the impression of what was seen cannot be removed. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

All creation, whether of the mineral, vegetable or animal kingdom, is compelled to obey the law of motion; it must either ascend or descend.

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But with the human soul, there is no decline. Its only movement is towards perfection; growth and progress alone constitute the motion of the soul.?

There are three maqámát encompassed by the Seven Valleys: the station of limitation (tahdíd), which comprises the first three Valleys; the station of unity (tawhíd),

which covers the next three; and the station of “faná and baqá” which are found in

the last Valley (faná and baqá are described below):

maqam-i-ta.hdiid The station of limitation. This is expressed in the first three valleys, where the world seen by the believer is the world of his own limitations.

maqam-i-tuw.hiid The station of unity. This is where the believer sees with the

eye of God, and beholds creation as it is, rather than as he sees it. This is the

beginning of true understanding.

maqam-i-fanaa va baqaa Annihilation and Eternity. This is disappearance of the self in God, where the seer is lost in the seen; the self becomes nothing, and the seeker subsists in God. Also described as nothingness, this stage does not

imply destruction, but absorption. (The English word “fan” is derived from fanaa, which comes from “fanatic”: someone who has lost their reason in devotion to something).

Bahá'u'lláh, like ‘Attár, calls His seven stages “valleys” in several places, but uses other terms as well. He refers to the Valley of Unity as the beginning of “maqaami-tuw.hiid”, or the station of unity (described above). Other than this, the Valley of Unity is not described as a unique station, but rather the beginning of this station.

The previous valleys are collectively referred to as “maqaam-i-ta.hdiid” in this verse

where the Valley of Unity is introduced:

saalik ba‘d az seyr-i vaadii-i ma‘rifat kih aakhir-i maqaam-i ta.hdiid ast
bi-avval-i maqaam-i tuw.hiid vaa.sil shavad

In the English the currently accepted translation is:

After passing through the Valley of knowledge, which is the last plane of limitation, the wayfarer cometh to the Valley of Unity. . .

Yet translated literally it renders as:

The wayfarer, after the journey of the valley of knowledge—which is the end of maqaam-i-ta.hdiid—cometh to the beginning of maqaam-ituw.hiid ???

The Valley of Unity is a dividing line between two larger stations: Knowledge marking the end of maqaam-i-ta.hdiid, and Unity beginning maqaam-i-tuw.hiid. The valleys after unity—contentment and wonderment—precede the station of faná

and baqá, which is the seventh valley. That valley is described as “the dying from self and the living in God”, which in the original uses the terms fanaa and baqaa:

iin rutbih maqaam-i fanaa-i az nafs va biqaa-i bi-al-llah ast

“This level [the seventh valley] marks the station of abandoning self (faná) and abiding in God (baqá).”

As the seeker moves from stage to stage, his vision becomes more penetrating until he is able to see God within the realities of all things. “. . . these stages depend on the vision of the wayfarer.” Since this is a journey of vision, there is no concept of time or distance that can be made to fit. As suddenly as the inner eyes are opened, the journey is complete. To “finish” the Seven Valleys, say the Sufis, ends the first

part of the soul's journey, "the journey to God", and begins the second part—which is endless—"the journey in God". Making progress on the journey requires "steps" which are actually advances in degrees of attention? . As the seeker pays closer and closer attention to the Book of Reality, he discerns more of the secrets written on its pages. "He beholdeth in illusion the secret of reality, and readeth from the attributes the riddle of the Essence." At first time is a barrier, requiring patience; then pain, which needs a lover's eagerness to endure whatever is demanded by his love; and finally evil, which tests the soul's faith in a perfect and loving Creator. Passing these initial stages frees the seeker from looking at reality according to his own limitations, and transports him to a station where "none shall contemplate anything whatsoever but that he shall see God therein." At that point his faith is complete, and he passes beyond the need for tests. He has proved his devotion: "This station conferreth the true standard of knowledge, and freeth man from tests." All fear is banished from his heart since he now knows: "All things are of God". When there is no more fear, the heart is open to learning the true secrets of love ("Love never dwelleth in a heart possessed by fear"). That is, the seeker moves from his earlier form of love, which was love for God exclusive of the world, to the realm of unity, where his love for God embraces all His works. He enters the Kingdom of God, makes his dwelling place in heaven, and eats of the fruits of paradise. Here there is perfect contentment, and all that happens is in accordance with the seeker's pleasure?? . However, this love itself can be a veil, since it blinds the seeker from realizing that he is at unity even with the One Whom he loves. When the seeker himself ???

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disappears, he enters a condition of annihilation in the presence of

God—faná—the
way a candle’s flame vanishes before the sun. Although this state is
nothingness in
relation to the seeker, it is baqá (eternity, subsistence) in relation to God.
“This is
the plane whereon the vestiges of all things are destroyed in the traveler. . .
”

These stations are a process of removing veils; they do not yet concern the
Reality
beyond those veils. A sleeper must remove the covers from his bed to waken, but
the process of removing those covers has little to do with the waking world. So
these
stages that relate to uncovering the eyes do not consider what is seen when
they
are fully opened. That world is infinite and without end—another
justification for
sometimes translating the baqá as “eternity”. Such begins the “journey
in God”.

This process of awakening is meant to take place within this life. In a hadith
is
says, “die before you die”. Also, the kingdoms encountered by the
seeker—heaven,
paradise and the like—exist in the world around us. Since they are perceptual
worlds, they cannot be separated in terms of time or space. Life and death are
metaphors for the life of faith and the death of unbelief. To die and be born
again
in heaven is a description of what happens when the seeker dies from self and
awakens to appreciate the manifold wonders of God’s creation. To consider
that these
stations are beyond an ordinary person’s reach, or that we must wait until
physical
death to approach them, places too much importance on the body and attempts to
connect what is timeless to a specific temporal event.

What is needed to progress is the grace of God. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us,
man
has complete freedom in choosing to undertake the journey but cannot move if
left
unassisted by God: “. . . the inaction or the movement of man depend upon the
assistance of God. If he is not aided, he is not able to do either good or
evil.”??

Thus prayer and meditation, supplication to God, are extremely effective tools
for
progressing along the spiritual Path: “. . . the core of religious faith is
that mystic
feeling which unites Man with God. This state of spiritual communion can be
brought about and maintained by means of meditation and prayer.”??
Thus assisted, one may come to behold the perfect love expressed by the

creation

around us. Until we learn the meaning of true love, we cannot appreciate what the world really represents: “If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee.”

I therefore reveal unto thee sacred and resplendent tokens from the planes of glory, to attract thee into the court of holiness and nearness and beauty, and draw thee to a station wherein thou shalt see nothing in creation save the Face of thy Beloved One, the Honored, and behold all created things only as in the day wherein none hath a mention.??

Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith

People need only two things to realize their perfection as human beings:

education

and effort. Both of these take numerous forms, so I don't mean conventional education and effort when I say that. Love can be viewed as effort, for example, when you

look at it as a (freely given) expense of energy.

If people were educated, they would become pure reflections of the attributes of

God: loving, kind, happy, content, eager, etc. Basically, what we would all love to

be.

If people were like this, they would not war with each other, be greedy, hate others, etc. They would learn to see reality as it is, and not how they imagine

it to

be.

But there is only one proper form of education, and that is the one given by God. Whatever humans make up for themselves is fraught with the very things such an education tries to remove: egotism, greed, prejudice, etc.

But God can't just deliver the answer directly to a person's doorstep. Some knowledge is too powerful for us to handle. Instead of teaching us peace, it might

bring about even more war and hatred.

For example, some people have such a perverted view of strength, that by not fighting back, they see you as weak. Showing them compassion only inflames their

hatred. With such people, a stronger approach is necessary, because that's the language they understand.

Likewise, humanity at various times has very different perceptions of the world.

There were different “languages of the spirit” that man was able to comprehend. If

true strength looks too much like weakness, how will the person ever learn what strength is? So something sterner is needed, to clear away their

preconceptions, and

prepare them to learn more.

As time marches on, we absorb more of these lessons. Culture advances—more or less—until the law of the jungle is no longer the universal reality of life.

At such a point, mankind is ready for more subtlety. We can appreciate more. What seemed like weakness and useless knowledge before, can now be seen as strength, and learned as such.

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One thing that mankind is now ready for now is the elimination of everything that separates people. With the exception of covenant breaking in the Faith, Bahá'ís

are free to read any literature, consort with any people, think any thoughts, and

ask any questions. Any social program which does not violate the laws of the Faith

is allowed, as well as any system of education. And those laws are not numerous,

compared to Islam and Judaism, for example.

In the past, there were laws against inter-faith relationships. You could not marry

a woman who had been divorced. You could not peruse forbidden texts, listen to music, etc. You even had to fight holy wars if the church called for it.

Basically, all of the institutionalized forms of separation have been removed, because God believes that humanity is now able to learn how to get together—without such knowledge resulting in our immediate destruction. It means we've grown up enough to learn how to play together as adults. No more supervision is necessary, in the form of priests, and no artificial barriers are necessary, such as those

between race, gender or caste.

Thus, the Bahá'í Faith represents the next stage in the progress of humankind's

spiritual education. Yet we are far from the end of it. Many tablets revealed to

Bahá'u'lláh He decided to cast into the river because we were “not ready yet”. Even

some of the tablets He did write—such as those proclaiming the equality of the

genders - caused some people at the time to slit their throats with their own hands.

Since we were ready, the violence did not go much further than that. However, had God revealed such knowledge a millennia ago, it might have resulted in a blood

bath, or crippled society. I don't know this, but there are reasons why men have only

learned about this now. I think we might have been FAR too threatened by such a

weakening of our power, and who knows what that might have caused. This is only my own speculation, however.

Anyway, the ground that was broken by earlier Faiths was not entirely clear.

Take for example: gender equality, racial equality, and evil. Islam thought once that

women did not have souls; Jesus specifically excluded the Gentiles from receiving

His miracles; and almost all religions focused very much on the reality of an “Evil

One”, or at least viewed evil as an active, subverting force. Buddhism is the only

Faith that comes to my mind which does not focus on this.

The Bahá'í Faith claims a unique position in religious history, in that the foundation of its teaching will not be revoked by future Messengers from God.

What we

have may be limited in scope, owing to our current capacity, but it is very explicit

in its accuracy. This is not to say that other religions were deceptive. Jesus did not

make a big deal about Satan (He mostly spoke of the “fire” of unbelief); Muh.ammad

did not condemn the station of women (He merely indicated they should be more subservient); and nowhere did Jesus explicit say the gentiles were “bad”.

However,

enough ambiguity existed that the believers made up their own stories afterward, in

???

order to fit the religion with their own sense of what was right.

In our Faith, however, the laws and teachings are not given in parables, or subject

to interpretation by priests, or fellow believers.

Yet clear or not clear, the message underneath is identical throughout them all:

Man is a spiritual being who must learn to transcend his earthly nature, if he is

to discover the mysteries of reality. As this state of being becomes more profound

and universal, the fabric of society is enriched and reinforced, and will continue to

progress until a state of cooperation and happiness such as we've only dreamed of

before.

A Journey of Faith

I would like to tell story of my encounters with faith. It is a story with many chapters

so far, and I hope many more to come. Perhaps in what I've gone through,

there

may be something of interest to others.

In my earliest, pre-cognizant years, I was baptized as a Methodist Christian,

to

the dismay of my catholic grandparents. I believe it was an act of rebellion on

the

part of my mother. They tell me I handled the event quite peacefully, except

for

being stubborn about constantly pulling on the minister's long mustache. Such

was

my induction into faith.

I remember attending several different Christian churches while growing up,

mostly Methodist and Unitarian. All of them were very relaxed—as

Protestantism

goes—and didn't stress religion too strongly. On the whole, they were

inexpressibly

boring. The first step was attending the sermon, which I could never remember,

and

had a terrible time sitting through. Then would come the children's classes,

where

I did learn a few useful things. I still remember some of the lessons I learned

about

the disciples, and also that hell is a very bad place which I would enter

directly if I

ever committed suicide. I must say, that class caused me to never to consider

suicide

as an option, whatever my present beliefs may be.

At one point, our Sunday school teacher told us we should invite Jesus Christ

into our hearts, and that if we did so, He would accept us. This was when I was

about twelve years old, and represents my only active participation

???

Joy is at the Heart of it All

Human beings were created to know joy. "He [the Ancient Beauty] hath drained

to

its dregs the cup of sorrow, that all the peoples of the earth may attain unto

abiding

joy, and be filled with gladness." Only God can fill the heart with such

joy, not by

plans or activities, but the genuine warmth of those who have touched the

Source.

The world, after all, has no shortage of planners, resources, organizations;

yet despite

these riches, it is still ravaged by a burning thirst. Remedying that thirst is

the aim

of religion, not the creation of new structures. "The whole world is

suffering, it is

sunk in misery, crushed beneath its heavy problems.”?

This thirst expresses the soul’s fundamental need to unite with God.

Inwardly, all

people are “wandering distracted in search of the Friend. . .”? ,

without even knowing

what they seek. They only dimly perceive the existence of their heartache, and

are

trying every approach to find a remedy:

Indeed the chief reason for the evils now rampant in society is the lack of spirituality. The materialistic civilization of our age has so much absorbed the energy and interest of mankind that people in general do no longer feel the necessity of raising themselves above the forces and conditions of their daily material existence. There is not sufficient demand for things that we call spiritual to differentiate them from the needs and requirements of our physical existence.?

The structures we build now are like a network of tributaries, bringing water from the mountains to the expanse of the plains. In this, they serve as intermediaries between the spiritual Source and mankind. “Bahá’u’lláh has given to the

world institutions to operate in an Order designed to canalize the forces of a new

civilization.”? However, their worth depends on this transmission of spirit: they

have no value in themselves. “In this, the Bahá’í dispensation, God’s Cause is spirit

unalloyed. His Cause belongeth not to the material world.”?

Thus the success of our efforts depends entirely on the presence of spirit.

Without spirit, religion itself “. . . will degenerate into a mere organization, and becomes a

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dead thing.”? It is for want of such spirit that all worldly attempts to cure our social problems have failed.

This is the soul’s longing, and alone can quench the deepest thirst: the spirit of

faith, granted by the Holy Spirit. It is the very light that Bahá’u’lláh has brought to the world.

The fourth degree of spirit is the heavenly spirit; it is the spirit of faith and the bounty of God; it comes from the breath of the Holy Spirit, and by the divine power it becomes the cause of eternal life. It is the power which makes the earthly man heavenly, and the imperfect man

perfect. It makes the impure to be pure, the silent eloquent; it purifies and sanctifies those made captive by carnal desires; it makes the ignorant wise.?

Everyone is looking for the signs of such a spirit. “The millions of Americans who are searching for spiritual truth are searching for traces of God’s love.”? Manifesting these traces will attract souls to the Cause; when people see us animated with love, nobility, and joy, they will find an echo of their own hope. If we realize that only in this lies the redemptive power of God’s faith—not in activities, projects, or buildings—we can use that knowledge as a tool to assess the fruitfulness of our plans. It is both a guide, and a measure of success. Do we find in what we do the signs of the spirit? Does it uplift hearts, and loft them above the mundane? Does it awaken the soul’s love for its Creator?

This would all seem obvious, and yet our community struggles to find ways to manifest these qualities—especially in our interactions with the public. “If actions took the place of words, the world’s misery would very soon be changed into comfort.”??

What, then, are the signs of the spirit, and how can we bring them about? Burdening ourselves with an excess of activity is not the way, for as Bahá’u’lláh counselled:

Lay not upon your souls that which will weary them and weigh them down, but rather what will lighten and uplift them, so that they may soar on the wings of the Divine verses towards the Dawning-place of His manifest signs; this will draw you nearer to God, did ye but comprehend.??

The metaphors of soaring, racing, charging, imply a lightness, a nimbleness of heart and soul: “Be light and untrammelled as the breeze. . .”?? ; “. . . as the lightning flashes let us laugh at our coursings through east and west.”?? The sense here is to be ???

joyful, radiant, illumined. “Joy gives us wings! In times of joy our strength is more vital, our intellect keener, and our understanding less clouded.”?? It is not weariness and exhaustion that will attract others, but joy, when everywhere else there is only sorrow.

We know, for example, that Bahá'u'lláh and the Holy Family suffered terribly.

Their history is a tale of trial and abuse. And yet, though history describes Them

as such, the people of the day did not refer to Them as sorrowful and encompassed

by woe. They went to Them to find solace from their troubles. What attracted the

people was Their spirit, not Their endurance. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells of His experience:

Affliction beat upon this captive like the heavy rains of spring, and the victories of the malevolent swept down in a relentless flood, and still 'Abdu'l-Bahá remained happy and serene, and relied on the grace of the All-Merciful. That pain, that anguish, was a paradise of all delights; those chains were the necklace of a king on a throne in heaven. Content with God's will, utterly resigned, my heart surrendered to whatever fate had in store, I was happy.??

This type of radiant spirit is needed in the world like a lamp in a dark night; and not the suffering, but the joy. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was able to find joy in the midst of

sorrow owing to His station. We will not find it through imitation, but by fostering

whatever will increase our spirituality, such as prayer and meditation, and "what will

lighten and uplift " our souls. "We, likewise, shall act according to His example only

as our inward spirits, growing and maturing through the disciplines of prayer and

practice of the Teachings, become the wellsprings of all our attitudes and actions."??

Therefore, may we consider the spirit, and what can attract it, in all our planning, and perceive joy as a hallmark of success, whether it is a joy found in the

heat of fire or the refreshing rains of spring. Whatever is lifeless, burdensome, tiring: these we should accept as justification that our energy is better spent elsewhere.

Sometimes, doing less will achieve more, if that less is infused with spirit, and the more not.

How many a soul expended all its span of life in worship, endured the mortification of the flesh, longed to gain an entry into the Kingdom, and yet failed, while ye, with neither toil nor pain nor self-denial, have won the prize and entered in.??

There is no set recipe for manifesting the spirit. If joy and liveliness are our

guide, solutions will present themselves. Where there is joy, "We seem better able

?? ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of, p. ??

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to cope with the world and to find our sphere of usefulness.”?? If we look to this quality, rather than numbers or achievements, people will be drawn to us by virtue of the pain in their agonized hearts: For Bahá’ís alone bring the tidings that the Heavenly Father has come.

Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt hath lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. . . Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.??

?? ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. ???

?? Matthew 5:13-14

Joy and Community Life

What is a Bahá’í?

What is a Bahá’í? What differentiates a Bahá’í from anyone else in society? Or a

Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim? Is it moral behavior, a set of high ideals, particular

characteristics, certain beliefs? These are shared in common by many groups, both

religious and not. So when we think of a Bahá’í, what are the identifying qualities?

Christ referred to His disciples as “the salt of the earth”. What is the meaning

of this salt? When we look at the material world, everything it possessed comes from dust. All the time, money, ideas, institutions, resources, etc., are generated or

mined by the bodies and intellects that abound on the Earth. There has never been

a shortage of these.

There is a quality which has nothing whatsoever to do with the dust. It does not

issue from it, and does not return to it. It is not part of our animal heritage, is not

found in a perfect body, or heart, or mind. It is a quality that cannot exist in nature

unless a pure heart manifests it. This quality Christ called “salt”.

Bahá’u’lláh describes human reality as a mirror. Its capacity to shine is what

makes possible the manifestation of divine realities in the world. He

writes:

O My Brother! A pure heart is as a mirror; cleanse it with the burnish of love and severance from all save God, that the true sun may shine within it and the eternal morning dawn. Then wilt thou clearly see the meaning of “Neither doth My earth nor My heaven contain Me, but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me.”?

Human beings are thus capable of bringing into reality, and worldly projects, a quality which can appear in any other way. Those who bring this quality into the world are regarded as the beloved of God. In each age and century they have varying names, but such have been called Jew, Buddhist, Bahá'í.

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Our gift to the world

If this is our unique capacity, it also represents our power, our gift, the one thing needed by the world above all else, which the world cannot acquire by itself. Even the social and ethical teachings of the Manifestations are not enough in themselves.

Shoghi Effendi wrote:

Laws and institutions, as viewed by Bahá'u'lláh, can become really effective only when our inner spiritual life has been perfected and transformed. Otherwise religion will degenerate into a mere organization, and becomes a dead thing.?

It is this quality of spirit that deserves our focus, because nothing can proceed without it, while all things will find their way to solution when it appears.

The

National Spiritual Assembly said, “The millions of Americans who are searching for spiritual truth are searching for traces of God’s love.”?

This spirit is of the nature of all things good, joyful, loving, true. All sadness

and misery come from the material, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke:

If we suffer it is the outcome of material things, and all the trials and troubles come from this world of illusion.?

Whereas He told us “the spiritual world bestows only the joy!” So joy and radiance are the signs, the tokens of this spirit. They become the measure by which we can judge the success of our spiritual endeavors. And they relate directly

to the

value of what we achieve in this life.

The material world, being the abode of dust, abounds in dust. All the wealth mankind could ever need springs from the ground itself. There is nothing we can add that will not in the end decay and return. The world does not need more wealth,

or an ever finer parade of forms displaying that wealth. It needs what it lacks, the

salt. And if we neglect to bring it, Christ asks, “And if the salt hath lost its savor,

wherewith shall it be salted?” In this sense, we are the bringers of light, the bearers

of glad-tidings, the heralds of grace; we reflect by our hearts the true wealth from

God, the “manna from heaven”.

If this spirit, this joy and love and warmth is so profound—the defining characteristic of the servants of God, by whatever religious name—then our discussion

should revolve around it, and aim toward it. Worldly problems will never cease; sometimes discussing them makes them worse! Whereas when we have joy, happiness, it is often the case that the material gives way:

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If we suffer it is the In times of joy our strength is more vital, our intellect keener, and our understanding less clouded. We seem better able to cope with the world and to find our sphere of usefulness.?

The present culture

Does our present culture foster joy, engender the spirit? This would define a “Bahá’í”

atmosphere, according to the previous discussion. We know that prevailing social

norms affect us, but do we understand how? The current culture might be called a

Christian culture with a slight Bahá’í twist.

Changing the pattern of activity

Doing less can result in achieving more, in the mathematics of joy.

Spirituality is

not like weighing ingredients to measure the recipe; this was shown in the example

of the loaves and the fish. When there is true spirit, even raw flour is a king’s meal.

Although to outward view, the wayfarers in this Valley may dwell upon the dust, yet inwardly they are throned in the heights of mystic meaning; they eat of the endless bounties of inner significances, and drink of the delicate wines of the spirit.?

My recommendation is that we follow closely Bahá'u'lláh admonition:

Lay not upon your souls that which will weary them and weigh them down, but rather what will lighten and uplift them, so that they may soar on the wings of the Divine verses towards the Dawning-place of His manifest signs; this will draw you nearer to God, did ye but comprehend.?

The prevailing culture of guilt and perfection retard our growth. The soul has wings; in joy let it fly.

A Light in the Dark

People have asked me at times why I don't do certain things it seems I should. In

simplest terms, it's usually because I'm busy doing something else. But in the truest

sense, I don't do these other things because they do not make me happy. And if

someone says, "but for this or that reason you ought to do it anyway", my feeling is:

if it causes me happiness, whatever it is, I want nothing to do with it.

This goes to the extreme limit, where if God Himself were to make me unhappy, I would turn my back on Him. I say this, because it is crucial to understand how

important joy is. It is like light; and if something in your life claims to be the Sun,

yet increases darkness— it is not the sun. "God" is just a word, after all. That

men could slave themselves to a concept without judging its effect makes no sense.

Rather, we must understand what the signs of "God" should be, so that if we find

these signs we know we're on the right track. And conversely, when those signs are

absent, then we have yet to find the God we're looking for.

The mind is not the place to define God, because it's capable of wanting what it desires despite every outcome. All senseless war comes from this capacity of the

mind to invent its own objectives. What we need, then, is a faculty which cannot be

deceived, and that we may trust to guide us faithfully on the journeys of our inward

life, such that we do not accept any substitutes.

Love is like this. It cannot be fooled. It is still fallible in the virtues of its object,

but it is infallible with regard to its own truth. Simply put, being in love cannot be

faked.

If the presence of love is dependable, but its object is not, we still need

something

to prove our orientation. Is our life going wrongly? Is there something more we should know?

When love, even fallible love, is first fulfilled, there comes with it an ecstasy that

alone had bred and kept whole legions of poets. This feeling of “communion”, or

joining, is a proof that love has found its object—whatever the nature of that desired one may be.

But let us suppose that the better the goal love is aimed toward, the finer, more

exalted, and more complete the feeling of communion should be. If we allow this,

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then “God” may be defined as “He Who offers the most perfect communion possible”, and the soul as “that in man which desires such a communion.”

That is,

the soul is evidenced by our desire to be happy, and God, by the discovery of such

happiness.

With this understanding, whatever God we believe in may be judged according to our own state in relationship with Him. If even worldly lovers exceed the joys we

find in Divinity, this proves that what we believe in is not divine; at least, not we

have accepted in the name of “God”.

Likewise, religion, if its purpose is to draw us nearer the one true God, must aid in forming this perfect communion. So that if there is no joy, there is no true

religion. If we were to follow a text on romance that founded no relationship, we

ought to throw it away. At least, our reading must be wrong; because the proof of

anything is in the fruit it offers. If such fruit is absent, it is worthless thing, and

misadvertised.

If another person questions these definitions of God and soul, I am interested to

know what he seeks from a different God—possessing as he must a different soul.

To me, happiness is the one quality that gives meaning to existence. In the midst

of that state, I need nothing else, or any eternity, because that one instant

is both
beginning and end—and hence beyond all time or boundaries.
But if one agree with these definitions, he is compelled to judge fairly the
aims
and pursuits of his life in such terms. That is, if one possess a “soul”
who desires
happiness; and if this soul yearns for a “God” Who fulfills that happiness
to the
utmost degree; then it is admitted that happiness is the point round which
these
terms revolve: the pivot of their dance, as it were: the heart of their turning
on the
wheel of events.

Whenever happiness is increased, it means these two endpoints are drawing
nearer; and whenever joy is absent, their distance should be inferred. If we
pursue the mystical path—by which I mean, a life lived for the sake of such a
soul
finding such a God—then happiness is the criterion to show progress or
decline.

To the successful soul, his happiness will increase day by day, and by
definition he
will know rejoicing only insofar as he draws nearer his Aim. On the other hand,
a
soul who has strayed far from its path may know this by the emptiness, the
draining
fatigue, the gathering weariness that threatens to crush his life.
For these reasons, not only should we never underestimate the role of joy in
our
spiritual life, but must know it as our compass, our proof, our sustaining
confirmation. If not, then what God do we seek? What does that God offer that
we should
continue, without the glory of His presence to draw us onward?
Krishnamurti and “religion”

Concerning the philosophy of Krishnamurti, reviewed from one Bahá'í's
point of
view: Any “path” must be a conceived thing, because it directs one toward
something
by directing them away from something else. These two points must be held in
the
mind for a person to distinguish what is one from the other.
However, while moral teachings are an excellent guide to what behaviors will
help clarity, they do not grant experience. No religion is the end it teaches.
I
believe this is what Krishnamurti was getting at when he said, “Truth cannot
be
approached by religion”. Such an approach would be like saying that by

reading the
Íqán a hundred times you will comprehend Bahá'u'lláh's station.
Instead, it is not
“religion” that gets you there, but US, our lives, our experiences and
interactions
with the present. These interactions are guided by religion, but religion does
not
yield the substance of the interaction itself. If we try to substitute one for
the other,
this is when “religion” is born in the mind.
The point here is that purity and awareness are far more valuable to the seeker
than knowledge or devotion. The Valley of Search, the Íqán, Gems of the
Divine
Mysteries, all repeatedly—over and over— stress the importance of clearing
away
obscuring dust from the heart: all attachments, all love and hate, all
knowledge
and understanding. At one point in the Íqán, Bahá'u'lláh reports a
divine saying
that one must know at least ?? sciences to understand the mystery of the
Mi'ráj; at
which point He says that not only will this knowledge not help the seeker, but
if he
happened to possess it, that more than anything else would be the cause of his
never
understanding the Mi'ráj!
The individual must purge all knowledge from his heart—“religion” being a
form of this knowledge—and not accumulate it. Knowledge must be relegated to
its
role of helping us function in life, and taken off its pedestal of determining
how we
look at life itself. You could say that religion is a functional thing, not an
endpoint;
it can help us, morally, to “unaccumulate”, but can cause the very harm it
seeks to
undo if we “accumulate” its own teachings.
Which is, fundamentally, the exact message of Krishnamurti. When he talks
about “religion”, he means the entity created in people's minds after
they come in

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contact with new teachings. The mind, seeking something, finds accents of that
something in a new Message; and so the mind fills itself with this message, its
dogma,
its forms, its beliefs—until the mind is so full it can barely hold another

thought.

And in that state, it will have so far removed itself from the purpose of the Message as to be tragic.

Interestingly, Bahá'ís understand this instinctively when they talk about Christians, or Muslims, or Jews. But they often miss the point when talking about their own beliefs. Haven't you heard people say, "A true Christian would leave his church and become a Bahá'í"? Well, a true Bahá'í would leave his ideas and become a human being.

For the Writings themselves, while advocating study for the purpose of advancing this world, reiterate ad nauseum that a deep, fundamental purity is the only hope mankind has of perceiving the faint glimmerings of Spirit that reflect in the heart

of every created thing. From lack of this vision, men treat each other worse than animals, and fail to understand their common brotherhood. The failure to achieve

world peace is not due to lack of means, or plans, or hopes—but is intrinsically a spiritual problem caused by "religion" (not religion). That is, because each person

has his "religion" and clings to it like a God, even two Bahá'ís may be seen to argue

with one another—despite the fact that conflict and contention are so sternly and categorically forbidden by their Faith!!!

When there is a clear perception of reality, there is no need for beliefs about reality. The soul who sees clearly, whose vision is freed from impediment, has no

need of religion. Instead, he applies his deeds and decisions to the Law, and is thus

informed of Truth. He is religious by his movement, his spirit, his breath.

There is

no more conflict between what he is, and what he thinks he should be. He serves men because it is a joyous thing to serve—not because he must. Here religious means

"free, real, human", and religion: an education toward this state. But "religion" is a

belief that the map is the territory, the teachings are the reality, the practice is the experience, and so on.

As a physicist recognizes the purpose of natural law, he will cease to contend with those laws, and start working with them; so too religion aims at

establishing
that kind of spirituality in which what is spiritual is the only way to live.
Because
indeed, if Bahá'u'lláh speaks truly, that is the “real world”, and
the fiction we afflict
ourselves with is due to a long-running denial of that world. In a sense, you
could
say religion is like a band-aid, or a cure, specifically tailored to a very ill
patient.

Should a patient revere the cure, or deplore his illness? But a wise patient
will use
the cure until he is well, and then be rid of it.

At that point—when “religion” has been stripped away as the last
impediment—

what is seen goes beyond description. This is the stage at which people act
spontaneously for the Good because it is their highest love. What is it that
stands between
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people and such a perception? It is their beliefs about reality, as opposed to
true reality. To put it coyly, true religion is that “unknowledge” which
makes direct knowing
possible; it undoes the self, that man may discover his being. But if
misapplied, it
too quickly enmires its adherents until they go to war for the sake of
perserving their
beliefs about ending war.

Does this make the point any clearer? The “religion” Krishnamurti saw as
clinging to the souls of men is the “religion” they have piled on top of
who they
truly are, and which they use as a defense against knowing what they are: good
or
evil, mediocre or excellent. But the real intent of it all is freedom—true,
genuine
freedom—and this does not happen just because a person binds themselves to a
different set of beliefs or ideas.

To have this true religion, one must do everything that Krishnamurti asks of
us, which is the same as what Bahá'u'lláh, and the Buddha, and everyone
else back
to the Oracle at Delphi: Know thyself. “He who hath known himself hath known
God.” Since knowing one’s self is the most painful, most difficult process
possible,
it all begins with purifying the eye, the ear, the heart, and the mind. The
practices of the Bahá'í Faith are designed to this end, and God will assist
us if we use
them accordingly; but since humans are allowed to be human, encrustation is
always

possible—and this is what Krishnamurti deplored so much in the world around him:

He saw human beings shrinking from reality in preference to a set of beliefs, and he wanted to free them from that. It isn't what you believe that matters, it's what you are and do! Isn't this same message echoed by Bahá'u'lláh? "Amongst the people is he who seateth himself amid the sandals by the door whilst coveting in his heart the seat of honour. Say: What manner of man art thou, O vain and heedless one, who wouldst appear as other than thou art?"

So I think you will find that the philosophy of Krishnamurti is about understanding who and what you are, and that this knowledge alone will connect you to God and life. But until such understanding has taken place, "religion"—in the form of ideas and dutiful practices— will remain your greatest barrier to Truth. The process of learning and mystical pursuit

In her essay on faná' and baqá'?, Alison Marshall wrote:

After coming down from faná' [the state in which the self is annihilated], a person passes into a state called "baqá'", which is 'living in God' or 'God living in us'. Izutsu explains that in the state of baqá', the person is reawakened to the 'multiplicity' of the world, after being 'extinguished' in the state of faná'. But now the person sees the world with new eyes; whereas before she saw only the many created things, now she can also see the One that is behind everything. It could be said that the person has a permanent vision of unity in diversity. . .

Compare this experience with what happens when we learn something: Before a person learns a subject, it appears very diverse to them. For example, someone looking at computers is mystified by how it could ever make sense to the programmer.

The programmer, who understands how a computer works, knows that at its heart it functions using incredibly few principles. In fact, there is really only one principle at work in a computer: the distinction between presence and absence. This distinction can be combined, multiplied, directed, converted into magnetic force—in millions and billions of ways. But at its heart the computer is a unity, whose incredible complexity is the revelation of this unified law in all its varied possibilities.

As a person starts learning about computers, they begin to see how many things

that looked separate and complex before are actually united and simple. It takes a while to understand how this is so, but the process of learning continually reduces the “many” to the “one”. For example, there are hundreds of computer languages; yet, they all do very nearly the same thing. After a while, it’s possible to learn a new language just by asking how it differs from the old. In fact, most new languages

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hardly have anything new in them at all; they just recombine the same ideas into a form that is easier to use for a new purpose. After enough research and delving into the field of computers, perhaps someday one goes far enough to achieve the “Grand Vision”. This is understanding how everything fits together, in every respect. It is not so difficult to achieve as you’d think, and there are signs of it in every single computer program. But seeing how this essential unity underlies the scheme of computers, without studying, is impossible. In its diversity the computer is the “most manifest of the manifest”, since everything proceeds from that united heart; but in its unity it is the “most hidden of the hidden”, because nowhere is this concept present in its naked form. Everything one learns is an inference, a derived idea, a consequence of an ever-more-profound understanding. Philosophy would say that the details of the computer transcend toward its central motivating idea, but since the idea is never immanent in everyday reality, no one but a student of computers can ever truly comprehend it. Finally the student reaches down to the bottom of the well, and puts it all together. It’s not so hard, really. It’s just the interaction between presence and absence. One could even say, “Knowledge is a single point, but the ignorant have multiplied it”. Anyway, from the day the programmer achieves this understanding, and every day forward, the computer now looks different to him. When he looks at it he sees the same machine as everyone else, but he now sees each individual aspect of

the
computer as a manifestation of that essential oneness. It is this oneness that
attracts
him, that now aids him in understanding each new detail he ever learns about
the
computer. It redefines his relationship to that entire field of knowledge, and
makes
it all seem familiar, understood, close at hand.
Thus the state of a consummate programmer is one of constantly beholding
unity in diversity, the one in the many. It's as though all computers (all
programs, all
operating systems, all architectures) are just variations on a Theme, a theme
he finds
beautiful beyond description in the elegance of its simplicity. It is, of
course, too
simple to ever explain, even given hours and days and an eager listener. It can
never
be shared, never talked about. One can speak volumes about it, but not suffice
to
capture the mystery of that one Truth about the computer world. There are some
who catch a hint of this mystery, and pursue it until they find it; while
others don't
have the time and desire it takes to reach that far. For some it takes decades
to reach
it, for others just months, or maybe they are graced with the capacity to
intuit the
whole thing in a single statement. One can never say.
But truly, computers are wonderfully simple, and in this respect a programmer
will always say it's really not so hard; that we're just one step away from
the essence
of what we seek. This unity is the basis of every action the computer takes,
it's
present in every feature. Without it, what it means to compute would fade away
into nothingness. For the programmer, this unity is bliss, and the means of
greater
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and more rapid understandings than he could ever achieve from the point of view
of diversity. He can now sit behind a foreign computer, a foreign
program—never
having seen or heard of it before—and in moments start to interact profitably
with it,
since he has a feeling for what computers do, how they behave, what to expect
from
them. Everything is familiar territory. In a single menu, he describes the
nature and
design of the whole; from a single glance, he can judge by his intimate

association

with the Secret, how it derives its meaning from that Source.

Linguistic style of the Bahá'í

Writings

The difference between plain English and “high” English is roughly similar to the

difference between Bahá'u'lláh's language, and that of the average Arab or Persian.

For whatever reason, Bahá'u'lláh chose to write in a lofty form of expression, and

Shoghi Effendi reflected this decision by using a similar stylistic distinction in the

English translation. If you ask a Persian or Arab, they will tell you that Bahá'u'lláh

is very difficult to read in the original, and that sometimes His grammatical choices

are not obvious. I remember a Lebanese man once who criticized a sentence in the

Aqdas because its structure seemed confusing to him.

So do we wrestle with understanding God's Will (the story of life on Earth!), or

do we seek to convert it to our preference? I don't know an easy answer to give the

would-be critic. A person either loves Truth in whatever form, or they're looking for something else.

Perhaps that alone is the reason: To discover who will strive to go beyond the words.

But at any rate, I do not think Shoghi Effendi's rendering would be needlessly archaic. I presume he intended something by it related to the character of the original

text, given that he was an interpreter and not a revelator.

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Living with ADHD

Since the age of four, it was noticed by doctors that I did not pay attention to things

the same way as other children. When the psychiatrist would give me an interesting

toy to play with, I became so involved that I did not see the other toys he tried to

tempt my attention away with. And if the toy was not fascinating, I quickly lost

interest, and could not give it any consistent focus. They also noted my high levels

of activity, excitability, and difficulty in calming down. These days they call

this

collection of traits ADHD, or: Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder.

The term “deficit” is misleading, however, causing many people to misunderstand what ADD really means. Having had a whole lifetime to think about it and

come to terms with it, I’ve finally boiled down the essence of ADHD to this:

Normal people can decide what they focus on, for long periods of time, if they deem

it important; a person with ADD cannot. Maybe I can pay attention for a little while (say, ??–?? minutes), but then it becomes too emotionally painful to continue.

It feels stifling, oppressive, turning into a strange kind of agony that is difficult to

describe. The pain is enough to affect my value judgments, causing me to care less

and less about the consequences of not paying further attention, until finally I am

in such a state of wishing to be elsewhere that I get distracted by my own thoughts.

My brain start to fantasize about random things, involuntarily, in order to help me

escape my acute sense of boredom. Before I know it I am off in some other world,

having lost all touch with reality. That’s when, after hours have passed, I finally snap

my head up and remember there was something I was supposed to be doing. . .

My ability to focus is directly related by my level of interest. This is not unlike

the condition of a child. However, even children, if sufficiently motivated through

positive and negative enforcement by their parents, can be directed to perform largescale tasks, such as homework. When they grow up, these same children can learn

how defer their interests to satisfy the demands placed on them by society.

They

develop an ability to pay attention to what is important, putting off their interests

until they have more time. This is a large part of what becoming an adult means.

It allows one to fit productively into society, an effective and smoothly flowing machine built up of the common effort of everyone moving toward a single, unitedly

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determined purpose.

For a person with ADD, however, this aspect of maturation never occurs. Nor should it be imagined we don't want it to occur! The ability to decide one's focus is so appealing, many take drugs in pursuit of this ability. Normal people seem superhuman to us, who can simply decide on a task and finish it, even if it takes days or months. If only I could choose what I spent my time on. . . I can already picture many of the things I would do. But it doesn't work that way. Not taking medicine keeps my mind active, agile, full of interesting things. Having a constantly shifting focus means I am always seeing new things, even within my own head. I like this experience, however much it prevents me from achieving what I see. It's like wandering around in a forest and exploring, compared to settling down in one place and building a house. Exploring is more interesting; building a house takes too much concentrated effort. I may have sleep under the stars, but hey, that's just the way it is. I stopped taking medicine in my early twenties. Medicine made it possible to finish school with passing grades, but it also left me relatively uninterested in life. I had few interests, few friends, and learned very little in all those years. I date the beginning of my real education at around age nineteen. Until then, I simply did what I was told, and only enough to pass tests and get back to playing with my computer. I may have learned how to program during those years, but life was not about living back then, but just getting by. In the years that followed—the unmedicated years—I learned an important lesson: ADD makes it impossible to sustain a collaborative effort on equal terms. This fact got me fired once, and it even led to a divorce. The inability to hold my focus on anything uninteresting has devastating consequences in terms of other people's expectations. Why couldn't I pay attention? Did I not care enough? After all, many people, if they care enough, can pay attention to the most boring things. If they care enough, normal people seem capable of almost anything. Obviously, if I could not pay attention for even one hour to a boring subject, it must mean I didn't care.

This conclusion, so easily framed in the mind of someone without ADD, is impossible to argue against. There is no way to say, “Yes, I do care, I just can’t pay attention”, because to most people, caring and attention are practically synonymous: caring means paying attention: one pays attention because he cares. The focus of the average mind is determined by a rational process of applying one’s will to whatever that mind has elected to pay attention to. And that choice is based largely on what the person cares about; ergo, attention relates to significance. This belief cannot be argued because it is commonly accepted as the very standard by which choices are to be judged. Because I don’t pay attention to something, I do not care. It doesn’t matter what I feel for the subject, the belief tells all concerned what my real feelings are. It is impossible to care and not pay attention. Since this ???

possibility does not exist in a normal person’s universe—in fact, it is so unthinkable as to border on the pathological—it is not something I can argue against. Without a common ground, I find myself fighting a paradigm with no place for my words. I am, in effect, asking people to accept a world unrelated to the one they’ve lived in for so long.

The outcome of this is that, in the view of many, I simply don’t care. The projected reasons for this lack caring are numerous: laziness, complacency, immaturity, insufficient discipline, etc. The list goes on. Some have tried escalating their punishments to induce compliance, but this is notoriously ineffective against ADD. It just leaves us battered, and the other person’s wishes remain unfulfilled. In every instance, such a relationship either ends, or both parties begin to understand what is going on.

My last manager was remarkable in this respect, and I must give him credit here.

In the beginning he tried very hard to bend me to a common, manageable mold: to arrive at work when my co-workers did, to complete my assigned tasks on time.

It reached the point that one day he implied I would lose my job if I didn’t

find a way
to work like everyone else. It was a very hard time for both of us.
Then, for a reason I will never fathom, everything changed. I still don't
know
what happened in his life to produce this change, but he suddenly had a
completely
different attitude. He told me I could get to work pretty much when I wanted
to, as long as I met my deadlines. And he relaxed those deadlines when he knew
the task didn't interest me. He even kept me "in reserve" for the kinds
of jobs I
excelled at. He defended my behavior in meetings, and told others that the key
to a
successful team was learning how to manage the strength of its various members.
I
was flabbergasted. His change of outlook caused even me to learn a lot about
myself.
It was the first I could see myself as a worthwhile member of society if put to
the right
use.
It was because of this that my private despair ended, and I started looking for
ways to succeed outside the ordinary models for success. I questioned the ideas
of
"success" and "productivity". I wanted to know what society really
needed, rather
than just what it asked for. Wasn't there a place for someone like me, who
can start
a hundred things in a single year, but not see a single one to completion?
Coming
up with ideas and inventions is not very difficult, but executing them is worse
than
pushing nails into my eyes. I can't explain the nature of the pain, but at
times I've
imagined death would be far preferable. Because death would mean peace.
That's
how bad it feels.
Maybe even, people like me are intentional. Perhaps God feels monotony is not
a recipe for success, and individuals are needed who are unable to fit the
mold. It
certainly causes suffering for everyone involved, but don't we grow through
suffering? Wouldn't a relentless, smooth efficiency cause people to stop
thinking about
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how to change things—exactly because everything worked so well ? Thus the
need for
people who are driven, not by external goals, but by their passionate

interests. We

couldn't follow a straight line if we wanted to: Our nature prevents us from becoming what society desires (even, a lot of the time, what we desire), thus we feel

compelled to look beyond such goals, and wonder if maybe something else wouldn't

be more worthwhile.

This is why productivity is no longer the name of my game. It does bother me, often, how unproductive my life really is in terms of what I could accomplish.

I've

never made it through higher education, never wrote the books I wanted to write,

never documented my programming efforts, never been anything but a distraction to the groups I've joined. There have been so many disappointed people left in

my wake, and so many hopes of my potential dashed. But for all the flakiness, people still find me interesting to be around; they still like me, even knowing that

my commitments are not terribly reliable. So it is that the social exchange works,

and that people with ADD really have something to offer: because there is more to

life than meeting quotas and building another bridge. We need those people who feel driven to pursue their odd, random interests; who can contribute color to the

beautiful mosaic humanity has so diligently designed.

This is my take on what it means to live with ADHD, and why I truly believe that not only do we have a rightful place in society, as we are, but if others recognized

this more of us could leave behind our medication and begin to cooperate on much

more beneficial terms—for all involved.

Love is a Veil

Love is a veil betwixt the lover and the beloved.?

When you love any object, you love it because of the presence of the Beloved's

attributes manifest within it; just as you love a letter from a beloved one for the sake

of its author. All created things refer to God in this way; creation is the token of its

Creator.

So the love we feel is the natural response of the soul to the quality of its Cherished One as revealed by and through material reality. And yet, because He is ever

inaccessible to us, this love must always make reference to the point of revelation;

that is, it must always be known and expressed within the framework of a limited being, however much that love is for the sake of One Who is limitless. Thus the nature of our love itself tends to draw us away from the One Beloved, because that love exists due to limited things, and must exist in reference to what is limited—even our feeling of it is limited, our understanding is limited, our own being was created within these limits—albeit the love itself is directed beyond the limited toward the Unlimited.

For example, you receive a letter from one who is longed for. All you have at that moment is the letter; you read it again and again, countless times, for the sake of the one who wrote it. It is your means of communion, your path, your point of connection. In respect to you, it is both reunion and separation, connection and distance; it emphasizes the presence of the author, and emphasizes her absence, at one and the same moment; it confirms and denies reunion in a single stroke. In respect to the writer, the beloved, it is the dawning point, the voice, the means, the vehicle, the expression, the word, the means, the sign. It is her way of making her love known. It is the form of the tie, the life of the bond. In respect to itself, it is not worthy of mention; ink and paper alone have never deserved love.

In respect to the life, it is both means and barrier. It is the channel, but not the flow; the form, but not the substance; the manifestation, but not the essence. Between the believer and God, love itself is like the letter. For love is one of the created attributes of God, knowable by its signs in the world of man. Love is

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enumerated among the several virtues which consciousness may experience. And so love itself is a means by which we gain access to God through the revelation of His attributes in the expression of love. And yet God Himself is exalted beyond love itself. Even love proclaims its lifelessness and unworthiness compared to God Himself. It is only a created reality, at the service of believer's approach to his Creator,

but in no way the goal, or an adequate substitute for the goal. God is beyond all things, all knowledge—inapproachable. Love alone, as with the other attributes of God, permit union between what is exalted beyond any concept of union, and the believer whose limitations require the idea of “union” in order to end the fire of “separation”.

Such that love itself, in its own being, is glorified by the role that it plays, and bemoans that it, too, must hold the believer apart from true union, in the sense of absolute oneness between what is finite with what is beyond even infinity.

The painting must stand between you and Beauty, however much it is your means and access to Beauty; however much you could not know Beauty without it; however much its meaning and glory and purpose are its relationship to Beauty; yet, by its very presence, it declares that you and Beauty are still separate, owing to your need of a medium. The painting declares, “You are not yet one with Beauty, for you look to me to see Beauty, though I am not Beauty.” So with love, we love the creator, yet require that love to have the experience of loving. We cannot gain access—while cherishing love—beyond that love, nor reach the Source behind that love, no more than we could see without sight, or know without knowing, or experience presence in absence. The attributes separate us from what is attributed, as the phenomena debar us from the noumenon.

Beyond this is a mystical station in which the medium altogether disappears, as described by Bahá’u’lláh:

. . . the denizens of the undying city, who dwell in the green garden land, see not even “neither first nor last”; they fly from all that is first, and repulse all that is last. For these have passed over the worlds of names, and fled beyond the worlds of attributes as swift as lightning. Thus is it said: “Absolute Unity excludeth all attributes.” And they have made their dwelling-place in the shadow of the Essence.?

These are a people who consort with the Author of love, of beauty, of all quality perceptible to life. They see love in terms of what makes love lovable, and beauty as

to what makes beauty beautiful; and since these two are the same thing, beauty
and
love disappears and are replaced by Him. Love is left behind; only He remains.
Life
is no longer experienced, but God is the sole experience. Love as love was “a
veil
betwixt the lover and the loved one”; now it is Him, and has ceased to be
nameable
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as its own reality. You ask such a man, “What is this? What is that?” And
he might
say, “What is ‘this’, what is ‘that’?”

. . . those personages who in a single step have passed over the world of
the relative and the limited, and dwelt on the fair plane of the Absolute,
and pitched their tent in the worlds of authority and command—have
burned away these relativities with a single spark, and blotted out these
words with a drop of dew. And they swim in the sea of the spirit, and
soar in the holy air of light. Then what life have words, on such a plane,
that “first” and “last” or other than these be seen or mentioned! In
this
realm, the first is the last itself, and the last is but the first.

In thy soul of love build thou a fire
And burn all thoughts and words entire.?

One does not even say here that such and such a thing is beautiful because it
reflects the Beauty of God; there is no “thing” apart from God to be named;
there
is no “beauty” to be described; there is no distinction of high from low,
left from
right. God is God in the mode of God—even though this itself is limited by
its
being reference to what is unreferenceable. “. . . the wayfarer leaveth
behind him
the stages of the ‘oneness of Being and Manifestation’ and reacheth a
oneness that
is sanctified above these two stations.” That is, if the beauty of a thing is
due to the
light of God within it, this still implies that something apart from God is
revealing
a light that originated from an unseen point outside itself; this still creates
a veil
between the Source and the believer, by asserting the existence of an
intermediary—
who is, by the nature of the description, not God. Yet if nothing is which is
not
Him (“There was God and there was naught beside Him.”), then what is meant

by
“intermediary”? One does not say that the being of beauty and the
manifestation
of being related to the same Source, without implying a division within this
Source
between its being and its manifestation. When even this veil is burnt away,
then
even the intermediary ceases to have being as an intermediary, which would
imply a
separate being from the Being that is its being. And thus:

In this city, even the veils of light are split asunder and vanish away. “His
beauty hath no veiling save light, His face no covering save revelation.”?

All veils, even that veil by which Beauty was known as “beautiful” by its
beauty
in the world, are rent, and the believer himself is rescued from his belief. At
this
point there is no story to tell, for such would imply a telling, which there
cannot be
as itself. And yet, a telling there is, and a sign, a beauty, a love—even
though they do
not exist, and it is absurdity to speak as if they did. It is not that the sign
is rubbed
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out from view, for then it would still exist even if invisibly; it is that what
was known
as “sign” is utterly gone; even sign and signified are beyond a claim of
oneness, and
one cannot understand why there are words used to talk of such a thing as
“sign”
and “signified”. What are these, when only God is?
It impossible to discuss the matter in a language that constantly establishes
its
points by distinguishes one truth from another. Talk of unity discards
plurality,
while plurality continues undisturbed. If you have a hundred love letters, and
say
that in fact there is only one letter, you speak truth and confusion in the
same
moment. There are one hundred, and there is one; each statement denies the
other,
while both are true. There is no way around this aspect of language, since
clarity is
achieved at the cost of obscurity. It must be left, then, to experience; hearts
which

understand will know it by other means, and perhaps speaking on these matters only

happens because not speaking was, for a moment, simply less desirable.

The Manifestations of God

For a long time I have been puzzling as to the meaning of the title

“Manifestation

of God”. It seems rather obvious what it means in an intellectual sense:

these Holy

Beings are the Perfect Reflections of God’s Will in the plane of existence.

But actually grasping the meaning of the appellation has never quite happened for me.

There has thus always been an internal conflict over whether I should implore

God,

or Bahá’u’lláh, in my pursuit for personal change. Since there can be no

direct tie

binding me to my Creator, how valuable is it for me to pray directly to Him?

And

since I have never been able to equate Bahá’u’lláh with God (there are

times when

this seems possible, and times when it does not), I have always been confused

about

Whom should be focal point of my reflections.

This weekend something changed. How such changes come about we can never

say, but suddenly a wind blows from someplace unseen—an unbidden zephyr that

carries with it a deeper understanding of the mysteries of life. In that moment

something like a glimpse occurred to me, and I have been mulling it over and

would

like to share it with you.

It began about two years ago. At this time I was forced to admit that a part of

me craved fame. So I asked this part, “Why?” To gain the respect of people.

“Why?”

Because respect implies their admiration and love. “Why?” Because my heart

has an

empty space which yearns to be loved. “Why?” Because my being was created

to be

a lover, and hence this indicates the need for a Beloved.

That basically covers the two years of thought. The Beloved is of course God,

just as Pascal wrote, “God has created a God-shaped vacuum in the human

heart.”

But no matter how strenuously I imagined it, I could not reach God with my

thoughts. Nor with my dreams, hopes, desires, or any other part of me. I found

him to be inaccessible.

This weekend it finally occurred to me that Bahá’u’lláh is the very

manifestation

of my Beloved. That is, every word He utters is the same as God’s word, Their

wills

are identical, His Face is the Divine Face. To read the words of Bahá'u'lláh is like receiving a letter from that long-lost Friend. Finally I understood the tradition, “I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself.”

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In looking for a way to describe this, imagine a person whom you have loved deeply. Immediately a picture of the person comes to mind. But is this imagine truly what we love? We remember their voice, their mannerisms—but is this what we love?

If our beloved should suffer an accident, and lose the faculty of speech, or become altered in some way, do we cease to love them, if truly it was love? So the outward form is mutable, and subject to change, but the very thing we love about them is more essential than that; it is not so easily destroyed.

In effect, then, what we perceive in them is the manifestation of that essential

being whom we love. Their body and mind we know will decay and pass away some day, but still we feel that there is something which has won our eternal love.

So the

body can be looked at as a manifestation of the spirit. The spirit is inaccessible to

our perception, but because of the intermediary of the body, we are given a chance

to perceive and become aware of the spirit which we love so dearly.

In the same way, Bahá'u'lláh is the Manifestation of God's Perfection.

I know

that this is nothing different from what is taught in the first grade of Bahá'í schools

everywhere, but in a very significant way it is quite new to me. These basic mysteries

never cease to amaze me in their depth. It seems everywhere I turn, there is also

something new to behold in the creation of the God of Mercy.

Truth, or what we all strive for, is better than sliced bread. When we become aware of that essence, our entire existence will revolve around it.

Thus we are drawn toward Truth, not repelled away from our lower state of being. This fundamental distinction in spiritual viewpoint is a profound one:

Love

is the cause of action and change, not vice versa.

I believe Truth is the most divine, heart-warming, beautiful thing there is.

I've

thought this since I was very young, long before I found religion, before I learned that “God” is a symbolic reference to this Truth. The Bahá’í Writings call it “Abhá”. The next life is the “Abhá” kingdom. Every day we repeat “Alláh-u-Abhá”—meaning, “God is Abhá”. Religion is about the attractive nature of God’s reality, that every good thing points to Him, and that “home” and “fulfillment” are found in that direction. It is most emphatically NOT about denial, self-scorn, or measured according to the degree of our self-abnegation. As the movie *Chocolat* so beautifully said, “Let us measure our goodness not by what we deny ourselves, but rather by the degree of to which we accept others.” When a lover is enthralled by his intended one, self-denial simply, naturally, easily, joyfully occurs! Humility is not something that needs to be worked for, nor is sacrifice or selflessness. Put me in a room with something desirable enough, and all those virtues will automatically become manifest. ???

The whole question is then: Where is God? How do I find Him? If He is so great, why don’t I feel it? Education is what begins the process of becoming aware of His reality, and then drawn to it like a magnet. When we catch a hint of this Truth, if the seeker “findeth on this journey a trace of the traceless Friend, and inhalet the fragrance of the long-lost Joseph from the heavenly messenger”, then we enter the Valley of Love, and all bets are off. Too often the attempt is made to manufacture spirituality by copying its products. But this task is too difficult for any human being to accomplish. The material world is too attractive by itself. Who can labor life long, striving for something never felt, never seen, when all around there are constant promises of pleasure and security? It is too much. But spirituality—to me—is to dip one’s foot in the lake, and then never look back. It is that much better. The world does not need education on morals and virtue. Not only. The purpose of morals and virtue is to align the heart so that it

may recognize these very truths.

I would even say to forget all duties, all goals or tasks. All one needs is to catch a

breath of that divine wind. After that, everything falls into place simply, like sunlight

filling a dark room.

Until that state is achieved, it is natural to wonder, where is it? Why is it?

How

can I find it? Asking this question begins the journey. The Prophet appears mainly

to show people it is there, because it is so easy to forget amidst the confusions of

life. He also gives us the laws and teachings necessary to keep that awareness alive

through successive generations. As long as there are people who have touched this

source (the “salt of the earth”), and manifest the joy and radiance that stems from it,

the world will never be bereft of proof that there are other realities than this one.

So my answer to your question is: find what your heart desires most, what it longs for in its depths. That feeling is your end of God’s connection to humanity. If

you can feel this thirst, look for what will satisfy it. Whatever does not, cannot be

true. Keep looking, casting away all previous knowledge and understanding, until

your inner divining rod (full pun intended) feels a pull.

If you can remain true to your heart’s need, and never become distracted by apparent, temporary gains, you will indeed find what you seek. And once you found, you won’t ever ask again, “Did I really find it?”, because all further questions

will be blotted from your heart. No one has to ask themselves, “Do I love this

person?” when they find someone they are genuinely drawn to.

In a way, seeking religious truth is like my recent experience with chess. For example, I know there are hobbies out there, waiting for me to find them, but I’ll

never know if I just sit at home waiting. I have to look. And once I find the hobby, I

won’t have to fake any interest. It doesn’t require any effort at all to remain engaged!

It takes zero sense of duty for me to read chess books, because I’m in love with them!

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I go through a book every few days. It's a lot of work, a lot of memorization, but I don't even notice it. Once I found what my mind was hungering for, it became a source of energy, not a sink. To an infinite degree is this true of religion, since it is the soul that's involved, not just the mind or heart. This is also the beautiful simplicity, the ease of it. It increases our ability to strive, by turning that striving into play. In the early days, people danced to their martyrdom. They laughed while being tortured. Let us not torture ourselves by imagining that religion is ever heavy or onerous!! Put a soul in touch with its true source, and the resulting fire is blinding. This, I believe, is the fundamental law of spirituality: If you long for perfection, look for God. Religion is God-centered, not self-perfection centered. On meditation

As for any set form of meditation, we have the following from the letters of Shoghi

Effendi:

As to meditation: This also is a field in which the individual is free. There are no set forms of meditation prescribed in the teachings, no plan as such, for inner development. The friends are urged-nay enjoined to pray, and they also should meditate, but the manner of doing the latter is left entirely to the individual.?

So as far as recommendations go, I'm afraid that all I have to offer are personal suggestions.

There are many grades of meditation. The simplest form occurs when we ponder a certain point expressed in the Writings. As we plunge deeper and deeper, meanings begin to unravel like the skin of an onion. Suddenly we realize a connectivity

latent in all things which defies the limits of our comprehension. This moment of intellectual frustration usually results in a feeling of awe, and of mental tiredness.

After this point, I often fall asleep.

A more subtle meditation involves releasing the mind from its material condition. We are all created of God. With respect to Him, in the field of true existence,

none of us exist. "How can utter nothingness gallop its steed in the field of preexistence, or a fleeting shadow reach to the everlasting sun?" We are simply manifestations of the Will of our Creator, as thoughts are the manifestation of our own will.

But do thoughts have any reality? They have a conditioned reality; their existence depends on us, though at the same time they may have a profound effect on us. Noticing this lack of true existence, and plumbing its depths, is another form of meditation. One understands that the words of God are not simply true—they are Truth. Every veil interposing itself between ourselves and the truth of His words is a foreign element. When we ponder the mercy and justice of God, does not a feeling of indignance sometimes creep up on us? We think, “How can God allow such things to happen in the world? Isn’t He the All-Powerful?” But God’s Will is His own. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has written a beautiful prayer expressing this intention:

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O thou who art turning thy face towards God! Close thine eyes to all things else, and open them to the realm of the All-Glorious. Ask whatsoever thou wishest of Him alone; seek whatsoever thou seekest from Him alone. With a look He granteth a hundred thousand hopes, with a glance He healeth a hundred thousand incurable ills, with a nod He layeth balm on every wound, with a glimpse He freeth the hearts from the shackles of grief. He doeth as He doeth, and what recourse have we? He carrieth out His Will, He ordaineth what He pleaseth. Then better for thee to bow down thy head in submission, and put thy trust in the All-Merciful Lord.?

As this self-knowledge of our existence through God dawns, the mind experiences a wonderful sense of freedom. The gates of the City of Certitude open, and we are no longer at odds with our Faith. In this condition we are able to apprehend the truths that were invisible to us before. The key is to know, from the bottom-most depths of our heart, that God’s creation is His own. “He doth what He willeth, ordaineth what He pleaseth.” If He were to treat us unfairly, and to manifest nothing but cruelty, that same injustice would be Justice, and that same cruelty, the essence of kindness. As Bahá’u’lláh has written in a prayer:

My God, Whom I worship and adore! I bear witness unto Thy unity and Thy oneness, and acknowledge Thy gifts, both in the past and in the present. Thou art the All-Bountiful, the overflowing showers of Whose mercy have rained down upon high and low alike, and the splendors of Whose grace have been shed over both the obedient and the rebellious.

O God of mercy, before Whose door the quintessence of mercy hath bowed down, and round the sanctuary of Whose Cause loving-kindness, in its inmost spirit, hath circled, we beseech Thee, entreating Thine ancient grace, and seeking Thy present favor, that Thou mayest have mercy upon all who are the manifestations of the world of being, and to deny them not the outpourings of Thy grace in Thy days.

All are but poor and needy, and Thou, verily, art the All-Possessing, the All-Subduing, the All-Powerful.?

The point is that God embraces all things, and nothing embraces God. The ageold question, “Can God create a rock too heavy for Himself to lift,”

presupposes that

God can be placed in a condition of lifting something external. But His Essence is

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unknowable. This means that no thought we have ever formed—however lofty—excluding the words of Prophets of God, has ever been close to the truth. It could be

stated that we have never thought of God before, nor known Him. Every definition

we have for “God” is false; every supposition of knowledge, groundless. The only

sourcebook we have is the Teachings of His Manifestations.

This is because God desires for us to know Him. Why He desires this is His own affair. The fact that he wishes us to worship Him—even though He is beyond

all need of worship, and nothing we can ever affirm of Him is true—is also entirely

up to Him. He asks us to state in the short obligatory prayer, “I bear witness, O my

God, that thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee.”

Plants were created to receive light from the sun and carbon-dioxide from the air. When they do not do this, they grow sick and die. Animals were created to eat

food and drink water. When they do not do this, they also die. And humans were created to know and worship God. If we neglect this duty, we too will die.

This is the heart of meditation, to me: when the mind realizes its own nature, and in that moment turns toward God with a sincere heart. What else were we created for? Although a discussion of worship would take a long time, it is the basis.

Prayer, work, service, good deeds: this is what we are. And until we realize it, we will

be incapable of loving one another. Can hungry wolves abide together in the same

cage? Do plants in a dark room make for a good garden? We are depriving ourselves

of the very reason for our being, and this has set us at odds with one another.

A metaphor to describe the Bahá'í

Fund

Imagine a society quite like our own: there is a city, a power plant, and thousands

of homes and buildings. The trick is to get the power to the people, since once it is

there it can accomplish innumerable helpful tasks.

The utility of electricity allows society to grow and develop. It permits us to discover realities that erstwhile were hidden deep in the bowels of nature. It reveals

discoveries and inventions that continue to amaze us with each passing year.

Yet this energy does not appear by itself. The essential properties of electricity

were created with the beginning of the universe, when all the rudimentary forces

were created. It was then that the potential for the appearance of such a force was

brought into being. But for the most part it has lain dormant, until the conditions

were just right for its appearance in the heavens above us in the form of lightning.

Men quickly acknowledged the transformative power of this force, and set about learning how to harness it. It was at about this time that a brilliant architect stepped

forth, who devised plans and set forth projects providing a means whereby this energy could be channeled and put to use by the people.

But the people were completely in control of the material resources. The architect and his fellow supporters were only a meager band, scorned and misunderstood.

The people-who had never witnessed the power of electricity, except for some flashing lights-laughed at the idea that machines could be devised that operated without

the need for human intervention.

Ultimately, however, the architect won the support of a small band of followers,

who were open enough to give his ideas a chance. Through the aid of demonstration

and example, they came to realize what a tremendous potential this idea portended

for the city at large. And so they set about trying to communicate these ideas to

others in a fashion that was compatible with the ways and understanding of the people.

Gradually there arose a significant enough number of individuals to champion

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the architect's cause. Of course it was still very minor in comparison to the city's population, but it was enough for the architect's "disciples" to take heart.

In the meantime, the architect had already begun producing electricity and refining the plant. He had started this project even before there were any supporters, because he knew the day would come when the entire city would want the benefit of electric power, and that the plant would have to be capable enough on that day-or else what was the benefit? So in order to achieve this, development work had begun right away. It would still be several years before the plant would be able to output energy in sufficient amounts.

And so he began, putting faith in his disciples to accomplish what they had to by the time the plant would be ready.

As more and more people joined the "faith" of this architect (as they called it),

they discovered that he knew much more than just how to make generators: he also knew how to design a cabling system that would canalize this potent energy into every part of the city. Yet to make real his design, a great quantity of copper was needed in order to build the cables.

Coincidentally enough, the coinage of this particular country was made of copper. Copper coins-just the substance the architect needed to fulfill his designs-were

to be found everywhere, in the hands and pockets of the people.

Now in the interim-because a great deal of time had passed-the original architect

passed away, but had left plans suitable enough for a committee to follow them.

It

then elected sub-committees, and further sub-committees, and so on, until there was enough infrastructure for the "Company of the Faithful" to ensure that the

work would go on.

This Company discovered that everything necessary had been planned out in advance by the Architect (they now capitalized His name out of respect, including

all pronouns referring to Him). All they needed was the copper.

As it became necessary, they grew the number of committees and territories to include the ever-growing numbers of the faithful. Yet it finally all boiled

down to
a question of copper: without it, despite the best of intentions, who would lay
the
cables that would fulfill the final objectives of His Grand Design? This simple
metal
would make possible the groundwork that He foretold would precede the coming
of the Most Great Society-a society wherein every person would use electricity
to
accomplish his task, and no one would be forced to toil in the fields any
longer like
beasts of burden. All that was needed was copper; that and the ongoing
endeavors
of the faithful to educate more and more people about the Plan.
Campaigns were begun, and literature was produced by the thousands. It seemed
that the growing body of followers needed only a push-yet they seemed somehow
resentful of the constant reminders. "Why keep telling us about the need for
copper?"
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they said. "Isn't copper just a plain, material thing? Too many people are
already
interested in copper. After all, energy is the main thing. That's what it's
all about."

And, "yes, that is what it's all about," the Company would say, "but
how can we
offer this Most Precious Elixir if there doesn't exist a means to transport
it? Immaterial things require material vehicles. One cannot carry water in his
hands; it requires
a vessel."

And they responded, "Yes, yes, we understand you. Forgive us. Here is more
copper. Now please leave us to meditate further on this Most Wonderful
Capacity.

It is truly quite amazing! Think of all the things we can do!"

It wasn't difficult to get people excited about the as-yet-unrealized
potentialities lying hidden, latent in the force of electricity. It was more a
question of how

the Company was to fulfill the original dream of the Architect: that of
bringing
unlimited quantities of energy to every part of the globe.

Without copper-which was now being called the "life-blood" of the
Company's

cause, since without it the work of the Company simply came to a halt-the
Architect's final plans, the most glorious stage of His design, would be
difficult to bring

into fruition. It simply needed more copper.

And so they laid out the cables furiously, these workers for the Company, and
some even gave their lives, spending their very last days in the remotest parts

of the earth. The Company received enough copper to continue, but it was feeling the pangs of short supply. The arteries had been squeezed tight, and its life-blood was now eking its way through an ever-closing aperture. This, perhaps, is why copper was referred to as a life-blood: because the degree of its availability was directly related to the general availability of the Precious Substance itself, which was the reason why this whole endeavor had begun in the first place. Yet even the Precious Substance was not the final goal. This was simply a means to make possible the further realization of the potentialities that lay hid in the society. The Creator had created man in order that he might carry forward "an everadvancing civilization". This civilization had attained a certain degree of development in its last six thousand years, but now was the time for a quantum leap: a leap that would change the course of mankind forever. And the ultimate goal of that change was a thing requiring the deepest contemplation. It deals with the very purpose of life-the story behind the story-and that, unfortunately, must be told another day. But to continue: the pioneers, as they were called, had extended the Company's network around the entire planet: even if this meant only a single wire stretched all the way from the seat of the Company (in Israel, of all places), to the furthestmost reaches of the Antipodes. The pioneers sent back word saying that the people were ready for more, and were poised to put this awesome force to greater use, but that they needed more copper to do so. Those wires took a lot of copper, after all. So now it comes to today. Those things that the Architect foresaw a hundred ???

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years ago are becoming manifest before our very eyes. The Company is poised to make a critical move that will usher in the New Society-one freed from all the hindrances of the past. This society will base its very functioning on that Essential Force, and will discover to a greater extent the reason why all these things were brought into being. It seems dream-like, but somehow this new future promises to bring to us an end to war, the equality of peoples, and the coming together of all the

other Companies in the world, who in their time had introduced technologies just as revolutionary and useful, and just as hard to establish in the hearts of men.

It only rests on us to offer the bricks that will build this building- the copper that will thicken those cables until they carry the torrents of spiritual energy required to fulfill His Great Design. What it will look like in that distant future we can only dimly foresee, but what it has done for us so far is enough to instill anyone with hope.

Millions of feet to lay, and the smelter is running low. . . And now a budget in the U.S. of \$?? million units in ???? alone! Amazing! But what an effect it will produce if we can muster the will to see it happen. . .

A metaphor for the self

The Buddhist Writings say that there is no individual self which is gaining, or achieving; only a combination of elements with a certain appearance, from which stem actions and results. These results propagate through the world of being, according to their efficacy, conducing either to its betterment or its detriment. They endure in the sense that friends and progeny will continue to play out the thought forms and actions that were begun by the original doer.

The doer, however, is not a concrete entity with his own existence per se.

Rather,

he is a “recognized” entity, just as a table is recognized by having four legs, and a tripod by having three. The reality of the table is in its substance and appearance,

whereas the concept “table” is applied afterward, and serves only the role of nomenclature. By naming it a table, this does not create a “table essence”, just as by naming

myself “John” I do not create an ego essence. “John” is a term applied to an aggregate, evolving pattern of arms, legs, ideas, and words, which (who) generates actions that result in an impact on the world.

This confluence of diverse elements which have cohered under the title of a “person”, strives toward perfection. If the idea of perfection is misunderstood, the progression will be downward; if it is properly understood, it will tend upward. The

choices that it makes in this progression are the very choices that produce the actions

and results which propagate and endure according to their nature.

But name does not convey essence. If an individual is a pattern of motives and constituents, and this pattern moves in a collective form—each part consulting with the other parts continuously—the result is a coherent pattern that can be

distinguished from its background. The distinguished element is given a name, as

happens with most things that can be differentiated from their environment. But a confusion arises when this aggregate of non-essential elements is misconstrued as

having an essential reality solely because of its apparent cohesiveness.

What is the self then? Perhaps the self is like naming a cloud formation, and then becoming attached to it and fighting for its continuation in a particular form.

No energy is ever lost in the Universe, and the water particles that make up a cloud

are extremely difficult to destroy (atomically speaking). So there is no reason to fear

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a destruction of the essential reality of the cloud. But if it is the form or shape of a

cloud that we are attached to, this is a thing extremely liable to change, and nearly

impossible to preserve for anything longer than a short time.

And yet, the cloud is not non-existent: it is made up of a substance. Form is impossible without substance. So perhaps it is that this substance is our reality.

While the outward form is changeable and evanescent, the inward element of which

it is constructed is not so likely to change.

Man displays two categories of attributes from which one could deduce a substance. The first category is material appearance, and concerns the things he is made

up of, and the particular actions he performs. These things could be classed as the

elements perceivable to an animal, and hence belong to the animal kingdom (such as weight, color, shape, etc).

The second category concerns attributes which man partakes of alone, and experiences independently of the animals, such as honor, truthfulness, glory and beauty.

Through right motivations we can express these using the medium of our actions.

But through wrong motivations, everyone knows that an honorable act with a

dishonorable heart is far from virtue.

Paired with our physical form there is a mental/emotional form that is constantly changing in configuration, and which might be called the “psychological self” —

apart from the “self” that is our physical self. This psychological self also evolves, and constitutes patterns that are constantly changing toward perfection. If we imagine that this inward self is also unreal, and only a nominal description of an aggregate pattern of tendencies and strivings, then in order for it to exist it must also be formed from an essential substance which is real and does not disintegrate or change.

This would be the “soul” of man, in the same way that water vapor could be called the “soul” of a cloud.

Imagining further a sky populated by unique cloud souls, distinguished by the particular water molecules that make up their form. While these may change form and achieve a lesser or higher degree in the sky, they are never destroyed.

Through change, they may acquire a beautiful shape, or they may fall to the earth and have to endure many days in the soil before being taken up into the sky again to assume other forms. In this metaphor, there is a substantial reality, and even distinct, perdurable essences, but no self or permanent “image”.

Imagine as another example the life-cycle of a particular atom. It begins independently, existing as hydrogen in the vacuum of space. Then it may fall to Earth

and become bonded with oxygen to form water. If this water is pure, it may be used

by a plant to build up part of its cell wall. If this cell is healthy, an animal may consume it for food. If the animal finds the cell salutary, it will include it in its tissues.

If the animal is in good condition, a man may slaughter it for a meal. If the flesh agrees with the man’s bodily needs, he may make it part of his own frame. If useful,

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the body may take it up into the nervous system, to aid in the functioning of the brain. This service might facilitate in the generation of a noble thought, and better the virtue of the man. The man may then extend his hand in service to humanity,

and thereby win his way into paradise.
Otherwise, the atom might never have been attracted by the gravity of the Earth,
and remained alone and desolate in the wastes of space; or at each step it might have
fallen into a lesser condition of existence, and not been deemed worthy of becoming part of a higher reality. In both situations, however, although the “name”, the
“form” and the “station” of the atom may have continued to change such that its
“personality” at each stage was entirely unrelated to its original condition, yet it’s essential reality as an atom of hydrogen— single, indivisible, indestructible according
to physical laws—was never altered or diminished. What changed was the role it
had, and the part it played in effecting a transformation toward Godly attributes in
the world in which it was a participant.
Had the atom choice, and if its choice had led it toward becoming a servant to the man’s reality, one might say that it had achieved a certain perfection. Imagine
further that it were made cognizant of the benefits imparted by that participation,
and in a sense received the blessings of the man’s activity, even though far too lowly—
according to its own reality—to be called responsible for them. What joy there
would be for that atom! But if the atom’s choices had led it to become a sickness
to the plant or animal, it would have ended in the dust, to be trampled down by a
world not made any better by the atom’s efforts, and which perhaps it might have
aided had it only willed to do so. Where is the plant now to absorb that atom into
its tissues? Where is the animal that would consider eating dust? When will a man
walk by who is willing to place dirt in his mouth? Until, by the grace of God, some
reconfiguration of the world occurs by which the atom is given another chance to
continue upward in the cycle of life, it will be forced to endure and suffer according
to its own unwillingness to obey: powerless to move itself from its lowly condition.
Like a drop which becomes part of the ocean, and is not destroyed but can never be found again; perhaps in this way we are meant to dissolve ourselves into

the
arms of the Beloved. Man is like a leaf which has blown from the Tree of Life,
cast
about by the tempestuous winds. Perhaps his only hope is to yield himself to
the
soil, submissive, lowly, there to be consumed and disintegrated. And thus shorn
of
self and reduced to his true elements, he may finally be reclaimed by the Tree
who
bore him. In this there is no destruction evident, only transformation toward
the
goal of nearness.

A drop of water is the best source of analogy I've found: A drop is made of
the essence of water, which exists within the ocean. This essence, no matter
how
dissolved the drop might ever become, is never destroyed. When the drop leaves
the ocean, it acquires independent form, but nonetheless its reality as a drop
of
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water is unchanged by this separation. Should it rejoin the ocean, it will give
up its
momentary independence, but its essence will remain as it has always been. For
the
drop, there are a million questions to be asked: size, shape, location, etc.;;
but for the
water, there is only one: is it near or far from the Source of its Being.
So, there is a "self" which is the separate drop, and then there is the
God-created
self, or soul, which is the water that constitutes the drop. Sartre and
Krishnamurti,

I believe, are referring to the former definition when they say that the self
does not
exist (i.e., it has apparent form only, not essence). As 'Attár writes:

In ceasing to exist separately it retains its beauty. It exists and non-exists.
How can this be? The mind cannot conceive it.

This second view of self-which-is-not-self is what allows the Bahá'í
teachings
about the soul to agree with the Buddhist teachings that there is no self at
all. I
am including an essay below, written a little while ago, that further
investigates this
theme.

Despite all this, our seeming "essence" is still contingent, a borrowed
existence

that derives its being from the One Source. “self ” is a mirage, while self is the real image; and yet, without the constant shining of the Light, even that image would cease to exist. If we become like moths, we will care only about the Light, and not the images it illumines or makes possible—and certainly not the shadows they seem to cast.

The thought of this station causes fear, and a struggle to reclaim a “foundation” for our being, since such selflessness implies an unwavering trust that in the midst of this absolute nothingness (for us), all is glorious (in Him). As long as we lay claim to any sort of being, I wonder how we can ever appreciate the true meaning of Being. And yes, God has granted us an eternal soul that we might forever know and worship Him; but even this does not truly exist on the uttermost planes of His being.

Were the eye of discernment to be opened, it would recognize that in this very state, they [the Manifestations of God] have considered themselves utterly effaced and non-existent in the face of Him Who is the All-Pervading, the Incorruptible. Methinks, they have regarded themselves as utter nothingness, and deemed their mention in that Court an act of blasphemy. For the slightest whispering of self, within such a Court, is an evidence of self-assertion and independent existence. In the eyes of them that have attained unto that Court, such a suggestion is itself a grievous transgression. How much more grievous would it be, were aught else to be mentioned in that Presence, were man’s heart, ???

his tongue, his mind, or his soul, to be busied with anyone but the Well-Beloved, were his eyes to behold any countenance other than His beauty, were his ear to be inclined to any melody but His voice, and were his feet to tread any way but His way.?

When I think only of my own awareness (per se), I realize it has only one attribute: nearness or remoteness from God. Otherwise, even its seeming independence from others is simply a token of God’s limitless powers of creation, and a sign of His to be wondered at.

Modes of Seeing Reality

The sun that arose yesterday and the sun that rises tomorrow are considered the same

because the idea referred to by “sun” has not changed. The atoms of its surface may have changed entirely, the configuration of its energy, the pattern of its magnetic fields; but in terms of the attributes we mean by “sun”, nothing has changed.

The word, then, does not refer to a present reality, but to an idea whose purpose is to abstract the basic principle of the individual suns presented over time.

If “sun” meant any one sun, it would cease to be true even before it was spoken.

This same holds for individuals, all of whose atoms will have changed to a different configuration by the time one conceives the thought.

Time permits minute transformations so constant that the physical bodies we give names to have little to do with reality. The distance of electrons from the

parent nucleus is such that, if time were entirely stopped, all we could see in place

of Earth would be dark space. But since electrons whirl at tremendous speeds, and

because changing energy states allow photons to be absorbed and retransmitted, time

permits a visual perception of “things” whose reality is otherwise imperceptible.?

These “things”, then, like the “sun”, do not refer to real compositions of elements, but to more abstract conceptions inferred from the consistencies among the

transformations of those elements. These successive temporal impressions impinge

on the memory, and owing to a lack of fundamental differentiation from earlier counterparts, an imago is formed in the mind to which we can apply a word like “sun”.

This demonstrates that the “sun” is not the sun. Nor can the real sun ever be

known in the same way as ideas, since it changes before consciousness has an opportunity to conceive of its prior state. This leaves us with two modes of apprehending

reality: Cognitively, by the process of ideation that abstract ideas and principles

from constantly changing particulars; and directly, by the mere fact that our own

existence is part of the reality of which we are aware.

If direct experience could not take place, it would mean one can only live in the ideational landscape presented by the mind—in the summarized projection of

actual reality. However, since this process of summary is indeed taking

place—as

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evidenced by the imagos resulting from it—then at some level we must be aware of the contents to which these summaries refer. That is, for an awareness of “sun”

to exist, there must at some level be an awareness of the actual sun, even if preconsciously we transcend those infinitesimal experiences to arrive at the truncated

abstraction, “sun”.

Some religious philosophies propose that we turn fully to the direct experience of reality by forgoing cognitive apperception. By emptying the mind, by meditation,

the avoidance of words, resisting processes of identification, we can experience what

is real by refusing to reduce it in terms of human understanding.

This approach, while it appreciates the value of the realities founding our experience of life, neglects the nobility of the mind in its ability to perceive underlying

principles. If direct experience is being aware of the infinite variety of life, then

apperception is the discovery of the fundamental unities underlying this variety.

Were human happiness found only in a direct perception of reality, there would be little reason to argue in favor of apperception. But can one be happy who denies

their nature? If use of the mind is a natural inclination—and pursuing knowledge

causes enough joy to suggest this is so—then ideation must take its place among the

higher pursuits.

What does ideation offer? There are some who scorn science because it removes people from life, while others—the physicists—find so much joy in the idea of

ultimate theories of life that they dedicate their lives to it. They obviously enjoy

something that fully engages their attention. Perhaps both kinds of awareness offer

something to the soul.

Returning to the analogy of the sun, we cognize the abstract term “sun” by transcending? the sequence of individual suns that present themselves over a course

of time. One could say we glean a principle from the variegation of phenomena; that reality offers us a set of impressions, which are consistent in some regard, and

our intellect is capable of identifying the nature of this consistency. In the case of the sun, it is light, warmth, location, etc., in contrast to its ever-varying quantity of atoms.

Yet the longer we spend in our study of the sun, the more we discover that even in the flux of atomic configurations there are general principles to be discovered.

This perception of principle from phenomena seems capable of as much profundity as the degree of our attention, with the result that physicists continue to grow

hopeful of finding a single set of laws that will describe the exceedingly complex interactions of the universe.

The motive underlying this search for a general description of reality is perhaps

more than mere intellectual curiosity. Whenever principles are discovered there is a

feeling of release from the vagaries of time, coupled with a deep appreciation of how

ably time plays out the consequences of such principles. We detach ourselves from
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the inexplicable character of phenomena—with the danger of separating ourselves

from life; while those who pursue direct experience unify themselves with phenomena at the risk of becoming incurious.

Direct experience appears to exercise the extroverted nature in man: our ability

to sympathize and sacrifice the coherence of our identity in order to know more intimately what is external to the self; while apperception exercises our introverted

nature by abstracting from the many toward an inner experience of the one. The fewer the laws, principles, and ideas, which are needed to describe life, the more

harmonious and unified our relationship to it. For whereas objects are constantly

different, they are also always the same. These two modes of reality are coexistent, so

it makes sense that human beings pursue two modes of comprehending that reality.

The ideal of direct experience is that nothing is ever the same: each moment is always new, unexplored, mysterious. The ideal of apperception is that everything is

familiar and well-known; that even between people who have never met, there is a

deeper bond uniting them as though instances of a single entity. Consider a universe full of mirrors, with a single light shining into all of them. On the one hand, since the angles of the mirror are different—and the effect is compounded by reflected reflections—one sees a rich universe filled with variety and complexity; on the other hand, since there is only light, all that is ever seen is that light—and to know the light well enough is to know the potential for its variation in the mirrors. If we call these two experiences of life immanence and transcendence, then the fullest development of man would consist in an appreciation of both: the unity of life and the diversity of life. So the magnifying feeling that comes through the discovery of general principles is as potent as the feeling of knowing that every morn and evening is different from those that came before. Without denying or demeaning the richness of every drop filling the sea, yet it is also true that each drop conveys all the ocean's secrets, and that even in an atom one may discern the signature of the laws governing the whole expanse of the universe. All things proceed revolve around a single principle, while no matter how much we may experience, one is astonished at the infinite forms this purpose has called into being.

Multilinearity and Free Will

The problem of free will concerns the domain of humanity's possible evolution. If, on the one hand, we are constrained to whatever decree science imposes, our direction and goal must be fixed. This has rankled just about everyone, however, since it precludes any essential benefit to thinking at all. On the other hand, if humans are completely free to choose, it requires that we accept the world we inhabit as entirely a product of human choice. Whatever design might pertain to the world is confined to those systems lacking choice, and generally the argument runs that whatever has come into being since man's fall from Edenistic bliss is now enmired in that fall. If the world as we know it is the process of human decision, where is Divine Will? If we say one must be content with the Will of God, to what does this

apply?

However many people may agree with that sentiment, very few are found willing to

accept particular events, if they do not accord with that inexplicable sense of God's

Will that people seem universally to possess. Whatever appears to be virtuous, or

expected as a good outcome, this is God's Will; but the truly despicable, evil cruelties

of the world, these are man's alone.

There is, however, a non-linear view of events in which it is plain that both conditions obtain: That every action borne of choice reflects free will, while every

action accords with the will of God. I call it "multilinear" to reflect the situation it

describes.

Determinism results from considering—independently of any moral or theological ideas—the simple fact that every effect is preceded by a cause. This is projected

into the formula that every cause might be followed by a single effect. Chained together, it becomes necessary that all futures effects are caused by causes

anterior to those effects. Thus is all past and future mapped out, and free will ostensibly

fades away.

However, while undeniable that every effect is preceded by a single cause, is it

true that every cause can have only one effect? Already in the theory of quantum

coherence we have found repeatable evidence that a single cause may have multiple

multiple

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simultaneous effects, until interference from an external system causes a collapse of

those possibilities into one outcome.

This evidence describes a situation in which a single cause may have a set number

of possible effects, multiplied throughout the domain of subatomic interactions to

provide for a finite, yet innumerable number of possible futures. It is not possible,

furthermore, to induce an effect which is not possible from a given cause at a given

moment, upholding the scientific requirement that every effect be preceded by

a

cause for which that effect is a possible outcome.

How the agency of human will is related to the brain we do not know, but if we say that this relationship involves selection among mutually possible outcomes—

which are selected between by some heretofore unknown agency—then we have a model which allows for free will within a system of determined outcomes, albeit the

quantity of possible outcomes is sufficiently large to defy conception.

For those with a taste for teleology, let us say further that whatever pattern has

been laid down to cause the orderliness of the world, and the rising up of conscious

beings capable of such a “selective will” as to choose among possible futures, that

this pattern is equally present in all of those possibilities, since their number is determinable in their finity from the initial moment of the pattern’s inception. There

is no method available for the computation, but by assuming that each cause leads

to a finite number of possible effects, we presume that the universe of all possible

effects followed by their effects, etc., remains a quantity that while impossibly large

is yet numerable.

This numerability of the set of possible futures implies a pre-ordained set of possibles, the exact shape of which considers the entire set, and not merely the

single track which human choice has selected from among this incalculably dense forest. Yet the forest is not a desert, or an ocean; we are cutting our way through a

pre-known geography, and the set of possible exits at any time is beyond the force

of will to evade.

To use a plainer analogy, consider the presentation of meals in a cafeteria.

Although we each make a choice according to our individual preference, and although

the set of possible combinations is rather large, in the end we are not choosing outside of the set of possibilities initially chosen for us by the cafeteria staff. For our

part, we are choosing, according to our will, whatever suits us; for their part, we

are choosing, according to their will, from among the set of choices presented to us.

There is no outcome that can exceed the possibilities allowed for, and in this sense

our choice is foreknown—if by foreknowledge one includes a knowledge of each

possible outcome simultaneously. Only the linearity of human minds might find such a conception difficult.

Thus we have reached a situation in which foreknowledge does not determine choice, and yet choice cannot escape that foreknowledge, since all available choices

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exist within the scope of the ordained pattern. The atoms of a river may jostle and

bounce, but the river's bed has fore-ordained the course. Whether one of those drops

strives for the surface, or sinks to the depths, they will all reach the same sea—some

collecting on the bottom, some moving out with the current toward greater depths.

Now if we call all events God's will, we mean that teleologically speaking, no

event can exist which does not reflect the fore-ordained pattern of human life.

We

also allow human will, which is active within this pattern, but cannot choose beyond

it. And we admit the principle of determinism, in a multilinear fashion, by allowing

each cause to have multiple events, which are chosen among by the function of coherence, the result of selective interference by effects external to the cause.

In this assessment, it would be better to say that human's have selective will; it

is not entirely free. It cannot contravene the Will expressed in the pattern, which to

us is absolute, inviolate. We are determined insofar as the Primal Will determines

our possibilities, and we are free insofar as these possibilities exist, unimaginably

broad. We are not ships, sailing upon an unlimited sea; rather, we are wayfarers on

a marked land, seeking a path to lead us to such shores.

Nickels and dimes

When we make choices in this life, do we make them based on knowledge, or something else? While reading a book lately, an image came to mind which perhaps

underscores the importance of a continued study of Life, since we are always in a position of making choices, and how we make them can often alter our lives permanently—for better or for worse.

Imagine a closed room with two piles of coins. To your left, one million dimes; to your right, one million nickels. Between the two is a man who tells you that can

choose either one or the other. Whichever you choose will be deposited into your bank account immediately-all taxes paid, and no fees attached.

Which do you choose?

A stack of ten dimes is about half an inch high. A row of ten dimes is seven and

a half inches long. One million is $???$ x $???$ x $???$, or five inches tall by seventy-five

inches square. That's almost a half-foot high, by over six feet square.

A stack of ten nickels is just under three-quarters of an inch high, with a row of

ten being eight and three-quarters long. For a million nickels, that's two-thirds of a

foot by seven and a third-foot square.

To a child, which of the piles appears more valuable? To a five-year old, the bigger pile (the nickels) obviously seems like "more money", because it is more money

in the sense that it represents a larger weight in coinage.

If the man between the coins asked the child which stack he wanted, he would probably pick the nickels. Even if an adult were to tell him that the dimes were

worth more, would he believe it? And if he then happened to make the right choice because he trusted the adult-would he understand why? Wouldn't his heart still be

torn? Wouldn't there still be a fear that he may have made the wrong decision?

An adult would never choose the less valuable pile, because it would be foolish to do so. There is no reason, if the money is being given freely, to choose the lesser

amount. Further, when the adult makes his or her decision, it will be bereft of fear,

because the adult has no doubt that he or she is making the correct choice based on

sound, mathematical reasoning.

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This, I believe, emphasizes the difference between: (a) ignorance, (b) knowledge

that has been told to us, and (c) knowledge that has been validated through true

understanding.

In the first situation-that of the child who has been given no assistance-the basis

of the child's decision is determined by outward semblances: because the nickels

appear larger, they must be worth more.

In the second, after the child has been warned, he has still not yet discovered the reality of the adult's knowledge. Without a proper understanding of monetary values, the child is uncertain whether the adult is correct, even if the child knows in his heart that the adult "knows better"; the child has no way of verifying the adult's knowledge. Such verification will only occur later, after the child has gone through school and learned these things for himself.

In the third case, the adult is in possession of true knowledge because there can be no doubt. Dimes are simply worth more than nickels.

It is my feeling that we in this world most often fall into the second category.

This is not necessarily a bad place to be because it is the domain of Faith.

After

our deaths, perhaps we will graduate to a higher state of being where all things will become "known" to us.

On this earthly plane we are told that sometimes the larger pile, even though it

appears more valuable, is not really so. The smaller pile is worth the larger amount

(in this case, twice as much!).

We are told this, and we read it, and we can repeat the words. But does it become

true knowledge? How can we verify it?

Twenty-three hundred years ago the Greeks believed that a man will never choose evil: only ignorance makes evil actions possible. I think that, in the context of this

example, they were speaking of knowledge in the third sense: that of an adult who

knows properly the value of things.

If we understood the value of a spiritual life, maybe our decisions would bear the same character. We would not choose what is clearly less valuable, because there

is no reason to.

But to "understand" is the key word. As long as our choices do not reflect pure

knowledge-and I am not sure that they can, unless God grant such knowledge-then we must strive ever to improve our understanding of Faith and of Life, endeavoring

with our utmost to recognize the true value of things such that we can act accordingly.

In the example, this is represented by the child's progression toward the

understanding of the adult. Whether they have been told that dimes are more valuable, or not, isn't the issue. The key is whether they have truly understood the meaning of that knowledge. Without such understanding, the information is little more than ???

a disconnected piece of learning, requiring much effort of willpower on the part of the child to obey it.

But adults make no such effort of will when it comes to choices like these.

Their

hearts are free of apprehension when it is a choice between nickels and dimes.

Perhaps

it would be the same for us, religiously, if we were somehow able to integrate those

profound principles into our everyday lives. I am not so sure it can happen in this

life. Perhaps that is what makes this the world of choice. In the next world, perhaps

things will be so clear that we would simply never choose differently from what God

chooses for us.

That, to me, is the challenge: to trust our Father, even though our hearts may fear that the losses we apparently sustain are not the gains He promises them to be.

It is our duty to do one of two things, either to ascertain the facts, whether by seeking instruction or by personal discovery, or, if this is impossible, to select the best and most dependable theory which human intelligence can supply, and use it as a raft to ride the seas of life—that is, assuming that we cannot make our journey with greater confidence and security by the surer means of divine revelation.?

Opinions and truth

This essay was written a short while before I learned about the concept of a “meme”, which is essentially what is being described here.

Within me I notice that there are certain impulses, and certain guidelines by which I choose my actions. However, when I am forced to admit that I have no knowledge of Truth—the nature of reality really—upon what are my actions based?

In the most complete sense, I would include under the term “actions” anything

that causes a change from one state of being to another. It may mean moving an arm,

a change of emotions, or a progression of thoughts. So that if a situation provokes

a certain reaction within me, I say that this is really an action, whose form

has been
pre-determined by my inner impulses and guidelines.
Yet if I have no knowledge of truth, then these guidelines must also not be
based
upon truth, and must instead be something more like opinions.
One possible source of these opinions is traditions, or the things I have grown
up with; they present themselves to the mind, and from them I extrapolate other
conclusions. Since these opinions are based on the circumstances of life, and
the
particular situations I have come into contact with, it would mean that they
are
arbitrary, since they depend ultimately on accidental factors.
Whether these accumulated opinions—which are accepted directly, or reasoned
from other opinions—coincide with truth is indeterminable, since I lack any
form
of true judgment. Instead, I proceed through life driven by the arbitrary
thoughts
and feelings within me, entirely in a stupor, as it were, with regard to Truth.
I must accept, then, that no decision I make is related to Truth. This does not
mean that people lack valid guidelines, if only we are willing to divorce the
word
“valid” from meaning “right or true”. One valid distinction is that
between pleasure
and pain. A reaction which provokes an escape from pain is a valid reaction, if
we
assume that the human body is better off not feeling pain. Other valid
guidelines
might be the decisions we make in order to live longer and healthier. This is
pretty
much the level we are reduced to if we divorce ourselves entirely from the
notion

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of truth, by accepting that we have no direct intercourse with it. In this
sense, our
guidelines are not much different from those used by the animals.
A very fascinating phenomenon, therefore, is when an individual claims to know
Truth directly, based on some special connection of which the rest of us are
deprived.
These individuals claim to have a special access to the nature of Truth, since
otherwise their opinions would have been, like our own, derived from other
opinions.
If the claim of these individuals is valid, the knowledge they convey is of a
true
character and not based at all on prior assumptions. That is, their knowledge

is in

no way accumulated from without, and must have arisen spontaneously from their connection with the Truth itself.

This provides us with a certain guideline by which we can examine their claim.

Due to what was said above—that all of our judgments proceed from arbitrary opinions—it is impossible for us to determine whether these individuals speak the

truth. It is possible, however, to try to discover whether their ideas are based on

opinions, or something else. That is, we cannot judge their words to be true, but

we can determine whether they were just like us in the development of their ideas,

or if they were different in some way. Even acknowledging that they are different

does not acquaint us with the truth, but it does tell us that they are unique from the

rest of humanity, and therefore have some basis for claiming that their knowledge is

unique.

Yet since they claim their knowledge to be actually true, at some point we must take them at their word. We can examine their lives and works, and assess that they are different from the rest of humanity. In this respect alone they have many

things to teach us, since they bring us new knowledge (new in the sense that we, by

ourselves, have been in-breeding our own opinions for so long, that nothing truly

novel has appeared for quite a long time).

Once we know that they speak of new things, we can learn from them by setting our own opinions aside and accepting what they say. If they claim that they speak

with the voice of truth, how can we respond? If in every other respect their lives are

consistent with their words, and their stated conclusions live up to the tests we put

them through, we must admit that they speak validly, at least insofar as we are able

to judge consistency and cogency as attributes of knowledge.

But we can proceed no farther than this on our own. Ultimately, if we wish to understand the world according to their knowledge, we must accept what they have to say directly. But in fact this is not so strange at all, since all of our original

views were derived from even sketchier sources than these. At least these individuals

possess something novel and sound according to the tests we have applied to them;

by altering our lives in the way that they describe, we are at least breaking new ground.

Some may ask why we should want to break ground at all, wondering if this is ???

the purpose of life. At such a point, logic becomes circular because the only defense we have is that these individuals told us we should do so. And if they speak from true knowledge, opposing them would be to contravene truth. Yet even this assumes that truth is something we should strive for. However, again, we are told this by those who claim to know what the truth is: that if we follow it, we will become happier and more alive, and that on the day when we are finally aware ourselves of what the nature of truth is, we will undeniably agree that it is the most desirable object to attain to.

Let us assume for the moment that we have judged their works according to their own standard. That is, if their words claim to produce courage as a proof of their validity, then the fact that they do produce courage is accepted as a proof. We do not really know ourselves if courage is a worthwhile goal, but their words have made a claim about the nature of courage, and this claim has been manifested before our eyes. This does not educate us about courage, but rather that the words have satisfied their claim.

On this basis, if we accept their words as stemming from the truth, the real question for us as humans is not how we acquire the fruits of that truth—for doing so would only result in further opinions, since we are still not in possession of the truth itself—but how we free ourselves from the opinions inside us which cause us to behave contrary to the lifestyle described by those who represent the truth. This would appear to be the only real achievement we can attain to in this world, until the day comes when we discover the nature of truth for ourselves. Our current behaviors take the form of actions which result from our opinions. As was said above, these opinions are arbitrary and for the most part derive

from experiences we accepted blindly at a young age. Once the phase of blind acceptance was passed, we began to develop further opinions—which we then called our own—from these original opinions. Perhaps we no longer accepted the opinions of others directly, but we still in-bred those original opinions, which did come from others.

These original and derived opinions may have originated with the words of some truth-speaking individual in the past, which were accepted by his followers and passed down through a chain of tradition. When they reached me, I accepted them directly with no knowledge of their truth. This means that even though some of these opinions may be related to the truth in some degree, they were still arbitrarily accepted by me, which means I have no way of knowing which of my opinions are related to the truth and which are not.

When I meet with the words of a truth-speaker, however, I can review the opinions that I have, and realize that some of them produce behaviors which correspond to those described by the speaker, and some do not. Those that produce correct behaviors—correct to the extent that they agree with the descriptions of that individual—I need not worry about so much. The real work to be done is to erase ???

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from the tablet of my being all the incorrect opinions I drank down during the time of my childhood.

These incorrect opinions are incorrect because they bear no relationship to the truth. If those who represent the truth claim that men should not hate, then the feelings of hate which arise in me are based upon an invalid foundation. And while the feeling of hate itself may seem like a natural response, consider how great a part perception plays in the development of these feelings. Imagine that we are sitting on the bus, and a man with his children is sitting nearby. The children are making a racket, and our anger begins to stir over how inconsiderate this man is being in not controlling his children. So we turn around to confront the man, justifying our action by the strength of our feeling. As the children are pointed out to him,

he

looks up in a daze and say, "What? Oh, I'm sorry. We're just returning from the

hospital. Their mother died today."

Such a response is likely to remove the anger from our heart, and replace it with

compassion. In fact, if we had known the details of the situation beforehand, our

anger would probably never have appeared. It is our opinion about the situation which produced the anger, and not a natural response.

Thus our opinions are very much related to our perception of the world. If I perceive money to be important, I will pursue it; if I perceive pleasure to be the

ultimate object of life, I will seek that. To my eyes, it may seem that the wealthy

man is more happy and successful than the poor man. But we know from history that this is not always the case. So much so that there are perceptions existing in the

world in which the poor man is viewed as the happier one.

Which do I adhere to? Do I perceive wealth to be a thing related to money, or something else? My answer to that question would have to come from the arbitrary

opinions existing inside me. In fact, I can not answer that question myself. I can

only state what those who claim to know the truth have said, or what my opinions

tell me. If they correspond to truth at all, it is because they were handed down to

me from some other individual who claimed to know the truth in the past; but even

still it is only a truth-related opinion that I have, and not the truth itself.

It would seem that the whole world is then an interplay between two basic elements: beings with the intelligence to think and hold opinions, and the opinions themselves.

Some of these opinions, whether true or not, are astoundingly ancient. The belief that the Earth was the center of the universe persisted for centuries before it

was disproved. Yet none of the individuals who espoused that opinion lived as long

the opinion itself.

This implies that opinions have almost a life of their own. They jump from host body to host body like a virus, and are capable of breeding and dying out just as

other species are. Since humans are so short lived, these long-lived opinions could

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almost be anthropomorphized into something like a “demon”, which “possesses” human minds and endures for centuries before meeting its death. In fact, the idea of a demon which governs the actions of people in order to lead them astray from the truth, combined with the sense of “possession” and “exorcism” as expressed by the church, takes on an almost uncanny resemblance to the characteristics of opinions. We can imagine that one of those individuals who misrepresented the truth was walking through the countryside, divesting people of their fallacious opinions—some which had been existing for millenia—and it being described as the exorcism of long-lived demons: of insensible creatures, able to jump from body to body, which, once they governed a person’s actions, took over and turned that person aside from the truth. What a miracle then for an individual to be able to clear away the slate of a person’s heart in a single moment, and replace those opinions with a submission to the truth. Doing so would immediately alter that person’s feelings and behavior, and make them a shining example of the truth promulgated by the prophet. This instant clearing away could only be described as a miracle, since ordinarily it is a hard and painful process to discover and free ourselves from our inveterate opinions. The question then arises: who am I? If I separate away all the demons, and subtract from the sum of my being every opinion, what is left? Religion again would likely refer to this remaining part as the soul, and the rest as the self. Those who speak the truth claim that the soul was created of Truth, in its own image, and therefore longs to return to it and have a relationship with it. The self, or opinions or demons, is what keeps us from the path leading to such a reunion. It becomes very compelling then, if we subscribe this choice of vocabulary, that the prophets have told us that we should abandon our “selves” and submit entirely to their will; that if we do not guard against the powers of Satan (and his minions, the demon legions) they will obscure our vision and prevent our souls from returning to their rightful place in heaven.

It may seem like a mythical tale—when one introduces the words “demon” and “heaven”, and portrays it as an eternal struggle between good and evil—but just considering who we are, and the fact that we can give no true justification for our lives other than that we are playing out feelings from day to day, makes it very fascinating that those who claim to know the truth should speak in such terms. Have we ever really seen these various, magical elements of religion? Or are they perhaps describing pictorally the invisible aspects of our own being, which we would be unable to comprehend without some kind of image? Even the idea of the perdurance of opinions is not quite graspable. As I write about it, and think about how opinions move from person to person through history, I am forced to visualize a kind of mysterious, unknown force, which lives for centuries and governs the actions of men outside their own will. Some opinions have ???

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perpetuated wars of incredible duration! When really, were those men to witness the true nature of things as described by the prophets, it would be impossible for any man to draw his sword against another. In that moment of revelation (or “apocalypse”, according to the Greek), the “swords would be converted into ploughshares”, assuming that all the evil spirits dwelling in the hearts of men were purged en masse from the body of mankind. At the present stage in our civilization, it seems that by far the majority of the world is driven by these demons of opinion. War, hatred, the inequitable distribution of wealth, continue unchanged generation after generation. When actually, if procreation were ever to cease, humanity itself would be extinguished in just over one hundred years: everything would be gone in a century, if it weren’t for the fact that we reproduce. Thus the entire body of mankind is renewed every three generations, and yet we are not so different—according to our humanity—as we were five centuries ago. The instruments that we use and their technology have improved dramatically,

and
the systems of government and communication have likewise developed, but we are still afflicted with the same greed, warring and prejudice everywhere we turn. A true apocalypse, which would cause humanity's perception to be also renewed,
would change the face of the world beyond recognition. Any idea or opinion which
was not directly related either to the physical world or the words of a prophet, would
be completely effaced, just as the bodies of our great-great-grandparents are now no longer seen.

Religion has told us that the production of an apocalypse of this sort has been reserved to God, and will be brought about at the time of the end. But what shape
would such an event take? Would each of us awake from our sleep with a new set of
governing principles totally different from the day before? This has never been the
case in the past, not with any of the prophets. Each of those prophets of old came
with a message of the truth, and it required the sincere effort of their followers to
sacrifice the opinions they had previously held.

However, despite the potency of the message, nothing prevented those original believers from propogating new opinions in place of the old ones. At the first the
religion renewed the race of people it came to, but afterwards it devolved into yet
another sequence of opinions, as individual thought was subjected to the yoke of
ecclesiastical oppression.

A true apocalypse would not be something that happens overnight, but it would promise to touch all of humanity before it lost its strength. This would require
certain basic elements, if we take the lessons of history as a guide: it would be international in character, and not restricted to any specific people, language or culture;
it would not permit a clerical order to withhold people from individual thought;
it would in fact encourage independent thinking; it would not allow the opinions
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of any individual to supercede those of others; and it would provide a mechanism
for safeguarding its original message, so that even many years later

individuals could
relate to it directly without almost no distortion.
If these conditions existed, I believe that the truth revealed by such a
prophet
would gradually extend to the whole world. At each stage it would encounter
great
resistance as it met with the more obstinately held opinions, but it would
continue
to grow in scope, faster and faster, until it had encompassed the whole globe.
At such a time, a new era would dawn for humanity, which would finally be freed
from the fetters of the past. Individuals would no longer be governed by
demons,
who have survived for so many ages, suppressing the creative intelligence of
mankind.
The details of such an age are beyond the powers of imagination, since that
world
would be based upon entirely different principles from our own.
What I can do in the meantime is to allow that revelation into my own heart,
contributing to the numbers of those who have accepted its message. The author
of just such a revelation, named Bahá'u'lláh, appeared among humanity in
the year
????, claiming to represent the Truth, and to have been given this
mission of erecting
the Kingdom of God on Earth. The attributes described above are present in the
World Order He describes.
That His message is true, and He is indeed a speaker of truth, must be
determined by each individual according to the standards of validity accessible
to us. We
must also come to terms with our opinions, those which take possession of us,
in
order to discover if we are gaining ground in our search for truth, or merely
contending with the world of opinion, and participating in an argument who
premises
and conclusions were thought up by individuals centuries ago.
Our idea of God

Each person has a certain conception of "God" that exists in his mind. At
the very
least, it is a word which implies that which is not known. But usually there
other
ideas added on to this, such as benevolence, omnipotence, or mercy.
By allowing attributes to enter the discussion, the problem becomes greatly
magnified. Who is God, really? Is He abstract, nearby, immediate, distant? When
I look
at the rising sun, all ruddy from the efforts of waking, there is something
within my
heart that gets tickled, deep inside. The animals do not respond to this the

same

way: they plant their nests in whatever spot is most convenient. But people. .
. human beings make all manner of choices according to a world of conceptions
animals

will never participate in: beauty, honor, goodness, justice. Is this human
sensation

just an extraordinary event, or is this really the soul experiencing the
attributes of its

Creator?

This is only the God of beauty, however, raising up the sun with His
cloudhands. What about when another individual performs an endearing act of
kindness,

or generosity? When we see our children learning compassion? When, in the
Writings, we glimpse that indescribable majesty inherent through all Creation.

..

Even still, these images of God are not exhaustive. Outside of these wonderful
qualities, which are so often described in the Writings: the Best-Loved of
all things,

the Most Bountiful, the Most Great, the Beauteous: there seems to be yet
another

God, one before Whom we tend to cower more than soar. Some thing (I hesitate
to call it God) which accuses us of every wrong we commit; that is eager and
swift

to exercise punishment; Who tends to domineer over our efforts to tread a
different

path, for fear we might incur "His" wrath. . .

What is this thing, this entity in our minds? I've encountered many people
who've experienced the whole gamut of negative emotions in their relationship
with

religion. How could that be consonant with the expressions of divine love we
find

so common in our Faith?

Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My
essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee. . . ?

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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. . . ?

Had it not been for the love I cherish for thee, I would not have uttered
a single word of what hath been mentioned.?

We have desired for thee naught except that which is better for thee
than what thou dost possess and all the treasures of the earth.?

From the look of things, our “idea” of God must be quite intricate, and have many facets. The question being: what of it is true? If God is truly unknowable— infinite beyond the conceptions of any finite mind—what kind of game are we playing at? How much of this conception is based on knowledge, and how much from psychology? Which leads me to this question: How in the world could we ever be justified in judging ourselves harshly according to what we think God might want from us? Let’s say that we wake up late, and we feel bad because, “God wanted me to do such and such; and now I’ve wasted the day.” What “God” is this? Is this our most loving Creator, Who is now pointing the finger, condemning our lack of initiative? Would a loving parent act that way toward a child? The Writings seem to describe an Essence Who is constantly striving to assist us toward achieving our happiness. The byword is: encouragement, inspiration, discovery, awe, mystery, wonder; these are the reasons why children become fascinated with all manner of activities! This is what makes life fun. But at the same time, there exists some bizarre paradigm, sitting behind our thoughts, never allowing us the unexamined pleasure of a relaxed moment; because its always saying that we “should” be doing something. “Should” be different than we are; “should” this, “should” that: “should”. . . Should we? Isn’t this what has made religious life so dry and empty, filled with the Spirit at times, but only during random encounters? If the whole thing is depicted with such awesome mystery, why is my excitement not consuming me?? When will I know the fulfillment of this verse?

Now is he struck dumb with the beauty of the All-Glorious; again is he wearied out with his own life. How many a mystic tree hath this whirlwind of wonderment snatched by the roots, how many a soul hath it exhausted. For in this Valley the traveler is flung into confusion, albeit, in the eye of him who hath attained, such marvels are esteemed and well beloved. At every moment he beholdeth a wondrous world, ???

a new creation, and goeth from astonishment to astonishment, and is lost in awe at the works of the Lord of Oneness.?

It would seem that in a way we have become dominated by our conception of God; which, in a sense, is a domination by opinions formulated from our

environment, and not really something born of the truth of our souls. We are guided directly by the form of the Law, it is true, but this bears only upon certain things not to be done, and specific exhortations that remain limited in number. The actual intent of our Creator, and the spirit, the purpose and wisdom, of His Law: how can we know that well enough to fabricate a voice within ourselves which commands us what to do, and which we spend our whole lifetime either dodging, assenting with, or defending? As if we were being ruled over by a fiction we imagine to be divine, but which is really just our own selves, fearing change: the true unknown. The Manifestations are very clear about certain points of Law. They command us not to steal, bear arms, or murder, for example. But outside of these very clear statements, everything else takes the form either of description or admonition, exhortation or elucidation. The Divine “must” turns very quickly into the Exalted “should”, and within the space of that very moment a certain freedom begins to emerge. The believers, and the Bahá’í community, are certain to change in the coming years. It has happened this way in the past, and will continue to do so. As other segments of the population enter the ranks of the Faith, and as we truly begin to embrace the world, the details of social life will shape themselves according to the ideas and backgrounds of that group. Our Faith appears particularly open to receiving these diverse segments of humanity. But such acceptance implies a definite lack of the “should” which was mentioned earlier. That is, although it will never be lawful to murder another human being, what about our ideas of reverence, or piety, or sacrifice? These kinds of things are not dictated: they are adumbrated, suggested, extolled: but no concrete picture is given to us—excepting for the example of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s life, which itself was colored more by acceptance, than a demanding of any particular sort of conformity. So it is, in this sense, impossible to decree what shape courtesy must take, since

the ideas of the various cultures differ widely according to their notion of what courtesy is. Nor does the Faith itself state that everyone should act a certain way— beyond the clear provisions of the Law. If this “should” is really missing from the intentions of the Faith toward humanity; if we truly are free to discover the limits of our own being within the bounds of the Law (and having no other bounds than these); if the Faith extends its open hands to all walks of life, and every background and disposition: then why do we treat our own selves so differently, as well as our immediate neighbors? ???

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God did not create us to exclude us from paradise, but to welcome us in. He made it, in fact, in hopes of our entry! “My eternity is My creation, I have created it for thee.”? He accepts everything about us, except that which He has clearly stated is unacceptable.

It is a mystery, then, what this psychological aspect of our conscience is that condemns so readily, and judges so quickly and harshly. It would seem, under closer examination, to represent everything that God is not, even though in our minds it often receives the name of what is right.

This opens up, perhaps, a new perspective on the rejection of “God” that is becoming so prevalent these days. To assume that the atheists, for instance, who in modern times often represent a very intellectually oriented segment of society, have made their decision to reject God and His religion without any rationale whatsoever, is to underestimate quite gravely the conscientiousness of these people. Rather, it is more likely that we have not yet understood what they mean by God, and by their rejection; that perhaps if we take the time to learn, we may well discover that they have considered the problem much more deeply than we have ourselves. A religionist who assumes that an atheist cannot “think straight” due to his rejection of God is probably just ignoring, or is not affected by, the same problems which led to his rejection. For example, if “God” meant a violation of your own integrity for

the sake of preserving the outward reputation of the Church, would you not find yourself questioning whether such a God was worthy of one's belief and devotion?

Maybe such has been their experience, and to them, making the plea that they rejoin

the religious life is like asking them to twice deny their own heart.

It appears to me that pain or maleducation is the primary motive for all aversion.

This being the case, what exactly is being feared here? and so vehemently opposed,

if not the very image of "God" which is exemplified by the denial of inner freedom,

the continual judgmentalism, the constant rejection, and accusation of failure?

A

voice of "God" that is so far from the Lover He declares Himself to be; a concept

of "God" that is more aptly named the "Harsh Adjudicator", eager to throw more

human embers on the greedy flames of Hell. . .

The most loving, most kindly-disposed Being in all existence, is being shunned by humanity wholesale; His message of love and forbearing is being used to excuse

all manners of atrocity; and His own name, at times, is mistaken to be synonymous

with the cessation of all those attributes which make life enjoyable: pleasure, joy,

freedom, peace, love.

This must not be God! This fiction that tears the world apart, stands like a falsehood before the Reality. Even what we think we know of Him—in every good and wonderful respect—even this can never approach the barest conception of His

Essence.

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Consider the past. How many, both high and low, have, at all times, yearningly awaited the advent of the Manifestations of God in the sanctified persons of His chosen Ones. How often have they expected His coming, how frequently have they prayed that the breeze of Divine mercy might blow, and the promised Beauty step forth from behind the veil of concealment, and be made manifest to all the world. And whensoever the portals of grace did open, and the clouds of divine bounty did rain upon mankind, and the light of the Unseen did shine above the horizon of celestial might, they all denied Him, and turned away from His face—the face of God Himself. . .

Ponder for a moment, and reflect upon that which hath been the cause of such denial on the part of those who have searched with such earnestness and longing. Their attack hath been more fierce than tongue or pen

can describe.?

The divines of the past did not necessarily lack for sincerity, or devotion.

But to

what were they praying? The true God, Who, forever being a mystery, will always remain so? And Who, as a result of this, never appears such as we conceive Him?

Even His Messengers remain like strangers until They announce Themselves. Or

were those seekers after truth really striving rather for the fulfillment of their own

imagination?

It might seem remote to our present circumstance—this denial in the past by those who were once in power—but the tendency remains with us to this day:

the

human mind's proclivity to associate its conceptions of truth with Truth itself, and

hence to reject the real Truth whenever it appears different from this conception.

Connecting the idea of self-acceptance to this illusion of "God" which the world

appears correct to dispose of, is perhaps a bit of a leap. But isn't it our feeling of

"right" that aims our criticisms so laser-like at the doings of our fellow man? And

don't we derive our sense of right and wrong primarily from our conception of what

we think God wants from our lives?

If not, then from where? If we are able to divorce our understanding of God's purpose from this unrelated feeling of "right", then of what conceivable validity is

the latter? If it have no connection with the message of Those sent by Him, what

possible claim to truth could it possess?

And yet we castigate, we berate, we vilify, as if the whole structure of life were

about to come undone! The vagaries of our neighbors, the malversations of those in

office, the rumors and stories: as if all of us were each privately bemoaning the nonexistence of that world which "should" have been, that "could"

have been. What

nonsense! The universe is infinitely variable, and here we are, struggling to keep the

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ocean's waters confined in a riverbed. God, the Origin of all, is the most obstruse

reality man will ever become aware of, and yet we force on our brothers such a specific conception of His Being, and of His intent, that not even blood seems

sufficient to expiate the difference of our opinions.

It is like there is a rotten weed, stuck in the soil of our hearts; a profound lack of insight into the nature of the problem. The first step is to eliminate whatever conception exists there now. The second is prevent any other from taking root so deeply. If those who have rejected religion, and those who have accepted it, could bond together in their common ignorance of His Reality, I think a much different sort of dialog would emerge. We are all, as nature made us, participants in the same physical and spiritual reality. Let's not dictate to each other what the Unseen is, or claim that we have a conception of It. Perhaps, then, those not wanting to be dictated to might prick up their ears, and consider joining us in our appreciation of this sheer mystery of life. Isn't that is what is, after all, to be alive: to feel the stirring of the unknown; to hear the call of the unseen; to sense, forever deeply, that something more—simply more—must be?

Nor shall the seeker reach his goal unless he sacrifice all things. That is, whatever he hath seen, and heard, and understood, all must he set at naught, that he may enter the realm of the spirit, which is the City of God. Labor is needed, if we are to seek Him; ardor is needed, if we are to drink of the honey of reunion with Him; and if we taste of this cup, we shall cast away the world.?

Our relationship with God

A relationship with any living thing involves a certain degree of mystery, since there is a capriciousness inherent in living things: an unknown quantity. It is this unknown which allows for new creations to appear—both good and bad. Human beings have difficulty with the unknown, because it's impossible to predict whether it will be positive or negative. In fact, anything obscure, mysterious, or strange, provokes a certain displeasure in the conscious mind; the mind simply wants to know.

When faced with an unknown, the mind will “invent” knowledge as a way of coping: a kind of “temporary knowledge” which can mollify the awful mystery of things, at least for a while. We see this trait very beneficially employed in the sciences, where it is used to formulate new theories, describe natural

behavior, etc.

But this trait is far more pervasive than being used in just the sciences; it is not confined to only hypotheses which are employed to help explain the physical universe. Everything unknown has a belief system associated with it to help us deal with our ignorance. For example, we presume that the future will take a certain course, in order that we can predict with a feeling of relative certainty where we will be in two days, or two weeks; we use classifications and stereotypes to help us demystify the opposite sex, foreign cultures, other nationalities, etc.

In the face of the grandest Unknown, we make the baldest assumptions of all. There is nothing so perfectly beyond our grasp as the essence of God's mystery.

Yet the fact that we even mention His name during discussion betrays a puzzling paradox. Lao Tzu said it very succinctly: "The truth that can be talked about is not

the Eternal Truth; the name which can be named is not the Eternal Name."

It is a tricky problem to realize that the belief systems which we invent are not

identical with the mysteries they attempt to clarify. Newton's laws of gravity, for

example, do not give us any knowledge about gravity itself. They represent a series

of beliefs which happily coincide with the behavior of some unknown quantity, to

such a degree that we can put those observations to practical use. But they do not

inform; they only describe.

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Likewise, our feeling of a stable tomorrow, based on the experience of so many yesterdays, is equally flawed. We do not know—we can never know—what will come tomorrow. All we have is a weak set of beliefs to shield us from the terrible uncertainty of the future.

The fact that these opinions about reality seem to work relatively well is both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is that they allow us to move forward, and to

advance ever farther into the domain of the undiscovered. The tragedy is that we implicitly, after years of confirmation and familiarity, begin to mistake these opinions

for truth. Once this occurs—when an opinion, bearing only a shadow-resemblance

to truth, is misconstrued as the truth itself— then any future knowledge, if it does not resemble as our tried-and-true opinions, is misunderstood to be false. Gravity was so well described by Newton, that people began to assume that his description must be close to the truth. But opinions have nothing to do with truth, except maybe as a mirror which reflects the light, or a lantern that carries light into the dark regions of the world. When Einstein presented his fundamental idea that gravity was not a true force, but merely a phenomenon resulting from a curvature in space-time, perhaps the flame was a little brighter, but the lantern had changed. People looked at the new lantern, housing Einstein's theory, and they compared it to Newton's. Finding that they were hugely dissimilar, and because Newton's ideas had been mistaken for truth, Einstein was rejected. Fortunately for science, it is possible to devise experiments that allow two, differing theories to be compared. It was discovered ultimately that space-time does curve, and people then accepted that Newton's theory was just a working approximation, meant for only low-gravity situations. But what about our more intangible beliefs, which are not so easy to prove or disprove? Our ideas about the future are so firmly rooted, for example, that we plan our lives according to how we think things will be twenty years down the road. How can we convince ourselves that this is only a working model, suitable only for rough guesses? Or what about God. Everything that hides behind that word represents the roughest approximation of all. If we find ourselves considering for a moment that when we talk about God we are really talking about God, we should shrink away in horror. What can we possibly mean when we utter that word, "God"? We have no direct experience with the Unexperientable. The finite cannot embrace the Infinite. At best, we use that word as it was used by the Prophets, but even Their language is one of utter mystery on that subject. The relationship that we have with God, and which is strengthened and deepened by religion, is one of perfect mystery. We simply cannot know. Yet the mind is

horrified by not knowing, so something must be invented to fill the vacuum. This invention I would call our private ideologies. We take in what our culture ???

says, what the Holy Books declare, what our life teaches us, and what our hearts

confirm; and we distill from this mixture a kind of woefully incomplete conception

that we then give the name of “God”. We imagine we know—at least, according to

our ideology— when this fictitious being is angry with us, pleased with us, what He

wants us to do, not do, etc.

The really bizarre piece of this puzzle is that our conception of God—which we

invented as a way of at least beginning to approach Him— is what keeps us farther

away than anything else. Because the real God is at all times so radically different

from the picture in our minds, that even if He were to knock on our front door, we

wouldn’t stand the slightest chance of recognizing Him.

Consider the past. People prayed day and night, devoted their lives to anticipating the coming of the Messiah, and then killed Him when He arrived.

Mullá

Husayn, one of the foremost, most dedicated followers of Siyyid Kázim, failed to

recognize the Báb until He Himself made it plain Who He was. These people did not have an aversion to the truth. Many of them were intelligent, thoughtful, and

devoted. But they had presumed their ideas to be, due to the weight of tradition and

evidence, equal to the truth itself. This had the result of making the actual truth,

when it came again in another form, foreign to them.

We as human beings are never able to deal with the truth directly. Since we are finite, we are condemned to relate to truth through a thick veil. Every philosopher

of the past has attempted to penetrate this barrier; every mystic has defied himself,

striving to clear away this final obstruction. But for as long as we remain finite,

our understanding will be finite, and therefore the very best we can do is to develop

opinions which will bring us ever closer to the truth.

For this progression to occur we must forever be abandoning the old to accept the new. As Lao Tsu observed, “Keep empty and you will be filled.” It is by

learning
to cultivate emptiness that we prepare ourselves for the influx of new ideas.
In this
pursuit, even our most sacred assumptions must be cast off for the sham they
are (in
comparison to truth). They may serve us for a while, and act as a guide along
the
way, but once they begin to mislead us they become our worst liability.
The essence of our relationship to truth is one of embracing mystery, and of
accepting the unknown. This does not mean that we empty our minds of opinion—
since we use those opinions to relate to the outside world—but that we
realize the
nature of what we call “knowledge”. When we accept that the content of our
brains
is essentially meaningless in the face of the Unknown, then we can discover a
new
flexibility which will allow us to free ourselves from these old opinions—in
order to
embrace new ones—at an ever increasing rate. In this way, we may each day
discover
a new mystery.
There is no blame to be given for mistaking opinions as truth. This is a
natural
propensity of the human mind. But we must accustom our tastes to the unknown,
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for the mystery of Who God really is is something that we would never guess in
a
million years.
Fortunately, we are given a starting point, and guideposts along the way, by
the
Messengers of God. In their language, we are taught the disciplines necessary,
and
the evidences to look for, to guide us along this darkest of paths. To a
perfect eye it
may be “the Straight Path”, but we begin it blind, and with no ability
adequately to
judge our progress.
Those outside the Faith often look at the ideologies developed and proposed
by others, and realize how untrue they are (in the strict sense of “true”).
Yet, at
the same time, they also suffer the mistake of confusing those descriptions
with the
thing described. And so, in rejecting these fallacious assumptions made by all
of
us about the nature of God, they unfortunately also turn away from any further

contemplation on what the truth of God's existence might be.
We all fall into this trap. None of us, by calling ourselves a believer, is freed from the constant error we make in assuming that we truly know anything. It is only a tragedy that the words "faith", "religion", and "God" have become so misrepresented that the world is no longer interested. But these words have no relation to the realities they attempt to describe, except as guesses made by very innocent creatures!
We are all innocent, when the true depth of these things is weighed in the balance.
What knowledge can we have? Then it is up to each individual to determine for him or herself whether these words have any truth behind them. Though the belief may be utterly false, what it is based on might genuinely exist.
This is the question the world must ask: not "does the God described by religion really exist?", because that God does not exist: He is only a description, devoid of life; rather, we must ask: "does religion point to a further understanding of what life is really about?" The issue of God will naturally come up during such an investigation, but "knowing God" is not what religion is about. Religion seeks only to further the spiritualization of men and mankind. It claims that our life does not end in death, and that the significance of this world will be discovered later. Is this true?
Are there any tests that can be applied to validate these assumptions? Those are the critical questions, I believe. If we focus on God, and whether or not He exists, we are asking a question which can never be answered truthfully, since "the name which can be named is not the Eternal Name". The moment we debate God, we are merely playing with the vain conceptions of an ignorant species. It is the significance of the question—what it implies—that deserves our attention. The value of Newton's laws had nothing to do with gravity, or whether gravity truly existed. The importance lay in the impact that those laws had on society. That those laws reflected a glimmer of the truth was only a beautiful detail; instead, their value lay in their efficacy, or relative value to society. And the value to science was that it allowed us to plumb the depths a little deeper.
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Religion does relate to God, but it does not offer us an understanding of Him—nor does it try to. The value of religion is that it is the only agency which can universally transform the hearts of men; while its future value is that it introduces us, step by step, into a further understanding of the meaning of life, and the role of our selves and the Creator. But we do not know these things; we only opine. We opine, and we labor to better ourselves, that some day we might appreciate the Great Mysteries to a fuller degree.

Hence the essence of any living relationship—of ourselves to God, or of our minds to truth—lies in accepting the fundamental mystery that we can never ultimately know the truth of anything. All of it is just a working hypothesis—however stable its foundation might be— and should be discarded as soon as we outgrow it.

The world looks at some of our older conceptions of “God” and “religion”, and turns away in disgust. Who can blame them? If I thought these ideas were attempting to describe the truth of the matter, I would run as fast as I could.

But the real issue lies elsewhere. Reject the conception, but don’t discard the concept.

Forget the package it came in, but do try to discover the meaning of the gift.

There is more to be found here—by everyone. The question is: how far will your efforts take you?

Pragmatism and value

A theme in society that has often bothered me is that which says, “what is not pragmatic, is not useful”.

I notice this greatly in relationship to art. Art is not respected because its product is not easily defined. Indeed, it has short-term benefit only for those able to

appreciate it—most of its societal benefit being in the long-term.

One reaction I see in the world to the idea of a “romantic” journey (that is, to run off from the rest of the world and contemplate life) is that it is not pragmatic, and hence ultimately useless.

Interestingly enough, it is possible to view “romantic” as being related to “artistic”. That is, its benefit is hard to define, and what benefit there is is only visible

to those in a position to appreciate it; and the actual societal “product” will only be realized in the long-term.

The typical social reaction to anything having those characteristics is distrust and disregard. In minor things, such as writing or painting—when it is not the primary source of income—is pretty much ignored, since what real harm can it have? If that’s how the person has fun. . .

But when it comes to placing art, and the need for art, as primary in one’s life, then society seems to try to rush to the person’s rescue: to save them from

themselves. What the artist is trying to attempt is scorned (in subtle, or not-so-subtle

words), and he is persuaded to abandon his attempt because “it is not useful”—

mainly because it is “not pragmatic”: there is no direct, concrete product associated

with his intentions. How is he going to benefit the world by the plans that he has?

This same pragmatism seems to deny the pursuit of anything for its own sake.

Knowledge for knowledge sake, or virtue for virtue sake. It always has to have an

end, and the end must be visible and well-defined. Such pragmatism denies any optimism in the face of life’s many sorrows; it ignores the hidden potentials which

are only a veil’s-width from our realization; it condemns as foolish or ultimately

idiotic anything done purely for the sake of some hidden or invisible beauty, of

which most people are unaware.

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Now, I do not think that most people openly subscribe to this view. That is why I call it a “social more”. Perceptual models seem to defend themselves: they use

human minds to propagate, almost like a virus attaching itself to a host. And the

person, even despite their own hopes and desires, may find themselves vehemently

declaring the social more as incontestable, merely because it has become such an

inseparable aspect of their Weltanschauung.

I see the societal models trying to curtail my efforts toward beauty at every

step.

It is constantly telling me that I should basically just keep quiet and continue working away at my job; that I should find a nice wife, buy a nice home, and ultimately just settle down to die.

The point where it becomes unacceptable for me is that something deep within me is positively screaming for some kind of change. Whenever I behold things that express true beauty, I am seized by such a transport of glorious joy that I keep saying to myself, "I will not live my life the way that other people do." The role of art has become an obsession, and my soul requires nourishment from the storehouses that it offers.

Of course, the result is that I am more and more viewed as foolish and irrelevant in our highly sophisticated, technological world. My fascination with ancient Greece, my longing for hardship and dire simplicity, my thirst for pain to burn away the ugly blackness that is settling on my soul: all of these have just about won me a front-row seat in the funny farm.

Can it be that I am really so crazy, and so idiotic? I know that from a strict social perspective, any intention I may have of giving up my life for one more dedicated to intangible realities, seems impractical and pointless. For I certainly will not be able to prove afterwards that I actually "did" anything.

Yet the soul cries for something. What I do not know, or else I wouldn't even be wasting my time writing these things down. One thing that I do know for sure:

the accepted social more does not offer me any substitute. What alternative does the ??? model of the world offer to someone who's heart is bursting from day to day? Whose souls groans in agony at all the irreverent indignities heaped upon it by a heedless and godless generation? Where is the ethereal fragrance of beauty in such a world, such as I once felt wafted over my soul while reading the short stories of D.H. Lawrence?

After thinking about it for a while, it seems possible that the very reason a "romantic" endeavor is termed such is because "romantic" is viewed as the atmosphere

surrounding “artistic”, and whatever is sheerly artistic, or is not pragmatic, will never conduce to a useful result.

Productivity and joy

All of my life people around me have focused on the “bottom line” (using their own particular definition). I think this has become a problem for those of us in the West,

owing to the ways we tend to define “effective” and “successful”.

All around me, everywhere, I encounter people saddened, either by life, or by the lack of spirit in their community, or by conditions in the world at large.

At the

same time, everyone is clamoring for things to be done: they want everything to produce a specific end result: and they believe better structure and more resources is

the answer to the problem.

Are they? How much can we accomplish without joy and unity? The world has countless resources, why aren't its problems solved? There are many people showing

forth extreme productivity, then why are people still unhappy?

This is an issue I think we need to plumb to its depths, because there exists an unspoken ambivalence with regards to flights of the spirit in our community.

I

for one believe that mysticism is ultimately practical, because only the joyful heart

can attract other hearts. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá once wrote, “Who can share the Cup of

Everlasting Life, who has himself not tasted a drop?”

Some recent events, here and elsewhere—which need not be dwelt on—simply give voice to this undercurrent. We sometimes prevent ourselves from engaging in the exact kind of activities which uplift and create spiritual resources, because

we cannot define the immediate material products of those activities. Is this right?

When we look to the end of things, what kind of end should it be?

To me, if the people around me feel confirmed in their Faith, if they are illumined in spirit and recommitted in their hearts, this effect will yield fruits that

themselves will yield fruit, since it creates fertility in the mind and heart.

It begets

creativity, and the willingness to persevere. Requiring numerical or demonstrable

results is what we've been doing for the last hundred years, and look where we are!

We know things must change—that we don't even begin to represent our future World Order. Perhaps our restrictive attitude towards unspeakable questions is

one
of those things that needs to change.

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But this is spoken according to my own prejudices, and my own history. This list was created so people would not feel alone, and would ultimately become confirmed and strengthened by consorting with people of a similar spirit. From this, they could shake off their burden of silence, and become more exuberant toward life, and carry this over into their work and their community. This has already happened for me.

You cannot know how much joy and happiness your responses and support have added to my life. In a way, it has drawn from me five times the commitment of energy that existed before, because I am now empowered by your spiritual support and connection. In worlds unseen our souls consort, and we whisper to each other of secrets and mysteries. Just knowing there is a place like this where I can say such things, causes me to sigh with joy.

What are your thoughts? I'm not asking what needs to change, because that is the old approach. We need a new approach. Everything we've tried before has not attracted the Kingdom. I want to know what will unlock your soul, what will enliven you, what will engender the conditions of true productivity and result. The genuine mystic, in my belief, can attract the power of the Holy Spirit to such an extent—through prayer, devotion and labor—that their mere presence acts as a magnet of love and rejoicing, and everyone, spiritually, is affected for the better. They do this by reflecting the bounties of God through an ever-purer heart, for as Bahá'u'lláh wrote, “. . . a single breath from the breezes of the Day of Thy Revelation is enough

to adorn all mankind with a fresh attire.”

We must cast off the approaches of the past, which sometimes are indeed nothing more than words designed to comfort the ego; we must also reject old titles people would place upon us to prevent our transformation. “No bond shall hold them back, and no counsel shall deter them.”

Let us define ourselves by consulting on what our intentions are, why we pursue the course that we do, and what our special response to the yearly call of the House

of Justice will be. Our life exists to serve and nurture the Cause of our Beloved; how

could anyone possibly impugn a contrary motive?

Property and prosperity

If I walk into a computer store and pick up a laptop, without paying for it, someone

will try to stop me before I leave. If I ignore them, they will call on additional force.

This interaction will continue to escalate until sufficient force is brought to bear, and I am stopped.

However, If I walk into the same computer store, put down two thousand dollars, and then walk out, nothing will happen. In this case, the computer is publically

viewed as my “property”, and no one will stop me. In addition, if someone else tries

to take that computer from me, I can bring the same forces to bear to stop them.

These “forces” are continually applied until the problem is solved. At first it may

be the store clerk, then rented security, then the police, and ultimately the national

guard if I choose to encamp myself with a group of followers. The same forces will

work for me in reverse, if someone tries to steal my property.

So in a sense, property has nothing to do with the object I purchase. Instead, capital, of which property is just a physical part, is a contract between the powers of

our nation and myself. By carrying two thousand dollars to the computer store, I

am “renting” our national might to prevent the computer store from ripping me off,

or anyone else from stopping me during this legal transaction.

Then even as I sit here in my house, none of this is mine. Merely, there is understanding between me, the people around me, and our government, that the necessary forces will be brought to bear if anyone violates the property lines that have

been drawn. Looked at it this way, it is a rather precarious arrangement, continually

dependent on mutual assurance and belief.

This arrangement is also directly related to the strength of our nation, and its

willingness to pursue vindication after acts of wrong-doing. With a very strong

government, no act of violation will go unseen, and the notion of property is both fiercely defended and defined. With a weak government, who hasn't the resources or focus to pursue every instance, it requires social goodwill to maintain any notion of property at all.

In our country, the government is strong and the corporations are strong. The corporations, in their pursuit for continued existence, want the ideal of property

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very well guarded, and so they willingly help the government to be stronger. Government, in its turn, recognizes the benefit of this mutual relationship, and responds

by helping create an environment where corporations can thrive.

When it comes to property, and protecting my personal and emotional investments in society, this is a good thing. The stronger the companies and government are, the less likely it is that anyone will trespass on my property—that is, any property which falls under the protection arrangement I paid for. If the definition of

property becomes more strict (as it does sometimes when laws change), I may find

that my ownership has grown stronger, but smaller in scope.

Yet going back to the idea that ownership is really “renting the forces of government”, I find that this is the basis of my relationship with our government. Government exists to promote the social welfare, which means creating a place where

everyone can pursue their own ends in harmony. It restricts liberty wherever such

liberty would cause a loss of freedom to others.

Nor is government a heaven-sent entity that existed before me, will exist after me, and nothing can be done about it. Our government was created by people very much like myself, who saw a need for establishing standards of agreement, and ensuring they would not be violated. Property is one of these standards, as it

gives people a wide berth to act and consume resources, without forever concerning

themselves with threats from outside.

However, our culture has progressed (or digressed) since that time to a state of

extreme materialism. Our society seeks to promote material welfare to the exclusion

of all else. This is epitomized in companies, whose growth and development depends

on material acquisition. For them, the “bottom line” is the only defining reality, and everything else is subservient to this end. Such may not be the case for me personally, or for others, but it will always be for them as they are currently constructed.

A company’s bottom line is determined by their customers, the increase of whose desire is their main reason for growth. Thus, at some point, I ceased to be a human being to them. I became only a customer, a demographic; and whatever they can do to increase my thirst and need for their product or service, is in their best interest.

To this end, the media and its machinery have begun to perceive me as an economic unit, rather than a person. This goes far to justify many of the practices we see today. Take sexual attraction, for example. It is a natural and powerful agent for motivating people. Companies see the compelling nature of this agent, and have exploited it to make me a more eager and regularly spending consumer. Gone is the thought that perhaps I do not want my life dominated by sexual impulses; absent is the concept that perhaps I don’t want their product, or that advertisers should leave me alone. I am but a unit of currency in their forecasts, and both media and government (who is intimately linked to the corporations) have begun to believe this. ???

What we need to change is not the existence or role of our corporations and governments. They are strong, and serve us in some ways, such as guarding property, very well. What is lacking is the human element, and the pursuit of a higher ideal than property and materiality. In such a world, spamming could have no place, because spamming assumes a fundamental disinterest in the one being sold to. What we need is a realignment of our excellent structures toward a higher social ideal, rather than a mere restructuring. This is something I believe communities are indeed perfect for. By collaborating together to achieve a sense of who we are, and what we want to achieve as a civilization, we can en masse influence our government, and use this influence

to chastise
the corporations, who have become like economic tyrants. But this cannot happen
constructively without a common, positive vision for the future. Anarchy is not
the
solution, for along with the evils we see today, it would dissolve many of the
goods
that have come from the structures that currently prevail.
The situation we are living with now is not unlike that of a rich man with no
aim in life. Which course will he choose, but the one most readily apparent?
And
if those arise who are indifferent to his view, they are swept aside by the
force of his
resources. Isn't this what is happening now? Some of us cherish freedom, and
see
potential for the human mind to grow along paths undreamt of. We can achieve
far
more than the mere economic security we've established so far. But our
powerful
organizations, which we have each and all created by our effort and
cooperation,
are defining their own goals now, leaving us by the wayside, causing us to
wonder
at all of the lawsuits, patent abuses, advertising methodologies, etc. By
failing to
understand and express our own vision for the future, we have left these
behemoths
to pursue their own, most facile course.
The solution, as I see it, is not merely the creation of communities as an
antithesis to government and big business. They should be a place for us to
converse
openly, freely, on the topic of our common future. Once this is done, and we
realize
the necessity for change, and the requirement for plans to help us accomplish
this
goal, our aspirations can make their way through government to the powers that
be,
and as a collective whole we will begin our ascent to a new level of social
well-being.
In short, what we have now is good, it is only misdirected; and this lack of
direction has encouraged the discord we see around us, as if a room of powerful
robots had been left without a plan. Let us come together, and by so doing
scatter
these forces of confusion, for only such a union can bring about the evolution
we
need, rather than mere revolutions, whose historical short-sightedness have
only
continued the problem under different guises and using different names.

Proving infallibility

Someone asked of Bahá'u'lláh: But as I have gone over and over the issue of His infallibility in my mind, I cannot see any way to derive a belief in it that is not circular.

If you examine only His statement of infallibility, it is circular. It's no more proof than if I said so.

He states "His own person" as the reason for true belief. During the latter ???s,

this meant visiting Bahá'u'lláh Himself, and hearing His voice. This was the basis

of belief for many early Bahá'ís, who could neither read nor write. In "Gleanings"

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

. . . His (God's) Manifestation can adduce no greater proof of the truth of His Mission than the proof of His own Person.?

After His passing, there remain two elements of "His own person": the record

of His deeds, and His writings. I myself am sceptical of historical record, so I turn

to the depth of His writings for ample testimony that He is no plain author.

There

is too much consistency over a long period, no backtracking, no revising of theories

that became outmoded as the years passed. But these are just what impressed me.

Question: Do you believe Bahá'u'lláh was literally omniscient?

He describes Himself in these terms:

. . . this Servant regardeth Himself as utterly lost and as nothing, even beside one of the beloved of God, how much less in the presence of His holy ones.

That is what He thought of Himself, as Mirzá Husayn-'Alí. But even as a book

speaks the mind of its author—more than just ink and paper—so the Will of God

was revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. In Him, and His words and actions, divine purpose was

made incarnate. To emphasize this station, He wrote the following:

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The essence of belief in Divine unity consisteth in regarding Him Who is the Manifestation of God and Him Who is the invisible, the inaccessible, the

unknowable Essence as one and the same. By this is meant that whatever pertaineth to the former, all His acts and doings, whatever He ordaineth or forbiddeth, should be considered, in all their aspects, and under all circumstances, and without any reservation, as identical with the Will of God Himself. This is the loftiest station to which a true believer in the unity of God can ever hope to attain. Blessed is the man that reacheth this station, and is of them that are steadfast in their belief.?

You might say it is a question of being. To say Bahá'u'lláh is equal with God can mean several things, some of them true, some of them false. Consider when I pick up the telephone. It's my brother calling. Now a young child asks, "Is that your brother?" I say, "Yes". But what if he were asking about the plastic and machinery itself? Bahá'u'lláh disregarded His own flesh, and proclaimed it dust. He said the same is true of all men. What is real about us is our spirit, the virtues we embody, and our faith. Well, when they bury me, it's not me they're putting in the box. So which am I? The man, or what animates the man? Bahá'u'lláh was a man just like you and I. But what animated Him was of a different order altogether.

Common questions about the
Seven Valleys

Note: My answers to these questions are my own opinions, since none of them are known to be answered explicitly in the Bahá'í Writings. I will try to give my reasons for the opinions that I have, but if they do not "work" for you, or if they detract from your enjoyment of the Seven Valleys, then by definition then they are worthless!

Why are there seven valleys and not five or eight?
Seven is a rather significant number in religious history. The Bible is filled with examples involving the number seven. However, it is not clear that "seven" in relation to the Seven Valleys is a fixed and rigid number. It may simply have been a convenient choice for Bahá'u'lláh in responding to the Sufi who questioned Him.

First, the original "seven valleys" can be found at the end of Mantiq'u't-Tayr

(Conference of the Birds), a book by the Sufi poet Farídu'd-Dín 'Attár.

Because the

Sufi who questioned Bahá'u'lláh was writing about this text, it was only natural for

Him to respond using a similar framework.

Second, in the beginning of Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys, he never says that there

are exactly seven. The wording he uses always refers to the beliefs of others:

The stages that mark the wayfarer's journey from the abode of dust to the heavenly homeland are said to be seven. Some have called these Seven Valleys, and others, Seven Cities. And they say that until the wayfarer taketh leave of self, and traverseth these stages, he shall never reach to the ocean of nearness and union, nor drink of the peerless wine.

Third, in an Arabic text named Javáhiru'l-Asrár (Gems of the Mysteries), Bahá'u'lláh

also writes about seven valleys, but He skips two of them, and gives a description

of two further valleys beyond the seven that occur in the Persian text. He even mentions this fact, and that He did this in the interests of time:

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. . . we were denied the opportunity and the necessary leisure by the traveler who came on your behalf. He was in great haste and felt urgently that he must be on his way. For this reason, we have limited our discourse and contented ourselves with less than a complete description of the stages along the path. We have not detailed these as was fitting and necessary. Rather, we have altogether neglected to mention several cities and stages of the utmost importance. The impatience of your messenger was so great that we even omitted any reference to the two exalted stages of self-surrender and contentment.

These "two exalted stages", if one compares the titles of the Valleys in that text

with those in the Persian Seven Valleys, would seem to relate to the Valleys of Knowledge and Contentment. Here is the sequence that He gives in the Arabic text:

?. Search

?. Love and allurements

?. Divine Unity

?. Bewilderment

?. Nothingness

?. Unending, Eternal life

?. The City that Has No Name

By merging these two texts, then, we find nine stages depicted in total, and even

these are not complete according to Him.

In conclusion, the use of “seven” valleys, as opposed to a greater number, appears dependent on the conditions in which the Seven Valleys was revealed, and therefore does not seem to have any essential importance.

Why does the Seven Valleys read the way it does?

The Manifestations of God always speak in terms relative to human understanding.

As Bahá'u'lláh mentions in the Hidden Words:

O Son of Beauty! By My spirit and by My favor! By My mercy and by My beauty! All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the pen of might, hath been in accordance with thy capacity and understanding, not with My state and the melody of My voice.

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If one reads the original Sufi text upon which the Seven Valleys was based (see above), he will find many of the same stories told, in some cases even exactly as

Bahá'u'lláh retells them. There are even several stories which Bahá'u'lláh does not relate, and vice-versa.

It is almost as though Bahá'u'lláh is using 'Attár's framework as a base—in deference to the limitations of the Sufi questioner—and using it as a way to fulfill and perfect what 'Attár was trying to say. In this way, we see the Divine Mind expressing

itself in a particular language, suited to a specialized system of understanding, yet

revealing the same eternal truths that can be found in all Holy Scriptures.

The Sufis, as a group, have always sought a more direct, experiential relationship with God, and the Seven Valleys explains how this is both a legitimate and

worthwhile goal given the proper orientation to God and His Manifestations.

Are the Seven Valleys a progression, to be passed through one at a time?

It is my belief that the Seven Valleys is not only a sequential progression of the wayfarer's understanding, but that passing through each valley has profound consequences:

- The behavior of the seeker is radically altered
- The world they see around them is fundamentally different from what others see
- The understanding they gain cannot be undone or lost

To see why this is so, it is necessary to discuss what is meant by understanding and knowledge.

In Ancient Greece, where philosophy was born, men debated a great deal about knowledge and wisdom, and what the signs were of each. It was understood that there are two fundamentally different orientations to the world: opinion and knowledge.

Opinion is something one holds in the mind, and thus is subject to change. It can be divorced from one's actions, or changed in its form to suit the speaker.

Modern language calls this "head knowledge". Opinions can be forgotten, or substituted with a different understanding at different times. One can even hold several opinions about the same subject, and select between them as he deems appropriate.

Knowledge is the opposite of these things. Knowledge is not held in the mind, since it is a universal fact. It saturates you, since it is the foundation of everything

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around you. It cannot be divorced from one's actions; in fact, when one truly knows

something, he cannot act contrary to that knowledge, unless at some level he desires

the consequences of doing so. Modern language calls this understanding, or insight

or wisdom, implying an alteration of the individual himself. Knowledge cannot be

forgotten, or substituted. Also, one cannot hold several different kinds of knowledge

about the same subject. Knowledge, like truth, is one. If you achieve a greater understanding of a subject, this new knowledge will extend the old.

Here are a few examples: If you know that a scorpion can sting you, you will not

step on one unless you want to be stung. Telling a child that scorpions can sting does

not impart knowledge. Until he is stung by something, and has a true awareness of

what it means to be stung, words alone will not suffice to convey knowledge.

If,

instead, he steps on the scorpion and is stung, from that point on he will "know"

what scorpions can do. As long as one does not wish to be stung, he cannot step on

scorpions.

Likewise, adults know that dimes are worth more than nickels, even though they

are the same color, are lighter, and much smaller. No adult will ever trade a million dimes for a million nickels. This is because he relates not to the dime or the nickel, or their understanding of size and weight, but to their knowledge of the value of money.

It is in this sense that Plato believed a man who knew the Good could never act against it, since all men long for the Good. Therefore, only ignorance of the Good can explain evil actions. To come to know the good—to truly know it, in the Greek sense of knowledge—was thus the aim of philosophy, since to achieve that goal would result in a perfected man.

Back to the Seven Valleys: If the Valleys describe a progression of true knowledge as outlined above, then the descriptions of the wayfarer in the Valley of Knowledge, for example, depict a state of being which is more perfect than those who have not yet attained it. If after passing through that valley we reach a plane that elevates our being to a new world, to new horizons, then the nature of the Seven Valley is exactly like a spiritual Treasure Map. It is a guide book leading us to new realities, to new forms of life. It draws us closer to the Good, and transforms us as we move forward.

If, on the other hand, these stages are merely descriptive, and not fundamental, then the Seven Valleys is more like a picture book, showing realities that we might visit but never fully attain. Just as as we might be in the Valley of Contentment one day, but not the next, so nothing we ever gain is truly gained, since it can be lost the next day. What kind of understanding is so easily gained and lost? The Greeks would say that only opinions have this character, not knowledge. Opinions are a thing one holds in the mind by force of will, and rallies the emotions to their service; when one's energy is good, success will be apparent, but when that energy is lacking, they are impossible to maintain. Knowledge, however, is not something ???

that one sustains, but it is that which sustains the knower. In a sense, we are in so far as we know—in the spiritual sense—for otherwise we are acting, trying to make our opinions seem real against a world of continual contrast. (This is not the place to get into what spiritual “knowledge” means, but please do not understand me to be referring to the type of knowledge that comes from study or learning. Bahá’u’lláh makes it clear that true understanding is available to all, and is dependent only on the spiritual qualities of purity and detachment. This is proven by the many illiterate Bábís and Bahá’ís in the world, who reached untold heights of spirituality, sometimes even without access to the written words of the Manifestation).

What is the Four Valleys, and how does it relate to the Seven Valleys?

There are basically three points of view regarding the Four Valleys:

?. They are the “four stages of the heart” mentioned at the end of the Seven Valleys.

?. They represent a renewed formulation of the stages of spiritual progress, and thus in a sense “supercede” the Seven Valleys.

?. They are an entirely different text, with a separate theme and intent.

It is my belief that the first two of these opinions are not supported by evidence,

while there is grounds for suggesting that the third may be true.

First, regarding the “four stages of the heart”. These four stages are given as

occurring after the seventh of the Seven Valleys, which means that the wayfarer has

already achieved the station of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness (faná).

And

yet, the first of the Four Valleys says, “On this plane, the self is not rejected but

beloved; it is well-pleasing and not to be shunned.” Since annihilation of self is a

dominant theme in the seventh Valley, this is hard to reconcile.

Furthermore, the Seven Valleys is demonstrably progressive:

And if, by the help of God, he findeth on this journey a trace of the traceless Friend, and inhaleth the fragrance of the long-lost Joseph from the heavenly messenger, he shall straightway step into the Valley of

Love. . .

And if, confirmed by the Creator, the lover escapes from the claws of the eagle of love, he will enter the Valley of Knowledge. . .

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After passing through the Valley of knowledge, which is the last plane of limitation, the wayfarer cometh to the Valley of Unity. . .

It is clear that certain conditions must be present for the wayfarer to move from one valley to the next.

In the Four Valleys, however, an entirely different scheme is presented. Rather than describing how a soul achieves a more perfect understanding of God, the Four

Valleys offer four separate pathways by which souls may approach God. In fact, it is

a message of tremendous joy and grace, since it opens the door of divine attainment

even to those unable to abandon the self, or the domains of knowledge and love.

If the travelers seek after the goal of the Intended One (Maqsúd), this station appertaineth to the self. . .

If the wayfarer's goal be the dwelling of the Praiseworthy One (Mahmúd), this is the station of primal reason

If the loving seekers wish to live within the precincts of the Attracting One (Majdhúb), no soul may dwell on this Kingly Throne save the beauty of love. . .

If the mystic knowers be of those who have reached to the beauty of the Beloved One (Mahbúb), this station is the apex of consciousness and the secret of divine guidance. . .

These, to me, clearly describe four different kinds of wayfarer, rather than the

progressions of understanding of a single wayfarer. And while it does seem from comparing the two Texts that one cannot ascend through all of the Seven Valleys unless the wayfarer si one of those who seek the Beloved One (the Fourth Valley), yet

the Four Valleys makes it clear that achieving the presence of God is not dependent

on such a high station.

As to the second opinion, that the Four Valleys supercedes the Seven Valleys—which is the position taken by at least one Bahá'í author—this is hard to support

when one considers that the Arabic rendition of these Valleys was revealed in ????

(according to the “Leiden List”), while the Four Valleys was revealed in

???? (according to Taherzadeh). If the Four Valleys was really meant to supercede, why would

Bahá'u'lláh revert to the same format as the Seven Valleys two years later? This

furthering my conjecture that the two Texts present different, though related, themes.

Reflections on the Fast

Provides a striking contrast to our everyday life which allows us to observe our accustomed behaviors and discover in what ways we can improve ourselves. Symbolizes becoming detached spiritually from the things of this world.

Fasting is a symbol. Fasting signifies abstinence from lust. Physical fasting is a symbol of that abstinence, and is a reminder; that is, just as a person abstains from physical appetites, he is to abstain from selfappetites and self-desires. But mere abstention from food has no effect on the spirit. It is only a symbol, a reminder. Otherwise it is of no importance.?

Happy is your condition for you have executed the divine command, and have arisen to fast in these blessed days. For this physical fasting is a symbol of the spiritual fasting, that is, abstaining from all carnal desires, becoming characterized with the attributes of the spiritual ones, attracted to the heavenly fragrances and enkindled with the fire of the love of God.?

Weakens the chains that bind us to the Earth.

. . . Whate'er thou doest, Prince! Eating or sacrificing, giving gifts, Praying or fasting, let it all be done For Me, as Mine. So shalt thou free thyself From Karmabandh, the chain which holdeth men To good and evil issue, so shalt come Safe unto Me—when thou art quit of flesh—By faith and abdication joined to Me!?

We have found, [the true philosophers] will say, a path of speculation which seems to bring us and the argument to the conclusion that while we are in the body, and while the soul is mingled with this mass of evil, our desire will not be satisfied, and our desire is of the truth. For the body is a source of endless trouble to us by reason of the mere

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requirement of food; and also is liable to diseases which overtake and impede us in the search after truth: and by filling us so full of loves, and lusts, and fears, and fancies, and idols, and every sort of folly, prevents our ever having, as people say, so much as a thought. For whence come wars, and fightings, and factions? Whence but from the body and the lusts of the body? For wars are occasioned by the love of money, and

money has to be acquired for the sake and in the service of the body; and in consequence of all these things the time which ought to be given to philosophy is lost. Moreover, if there is time and an inclination toward philosophy, yet the body introduces a turmoil and confusion and fear into the course of speculation, and hinders us from seeing the truth: and all experience shows that if we would have pure knowledge of anything we must be quit of the body, and the soul in herself must behold all things in themselves: then I suppose that we shall attain that which we desire, and of which we say that we are lovers, and that is wisdom, not while we live, but after death, as the argument shows; for if while in company with the body the soul cannot have pure knowledge, one of two things seems to follow—either knowledge is not to be attained at all, or, if at all, after death. For then, and not till then, the soul will be in herself alone and without the body. In this present life, I reckon that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible concern or interest in the body, and are not saturated with the bodily nature, but remain pure until the hour when God himself is pleased to release us. And then the foolishness of the body will be cleared away and we shall be pure and hold converse with other pure souls, and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere; and this is surely the light of truth. For no impure thing is allowed to approach the pure. These are the sort of words, Simmias, which the true lovers of wisdom cannot help saying to one another, and thinking. . .

And what is purification but the separation of the soul from the body, as I was saying before; the habit of the soul gathering and collecting herself into herself, out of all the courses of the body; the dwelling in her own place alone, as in another life, so also in this, as far as she can: the release of the soul from the chains of the body. . . ?

Can be a form of healing.

There is but one power which heals—that is God. The state or condition through which the healing takes place is the confidence of the ???

heart. By some this state is reached through pills, powders, and physicians. By others through hygiene, fasting, and prayer. By others through direct perception.?

Is a kind of personal communion with God.

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.?

Teaches self-restraint.

O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint. . . ?

Conduces to mindfulness, and the awakening of consciousness.

Besides all this, prayer and fasting is the cause of awakening and mindfulness and conducive to protection and preservation from tests. . . ?

Demonstrates our eagerness to progress along the Straight Path.

Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning. . . ?

My last request is that you permit no one henceforth to enter my chamber. From now until the time when I shall be summoned to leave this house, let no one be allowed to disturb my devotions. This day I intend to fast—a fast which I shall not break until I am brought face to face with my Beloved.??

Táhirih's last words to the wife of Kalantar, who was looking after her:

Mullá 'Alí hastened to his companions and acquainted them with the nature of his conversation with Mullá H . usayn. Ablaze with the fire which the account of that conversation had kindled in their hearts, they immediately dispersed, and, seeking the seclusion of their cells, besought, through fasting and prayer, the early removal of the veil that intervened between them and the recognition of their Beloved. They ???

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prayed while keeping their vigils: 'O God, our God! Thee only do we worship, and to Thee do we cry for help. Guide us, we beseech Thee, on the straight Path, O Lord our God! Fulfill what Thou hast promised unto us by Thine Apostles, and put us not to shame on the Day of Resurrection. Verily, Thou wilt not break Thy promise.'??

Is a form of humbling our will before the Will of God.

But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom.??

Might be considered as a period of spiritual "gestation" before re-entering the affairs of the world; such as it was common for the Manifestations and others (e.g., Shoghi Effendi) to withdraw from the world for a time before embarking on their missions.

Is a time of mourning the absence of our Beloved.

Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be

taken from them, and then shall they fast.??

Is a way of relating to the experiences of our Beloved. (I apologize, but I don't

have this reference with me; it is from the book "Fasting: A Bahá'í Handbook",

where 'Abdu'l-Bahá talks about the wisdom of fasting).

Establishes a kind of silence in our lives, which betters our inward hearing.

Is the Sun of religion. . .

And as the sun and moon constitute the brightest and most prominent luminaries in the heavens, similarly in the heaven of the religion of God two shining orbs have been ordained— fasting and prayer. 'Islam is heaven; fasting is its sun, prayer, its moon.??

Impresses upon the believer, in a more moderate way, what asceticism would hope to achieve.

Introduces us to a way of life which is different from the ways of this world.

Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? Wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day ???

of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. Is it such a fast that I have chosen? A day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward.??

Sharpens the distinction between that part of us which is carnal, and that which is divine.

Likewise, reflect upon the perfection of man's creation, and that all these planes and states are folded up and hidden away within him.

Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form When within thee the universe is folded?

Then we must labor to destroy the animal condition, till the meaning of humanity shall come to light.??

By removing the most immediate forms of self-gratification, it gives us pause

to consider exactly what this world has to offer. For example, perhaps we are like a drowsy bird asleep in his cage. Each time we come close to wakening, and hence to realizing the horror of our imprisonment, we are lulled to sleep by the complacency of material satisfaction. By removing the narcotic effect of material balsams, in a sense, we permit the mist to clear, and waken to the realization of our own selves.

Empowers us, by demonstrating quite palpably that our will is capable of overcoming our physical concupiscence.

Offers a view of the world, and a state of mind, which, like prayer, is unique among the experiences of life. In what other avenue of life do we experience the same feelings as we do when we're fasting? It introduces us to a way of living that is not common, and thus implies that the ordinary mode of survival is not the only kind of life there is.

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Makes very real to us the influence our physical lust has over our wills, and how much of our daily plans are devoted to material considerations. Like prayer, it is a very real, concrete sensation, and so can become a powerful focal point of meditation. Mere ideas have a chance to become forgotten, but physical experiences obtrude on our consciousness.

Causes us to be grateful that it lasts for only a fixed time! And thus we realize

God's mercy, and the Hidden Word:

O Son of Being! If poverty overtake thee, be not sad; for in time the Lord of wealth shall visit thee. Fear not abasement, for glory shall one day rest on thee.??

That is, the fact that we are permitted to break the fast is perhaps symbolic that times of deprivation will always be followed by reunion.

Increases our awareness of the sufferings of others; not only their material privations, but their lack of familiarity with the Beloved. After all, a condition of thirst

and hunger describes the situation of someone who has not yet been introduced to

the Table of Bounty. In this way, it may underscore the primary role of teaching in

our service to the world.

Reminds us that the spiritual life requires attention and effort, and that if instead

we relax ourselves entirely, we shall sink inescapably into oblivion.

Ye are even as the bird which soareth, with the full force of its mighty wings and with complete and joyous confidence, through the immensity of the heavens, until, impelled to satisfy its hunger, it turneth longingly to the water and clay of the earth below it, and, having been

entrapped in the mesh of its desire, findeth itself impotent to resume its flight to the realms whence it came. Powerless to shake off the burden weighing on its sullied wings, that bird, hitherto an inmate of the heavens, is now forced to seek a dwelling-place upon the dust. Wherefore,

O My servants, defile not your wings with the clay of waywardness and vain desires, and suffer them not to be stained with the dust of envy and hate, that ye may not be hindered from soaring in the heavens of My divine knowledge.??

Underscores the fact that true growth requires a certain degree of pain, while the

rewards far outweigh the cost! We should pursue our spiritual course with alacrity,

even if at times the flesh may be unwilling.

The steed of this Valley is pain; and if there be no pain this journey will never end. In this station the lover hath no thought save the Beloved, ???

and seeketh no refuge save the Friend. At every moment he offereth a hundred lives in the path of the Loved One, at every step he throweth a thousand heads at the feet of the Beloved.

O My Brother! Until thou enter the Egypt of love, thou shalt never come to the Joseph of the Beauty of the Friend; and until, like Jacob, thou forsake thine outward eyes, thou shalt never open the eye of thine inward being; and until thou burn with the fire of love, thou shalt never commune with the Lover of Longing.??

Causes those with means to understand the suffering of the destitute:

All praise be unto God, Who hath revealed the law of obligatory prayer as a reminder to His servants, and enjoined on them the Fast that those possessed of means may become apprised of the owes and sufferings of the destitute.??

It leaves us with nothing to suffice us but God.

Rid thou thyself of all attachments to aught except God, enrich thyself in God by dispensing with all else besides Him, and recite this prayer:

Say: God sufficeth all things above all things, and nothing in the heavens or in the earth or in whatever lieth between them but God, thy

Lord, sufficeth. Verily, He is in Himself the Knower, the Sustainer, the Omnipotent.

Regard not the all-sufficing power of God as an idle fancy. It is that genuine faith which thou cherishest for the Manifestation of God in every Dispensation. It is such faith which sufficeth above all the things that exist on the earth, whereas no created thing on earth besides faith would suffice thee. If thou art not a believer, the Tree of divine Truth would condemn thee to extinction. If thou art a believer, thy faith shall be sufficient for thee above all things that exist on earth, even though thou possess nothing.??

During the time of fasting, the spiritual takes on the ascendant in our lives; in this way it may symbolize the “Divine Springtime”: the period of the Manifestation’s presence amongst us. The force of that Presence perpetuates throughout the rest of
?? Bahá’u’lláh, from the compilation on Obligatory Prayer and Fasting
?? Báb, Selections from the Writings of, p. ???
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His Cycle, but the time of its Dawning is especially blessed. The fast perhaps is a symbolic remembrance of that time, and hence our joy and our desire to spend time with Him would outweigh all material considerations.

O My friend, listen with heart and soul to the songs of the spirit, and treasure them as thine own eyes. For the heavenly wisdoms, like the clouds of spring, will not rain down on the earth of men’s hearts forever; and though the grace of the All-Bounteous One is never stilled and never ceasing, yet to each time and era a portion is allotted and a bounty set apart, this in a given measure. ‘And no one thing is there, but with Us are its storehouses; and We send it not down but in settled measure.’ The cloud of the Loved One’s mercy raineth only on the garden of the spirit, and bestoweth this bounty only in the season of spring. The other seasons have no share in this greatest grace, and barren lands no portion of this favor.??

O Son of Justice! Whither can a lover go but to the land of his beloved? and what seeker findeth rest away from his heart’s desire? To the true lover reunion is life, and separation is death. His breast is void of patience and his heart hath no peace. A myriad lives he would forsake to hasten to the abode of his beloved.??

Consider these nightingales. So great is their love for these roses, that sleepless from dusk till dawn, they warble their melodies and commune with burning passion with the object of their adoration. How then can

those who claim to be afire with the rose-like beauty of the Beloved
choose to sleep???

?? Bahá'u'lláh, The Seven Valleys, p. ??

?? Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words, p. ??

?? Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in God Passes By, p. ???

Religion and authority

Is religion an authority in life? Are humans meant to explore truth
individually,

personally, or is it the place of religion to dictate truth to us?

It is my understanding that religion, with respect to the inward aspect of the
individual, represents no authority: that although socially religion may have a
purpose, it makes no demands of the heart. In fact, such freedom of spirit is
essential

to what it means to be human.

The course of this essay depends on the meaning of two words: “authority”
and

“law”. As such, a bit of definition is in order. These are only attempted
definitions,

but perhaps from example a clearer picture will arise.

- Authority is the capacity and intention to exercise power in pursuit of a goal.
- Law, in the absolute sense, is a condition of existence; in the relative sense, it is the dictims of authority.

In pursuit of its goal, an authority exhibits two major characteristics: the
restraint of personal liberty, and response to challenge using force. Since
relative laws

only express the will of an authority, they do not possess attributes per se.

But absolute law—or natural law—has the distinct characteristic that it is
inviolable within

its scope. One must decide what relationship one will have to it; it does not
dictate,

or determine anything relative to the subject. It is entirely without motive,
which

is something possessed in high degree by both relative laws and their governing
authority.

Governments are a typical example of an authority. In the pursuit of their
goal,

putatively social welfare, they exercise power to keep citizens within the
bounds of

their law. Yet these same attributes can be found in the gardener, or the
teacher:

anywhere that artificial rules (i.e., relative laws) are imposed to produce a
desired
effect.

Authority itself seems to be neither good nor bad. If the laws it proclaims are healthy, and its aim a good one, the result will be good. But if the laws are inappropriate, or the aim evil, the result will likewise be evil.

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Without authority there would be no exercise of power. Life would be an agglomeration of unintended forces and blind instinct. The moment we begin making

decisions and applying them, we are exercising our power and asserting our authority to make those changes to some degree.

But despite the useful nature of power, there exists a dimension in human life where it never exerts a beneficial influence. Consider the artist. In the field of

painting she represents an authority through her control of form and color. By following certain inner, ethereal guides, her brush can produce whatever goal her

imagination desires. For the sake of simplicity, let's say our artist has chosen beauty

for her subject. And by a good hand and a willing brush, picture such an example

standing before you now.

Is there any authority imaginable which can decide your appreciation?

Someone may command you to act kindly, but can they demand your love of kindness? Neither can they decide another's faith, or happiness, or their heart's

desire. For the human heart is exempt from all authority.

Which is not to say it is exempt from the laws governing its existence! For this

is what I believe one purpose of religion to be: the education of man as to the laws

governing his spirit.

A true law cannot be contravened, but it can be used. Gravity prevents us from jumping to the moon, but proper use of physical laws has allowed us to fly there. So

although the spirit cannot escape its own reality, it can profit and develop through

an understanding of its nature.

Yet, the expression of a natural law bears no relationship to any authority. An authority voices relative laws, laws specific to its purpose. Natural laws deal with

the fabric of reality itself. Parents tell their children that gravity holds them to the

Earth. But is this a command that it must be so? There is a distinct difference between elucidation and command. No physicist has ever been accused of playing the tyrant.

Furthermore, authority is always in pursuit of a goal, whereas natural laws exist of themselves. Men can either profit through the knowledge of them, or suffer the consequences of ignorance. Never do they seek to win first place in our hearts; the reaction we chose determines our relationship to them.

Religion has parts of both of these. With regard to the individual, it reveals to us the secrets of our own nature; with regard to society, it seeks to unify us by threatening reward and punishment, the trademarked tools of any authority. Since the latter involves material reality, and I've already said that the use of authority is required for progress, I won't question religious authority in that respect.

But I would like to see what more can be rooted out in the first case, that of religion's message to the individual.

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Our love for anything cannot be decided. To do so, for whatever purpose, would be the act of an authority which has chosen our love as one of its operating criteria.

Even when our conscious mind tries to play that role, it fails. Love is a spontaneous production of the heart, dependent on sensitivity and circumstance, not will. It makes no sense, therefore, to believe that God has decreed for us to love Him.

Perhaps He has created us in order that such love might exist, but it must come about through the pureness of one's heart contacting the very thing that heart most desires.

If spiritual law says that God is perfect beauty, and that He cannot be seen until we open our eyes, is that a command? Why would an omnipotent being have any need to command, if he could have created us without lids?

Authority exercises power to dominate, because without power its goal could not otherwise be achieved. God, on the other hand, if He is omnipotent, all-possessing,

incomparable, has no need to invoke power. His station is the root of dominus: Lord. Why exert power to dominate, if your very being betokens Lordship?

Therefore, in the relationship between believer and Lord, there is no question of authority. The affairs of men may always need some beating into shape, but the

human heart is a thing to flower, not to mold. For One Who could have created us in any image, He chose His Own: that we might reach out across the immensity of ignorance by our volition, and learn through that experience to appreciate

the
beauty of His creation.
Religion and Ethics

. . . it is the relationship of the individual soul to God and the fulfilment of its spiritual destiny that is the ultimate aim of the laws of religion.?

At some point recently it dawned on my attention that most of the world considers religion as primarily a system of ethics. That is, religion is about what a person should or shouldn't do in order to become a better person.

This would seem to be the ostensible focus of the Christian church, whose doctrine is sometimes entirely concerned with the salvation of the individual believer.

Although "doing good" may mean having faith rather than performing good deeds,

all the same it regards the actions of the individual, and how those actions transform one's life.

But it is my opinion that religion is very different from ethics, and in fact is not at all an ethical system.

In ethics, according to my understanding, virtue is a state of being in which the good has taken root in a person's life; the good is attracted by certain behaviors, called virtuous, and by aligning ourselves with those behaviors, we reach the culmination of our human nature.

Since these behaviors are the primary focus of ethics, good behavior will constitute success, and bad behavior, failure. So that if we are not acting according to our

ethical guidelines, we are in a state of failure to some degree; and likewise, anyone

who does act in such a way, has succeeded.

Now, religion definitely prescribes a set of laws for the believers to follow, and

in this I can see a correlation to ethics. But most religionists understand that it's not

just about what you do. In fact, parts of the Christian church have taken this to an

extreme, whereby they claim that faith alone offers salvation.

In the Bahá'í Writings, it is also stated that behavior alone is not sufficient.

Bahá'u'lláh begins His book of laws by stating:

Whoso achieveth this duty [of recognizing the Manifestation] hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed.?

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Yet immediately after this sentence He commands our obedience, and claims that recognition of Him is not acceptable without such obedience.

So there is an interplay here between our mystical relationship with God, and what appears to be an ethical system of conduct for the believers to follow.

But

herein lie also many snares, since each half of the scenario is sometimes considered

separately: am I succeeding in life because I am nearer to God? But how can this

be if my behavior is not in line with the Teachings? Conversely, am I succeeding

because I act properly? But how can this be if my heart feels empty?

Our failure to behave with complete propriety (which is the lot of us all, I'm

afraid) can become a source of anxiety, because one half of

Bahá'u'lláh's prescription

seems to indicate that our lives, and our love for God, is unacceptable to the extent

that we fail in our behavior.

This is the ethical view: that virtue consists wholly in acting rightly. Since this

idea comes from Aristotle, it's understandable that we find it at the core of our

Western perspective. So indivorcible is it, in fact, that we regularly fall into the trap

of considering religion as equivalent to a system of ethics.

I run into this in people's choice of prayers, or their favorite quotes. Next time,

when someone shares something from the Writings with you, what kind do they choose? Bahá'u'lláh revealed in many voices, one of which is the lawgiver. What

voice do they commonly pick as their favorite? The ethical "mode" would prefer

the lawgiver, since it makes religious life clear and definite. But how often do they

choose the truth-seeker, or the mystic? These are much less clear with regard to what

one should "do", and yet they are no less valid.

At one time We spoke in the language of the lawgiver; at another in that of the truth-seeker and the mystic, and yet Our supreme purpose and highest wish hath always been to disclose the glory and sublimity of this station. God, verily, is a sufficient witness!?

The image that came to mind to describe the difference between ethics and religion is that of looking for treasure on a treasure map. A map gives certain

directions

in order for you to find your goal. It says: at this juncture turn left, and here, turn

right; but when you're here, don't turn left, as that will lead you astray.

When we think of following the directions on a map, do we consider that "ethical"? It's a bit different from saying "you should do this" or "you should do that."

Instead, directions take the shape of "you should do this to find the treasure" or "you should do that if you want to reach your goal."

Sometimes these directions are not spatial. For example, we know that we shouldn't drink alcohol if we want to drive a car. The reason is not that abstaining from alcohol is more virtuous, but that if we want to drive safely, we shouldn't
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impair our coordination and reflexes. (Which is not to say that drinking alcohol

is ever OK, but ethically the reason for refraining is that the effects are undesirable

in the long run, and not due to anything intrinsically terrible about alcohol itself).

This is not an ethical mandate, but a practical one, in view of achieving our goal.

Which comes to my conclusion: I believe that religion is not about us and our behavior. It is about the Glory of God, and how we can achieve nearness to Him; in the same way as a treasure map, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is not an ethical text, but a guidebook for discovering this treasure.

O ye peoples of the world! Know assuredly that My commandments are the lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures.?

Perhaps these are lamps to find our way through the night, and keys to unlock the doors of His mystery? Each image implies movement toward something else. Also, when we search for treasure, success is measured not by how well we behave, but in our nearness to the objective.

O Son of Man! Sorrow not save that thou art far from Us. Rejoice not save that thou art drawing near and returning unto Us.?

Correct behavior is necessary, then, not for its own sake—which is the mode of an ethical system—but simply because it is what we must do in order to unearth those faculties within us which will allow us to ascend home. If that world is spirit,

and we are still of the earth, how can we return?

O Son of Desire! Give ear unto this: Never shall mortal eye recognize the everlasting Beauty, nor the lifeless heart delight in aught but in the withered bloom. For like seeketh like, and taketh pleasure in the company of its kind.?

We become spiritual, not in order to “achieve” anything, but so that we can discern the signposts leading home. For example, all of us speak at least one language.

Did we learn our mother tongue because we saw it as a virtuous thing to do, or simply because we needed it to function in this world? Similarly, I believe that the

development of our spiritual capacities is much like exercising our infant wings, so

that one day we may become strong enough to fly heavenward.

In conclusion, religion is not ethics: religion is about God. The laws of God weren't given us for their own sake, but rather as keys to unlock the spiritual potentialities of our being, so that we might relate to the world in which He abides. If

we choose not to pursue them, who is at a loss? If we do achieve them, who is at

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a gain? There is no loss and gain; either we are advancing toward God, or we are

becoming more and more embroiled in this world. At the end, His is the beautiful

life; I think that far from being a burdensome thing ridden with guilt, and a sense

of failure, religion should be considered as a door opening up to a world we've never

seen. The mystery, and the excitement, is what lies beyond. . .

Make not your deeds as snares wherewith to entrap the object of your aspiration, and deprive not yourselves of this Ultimate Objective for which have ever yearned all such as have drawn nigh unto God. Say: The very life of all deeds is My good pleasure, and all things depend upon Mine acceptance. Read ye the Tablets that ye may know what hath been purposed in the Books of God, the All-Glorious, the Ever-Bounteous. He who attaineth to My love hath title to a throne of gold, to sit thereon in honour over all the world; he who is deprived thereof, though he sit upon the dust, that dust would seek refuge with God, the Lord of all Religions.?

Religion does not get harder

I am doubtful of the conventional Western attitude toward religion, that is hard,

requires strenuous effort, and after all that just keeps getting harder. This view tends to leave out everyone who is not strongly motivated by their sense of duty or shame. It makes it seem like this is all some herculean struggle between one part of myself and another, which only the best may participate in. Contrary to this view, I have been developing the understanding that religion is actually the simplest of all things, and only keeps getting easier. Mainly this is because we rely upon God more, but there are other, more banal factors as well. For example, telling the truth is much easier than telling a lie, because lies require maintenance whereas the truth stands by itself. The truth may be more painful, or difficult for our ego, but the act of doing it is easier. And that is where I see the difficulty of religion: one must be willing to prefer the Will of God over one's own will. Yet once this willingness is in place, pursuing it is easier than ordinary life. A further example: truly religious activity is joyful and fulfilling. It gives one greater strength to continue. There are tests, but as one grows in spirit, these tests become an exciting challenge, full of reward. Whereas one who ignores spirituality, however easy their path may seem, it is constantly fraught with little frustrations, anger and dissatisfaction. Life becomes so short and impermanent, that one is constantly forced to hurry along, or deny the ever-present truth that life is flexible and inconstant. Religion allows one to relax in the truth, in a sense, and to share the larger movements of eternity. At every point one must be willing to be a part of this—and this willingness can be hard—but difficulty lies in the choice, not the action. Life needn't be a constant battle with one's self, always full of tension, opposition, and negativity. This hatred that develops of the spiritual side for the material, neglects the fact that spirituality is dependent upon material means, and that the two CAN work together harmoniously. It is a question of balance and placement, not superiority and control.

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Perhaps because Western life desires control, we seek control over our own spirituality—a sense of possessing a consistent spiritual mode that will allow us to act and appear as we desire most. But the essence of this quest is to let go, and allow one's self to become part of a vaster scheme, appreciating and acknowledging that our part is divinely ordained, although perhaps not as spectacular as we might wish.

What is harder than accepting that next to God, even the infinity of our nature is infinitely small? It's a bitter pill to swallow, to believe that what we do matters less than the context in which we do it. If that context is not ripe, or changes, we must change. This is the nature of contingent existence, and it denies all hope of control over destiny.

And at the very same time that this view is hard for a Western mind, it is so much easier! Because it allows us to look to that context for guidance, to pray to God for assistance, to permit inspiration, rather than mere perspiration, to fuel

our endeavors. It is hard in the essential sense—perhaps the most difficult thing in life—but easy in the actual sense. Because religion is joy, the soul finding home, a relaxation into the waiting, loving arms of God.

This is why I'd like to know if the Writings really depict life as constantly arduous—and then more arduous. If that is true, why would anyone seek refuge with us? The Bahá'ís I know are tired out, and always feeling more burdened. Most

conferences I've been to (with the exception of the Kingdom Conference!) drill in the

message: "You're not doing enough, you must work harder, this is no easy game, do

more, be more, give more!!!!" In short, I leave these meetings depressed and anxious, fearful of my future Day of Reckoning. Life seems so bleak, so tiring. Weary

of heart, it saps all my energy to continue.

Whereas when I listen to other speakers, who focus on love and possibility—such as Puva Merdi, in San Jose—I always feel uplifted, more aware of my awesome

heritage. Instead of harping on duty and obedience, I am told that someone loves

me. That this love is more important than what I do, and that my actions, should

they share in such love, will be far easier to accomplish. It is like being in love; if your

beloved asked you to help clean her house, or her car, you wouldn't even remember doing it! The entirety of the act would be for her sake, and her perfume is all you'd remember.

We often mention the worthlessness of this world, and how we should be free of it. And yet, why focus on what we shouldn't see? Pay attention to the giver, rather than the gift, and everything will naturally, easily, joyfully fall into place.

Religion is the most natural state of all, since we are in fact spiritual beings. Likewise, why focus on duty and accomplishment, instead of its purpose? We do all that we do to create an atmosphere of love and harmony for every human being; an atmosphere in which all peoples can know and love God without suffering, and in a spirit of brotherhood. Since the aim is brotherhood-through-recognition-???

of-divine-origin, then to actively realize this brotherhood is more important than whatever laws or institutions might exist in the Faith! Those laws and institutions may be necessary to achieve that goal, yet this does not mean that such laws are primary in importance. Spirituality ranks higher than the medium of spirituality.

Here is a quote to clarify this:

Laws and institutions, as viewed by Bahá'u'lláh, can become really effective only when our inner spiritual life has been perfected and transformed. Otherwise religion will degenerate into a mere organization, and becomes a dead thing. . . ?

Why wouldn't this be true on a larger scale as well? That our Faith cannot become an effective refuge for humankind, until we perfect and transform the nature of our interactions, and achieve a station of love and amity which makes doing things together natural, easy and joyful??

It is my belief that mainly because we view as religion as hard, unnatural and difficult, that most of our own membership has no interest in Feast. I see this attitude as intricately linked with the difficulties we now face. Secular life seems so easy, because we believe it's easier! But actually, secular life does not offer what people need, which is peace, love, true joy, happiness, security, etc. There is enough

duty, shame and guilt to last the world for countless generations. Yet none of it comes from religion:

. . . all the sorrow and the grief that exist come from the world of matter—the spiritual world bestows only the joy!?

‘Abdu’l-Bahá even said that material development is dependent on this love and amity:

Know ye, verily, that the happiness of mankind lieth in the unity and the harmony of the human race, and that spiritual and material developments are conditioned upon love and amity among all men.?

And from Secret of Divine Civilization:

It is certain that the greatest of instrumentalities for achieving the advancement and the glory of man, the supreme agency for the enlightenment and the redemption of the world, is love and fellowship and unity among all the members of the human race.?

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Love and fellowship are easy to do! Making new friends may be hard, but associating with current ones is how I want to spend my time!! How can this fit with

the view that religion is inherently difficult, when it is exactly such fellowship and unity that is the bedrock of religion??

From Vignettes of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

In ??? Ethel Rosenberg made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Although He was free, the Master had not yet left ‘Akká to live in Haifa.

Ethel asked Him what the friends could do to increase their numbers and to make their work more effective. He answered that ‘the members of the little groups should love each other very much and be devoted friends. The more they loved each other, the more the meetings would attract and draw others, and the more they loved, the more their influence would be felt. . . I say also in English, that you may understand how much I mean it, that love is the foundation of everything. . . ’

And lastly, from Shoghi Effendi, Directives from the Guardian (p. ??):

The Cause of God is endowed with tremendous powers, and the reason the believers do not gain more from it is because they have not learned to duly draw these mighty forces of love and strength and harmony generated by the Faith.?

Now, I don’t know about you, but love feels good. Even if what happens is physically or emotional painful, the fact that it is done with love makes it easier to

bear. Love lifts the burden of living from a sorrowed heart. Love and joy make our thoughts keener, our creativity more fluid, our inspiration plentiful. Isn't religion the primary source of all love?

You must live in the utmost happiness. If any trouble or vicissitude comes into your lives, if your heart is depressed on account of health, livelihood or vocation, let not these things affect you. They should not cause unhappiness, for Bahá'u'lláh has brought you divine happiness. He has prepared heavenly food for you; He has destined eternal bounty for you; He has bestowed everlasting glory upon you. Therefore, these glad tidings should cause you to soar in the atmosphere of joy forever and ever. Render continual thanks unto God so that the confirmations of God may encircle you all.?

When I read these talks, and talk in this vein with other people, I feel relieved; I feel like the future peace of humanity is assured, and that I can do something about ???

it; I see that religion is not some awful, dour, puritan torture machine. The focus is no longer on my spiritual station, or future deliverance. The entire aim is the unity and well-being of mankind, and this is the most joyful—and easy—condition of all.

Were men to discover the motivating purpose of God's Revelation, they would assuredly cast away their fears, and, with hearts filled with gratitude, rejoice with exceeding gladness.?

The Great Being saith: O ye children of men! The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men.?

O Son of Spirit! With the joyful tidings of light I hail thee: rejoice! To the court of holiness I summon thee; abide therein that thou mayest live in peace for evermore.

And so, although tests and trials may increase as we strive after truth, the increase in our joy and ease that comes from reliance on God will always outpace these difficulties. They become smaller and smaller, dwindling away, until the station is reached where Bahá'u'lláh says:

This station conferreth the true standard of knowledge, and freeth man from tests. In this realm, to search after knowledge is irrelevant, for He

hath said concerning the guidance of travelers on this plane, “Fear God, and God will instruct thee.” And again: “Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth.”

Wherefore, a man should make ready his heart that it be worthy of the descent of heavenly grace, and that the bounteous Cup-Bearer may give him to drink of the wine of bestowal from the merciful vessel. “For the like of this let the travailers travail!”

Relying on one another

Upon the great ocean of life we sit in a boat. This boat represents the sphere of our contact with the world outside. Beyond us, we can see the bright blue waters extending for miles and miles, and below us, the depths receding quickly away into an unfathomed deep.

When we first enter life, we sit like a child on the bottom of that boat. Life decrees that we move forward and progress, yet we sit motionless. Without progress,

we die; without anyone to help us, we die.

So our parents, being loving, attach to us like a tugboat and pull us forward. The going is slow, but it is steady. We cannot choose our course, but at least we’re

moving. This is the condition of dependence.

But as we grow older, we see other places we’d like to go. Our arms grow stronger,

and we figure out how to use the pair of oars that are sitting nearby. By dipping them

into the water and pulling on them, we are able to frustrate the steady course that

has been chosen by our parents. This causes some turmoil, but it makes us aware of

our ability to choose a different path.

Through practice, and an increase in strength, we are able one day to struggle and break free of the tugboat’s hold. Now we are on our own; we are choosing our

own destiny. This is the condition of independence.

Those who are independent realize that their only means to success is self-made decisions. If they do not choose to work, no one else will be able to make them successful. It is the same with virtue. No one conditions the heart of another person.

Being in this position, the independent person learns how best to maximize their

talents. They learn how to row the oars faster, how to build up stronger arms, how

to use the current to their advantage— but they are still moving relatively slowly.

Can anyone realistically row around the world? Maybe a few people can, but not everyone.

So there is another step. From independence we learn how to choose our own goals, based on our own values. Yet it is through interdependence that we derive that

very important quality of speed. Only through interdependence can the majority of

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us make it around the world. Many independent people understand the goals they want to accomplish, but these goals are too audacious for them to achieve.

In the condition of interdependence we become aware that there are masts rising up from the center and ends of our boat. These masts have always been there, but

we didn't know their purpose. These masts represent the people who are close to us

in this life.

When our relationships are well-developed, it is like hoisting up huge, fine sails upon the masts. And when we are loving, it produces the wind that billows in

the sails. How much faster a sailing ship is than one powered by oars! In times of

stillness we can still fall back on our talents of independence—thus ensuring forward

motion— but true progress is gained only with the help of our friends.

Think about the captain of a sailing ship, as opposed to the rower. The captain does not spend his time toiling at the oars. The ship is moving of its own, powered

by the immense winds that swirl about. With such freedom, the captain has time to direct, rather than having to spur himself on. Instead of pushing himself towards

his goal, he simply has to point his ship in the right direction.

This is the power of a unified team of like-minded souls. As individuals, independent though we may be, there is plenty of aspiration, but what can we produce?

As a team, not only do we glide toward our destination with facility, but we also

enjoy the pleasure of reaching there together.

Rhapsody on the Seven Valleys

In the valley of Search, one seeks out an entrance, looks for some secret that will open

the door, like pursuing a person we fancy, trying anything to gain some interest.

Then the eyes that Intended One look toward us, and the realization of

possibility kindles a hope that turns the world upside down. What does anything matter now? The Beloved has acknowledged you.

By immersing one's self in the problem of remoteness and proximity, the differentiation between this world and that—the land of the servant and the plane of the King—becomes more plain. It is seen that time and place are not real, but perceptions of the ego's experience, like light playing on the eyes. When these two falsehoods fade away, and the vision of the seeker transcends its limitations, then beginning and ending are one; you have already achieved your goal. The Beloved is near enough to be called your own self.

The fish has now returned to the Ocean, and there is no question of "Where is God?" As the perceptive faculties develop, and spiritual vision of faith becomes more real, it is seen how all evidences of distinction proceed from the understanding of the individual, and are not related to the Infinite. In a sense, the world we see is the manifestation of our own ignorance. As we see it, good is contending with evil, and there are always battles. Yet beyond all hindrances of vision, evil is as directly related to the Truth as good.

At this point there is no more striving, and nothing leads astray. Perfect contentment ensues. Where can the lover's eye turn that he does not witness the beauty of the Beloved? Every breath is a kiss, every breeze an embrace. Whatever his outward condition, such a seeker is content with both life and death. Nothing gives, nothing takes away. His very existence is his bountiful food.

Finally, because he has sated the passions of knowing, the heart of the seeker is prepared to receive. And now from the cold night a fiery dawn emerges, and the spring rains begin to descend from the winter peaks. With all this flooding of light the heart of the lover is thrown about, because he is only a mite in a vast world.

Everything he knew was only the beginning of knowledge; and, having thought himself satisfied, he finds that it was only the bliss of ignorance, whereas now he

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must contend with awe. This is the babe birthing from the womb, and the dreamer awakening. The world he sees now exceeds his imagination.

Through all this, it finally pervades his soul that he is less than nothing—even

non-existent. Placing upon himself the cloak of faná, he returns to the Ocean as a

single drop, and is gone. Yet, through his form be lost, his essence is not destroyed,

and the world still receives his benefit. When a cow defecates in the garden, are we

later able to the dirt and say, “Look, there it is?” The form is lost, but the essence

remains, and imparts its properties to the soil. So it is that the body has form, but no

essence, and the soul has essence, but no form. In trapping our consciousness within

the limited frame of our life-conception—which is based initially on our material

experiences—we divide ourselves from the nature of our origin, and become like a

ray of sunlight buried in a cave. This is illusion. It is we who bind ourselves to that

cave through a false sense of requirement, since we are unfamiliar with the nature

of things. When we relinquish all feelings of knowledge, and divest ourselves of

concepts even as basic as existence itself, our spirit is freed, and we find that nothing

was holding there but our belief that we should have been.

Freed of space, the soul is a part now of both sun and earth; freed of time, there

is on question of proceeding; freed of knowledge, the prison bars are shattered, and

we enter a world where what we had known as nothing was not even so stable as false conjecture; and freed of limits, we resume our place in the Infinite, and

there is

nothing left but the will of the Creator. Questions of purpose are relative to where,

when and why; but to that world, this place is such madness that questions are their

own answers. And thus the journey is begun.

The Western Romantic Ideal

Men and women seem to believe—according to the romanticized ideal of marriage in western culture—that when they marry they become number one in the other

person's eyes: the most beautiful, most interesting, most desired, most fun to be around, etc. The role of "wife" becomes a permanent assurance of value in the eyes of the "husband", and vice-versa. This is "wedlock", in the sense of the one's values and appreciation being locked, or fixed, with respect to the other; it is the "marriage bond", in terms of binding the eyes of one to a particular valuation of the other—which valuation must always, of course, regard him or her as the highest value. This fantasy takes place independent of any actual values. The course of infatuation, unfortunately, tends to produce such inflated valuation of the other party that it seems not only possible "to love and to cherish" forever, but even feels like that must be the case. Once the infatuation passes, one finds that others do act in ways that are neither deserving of love nor of cherishing. One may still love and cherish the potential for the other to have such qualities, but if their behavior does not have them, these profound feelings cannot be faked. So the wife, for example, after cooking her first meal and finding the husband doesn't like it, may burst into tears. The ideal is already giving way to reality. The "marriage bond" promised that he would love and cherish her always, and already he in neither loving nor cherishing her cooking. I believe these strong words regarding marriage refer to the souls involved, but the romantic ideal has taken them to refer to the self and its actions and attitudes. Thus the husband cannot find his wife to be ugly or fat, he cannot appreciate the beauty of other women, etc. The charade of guaranteed value—from "husband" to "wife" and back again—must be maintained at all costs, lest the ideal on which their marriage was founded be utterly destroyed. When the husband or wife is no longer number one, and one finds they have more passionate interests elsewhere (I refer to hobbies here), these can easily cause jealousy and anger. Even if they are "allowed", they weaken the ideal. They prove that the husband, for example, has an independent sense of value as expressed by his interests. Why is the wife not as interesting, if she represents the

highest value?

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Because of the truth—the death knell of the ideal: she is not.

This shouldn't be surprising, because God is the highest ideal and He is manifested in His creation. Those things that are truest to their nature will reveal His

light in the purest form they are capable of. If the wife or husband is not true to

their nature, clearly they will not be to the other what “wedlock” was meant to ensure. One cannot exhibit a lesser value and still expect to be valued highly. This is a

mythical belief in the power of marriage to get a strange hold on the other person's

values—to fix them in the state of infatuation—that has no basis whatever.

Everyone, at some point or another, complains that, “He or she doesn't love me

like when we first met”. This expresses a wish to be over-valued: for the other party

to return to the inflated values they expressed during infatuation. It is even said

as though the other should do this: as though he or she had failed the promise of

marriage by letting their values find moral ground again and pursuing their interests

where they lay.

This explains, too, why arranged marriages can be successful, and why marriage in Western society—free marriage based on “love”—is a travesty: because couples in

arranged marriages never agreed to value the other as an absolute. They were put in

a situation and had to make do, so they sought value where it could be found and

satisfied their needs in other ways. This is not an affront to either party, because

it makes sense: Why would someone value a person for anything other than their good qualities?

Idealized marriage turns this statement completely around. It asks: How can he or she not value me completely at all times? When the other does not anymore—as must happen—that is when adultery—an attempt to recapture that promise of

absolute adoration independent of merit—becomes a great danger. Or, simply, a divorce to allow both parties to “find what they were looking for”

elsewhere. But

it cannot be found, anywhere. No one can offer the mercy of a baseless

valuation

forever, unless their needs are being fully met in some other way.

Couples that survive drop the ideal. They present enough value to each other that it is worth the time and energy to stay married. Otherwise, it will lead to

divorce or terminal unhappiness. After the first few years, one would hope, husband

and wife stop beating on each other with the shillelagh of “wedlock”, and start to

recognize that value is what value is—and that each person’s needs and capacity for

appreciation of it differ. False valuation always comes to an end under the pressures

of communal living; it simply requires too much energy to keep up the pretense with little return. The only time it remains imaginable is when superlative value is

being offered in other ways. Then the continuing lies might have a pool of energy

to draw from, to keep them going.

How to restore a lifeless marriage, then? There is only one way, and this applies

to any kind of relationship: Offer more value. There are many ways to do this: find

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new values, increase old ones, become better, lessen flaws. All of these will increase

the quality of a relationship.

What will not work is asking the other party to see value where they do not.

Changing a person’s moral compass—that is, how they determine value—is not to

be attempted for any reason but re-orienting them toward God. To do it for the sake

of a marriage or a person is like asking them to be placed on God’s throne instead.

Idols are to be cast out from the temple—not put there intentionally.

So interest may not be dictated. Dull conversation cannot be re-interpreted as interesting. If conversing is dull, the couple will have to do other things to

find

value. Those other things may even liven up that conversation, in which case it is

the value of conversation that has changed, and not the perception of its value by

either party.

Hobbies are a good thing in this respect, as well as other friendships. They take

the strain off, and make lower levels of value acceptable by satisfying one’s

needs

elsewhere. However, they do not make the marriage itself more interesting, simply more acceptable. For the marriage to improve, it must find a greater value of its own.

Nothing, I believe, causes a greater increase in the value one offers to others than self-perfection. By the soul's becoming educated, it grows more beautiful. This imparts value.

The danger in our idealized culture is that one party may become so disillusioned by the promise that was held out to them, that they give up on the marriage

altogether. The other person is at fault, and until they receive the absolute valuation they had expected, they are not willing to accept anything else. In this case, even

if the spouse offers more value, it is actually an affront! because it only emphasizes why the other is not being valued as they wish: because they haven't offered enough value.

In this sad state, value itself becomes the enemy because what the wife or husband wants is not value, but proprietary ownership of the other's sense of value.

Aren't they, after all, entitled to such ownership by the title of "wife" or "husband"?

But unless they give up this fantastic demand, no help is possible. What they want cannot be given. The marriage must fail, or become a continual, living misery. Every avenue of survival is cut off, and even what would ordinarily help becomes poison.

If the ideal is not given up, it destroys those involved, or their marriage.

If the above is true, then the road to finding a healthy marriage must begin by removing this ideal. Infatuation in the beginning cannot be helped, but there is

no reason to believe in every value seen. With this in mind, one can find ways to discover the truth—especially in seeking the counsel of others.

Once married, value alone provides a foundation for happiness, just as with any aspect of life. Both parties must recognize this, and not expect values to appear

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which were not visible at the beginning. What needs to be known can be seen

well
before marriage, if one is looking honestly for values he or she is interested
in. What
that person offers to the other only the other can judge; but if it is not
sufficient for
them, there will not be the kind of love and cherishing one might expect. It is
all
about value.

If both parties do recognize and honor value, if they both offer substantial
and
numerous values to the other, if they know that marriage offers no special
rights
other than the legal, and if they have no expectation that they will ever be
valued in
ways they do not deserve—solely owing to the title of “wife” or
“husband”—then it
is hard to see why it would fail. This is, after all, how all good and lasting
friendships
are formed.

Seeking the ideal beauty

One of the underlying thoughts in religion, and more ancient philosophic
literature,
is the idea of the human being’s kinship with the divine: that there is some
part of
us, some inner core, which is not of this world, but rather comes from the
world
beyond. As such, it relates to that world, instead of to this one. It is like a
stranger
in a strange land here on Earth, and in reality longs to return to its
spiritual home.

But, from the instant we are born into this life, the demands of the body
dominate our attention. We immediately feel many needs, such as hunger, the
need to
breathe, sleep, etc. It is due to the forcefulness of these impressions that we
begin to
consider them “real”, and to pay attention to them.

After very little time, other human beings around us begin to reinforce our
sense of the reality of the physical world. Even until the time we start life
on our
own, society and friends continue to encourage us to pay heed to the demands of
our physical nature—in some cases, to the extent that we deny our spiritual
part
completely.

Unless man is given some way to foster the consciousness of his spiritual
nature,
and hence to educate it and develop its capacities, he is primarily living a

“physical life”. That is, his relationship to the world around him is based on physical terms, taking no account for the rules which govern the life of his spirit. Our spiritual nature, however, is our true reality, and it is this which defines who we actually are. The physical nature is simply a vehicle, even though it may make very real demands on our time. Educating our spiritual nature into awareness is one of the goals of religion. This is a complex, and at times bewildering, process, and yet nothing else quite like religion so directly focuses on the needs of our spirit. For this reason, I think Plato’s ideas of the soul and its quest for beauty have a close relationship with what we find in the writings of the Faith on the subject of the nature of the soul. Man has been created with a twofold nature. In one respect, he is a physical entity having attributes in common with the animal kingdom. But the real essence of his being is that he was created with an eternal nature, an immortal soul. It is in

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this respect that he bears a certain kinship with the divine, just as the Bible states that we were “created in the image of God”. It is due to this kinship that man relates primarily to the kingdom of the ideal. For even though he may seem at first to be mainly a physical being in this life, if we look closely I believe we can find evidences of his divine origin in every aspect of our lives. Human beings are born into this world with completely no knowledge. Our spirits, since they employ a physical body as their means for existing in this life, are entirely ignorant of their nature. Due to the physical demands of our bodies, we perceive this life to be “real”, since it forces itself upon our awareness so violently that we can perceive little else. Society and our peers also reinforce this perception, and may at times council us to believe that this is indeed all there is. But the spirit,

despite whatever may happen to us, still bears its relationship to the immortal realm.

It will always know where it came from, and longs to return there.

This relationship is one of coincidence only, however. Since the soul is essentially

divine, it feels kinship with the divine; but this does not mean it knows where to

find divinity, or how to establish a relationship with it.

The soul can only relate to the world according to its knowledge. Outside of this knowledge, it has no awareness of any kind. And so its longing for beauty, or

love, will take shape corresponding to its understanding of these divine realities.

In fact, any understanding we may have of beauty, in any form, derives from our essential relationship with it: from our common nature. So that if a person is

attracted to the appearance of someone, or a painting, or a scene of nature, what

they are attracted to about it is the reflection of any divine attributes within it.

Outside of this, color and shape are merely emanations of light. Yet for those with

the capacity to appreciate beauty, such physical phenomena will invariably come alive with glorious representations of the spiritual kingdom.

Our first experience of the world is physical, and until we learn otherwise, we continue to relate to it physically. In this sense, we are drawn toward anything that

is good, beautiful, fulfilling, according to our ability to perceive it. And since our

vision at first depends mostly on our physical eyes, we pursue beauty where we can

best find it physically.

The essential idea, however, is that even physical beauty is not purely physical.

In fact, in the absence of a human mind to perceive it, I believe there would be no

such thing as physical beauty. It would become merely light waves, or a combination

of intensities of light. But hidden within this there is a semblance of beauty, which

the human eye is capable of perceiving because it understands beauty intuitively,

due to its inherent relationship. It is important to note that our eyes do not perceive

beauty; it is what the soul experiences, according to what the eyes transmit, that we

call beauty.

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Thus the more involved the soul is in the act of perceiving, the greater its experience of beauty will be. If the soul looks at things with only physical eyes, it will see beauty only in physical objects. It would be like trying to listen to delicate music through a brick wall: only a certain part of the sound comes through; and even what does is neither very accurate, nor intense.

The goal is free ourselves from the obstruction—the brick wall— which intervenes between us and what we seek. I say “seek”, even though we may not be aware of it as seeking. Yet, consider that human beings are always seeking experiences which animals would never desire: they want to feel fulfillment in their lives, they want to find happiness, they want to achieve something. We are always looking for a way to transcend our ordinary, dull existence. “Praise be to God! man is always turned toward the heights, and his aspiration is lofty; he always desires to reach a greater world than the world in which he is, and to mount to a higher sphere than that in which he is. The love of exaltation is one of the characteristics of man.” (Some Answered Questions, p. ???). But animals want just the opposite. If they could achieve a mindless routine that would keep them well-fed and safe—with perhaps an opportunity here and there for exercise, or whatever social urges they might feel the need to pursue—they would call that perfection. I can’t think of a cat or dog who has ever become discontented with a good owner, no matter how invariable his life may have become.

Human beings, though, are always looking to satisfy some indefinite desire within themselves. It seems almost like a sense of homelessness: that we are not of this world, and our souls know this. And so we seek to find that place which will make us feel as though we completely belong there. And it is just because this “place”, the spiritual world, reflects its attributes on this plane of existence, that we pursue material objects for fulfillment. Otherwise, if the physical world were bereft entirely of its capacity to reflect spiritual attributes, I think we would feel

for it about
as much as we feel for a pound of sand.
Imagine, in fact, that our need to eat, drink, sleep, etc., had magically
vanished.
Yet imagine also that the entire world contained nothing but sand. Nothing else
but sand. Our mating urges would have also vanished, and so picture the world
as
being inhabited by no one but people of the same sex. So here we sit on our
mound
of sand— which hasn't even the decency to form itself into dunes, since
there is no
wind, either—with absolutely no need to do anything. We just sit around,
nothing
forcing us to move, and nowhere to go.
I think most people would consider this hell. But this is something similar to
what the world would be like if we stripped it of every reflection of the
divine.
Perhaps some mystic might yet find a paradise in such a world, but for anyone
who
depended on their physical body to perceive beauty, there would be precious
little
for him to look at.

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So even our love for the things of this world comes from the fact that they
bear some kind of resemblance to spiritual reality. It is because of this that
we
actually pursue them as if they would grant us the happiness we seek; at times,
we
even arrange our entire lives around the pursuit of some material goal. When in
reality the purpose of this world is only to sustain the health of our bodies,
and the
promulgation of the species; at least, that's how it looks from the animal
kingdom's
point of view.

Yet we humans go so much farther than merely satisfying our basic physical
needs, that it must make anyone wonder. Is the addition of abstract thought—
which is the only difference that materialists grant to the reality of man—so
profound a thing that it would explain the irrational and chaotic endeavors of
men?

Our behavior is so radically different from animals in certain respects that it
would
seem to me that there must be more at the heart of the matter, which would give
a
consistent picture why we behave the way we do; which, if taken into
consideration,

would make us appear no longer irrational, but very definitely following a set course toward a determined objective.

This objective, I believe, is to find a place, situation, or circumstances, which

would make us feel “complete”. Just as hunger seeks to be satisfied—without ever

explaining why it should be— so the spirit longs to regain its home, without seeking

to justify its longing. There are many things that we do simply because they feel

good, and we accept this as a sufficient reason for why we do them. What other goal but true happiness is needed to understand why the soul desires to find that

homeland from which it came?

What must happen is for us to find the Way to that condition of being. To do this requires being able to discern the signs clearly. This means finding a way

to discover the divine principles more and more directly—since perceiving them

through the material senses always distorts them to some degree.

In the beauty of a sunrise, for example, we see the reflection of the divine beauty.

But in order to separate away the material elements of the picture, in order to leave

nothing but pure beauty, would require already knowing which where the physical elements, and which were the divine. However, since possessing this knowledge is

the end we have in mind, then in our condition of ignorance we will not know which are the divine aspects, and which are the material.

Because of this confusion, we are likely to pursue our heart’s desire sometimes in

the wrong direction. We may discover beauty in the physical forms of other human

beings, and then mistake these forms for beauty itself, and wind up organizing our

lives around this one objective. But it is not the form which should be seeking;

rather, beauty itself.

It is very difficult, without already possessing a knowledge of what beauty is in its essence, to go about finding it. It’s almost a catch-??, since,

without the
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capacity to distinguish between what is truly beauty and what is merely a physical

form reflecting beauty, we really can’t know whether we’ve taken a right

step or not.

Sometimes the physical object is so pleasurable that it's just about impossible to

remain objective in order to see things clearly.

In fact, it is entirely impossible. The physical world is too beguiling, and the

object which we seek too elusive, for us ever to achieve this on our own. Left alone, we would end up worshipping whatever was most physically attractive, simply

because this is as real as beauty would ever be for us. What other way of seeing

things with our physical eyes is there? In what way would the human soul ever receive the education it requires in order to break into the light, unless there were

some way that a pure knowledge could be transmitted to us, in a form that we could

understand? It would be like to trying to describe the experience of sight or color

to a blind man. Without some common frame of reference, the communication of this knowledge would be impossible.

This is exactly where the Messengers of God come in. It is because these Individuals have a direct knowledge of the Truth—unobstructed by the normal hindrances

of the human body—that they are able to communicate this knowledge to us in a form we can understand. Even still, the knowledge is presented, but it is not a

knowledge of anything we have had any experience of, except dimly. And so at first it seems strange, or incomprehensible; not because the prophets desire to keep

anything hidden, but because we can't relate to what's being said. It would be like

opening a Calculus text book with no prior knowledge of math: all of the answers

are there, in clear print, but we are not yet able to understand them.

Understanding the principles of math is a slow, continual process of building concept upon concept, one at a time. Our spiritual education is something very similar. The Prophets communicate knowledge which our souls may relate to, but our

minds and hearts are completely unfamiliar with. It requires time, and patience—

but it is by no means impossible.

This knowledge communicated by the prophets is often understood by some, but not all, of the people. And since God has sent Prophets to us since the beginning

of man's existence, we have always had the benefit of their knowledge, even if we did

not always understand what was being taught to us.

It is in this way that the philosophers and sages are able to postulate and make discoveries about the nature and condition of the soul. Since even in the fairy tales that our parents tell us when we're younger—perhaps the crudest form of ethical philosophy— there is a faint echo of the teachings of the early Prophets. That which had benefit was kept, and that which was useless was discarded. Humanity knew that justice was a required principle of government, and for this reason we still find it with us today, despite the various forms it may take—at times being so crudely implemented as to seem antipodal to the divine message it came from. ???

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In the Writings of the Manifestations themselves, however, we find the most direct, unmodified transmission of these spiritual teachings. These teachings direct us toward our goal—what has been called the “Straight Path”, or the “gate of heaven”—and they instruct us as to what we must do in order to better our spiritual perception, and thus make the correct decisions which will ultimately lead to our true happiness. It is through them that we learn how to separate between the divine realities being expressed in nature, and the lifeless, material elements which are used as the medium for their expression. Plato's means of achieving this goal, a mode of life lived according to the soul rather than the body, was to lessen the attention paid to the body to the extent that the soul's needs must perforce break through. But we know this to be a crude and inexact approximation of the divine teachings. There is nothing inherently bad or evil about material reality. At worst, it simply has no value at all. And yet it does reveal to us, in the form of our first experience with the divine kingdom, those attributes which are possessed by our Creator. The only real tragedy is if we mistake the medium for the message, and direct our lives toward the pursuit of some material object, when in reality it is something much more ethereal about that material

object

which we are attracted to.

Hence religion indicates to us that our desire for beauty in any physical

object

is really the soul's desire to be reacquainted with the divine beauty from

which that

object derives its qualities. It also teaches us how to distinguish between the

twofold

nature of the physical world, and to learn to appreciate the divine realities

directly,

without depending on our physical senses at all.

For what would happen to us if one day our sight were lost, and our only means

of perceiving beauty had been through our eyes? Or if it were by sound that we

knew these things, and we then lost our hearing?

In fact, the day will come when we will have lost all our physical senses, and

if,

by that time, we have not learned how to apprehend the divine reality any other

way,

what will become of us? All of the concrete things by which we knew God's

qualities

will be gone. If we haven't learned how to use the faculties of our soul by

then, we

will be just as handicapped in the next world as a blind person is here on

Earth. It

would be like to a baby which saw no need to develop its power of sight, only

to

discover later, and much to its chagrin, how important that ability really was.

But even the loss of sight does not render a person's life naught. They are

still

able to manage, just as I believe that all souls, no matter how ignorant they

may

have been of the spiritual truths, will be able to make a life for themselves

in the

next world, and develop some sort of relationship with that world. But the

degree of

appreciation one develops for beauty is in direct proportion to his ability to

perceive

it. Do we want merely to exist, or to find the most desirable existence

possible?

None of us would choose to have been born blind, since it is evidently a

condition

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of loss. Yet now we have a very similar choice, with regard to our spiritual

vision:

will we choose to remain wholly dependent on our physical eyes, and left

entirely to

God's mercy when we lose those eyes, or will we attempt to discover another mode of perception, one which is more directly related to the nature of the soul, and hence be possessed of a faculty which we will not lose when we shake off this mortal coil?

It is the soul inside us which constitutes who we truly are, and in reality every aspect of our lives is determined by this truth, whether we are able to see how this is so or not. We may not be aware that our desire for beauty stems from our inherent relationship to the divine, but nevertheless the soul is at the root of all of our actions, feelings and experiences. The aim of the philosophers, and the intent of religion, is to teach us a new means of relating to the world; one which is more directly in touch with our true nature, and which lessens our dependence on the physical vessel in which our souls exist, so that one day, when this body is gone, we will have learned to swim well enough to be able to push off from the pier unassisted. We are, in a sense, being taught how to "use our souls"—since true sight is something very different from physical sight, even though physical sight may be able to teach us some things, in a symbolic way, about the former. Perceiving the world according to its real, essential reality, is something foreign to our physical mode of existence. Our souls are very aware that this crude, material substance is not what it seeks. Hence it is the ideal of beauty, not merely its various manifestations, that we are ultimately seeking. And it is the Prophets of God alone Who can teach us how to achieve this ideal. It is a tricky thing, something that we must admit to having little or no knowledge of, for the very reason that material existence is so misleading; but with prayer, meditation, and striving to harmonize our outward lives with what we've been taught, we can learn someday how to break free of our crutches, which are supporting us during this time of ignorance. On that day, when we come face to face with the nature of beauty itself, it will be as much grander as the perception of beauty in this world is to a mere, verbal description of it. For is it possible that the word "sunset" could convey all

that that word implies, or be anything more to the hearer than merely a reminder of something he already knows? So too, how can we expect the glory of the next world to be comprehensible to us, if we are condemned here on Earth only to fall in love with its shadows? The essence of everything we love about life comes from that world, and so try to imagine, in lieu of experience, what it would be like if from a lone vibration our hearing were suddenly to develop into a realization of the symphony from which it had issued; or if from a glimmer of light, we were suddenly brought into an awareness of the entire luminescence of the Sun. I think that we have seen so far only the dimmest suggestions of what life truly is, and when we move on, the very greatest thing that we ever knew in this life will seem to us as commonplace as the sand on the beach, or the never-ending, lullaby motion of the

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waves.

The concept of self and the
Kitáb-i-Íqán

The word “self ” is used in different contexts in the Bahá’í Writings. Its most common use when not capitalized, and excepting for certain instances, is definitely negative:

- the satanic self
- the darkened self
- the prison-cage of self
- the shadows of the valley of self
- this fire of self
- the Satan of self
- the tomb of self
- the idol of self
- the bondage of self
- the veil of self
- the treacherous hand of self
- the dust of self
- the wall of self
- the clay of self

Where the self is mentioned positively, it is almost always qualified:

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- his inmost true self
- thy proper self
- the higher self

And in the first of the Four Valleys, Bahá'u'lláh describes a view of self which is not negative at all:

On this plane, the self is not rejected but beloved; it is well-pleasing and not to be shunned.

How are we to understand all these different uses of self, some of which seem contradictory? If Bahá'u'lláh truly applies different meanings in different places to

the same word, how can we ever know which meaning is intended?

It is my assertion that self has two basic meanings that are related, yet differ

fundamentally in degree. Further, that the Seven Valleys is a manual teaching us

how to progress from the lower degree of self to the higher, while the Kitáb-i-Íqán is

a historical exposition of this difference with respect to the Manifestations of God.?

The meaning of the two selves, and their relationship one to the other, is summarized in the following statement from Bahá'u'lláh:

Know verily that whenever this Youth turneth His eyes towards His own self, he findeth it the most insignificant of all creation. When He contemplates, however, the bright effulgences He hath been empowered to manifest, lo, that self is transfigured before Him into a sovereign Potency permeating the essence of all things visible and invisible. Glory be to Him Who, through the power of truth, hath sent down the Manifestation of His own Self and entrusted Him with His message unto all mankind.?

Here we find that Bahá'u'lláh, when considering His “own self” (in the possessive), “findeth it the most insignificant of all creation”.

However, when He contemplates the higher realities of His nature, “that self is transfigured before Him” and is seen as “the Manifestation of His [God's] own Self”.

What is this lower self, and what form of contemplation leads to such a transfiguration, that what seemed the most insignificant thing in all of creation now appears

to Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God's own Self?

I believe the Kitáb-i-Íqán represents an explication of this theme. In it, Bahá'u'lláh

repeatedly asks of the people who deny the Manifestations, “What could have

been

the reason for such denial and avoidance on their part?" This question is repeated
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several times throughout the text, interleaved with descriptions of the historical sufferings of the various Manifestations of God. One particular discussion culminates

with the well-known analogy of the Sun:

Consider the sun. Were it to say now, "I am the sun of yesterday," it would speak the truth. And should it, bearing the sequence of time in mind, claim to be other than that sun, it still would speak the truth.

In like manner, if it be said that all the days are but one and the same, it is correct and true. And if it be said, with respect to their particular names and designations, that they differ, that again is true. For though they are the same, yet one doth recognize in each a separate designation, a specific attribute, a particular character. Conceive accordingly

the distinction, variation, and unity characteristic of the various Manifestations of holiness, that thou mayest comprehend the allusions made by the creator of all names and attributes to the mysteries of distinction and unity, and discover the answer to thy question as to why that everlasting Beauty should have, at sundry times, called Himself by different names and titles.?

Here He compares the particular, daily appearances of the sun with the sun's constant, enduring reality. That is, the sun which rises on a particular day has a certain name, and a certain designation within the Zodiac; but this plurality does

not mean that there are multiple suns. The reality of the sun is one, although it can

be seen to manifest itself from different places on the horizon, and is referred to by different names.

In like manner, the Manifestations of the Sun of Reality, although they appear in the garment of a human frame, and manifest signs of distinction, are in truth

independent of this distinction, and all sit upon the same throne of Unity.

This

distinction should be very familiar to most Bahá'ís, and can be read about in more

detail by perusing the *Íqán*. But what does this have to do with selfhood, and the

Seven Valleys?

The analogy of the sun shows in very plain terms the difference between the immanent and the transcendent, to borrow terminology from modern philosophy.

The

immanent is what appears to us in the moment, in its present form; the

transcendent

is what the immanent “refers to”, or implies by its being. All of the Manifestations

of God, as they appeared to humanity, were without a doubt distinct and different people; that is, their immanent form was of a particular man from a particular

village, speaking whatever language was common. Yet the essence of those Beings was something utterly beyond their appearance. Whatever they seemed to be, they were something far greater. This greatness could only be hinted at, or demonstrated

through signs, but not seen directly since it does not appear as immanent.

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Through understanding and recognition of signs, some are able to transcend the experiences of eyes and ears, and become aware that These are not ordinary beings

as They seem, but Rays of a Sun whose brilliance we cannot imagine. This higher station of Theirs is not obvious, and yet it is Their true Reality; it is far more real

than the physical Beings Who walked among us. What is this thing which is not obvious to our senses, yet is more real than what senses are capable of? Such is the

nature of the transcendent.

To go back to the analogy of the Sun: every day has a particular name on the calendar; this is how we know each day in its immanence. There is no “nameless day”,

no “ideal day”. Every day is a day of a particular name, be it Monday, Tuesday, etc.

By looking at the reality of Monday and Tuesday, we notice that each of these refers

to another, more constant reality. That is, every day of the week shares certain

qualities with every other day. By applying our understanding, we can transcend our awareness of each day as particular and distinct, and become aware of another

reality we call “day”. We transcend the particular toward the abstract.

However, this

abstraction is not just a name; “day” is a very real concept, and each particular day

contributes to the reality of that concept. We can look at today and say, “This is not

Tuesday, it is Monday”, and at the same time say, “This is Monday, which is a day

just like Tuesday”. In the first instance we consider the two days in their separation,

while in the second we see their transcendent union with all the other days.

Given these terms, we can now define “self ” more precisely: self, as negatively referred to in the Writings, is our immanent self, our particular self. It is the self which has a name, and is distinct from every other self. In this station, we are separate from others; we can look at someone and say, “That is not me”. We can also prioritize the desires of our self above those of the selves of others, since the desires of others will not aid our own self. Just as with the Manifestations of God, there is also a “higher self ” that we all participate in, a station by which all human reality is essentially united: the transcendent self. In this station, we are all leaves of the same tree, rays of the same Sun, flowers of the same garden. The desires of another are coequal with my own desires, since they are the desires of one reality. It does not matter, for example, if “I” perform a certain service, or “another” does it; in both cases in is “a servant” who has performed it, and since this is the transcendent reality of human beings, in fact there is no difference in who did it. Ego does not have authority on this plane, nor can it claim anything for itself. When one’s vision accomplishes this transcendence, he is now aware of Divine Unity, a station depicted again and again in the Seven Valleys. It is in this station that we see the Manifestations of God as one, their Reality as one, their Being as one:
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It is clear and evident to thee that all the Prophets are the Temples of the Cause of God, Who have appeared clothed in divers attire. If thou wilt observe with discriminating eyes, thou wilt behold them all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith. Such is the unity of those Essences of being, those Luminaries of infinite and immeasurable splendour.?

He states this idea even more directly in the following passage:

From these statements therefore it hath been made evident and manifest that should a Soul in the “End that knoweth no end” be made manifest, and arise to proclaim and uphold a Cause which in “the Beginning that

hath no beginning” another Soul had proclaimed and upheld, it can be truly declared of Him Who is the Last and of Him Who was the First that they are one and the same, inasmuch as both are the Exponents of one and the same Cause. For this reason, hath the Point of the Bayán—may the life of all else but Him be His sacrifice!—likened the Manifestations of God unto the sun which, though it rise from the “Beginning that hath no beginning” until the “End that knoweth no end,” is none the less the same sun. Now, wert thou to say that this sun is the former sun, thou speakest the truth; and if thou sayest that this sun is the “return” of that sun, thou also speakest the truth. Likewise, from this statement it is made evident that the term “last” is applicable to the “first,” and the term “first” applicable to the “last;”

inasmuch as

both the “first” and the “last” have risen to proclaim one and the same Faith.?

In the Seven Valleys, Bahá’u’lláh uses the metaphor of color and light to describe

the fundamental difference between the immanent and the transcendent. In His example, the immanence of particular colors refers to the light which shines upon

material objects. Were man to comprehend the meaning of unity, he would look at the colored objects and see not just the colors, but the sun from which they derive their color and for which they exist as evidence. In order to see this truth

we must “transcend” the difference of individual colors, and, through faith and

understanding, see the reality of the sun these colors represent and reveal:

. . . colors become visible in every object according to the nature of that object. For instance, in a yellow globe, the rays shine yellow; in a white the rays are white; and in a red, the red rays are manifest. Then these variations are from the object, not from the shining light. And if a ???

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place be shut away from the light, as by walls or a roof, it will be entirely bereft of the splendor of the light, nor will the sun shine thereon. . . ?

Thus when the wayfarer gazeth only upon the place of appearance—that is, when he seeth only the many-colored globes—he beholdeth yellow and red and white; hence it is that conflict hath prevailed among the creatures, and a darksome dust from limited souls hath hid the world.

And some do gaze upon the effulgence of the light; and some have drunk of the wine of oneness and these see nothing but the sun itself.?

In the Seven Valleys, this example is given to describe the nature of those who journey in the Valley of Unity. Yet it is awfully similar to the analogies given previously in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. In fact, Bahá’u’lláh ties the two together when He says:

Yea, these mentionings that have been made of the grades of knowledge relate to the knowledge of the Manifestations of that Sun of Reality, which casteth Its light upon the Mirrors.

The “grades of knowledge” are the levels of understanding from which we view

the realities of the world. Were men to forgo the attraction of the immanent for

the virtue of the transcendent, and not allow the beguiling nature of differences to

distract him, he would in every age have recognized the Manifestation of God by His signs, rather than expecting someone of his own fancy. Because men are so attracted to titles of distinction, “a darksome dust from limited souls hath hid the

world”, and thus the underlying unity of all things, and especially the unity of the

Manifestations of God, has remained a very difficult concept to grasp.

Thus it is that certain invalid souls have confined the lands of knowledge within the wall of self and passion, and clouded them with ignorance and blindness, and have been veiled from the light of the mystic

sun and the mysteries of the Eternal Beloved; they have strayed afar from the jewelled wisdom of the lucid Faith of the Lord of Messengers,

have been shut out of the sanctuary of the All-Beauteous One, and banished from the Ka’bih of splendor. Such is the worth of the people of this age!?

For some there are who dwell upon the plane of oneness and speak of that world, and some inhabit the realms of limitation, and some the grades of self, while others are completely veiled. Thus do the ignorant people of the day, who have no portion of the radiance of Divine Beauty, make certain claims, and in every age and cycle inflict on the people of the sea of oneness what they themselves deserve.?

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These proofs, then, relate not only to our acceptance and rejection of the Manifestations of God, but also to how we view our own reality. Just as the station of

God’s Messengers is that of Lordship, Dominion and Authority, our station is one

of servitude, humility and obedience. As the Manifestations are all One with respect

to their True Reality, so we are all one with respect to ours. The Writings are replete

with references to this theme.

Looking at ourselves in this light, it is plain that conflict can exist only between

our lower selves, since with respect to our higher self we all serve the same purpose,

and aim at the same goal. Distinction and contradiction can occur between

colors,
but not within light. Lanterns may vary with respect to size, shape, design,
etc., but
not in respect to their function and purpose.
Human reality is no different, and the Seven Valleys depicts a progression of
human understanding from perceiving the world in its immanence, to discovering
the transcendent realities implied in that immanence. By this progression we
come
first to recognize our goal, then to see how our lower self obscures that goal,
then
to surrender of that self, then flee from our self and discover unity, and
finally to
abandon the self and exist on the plane of oneness:

And when thou hast attained this highest station and come to this
mightiest plane, then shalt thou gaze on the Beloved, and forget all
else.

The Beloved shineth on gate and wall
Without a veil, O men of vision.

Now hast thou abandoned the drop of life and come to the sea of the
Life-Bestower.??

Notice again the distinction between “drop”, a unique isolation of water,
and
“ocean”, which is an undifferentiated agglomeration of water. We abandon
the drop
by letting go of our confined self, “the wall of self”, “the prison of
self”, “the bondage
of self”, and merge with the ocean of His Will, Who is the creator of our
true reality.

Reading further, it also appears that “self” and “soul” are distinct
realities, and
that the soul can choose to align itself with either the limited self, or its
unlimited
Creator. In “Summons of the Lord of Hosts,” Bahá’u’lláh writes:

Know also that the soul is endowed with two wings: should it soar
in the atmosphere of love and contentment, then it will be related to
the All-Merciful, and should it fly in the atmosphere of self and desire,
then it will pertain to the Evil one; may God shield and protect us and
protect you therefrom, O ye who perceive! Should the soul become
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ignited with the fire of the love of God, it is called benevolent and
pleasing unto God, but should it be consumed with the fire of passion,
it is known as the concupiscent soul. Thus have We expounded this
subject for thee that thou mayest obtain a clear understanding.??

This shows that the soul is not the self, and that the soul can choose to relate itself either with its Creator and His attributes, or with the lower self and its desires. As with a lamp, the soul can identify its reality with the iron of the individual lantern, or with the universal attributes of light that shine from it. Whichever it favors will gain the greater strength, and eventually come to overpower the other. When the soul makes this higher choice, and favors absorption in the Divine over independent selfhood, what becomes of the self? Is it destroyed, eliminated? Or is its relationship within the scheme of things merely set to rights? Perhaps, instead of obliteration, oblivion would be a better word. That is, the self does not become “nothing” in itself, but with respect to our regard for it, it becomes “as nothing” in the sense of that our soul now identifies with God and the universality of His attributes, rather than the lower orders of Creation and their separate qualities. Perhaps an analogy will help to clarify this: Soil is a very rich substance, able to impart life. The tree that grows from it gives us the food we eat. In this sense, the tree cannot exist without the richness of the soil. Let us consider that the nature of our lower self is like this soil. It has a certain richness, and is filled with potential. However, it alone cannot feed others. The lower self is needed to beget the tree, but it is God’s grace that provides the seed and makes the tree. Now the soul is related to both our selves, the soil and the tree; if it focuses on the bounty of the tree, it sees the soil merely as a servant, worthy of respect and care, but not deserving of any special attention during the harvest. Once the harvest is made, the needs of the soil are once again cared for, so that it may continue to be fertile. If the soul focuses upon the richness of the soil, however, it considers itself the “author” of the tree, or the one responsible for everyone’s gain. It

claims for itself
the rights of bounty, and strives to view its fertility as coequal with God's
powers
of creation. And yet, sadly, this attitude only causes it to dry up and cease
to be
productive.

In this sense, the independence of the soil to create is a complete illusion,
and
can lead it to flights of vanity which are entirely unjustified. Compared to
the beauty
of the trees and flowers, soil should be like a humble servant. It has a
wonderful role
to play in the growth of creation, but it is only the custodian of the higher
powers
that have been placed within it as a trust; in itself it is powerless.
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When we let go of seeking to attribute powers to the soil, we allow God to do
his work with it, adding sunlight and rain, and casting His seeds over it. In
fact, soil
works best when it does nothing at all (in respect to its relationship with the
seed).

It is poverty itself without the seed, mere dust; it is powerlessness itself
compared
to the seed's ability to grow. However, at the same time it is the matrix of
the seed,
and, conjoined with the seed's capacity to grow, serves it in ways entirely
necessary
for the tree to flower.

What results from the soil's service to the seed is a far more beautiful
reality than
the filthy, yet honorable, soil. The tree stands proud beneath the sun, gathers
the
rays of that sun, and strives to grow toward the sun. It yields fruits and
flowers that
can feed the many, and continue the process of fruition.

But does even the tree merit individual recognition? We do not love the tree
for itself, but rather for the attributes it reveals: the ability to sustain
life, its beauty.

These attributes are universal among all fruit-bearing trees, and we love them
all
equally for exactly that reason. A rose in the East smells just as sweet as one
in the
West.

So humanity, in all its uniqueness and individuality, carpets the earth in a
mantle
of fecundity, awaiting the seeds of God's grace to shower down upon its soil.

If we
relinquish our own will, and do not strive against the Divine Pattern,
bountiful trees
can come forth. In this second life we are all coequal; although there is
distinction in
color, shape, variety, at the same time there is unity of virtue, objective,
purpose. We
are able to feed the many only when our lower selves exist as servants to the
higher
self, which itself is not “ours” but a manifestation of the attributes of
God. Viewing
the world through this lens, we see the soil in its role, rather than
identifying our
soul with it. Rather, the soul participates in a grand, never-ending struggle
toward
the Divine, in which any form of identification acts as hindrance.
The process of this coming forth of the higher from the lower—or rather, the
discovery of the higher by the renunciation of the lower—reveals God’s
attribute
of “Creator”. Were it not for this creation, how could we understand His
ability
to create beauty from nothingness? Our lower selves receive the potency of His
Will, and are given a chance to cooperate in the manifestation of a higher
reality.
The illusion is that we do any of this, or deserve any individual praise for
it, or
that our reality is in any way truly distinct or superior to another’s. When
we see
this, we transcend our belief in exclusivity, and enter the realm of the
inclusive: we
leave behind lack and experience abundance: we let go of the confining space of
the
drop—whose essence is still water—and merge with His mighty Sea.
If this analogy bears any resemblance to truth, it is clear that the self is
not evil,
or to be shunned, but merely that it has a particular place in the scheme of
reality—
and this place is not as the throne of the soul. The self is an abject, abased
reality
in comparison to God; yet, in relation to the operation of God’s will, it
assumes the
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respectable nature of serving as a foundation for our aspirations God-ward.
A letter written on behalf of the Guardian clarifies this notion of self
further:

Regarding the questions you asked: Self has really two meanings, or is used in two senses, in the Bahá'í writings: one is self, the identity of the individual created by God. This is the self mentioned in such passages as "he hath known God who hath known himself etc.". The other self is the ego, the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on. It is this self we must struggle against, or this side of our natures, in order to strengthen and free the spirit within us and help it to attain perfection.

Self-sacrifice means to subordinate this lower nature and its desires to the more godly and noble side of ourselves. Ultimately, in its highest sense, self-sacrifice means to give our will and our all to God to do with as He pleases. Then He purifies and glorifies our true self until it becomes a shining and wonderful reality.??

Hence it is that we "free" ourselves from the lower self, and "subordinate" it to our more godly and noble side. The self, like the soil, is not to be reviled or destroyed; rather, it assumes its proper place in relation to the Grand Design of the Tree, nor does it seek to excel it. We are created to be loving servants of all, and it is in the fulfillment of this role that we find our perfection, when all aspects of our being work in harmony toward one Goal.

The above is one view of how the self is variously referred to in the Writings, and its connection with the Kitáb-i-Íqán and the stages depicted in the Seven Valleys.

It shows also how our understanding of the unity and distinction among the Manifestations of God might be suggestive of a far more universal theme—one perhaps hinting at the very underpinnings of reality.

Serving joyfully

Someone asked: What is happiness? What does the Bahá'í Faith say about being in a good mood? About being in a bad mood? What is the chief means of achieving a happy, good mood in the Bahá'í Faith? Are cognitive or other approaches or methods to mood elevation besides prayer wrong?

I don't think anything connected to joy, that is not denied by the laws of Bahá'u'lláh, is "wrong".

There are many people who will answer the above question by saying “serve the Cause, pray”. But this does not result in joy for everyone. Deriving pure joy from serving of others is a spiritual station that takes time and insight to achieve. It is not automatic.

In the meantime, learning how to be joyful is an important element of one’s life, since people who are joyful typically provide better service than those who aren’t!

So if the essence of life for human beings is love and service, and if joy is an important element to serving others, and not everyone derives joy just from serving, what is the answer?

It’s simple: Life is meant to be organic, to grow in stages. Don’t expect perfection at every turn. It’s certainly VERY OK to look for fun and joy in places other than prayer and service, so long as the Divine Laws are observed (and these are really quite few in number).

I once was involved in a service project with a Bahá’í friend who had an excellent attitude: We serve, then we play. Every Saturday we would go to another town, teach and serve people there for several hours, and then spend the rest of the day doing things that were purely for enjoyment—going out to movies, dinner, taking a trip to the ocean, etc.

The result? We looked forward to serving every weekend, because we knew the whole day would be rewarding—both to ourselves and to others. I would always look forward to SOME part of the day. After awhile, this fun spirit began to permeate the whole day, until even the time spent in service had a joyfulness to it.

Anyway, my advice is to avoid Puritanist ethics like the plague. It is good to spend money on yourself? and to enjoy one’s existence. While doing so, begin to

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factor some kind of regular service into your life. You will find that as your reserves of joy increase, your capacity and your desire to serve will also increase. Once this

cycle reaches the point that the service itself is fun, you will begin fulfilling those

quotations that have already been mentioned.

The point is that life is a process of growth, not a leap into imitating a perfected

existence. And happiness and joy water that growth far, far more effectively than

guilt and self-recrimination.

Social wealth

It seems to me that most people in a position of wealth do not know what to do with that wealth. I include myself among this number, and realize that I have never

been taught what to do with wealth. Up to a certain amount, I do know what to do. Rent, food, fuel, retirement savings—all these seem appropriate, and worth the

money I spend. But beyond that point—which for some represents less than half their income—what should the remainder be spent on?

The question is deceptively simple, because it is the perception of everyone that

“you can never make enough money.” But really, beyond acquiring objects for personal pleasure, what can constructively be done with excess wealth? Man is a social

element as well as an individual, and the problem of wealth seems to span both sides. The first part is taken care of by a usually fixed sum of money from year

to year, because realistically our personal needs do not fluctuate very much.

If we

do tend to consume money at an ever-increasing rate, perhaps it is the signal of an

addiction, or energy being spent trying to run away from something. Otherwise, given moderate tastes (neither ascetic, abstemious, lavish or wasteful), the amount

we need to maintain ourselves individually is economically constant (meaning that

changes are more due to fluctuations in the value of the currency employed, than in

the quantity or quality of the goods obtained).

Once the individual aspect is taken care of, the excess becomes a problem. In actuality, I haven't a clue what to do with this money. I don't mean that I can't think

of ways of getting rid of it (the Fund, cars, entertainment, etc.). What I mean is

that I was never educated in terms of my role as a social element, and what role this

“unused wealth” plays in the social context.

There are three options usually taken. The first, and most common, is to expend

this additional sum on the individual aspect as well. There are certainly more ways of getting rid of wealth than can ever be exhausted. I have personally watch people buy new cars merely for the sake of getting something new.

The second is less common, which is to change the hands of this wealth, usually through philanthropy, or donating it to an organization. Then the problem of properly expending it socially is no longer the concern of the individual. This is

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probably the best course to take if one is not willing to understand the problem for

themselves, and may even still be the best course to take after understanding the

problem. But my whole question is not what to spend the money on, but what is meaning of social wealth. If I am going to defer all of my wealth to charity, I

want to do so consciously with the understanding that I am not merely shirking my

responsibility and handing the money off for someone else to deal with, but I have

actually understood that by deferring I am fulfilling my responsibility.

The third is probably the least common, which is to do nothing. Just let the money accumulate unchecked. I have met some people who fall into this category.

In all three cases there the underlying thread that citizens are not taught what

do with their “social wealth” (wealth that exists after all genuine personal needs and

desires are taken care of).

Now, I do not understand this problem. What is the reality of social wealth?

What can I spend it on? What should I do with it? If I just accumulate it, then society loses the benefit. If I spend it unconsciously, then I am just handing off

the problem. Possibly I may be handing it off to the right person, but if I do so

unconsciously, then I never really know.

Brief thoughts on “the camphor fountain”

In the Qur’án, verse ??:?, we find:

’inna al-abraara yashrabuuna min ka’siN kaana mizaaju-haa kaafuuraN

(Verily the righteous shall drink from a wine-cup that has been tempered with camphor.)

The literal translation of the Qur'anic verse is:

'inna (verily, thus) al-abraara (the ones who are just) yashrabuuna (shall drink, imbibe (from sharaba)) min ka'siN (from a wine-cup (i.e., cup filled with wine)) kaana mizaaju-haa (that has been tempered (from mizaaj, temperament)) kaafuuraN ((by) camphor)

Historically, camphor was an extract with many uses, which was added to wine to enhance its flavor and bouquet. Since it is also rumored to quiet the passions, it has been linked with detachment from the world, and being freed from the vagaries of the heart.

In Persian literature, the word "camphor" is used with four meanings (besides the oil/plant itself): to convey whiteness, fragrance, something with a cooling effect, and a lack of virility (because the passions have been cooled). For example: tuuda'-i kaafuur A heap of snow; a fair skin; a white head.

khurda'-i kaafuur (crumbs of camphor), The stars.

kaafuur khurdan To eat camphor (an expression used to imply deficiency of virility).

kaafuur-baar (raining camphor) Anything cold or fragrant; snowing.

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may-i kaafuur Camphorated wine (which is done to cool it).

One Qur'anic commentator writes:

The root of the word camphor that has been used in this context means suppressing and covering up. This is an indication that they have drunk of the cup of cutting asunder from the world and turning to God with such sincerity that their love of the world has been cooled down. All emotions are generated by the ideas of the heart and when the heart withdraws far away from improper thoughts and has no concern with them, the emotions are subdued till they disappear altogether. In this verse God Almighty desires to convey that those who turn wholly to Him cast aside their passions and their hearts become cool to worldly activities and their emotions are covered up and suppressed as poisonous matter is suppressed by camphor.?

This meaning resonates with Bahá'u'lláh's reference to the above verse when discussing freedom from worldly limitations:

He who hath attained this station [of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness] is sanctified from all that pertaineth to the world. Wherefore,

if those who have come to the sea of His presence are found to possess none of the limited things of this perishable world, whether it be outer wealth or personal opinions, it mattereth not. For whatever the creatures have is limited by their own limits, and whatever the True One hath is sanctified therefrom; this utterance must be deeply pondered that its purport may be clear. “Verily the righteous shall drink of a winecup tempered at the camphor fountain.” If the interpretation of “camphor” become known, the true intention will be evident. This state is that poverty of which it is said, “Poverty is My glory.”?

If the interpretation of camphor here referred is “releasing man from bondage to limited things”, it fits nicely.

Bahá'u'lláh also brings up this verse when discussing the necessary qualities for apprehending the meaning of the Holy Writings:

Hence, it is clear and manifest that by the words “the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven” is intended the waywardness of the divines, and the annulment of laws firmly established by divine Revelation, all of which, in symbolic language, have been foreshadowed by the Manifestation of God.
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None except the righteous shall partake of this cup, none but the godly can share therein. “The righteous shall drink of a cup tempered at the camphor fountain.”?

When He says, “None except the righteous shall partake of this cup”, I believe

He is referring to the cup of Revelation, where “partake” means to understand its

real intent. And this to the righteous because they drink from the camphor fountain

(that is, they’ve purged their hearts from worldly affections). This theme is addressed

later when He writes:

The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit.?

Likewise, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes reference to the above verse in the following prayer:

Call Thou to life those who dwell in their tombs, warn Thou the prideful, make happiness world-wide, send down Thy crystal waters, and in the assemblage of manifest splendours, pass round that cup which is ‘tempered at the camphor fountain.’?

The idea of detachment would render the meaning of this prayer as “Make all to be forgetful of the world, purified from lesser interests, and mindful entirely of

Thee”. And in another tablet He writes:

Therefore must the desire of the friends be this, to bring together and unify all peoples, that all may receive a generous drink of this pure wine from this cup that is ‘tempered at the camphor fountain.’?

A possibly more explicit reference to “camphor” is given in the following:

Muhammad-Hádí was loyal always, and he accounted all things other than God’s good pleasure as fiction and fable, nothing more. Blessed is he for this gift bestowed upon him, glad tidings to him for the place to which he shall be led; may it do him good, this wine-cup tempered at the camphor fountain, and may all his strivings meet with thanks and be acceptable to God.?

Lastly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reports one of the Bábí martyrs as offering these words in a

prayer immediately before his execution:

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Thanks be unto Thee that Thou didst succor me and confirm me and didst give me to drink of this cup that was tempered at the camphor fountain?

The next verse begins with “‘aynaN”, meaning “a spring, source, fountain (also

’eye’)”. Whether this fountain is related to camphor is unclear.

Bahá’u’lláh refers to this verse—“a fount whereof the near unto God shall drink”—

in the Valley of Unity, where He seems to describe the sufficiency experienced when

a person has purified their heart from limitations and God’s light begins to reflect

therein.

So, the righteous drink of the camphorated wine, and they also drink from a fountain whose flow increases by the drinking. My previous reading would link these two with: “This state is that poverty of which it is said, ‘Poverty is My glory.’”

Both “kaafuuraN” and “‘aynaN” are in the accusative case, kaafuuraN because it

is the noun related to “temper”, and “‘aynaN” because it is the object of the following

phrase (“from which the righteous shall drink. . .”). My Arabic does not go much

farther than this, though, so if there is truly a grammatical connection between these

verses, I cannot see it. Can anyone else assist?

I thought perhaps Bahá'u'lláh may have joined “kaafuuraN ‘aynaN” (a camphor fountain), but in the original Kitáb-i-Íqán He does not quote the word “‘aynaN”.

The Guardian decided to translate “fountain” into the reference. And as I understand it, the wording would have to have been “‘aynaN kaafuuraN” if kaafuur were to be read as an adjective of ‘aynaN. “A fountain of camphor” would have been “‘ayna kaafuuriN”.

Question: What do you think that the camphor fountain refers to?

I apologize that my previous posts were unclear. I am examining the possibility that camphor refers to purification and detachment, and that as a result, one gains access to the heavenly wine of Divine Intention (expressed most directly in the

Covenant). Perhaps all of our suggested meanings inter-relate.

I also wish to consider the agency of camphor, which has more uses than fragrance alone. If “camphor fountain” is taken only to mean obedience to the Covenant,

without reference to the agency or qualities of that obedience, then the following

paragraph seems to end in a non-sequitur:

This is the purpose underlying the symbolic words of the Manifestations of God.

Consequently, the application of the terms “sun” and “moon” to the things already mentioned hath been demonstrated and justified by the text of the sacred verses and the recorded traditions.

Hence, it is clear and manifest that by the words “the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from ???

heaven” is intended the waywardness of the divines, and the annulment of laws firmly established by divine Revelation, all of which, in symbolic language, have been foreshadowed by the Manifestation of God.

None except the righteous shall partake of this cup, none but the godly can share therein. “The righteous shall drink of a cup tempered at the camphor fountain.”

At this point in the Íqán, Bahá'u'lláh is discussing the true meanings of the

heavenly allusions, and why the divines have failed to perceive them. Now, just above He says “. . . all of which, in symbolic language, have been foreshadowed by

the Manifestation of God”. Then immediately after that He says, “None except the righteous shall partake of this cup.”

He does not mention the Covenant here (or in the paragraphs surrounding), nor

the attractive qualities of the Word of God. When He says “this cup”, I believe He is referring to the preceding discussion by use of the demonstrative adjective. He then links “this cup” with the wine-cup mentioned by Muh.ammad. Taken in context, “this cup” seems to refer to the true intention of “the symbolic words of the Manifestations of God”, and that “none except the righteous may partake of this cup”. Why? He gives the necessary qualifications later in the same text:

The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven. . . depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit.

To “partake of this cup”, we need purity, chastity, freedom, all of which imply sanctity (from impurity, defilement and bondage).

Taking the literary uses of “camphor” into account, where it means either whiteness, fragrance or cooling of the passions (even botanical guides list it as an aphrodisiac?), it would seem that the third usage fits very well: that the wine-cup tempered by camphor means that the vessel of the human heart has been freed from ephemeral attachments, at which point it is capable of apprehending the manifold meanings of the Word of God. Compare this with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá statement in the commentary on the Sur’ih of Rúm:

Were one of the sincere ones to turn to God in this most great Day and see with the purest vision, he would understand all of the realities and meanings of every word of the verses of God, the Eternal Protector—nay indeed, every letter and every dot.
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Forgive my prolixity, but in reading camphor to indicate “true poverty” (inner poverty, abandoning all that is not of God), I am offering this interpretation of the

Qur’anic verse:

Verily, those who hold to justice?? have purified their hearts by a draught which has severed their connection to the world, and they now enjoy the crystal waters of communion with His will, a solace that increases with every drink.

Of course, since His will is made manifest most brightly in the Covenant, this would indeed refer to that “fountain”. I am excited to see this connection;

both

yours and Patti's letters have helped me find it. Also, Patti's reference of tempering

to fire, which I too quickly passed over, leads to this additional interpretation of "a

wine-cup tempered by camphor":

The wine-cup is the human heart; after being tempered by the fire of tests and trials, it is touched by the cooling essence of that camphor which attracts souls into the sheltering shade of the Covenant?? .

As Patti expressed, there are many layers here, and just playing around with these

few has increased my excitement, and brought me into greater contact, with verses

I had longed considered too mysterious to approach.

Just a brief note on the tempering of metal, since it figures into many different

metaphors.

The process of tempering means to alter behavior or condition by contributing a new factor. This could be by admixture, pressure, heat, etc. Burning away impurities, by the way, would indicate a different process (purification).

In the case of steel, tempering acts as follows: When carbon is dissolved in liquid

iron, and cools sufficiently to be malleable, it is in a state called "austenite". If it is

allowed to cool freely, it will become "pearlite", which is very weak chemically. The

steel molecules will be randomly arranged, and the metal is neither hard nor strong.

If austenitic steel is quenched—if its temperature is dropped quickly—it forces

the steel molecules to solidify into structures they would not normally select.

This

is called "martensite" steel, and is very hard. However, it is also very brittle.

To make martensitic steel strong enough to be useful, while retaining hardness, it is necessary to "temper" the metal: literally to mellow its temperament:

by heating

it up to a temperature less than austenite, but enough to induce a structural change

within the metal. The result is similar to Rebar embedded in concrete: the iron is

fortified by a latticework of ferrous carbide molecules within the steel.

Once the tempered metal has cooled, it is both hard and strong, which is the whole purpose for adding the carbon to iron in the first place (since iron is neither

hard nor strong).

The game of life

Recently, there have been many interactive video games made available that make games of the past seem trivial. Games like EverQuest, Ultima Online, Asheron's

Call, provide real-time virtual domains where one can interact with friends, collect

gold and equipment, solve quests, and earn a reputation.

These games are so addictive that studies have been made, and organizations created, to help people wean themselves from their powerfully addictive nature.

Hmmm. . . making friends, collecting gold, earning a reputation, becoming attached to your character and its progress. . . that sounds awfully familiar.

. .

Many gamers, after spending day-long binges at the screen, describe an experience of "soul suck", or feeling that their vital essence has been drained away by the

actions of mouse and keyboard. One friend could not stop until he realized that his

gaming was just too similar to those rat experiments, where a wire is connected to

the pleasure center of the rat's brain, and it pushes a button over and over again—

neglecting sleep, food and health—to get that "fix". In his case, it was a mouse

button (a perverse irony there), but the similarity of the experience was too clear to

be ignored.

However, games aren't bad. Played in moderation they are much better than television, since they require skills of coordination, planning, and they involve learning

and memorization: none of which a sitcom provides. It is the degree of absorption

that worries parents and players, not the game itself.

For what happens when the character dies, and everything is over? It doesn't matter if Xena the Magnificent had one million gold pieces or one, it all goes away

in a single instant. Nothing is carried over into "real life" except the lessons learned

and the character traits that may now appear in ordinary living. In fact, it is by

asking, "What did I gain from all that time and energy and devotion?" that some

people decide the game isn't worth continuing. Compared with the result, the energy invested doesn't pay off. We could have been talking with real friends, walking

outside, making money, doing something constructive.

Or is even that investment so fruitful as we think?

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Because yet another day awaits us all, when this game—the game in which you and I are players, and what your character is doing right now is reading e-mail—will

be shut off, and then it doesn't matter if we earned one million dollars or one; all

we'll take with us is the lessons learned and those character traits relevant enough

to our soul that they'll carry on. At that moment we may realize how little our

“investment” in this life truly pays off. Perhaps in the next world there are even

organizations, hard at work figuring out how to detach us from our addiction to this very compelling game we share in. God sends a Representative every thousand

years or so to remind us of the fact.

But games aren't that bad. They test us, cause us to learn, setup mock battles

that perchance we will do better when the real fight comes. No, it isn't the game

that needs changing: but the player.

Some people who play games have fun, they enjoy themselves tremendously, and use the game as a way to get closer to others. Party games supposedly exist only for

that purpose. We know that the “money” we're spending is play money, and that

the outcome of the game is irrelevant if anyone isn't having fun. We play the game

for the spirit it engenders, and if it ceases to provide this, it's not worth continuing.

As we look at life, ponder how quickly it will all end; as fast as pulling the plug

on a round of EverQuest. All that seemed important, all that appeared as gain, will vanish without a trace. Sure, the experience of playing stays with you, but that

depends on how you played the game.

The money you have with you now, it is play money. The house, the car, the dog, these are but items in one's inventory—tools the game character uses to continue

playing. Elves in EverQuest need food too, they need transport. It's not that these

things aren't important relative to their purpose. But Elves aren't real!

The horses

they ride aren't real! As for that Honda. . . we call it real? Are “man” and “woman”

real?

If the game leads to joy, if it unites the players, strengthening their character, teaching them new things, great. As long as the player keeps in mind that it is only a game, it's hard to go wrong. Staying mindful of the context ensures that our idea of "success" is in keeping with the game's true purpose.

It is only when we identify ourselves with that ruddy dwarf in Ultima Online that mishaps begin to bother us. Yet anyone will tell you, you're not that dwarf, it's only a silly game character! Hmm. . . I am not my ego. That's not even a new concept.

Keep it light, play the game, enjoy. We're here to make friends, and to use the equipment in our roster to keep playing. But there's a reason for not taking these things seriously: games just aren't a serious matter.

Say: O people! Let not this life and its deceits deceive you, for the ???

world and all that is therein is held firmly in the grasp of His Will. He bestoweth His favor on whom He willeth, and from whom He willeth He taketh it away. He doth whatsoever He chooseth. Had the world been of any worth in His sight, He surely would never have allowed His enemies to possess it, even to the extent of a grain of mustard seed. He hath, however, caused you to be entangled with its affairs, in return for what your hands have wrought in His Cause. This, indeed, is a chastisement which ye, of your own will, have inflicted upon yourselves, could ye but perceive it. Are ye rejoicing in the things which, according to the estimate of God, are contemptible and worthless, things wherewith He proveth the hearts of the doubtful??

The Hidden Door

If God is all that is good, and a perfect Creator, how could He make something bad?

How can things like sorrow and misery be real, if all was created from good?

If all is good, perhaps we fail to see it because time and space put blinders on our

perception. We see only a limited part, a sliver of a moving whole—all of which is

good, even if one part seems disjoint from that theme. The "whole picture" cannot

be stopped or divided, and still be seen. It includes all the movements of reality,

so cannot be frozen; it comprises every element, so cannot be separated without

appearing as other than what it is, which is perfect—if indeed it was created by a good and perfect Creator.

What limits and divides our perception are ideas. They abstract from the All certain parts, to allow us to interact with those parts individually. But as long as

our consciousness finds itself in ideas, we fail to perceive what lies outside them.

Like the eye's ability to focus, which must pick out certain parts from a whole field,

in order to “know” things we contrast them with other “things”.

Contrast and

distinction make up our awareness, but they also blind us to the All.

There is an exit to this paradox: The knowledge of things through contrast itself contrasts with the nature of the All. Our method of awareness can lead to an

awareness of what lies outside it! Through this leap, we may be able to see things

without knowing them as “things”. Our awareness is able to transcend the requirements of awareness. Thus contrast, which makes observation of the All impossible,

can permit us to become aware of the All. It is like a hidden doorway into a different

world.

For the remainder of this essay, I refer to operations outside the scheme of ideas

as knowing and seeing, with the idea that knowing follows from realizing the incapacity of knowledge—and what it is incapable in regards to—and seeing comes from

abandoning the futility of sight for the same reason.

Since ideas divide reality, it is they that distinguish “good” from “bad”. They

make the All appear to contain these two attributes, which appear when we look at one part in exclusion from the rest. Since the All was created by a good and perfect Creator, the nature of the All must be only good—and perfect good—so

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that ideas allow us to see only “somewhat good” and “somewhat bad” on a sliding

scale. In fact, since the underlying reality is only perfect good, what ideas see are

merely differentiated values of good from lesser to greater extent. There is no “bad”

per se: what we call “bad” is an arbitrary line drawn on the gradient

between the
least perceived good and the most perceived good. Then each definition of good
and bad relates to the perceiver, because each draws that line differently.
This gradient exists only for ideas. If we did not see with ideas, not only
would
our sight be undifferentiated, but we would see only the underlying, perfect
good.
Thus if “joy” is what attends our experience of the good, and sadness of
the bad,
then once we see there can be no more sadness, as “bad” no longer has
meaning.
Sorrow was never real—since the underlying reality is perfect good—it was
simply
the perceived form of our deficiency of understanding. Once there is knowledge,
sorrow can no longer be. This accords with a statement found in the Bahá’í
writings:

This is a station which, wert thou to attain unto it, thou wouldst arrive
at a happiness which would not be followed by sadness, a joy which
is not succeeded by grief, an ease and comfort that does not end in
distress and hardship, a prosperity that does not turn to destitution and
misfortune, for the might of thy Lord has grasped firmly the reins of
affairs.?

And also here:

The wayfarer in this Valley [of Knowledge] seeth in the fashionings of
the True One nothing save clear providence, and at every moment saith:
“No defect canst thou see in the creation of the God of Mercy: Repeat
the gaze: Seest thou a single flaw?” He beholdeth justice in injustice,
and in justice, grace. In ignorance he findeth many a knowledge hidden,
and in knowledge a myriad wisdoms manifest.?

If seeing leads to an experience of life which is only good, perhaps the
purpose
of sight through ideas is to lead us to sight. In other words, the nature of
the world
we first experience, through ignorance, exists in order for us to become truly
aware.
Without that first, deficient awareness, we could not become aware of what such
awareness cannot approach. The fundamental paradox of contrast must resolve
itself
for the circle to close in a conscious way.
To say it again: The purpose of the world of seeming, with its mixture of
“good”
and “bad”, “joy” and “sorrow”, is to offer a hidden door, on the
other side of which
is a true awareness of the Good—an awareness fundamentally different from
what

we started with. It's like teaching a baby how to use a muscle, which can only be learned from the exercise of it. In this way I understand the tradition: ???

“O my Lord, how shall we reach unto Thee?” And the answer came, “Leave thyself behind, and then approach Me.”?

That is, in order to exit the world of ideas we must learn to leave them behind, foremost among which is “self”.

How to find this door and achieve sight? Well, an element exists to religion which is all about learning to see what doesn't appear to be there, such as seeing good

in the bad that happens to us: Faith. Faith believes that the reality it fails to see is

more real than what it does see. It suggests that what we think exists perhaps doesn't

exist at all. And faith develops, not by adding to an ever-growing store of ideas,

but by weakening their hold on us through various exercises, such as: detachment,

meditation, regarding our strength as weakness and our wealth as poverty, lessening

our love of “self”, etc. All of these aspects of religion aim at making the door to

the All visible. I even think now that all of religion aims at this on the personal

and social scale, that from this goal are born all its laws and institutions.

Only when

they depart from this objective, of truly awakening man to the perfect joy of knowing

God, do they go astray.

Concerning the world beyond the door, because division cannot comprehend it, concepts must regard it as a single reality. Although that world exists within this

world—beyond the veil of ideas—it cannot be perceived except by seeing it.

As Lao

Tzu put it, “Looked at, it cannot be seen.” A man in this realm might use concepts,

but he no longer sees in terms of them. In order to know, he gives up knowledge.

When hungry he might look for food, but he no longer knows what “hunger” and

“food” are. “Thus is it said, ‘Absolute unity excludeth all attributes.’”

The world beyond the door is not just a cause for undimmed joy, it is the very meaning of joy: to know the good. To such a degree that what we call “joy”

is
but a shadow of the truth. Everything in this “world” is a shadow cast from
that
world, along a gradient from light to dark. The perfect good is reflected as
“good”
and “bad”, perfect joy is reflected as “joy” and “sorrow”, and
every other kind of
perfection is seen here as more or less imperfect.
The real world is kept from us, not by the barrier of physical death, but the
death
of our “selves” who hold so dearly to the illusory world of concepts. The
true reality,
unlimited by time or space, is the world. All failure, impermanence, and
insecurity
arise from the way we see it, or how our “first awareness” divides and
separates
it. What we call “flawed” is in fact perfect, and what we call
“impermanent” is
essentially eternal. It only seems otherwise. And thus, by transcending the
limits of
our vision, our souls may enter the heaven intended for them, which has been
here
with us all along.
Strive then, O My brother, to apprehend this matter, that the veils may
be lifted from the face of thy heart and that thou mayest be reckoned
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among them whom God hath graced with such penetrating vision as to
behold the most subtle realities of His dominion, to fathom the mysteries of
His kingdom, to perceive the signs of His transcendent Essence
in this mortal world, and to attain a station wherein one seeth no distinction
amongst His creatures and findeth no flaw in the creation of
the heavens and the earth.?

Thoughts on the Four Valleys

After some thought on the scheme of the Four Valleys, the following is an
interpretation based on some time spent musing.

The Four Valleys seems to describe a few of the paths by which each soul may
approach God. Since this approach is the fundamental concern of reality, it
makes

sense that multiple avenues are possible. This is adumbrated in the following
Hidden Word:

O Son of Man! Write all that We have revealed unto thee with the ink
of light upon the tablet of thy spirit. Should this not be in thy power,
then make thine ink of the essence of thy heart. If this thou canst not
do, then write with that crimson ink that hath been shed in My path.

Sweeter indeed is this to Me than all else, that its light may endure for ever.?

Here Bahá'u'lláh indicates that His Revelation should be written upon the tablet

of the spirit; but if this is not possible to the believer, he may write it upon his heart;

and if not this, then he may shed the blood of his material substance. All forms are

given as acceptable, it being left to the seeker to choose which path lies within his

power.

The Four Valleys seems to present a similar idea, laying out four avenues of faith,

all of which lead to the purposed goal.

The Valley of the Intended One

The First Valley is for those who seek the Intended One (maqsúd). Here God is conceived of as a destination (maqsad), to be reached through the fulfillment of

religious duty. Although this scheme places union with God at some indefinite point future—and thus embraces the concept of a long and arduous journey, never

to be fully completed in this life—yet through consistent effort, the seeker will surely

reach his goal.

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Although at the beginning, this plane is the realm of conflict, yet it endeth in attainment to the throne of splendor.?

Further, since the journey is one of gradual attainment, it upholds the concept of a “self”—since only the self can “acquire” virtues:

On this plane, the self is not rejected but beloved; it is well-pleasing and not to be shunned.

The course of this Way is given in the following verse:

“O Abraham of this day, O Friend Abraham of the Spirit! Kill these four birds of prey,” that after death the riddle of life may be unraveled.

Which is: conquer the evil qualities in your self, until you come to reflect the

Divine; then, after death, you will receive the merit of your deeds.

As the seeker moves forward in this plane, he constantly takes the measure of himself, to determine whether he is yet pleasing to God:

One must, then, read the book of his own self, rather than some treatise on rhetoric. Wherefore He hath said, “Read thy Book: There needeth none but thyself to make out an account against thee this day.”

The warning given in the First Valley is that the seeker not become too

attached

to these names and titles. When the Beloved is found, cast aside all that has been

acquired, and accept him utterly.

The death of self is needed here, not rhetoric:

Be nothing, then, and walk upon the waves.

And lastly, one cannot relax in this path, since the seeker's forward motion comes

from his constant devotion:

“And be ye not like those who forget God, and whom He hath therefore caused to forget their own selves. These are the wicked doers.”

The Valley of the Praise-worthy One

In the second valley, the duty of self-perfection is not the primary motivator, but

rather the seeker's fascination with the ways of God. To penetrate the wisdom of

this path requires profound faith, since God's doings are shrouded in impenetrable

mystery. And because the mind cannot embrace Him, this Valley offers hours of confusion for every moment of clarity:

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On this plane, the traveler meeteth with many a trial and reverse. Now is he lifted up to heaven, now is he cast into the depths.

However, as faith in the way of God develops, the seeker comes to appreciate the beauty of how well-ordered is creation. The sign of this station is that of the

companions in the cave, whose faith was tested when God sequestered them there. Although they were in the cave, and could not see what transpired outside, they saw

the sun rise on the right, and pass on the left. In a similar way, though the seeker

does not understand how his prayers are answered, from the time he prays, until its answer, he has Faith that all events are toward his benefit. As

Bahá'u'lláh writes

elsewhere:

Whatsoever occurreth in the world of being is light for His loved ones and fire for the people of sedition and strife. Even if all the losses of the world were to be sustained by one of the friends of God, he would still profit thereby, whereas true loss would be borne by such as are wayward, ignorant and contemptuous.?

Therefore the task of this Valley is to purify the heart, and plumb for an everdeeper understanding of things, that divine inspiration may take the place of ignorance:

Wherefore, a man should make ready his heart that it be worthy of the

descent of heavenly grace, and that the bounteous Cup-Bearer may give him to drink of the wine of bestowal from the merciful vessel.

If the First Valley is focused on attaining qualities, this Valley is focused on attaining true vision. Attainment of either will conduce to right behavior. And although the course of the Second Valley is at first a source of frustration and confusion, afterward it leads to a faith well-grounded in knowledge (ma'rifat).

The Valley of the Attracting One

The Third Valley is the course of most mystics, since it is the plane of rapture and ecstatic devotion. Here the seeker aims to fall in love with God, until all aspects of his self are burnt away. He neither wishes for a respectable self, nor cares to understand. For him, thirst is what leads to true recognition of the waters of life.

These lovers of God throw everything into confusion, and often become a cause of upset to their fellow believers in the beginning:

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These are a people who deem the lowest place to be one with the throne of glory, and to them beauty's bower differeth not from the field of a battle fought in the cause of the Beloved.

However, they burn with desire to meet their Lord, and brook no delay. They need neither prompting, nor assurance, since their own condition propels them ceaselessly to seek the Beloved. They cannot rest without Him; they tolerate no substitute.

Effort in this Valley takes the form of burning devotion and mystic intoxication.

His lovers seek Him anywhere, in every face, in every mind. Though at times they seem to lack discrimination, the true seeker on this path knows exactly Whom he seeks. He may enter places high and low, but he accepts naught unless he inhale therein the scent of his Beloved's musk.

The Valley of the Beloved One

In the Fourth Valley, the seeker himself has no more significance. Here, God alone is the way, and the purpose. The seeker lives in God, or he dies in separation, for there is only He.

Verily, the wayfarer who journeyeth unto God, unto the Crimson Pillar in the snow-white path, will never reach unto his heavenly goal unless he abandoneth all that men possess. . .

Because there is no self here—existence being only through God— this Valley does not conceive of God as on the other side of a long journey. The seeker is always united with God, since he cannot possess separate existence. To him, “All things are of God, and every melody from Him.” Separation would be as inconceivable as vision without light.

Meditate on what the poet hath written: “Wonder not, if my Best-Beloved be closer to me than mine own self; wonder at this, that I, despite such nearness, should still be so far from Him.” . . . Considering what God hath revealed, that “We are closer to man than his life-vein,” the poet hath, in allusion to this verse, stated that, though the revelation of my Best-Beloved hath so permeated my being that He is closer to me than my life-vein, yet, notwithstanding my certitude of its reality and my recognition of my station, I am still so far removed from Him. By this he meaneth that his heart, which is the seat of the All-Merciful and the throne wherein abideth the splendor of His revelation, is forgetful ???

of its Creator, hath strayed from His path, hath shut out itself from His glory, and is stained with the defilement of earthly desires.?

In this Valley, whatever He decrees is beloved, and is in fact seen as the essence of life: “He doth what He willeth, ordaineth what He pleaseth.” His will is perfection unalloyed, and likewise His creation:

Herein the high heavens are in no conflict with the lowly earth, nor do they seek to excel it, for this is the land of mercy, not the realm of distinction.

Even the lover desires something for himself, in the Beloved. Yet in this Valley, all desire is forsaken. Not even motivation is required, since no life is possible but through Him. Thus, the seeker’s only possession is his poverty before Him, and his only capacity, to acknowledge true powerlessness before the Divine decree:

Astonishment here is highly prized, and utter poverty essential. Wherefore hath it been said, “Poverty is My pride.” And again: “God hath a people beneath the dome of glory, whom He hideth in the clothing of radiant poverty.” These are they who see with His eyes, hear with His ears, as it is written in the well-known tradition.

These followers of the Beloved see in His decree their final goal:

See, our hearts come open like shells, when He raineth grace like pearls,

And our lives are ready targets, when agony's arrows He hurls.

Whoso hath inhaled the sweet fragrance of the All-Merciful, and recognized the Source of this utterance, will welcome with his own eyes the shafts of the enemy, that he may establish the truth of the laws of God amongst men.

Summary

These ways of treading the path of Faith are multiple, according to the differing temperaments of mankind. Another reference to this theme occurs in the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf:

At one time We spoke in the language of the lawgiver; at another in that of the truth-seeker and the mystic, and yet Our supreme purpose and highest wish hath always been to disclose the glory and sublimity of this station.?

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In this verse the language used in each of the first three Valleys is mentioned.

In another place, Bahá'u'lláh mentions that He uses up to nine different modes of discourse while presenting the Message.

Whichever language attracts the soul to God is the right one for him. A primary requisite for teaching is determining what form of the truth a person wishes to hear.

Bahá'u'lláh quotes:

“Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it.”

The real task is piquing the soul's interest, and using the terms it understands

best. This is exactly how Bahá'u'lláh spoke to humanity, which can be seen in the

way that Four Valleys itself relies so heavily on Sufi terminology and concepts. It

only matters that we find God. Everything else is a means to that end.

Translating thought into language

The essence of one's thought is a very hard thing to describe. And even though we

often think to ourselves in terms of words, there is something nebulous and remote

which exists before the words appear. Perhaps it is an inclination of the soul, or

what some describe as “intent”, but by casting that essence into words we make it concrete.

The nature of this essential thought is highly complex, indicating that something is probably lost when we force it into a few simple words. Usually it suffices for us when we think with these words, because we are also aware of the subtle context surrounding the choice of those words. What “anger” means to two people can greatly differ, But we have no trouble using “anger” when thinking to ourselves, because we know exactly what we mean.

Some words have a common definition, such as “horse” or “table”. Other words usually require clarification in order to avoid misunderstandings. The degree of clarification needed is somehow related to the complexity of the original thought which prompted the choice of that word.

The role of this “clarification” can be viewed as follows: In the field of our minds, imagine that a certain tree is growing. This tree provides us with fruit, shade, and many other wonderful things.

One day a friend notices how happy we are, and they wonder why. We tell them about the tree, and decide they should have one of their own. But because a tree is a very difficult thing to uproot (and sometimes kills the tree), we have to give them a tiny little seed, which they can plant themselves.

The seed is not the tree, but in another way it is. If the person treats it well, it will grow up similar to (but not exactly the same as) the original. The smallness of the seed and its apparent uselessness—there’s no shade or fruit whatsoever—

represents the difference between the subtlety of our thoughts, and the words we use to communicate. The “context” spoken of before is the care and feeding that the seed requires in order to grow properly.

What is happening is that the first person is taking a very complex things, call it meaning, and he is encapsulating that meaning into something portable. That

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portable something, the seed, requires a few other things in order for a second tree to be created.

In a similar way, the essence of our thoughts is captured in words, but these words mean nothing without a common understanding of: (?) a basic definition of the word, (?) the specific “slant” I intend for the word to have, and (?) why I’m saying the word at all.

If the other person can understand these three things, then a second essence, very much like our own (thought not exactly the same), will appear in their mind.

This basically describes what happens when we “parse” the words of another person. They are spewing basic units of information at us (words), which have a common basic definition (that is, they have a lexical form, or a basic representation which we can understand simply from knowing the same language). These lexical forms combine in certain patterns to convey a specific intent. Telling someone, “Your house is on fire!” says something very different from “Is your house on fire?”

The lexical units, or lexemes, are the same (Is, house, fire, your, on), but the combinations imply a different meaning. Also, only certain combination are “legal”.

What determines legality is something called syntax. Syntax specifies how lexemes can be sequenced. Syntax also indicates that certain sequences have a specific meaning: placing “your” in front of “house” means that the house belongs to you. But “house your” is not legal syntax.

This notion of meaning is called semantics. Several syntaxes can express the same semantic intent. “Your house”, “Sein Haus”, “Su casa”, all say the exactly the same thing. In fact, they even have the same syntax; it is the lexemes which differ.

However, each syntax defines it legal lexemes, making these three sentences part of three different syntaxes, or grammars. Normally we refer to English and German as languages, but we could also refer to them as grammars, which imply a single syntax having a unique lexical dictionary.

The same syntax can also have different semantics. This difference is usually determined by the context of the expression, such as whether “Su casa” means “his house” or “your house”. It depends on the subject.

It is the job of a translator to take a sentence from one syntax, and re-express that sentence using a different syntax, but without changing the semantics.

Translating

“Mien Haus” to “My house”, does the job faithfully without changing the meaning

at all. When two computer languages are involved, and the second language is some

kind of machine kind, we call the program a compiler.

A compiler works in much the same way as two people who are having a conversation. To an outside observer, nothing is really passing between the two individuals

but sound waves. The sound waves are fluid, having high points, low points, and strange fluctuations.

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The hearer in the conversation first chops these sounds into units. He takes in each unit, in relation to the one before, and builds up sentences. As the sentences are

growing, their meaning is formed until the hearer understands what the other person

was saying. But understanding cannot happen at the level of words, it happens in

units of own. Sometimes these units very small, such as sentences, and sometimes

they are very large. There is actually a gradation of size, starting with a single unit

to encompass the entire conversation, and then each theme in the conversation, and

further to each point within the theme.

A computer language communicates in units which parallel these in many ways.

A program is made up of routines, along with statements which express relationships

among routines and data.

The Unity of Being

The many and the one

Alan Watts, in his book *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, wrote:

The sense of unity with the “All” is not. . . a nebulous state of mind, a sort of trance, in which all form and distinction is abolished, as if man and the universe merged into a luminous mist of pale mauve. Just as process and form, energy and matter, myself and experience, are names for, and ways of looking at, the same thing—so one and many, unity and multiplicity, identity and difference, are not mutually exclusive opposites: they are each other, much as the body is its various organs. To discover that the many are the one, and that the one is the many, is to realize that both are words and noises representing what is at once obvious to sense and feeling, and an enigma to logic and description.

Previous to reading this, I had been looking for an experience of reality underlying all my perceptions of it. Now, I wonder if my perceptions are that reality—if not in essence, then in being.

For example, my heart is me, in the sense that if I lost my heart, I would perish.

My life and my heart are synonymous. But my heart is not what you read in these sentences. The personality you read is a reality more uniquely me than any physical part. This intangible me, in one sense, is distinct from the physical; this can lead

me to see the two soul as utterly different, sometimes at odds with each other.

Yet,

I have never had an experience of life other than a bodily one, which means that

my body is as much me as my soul—at this point in my experience of life. The two

depend on each other. This creates a unity from the two, which is what people think

of as “John”. Since no one can see my soul, that is not “John”; and if my body were

laid under the ground, that also would not be me. My reality is neither one, but the

unity of the whole. The many are the one.

It might be said that what is most real is what can endure death. In the scheme of my separate parts, this is certainly true. But the part of me that does survive

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cannot become what it will without the part it leaves behind. Without this mortal,

physical life, my soul would be a very different soul. Thus, in the scheme of my

being, there is no part more real than another. To call the physical experience unreal

would imply that what my soul has learned here is unreal; yet if I suddenly undid

the whole experience, the being that I am—who has learned all these things—would

also vanish.

The ultimate reality, then, of which all my perceptions are but shades of glimpses,

is also what I perceive of it. Because without those perceptions, there would be no

“thing perceived”. “It” might still continue, but it would no longer be

an “it”, any
more than a thing unexperienced can ever be real to anyone but itself. In the
scheme
of the many, what is truly real may forever outreach me; but in terms of our
unity,
how I perceive it is very much a part of what it is.

For example: everyone reads a poem differently. There is the author’s intent,
which no one can truly understand but him; and there are all the opinions
people
have of that poem. It could be said the author’s intent is more real, because
his
intention is what created the poem. Without him, there would be nothing to
read.

Other people’s views did not bring the poem into being. But are they less
real? In
the sense of unity, those opinions are also the reality of the poem. It is both
what the
author intended, and what other people read into it. If they never read it, it
would
not be a poem. It would rather be a nameless experience shared between the
author
and himself. To call it a “poem” would mean no more than calling it by any
other
name. It becomes a “poem” only when there is an audience to hear it. It’s
reality,
then, is both in itself—separate from the reader and nameless—and in the
reader, in
the form of a synergistic whole we call “a poem”.

All of this, of course, relates to our connection with the One Who created us.
In
the sense of being separate, I could no more say, “I am God”, than a cell
of my body
could claim to bear my identity. But in the sense of the-whole-in-the-parts, we
are
very much “God”, for without a creation He would not be a Creator. His
essence
would still endure, but He would no longer be “He” without us. “His name,
the
Creator, presupposeth a creation, even as His title, the Lord of Men, must
involve
the existence of a servant.”

To use another example: Every father was also a son. As a man, the father is
separate from the son, but as a father, he is linked. Without the son, he would
not
be a father; without the father, there would be no son. Father and son are thus
two sides of a single being: a greater unity made up of the two. Take either
away,

and both disappear. They are each other. Separate in one sense, but of one being (“fatherhood”) in another.

So when I look up at the sun or the clouds, I am more than the eyes that see them, or my sight of them. I am something which includes me as the seer, and the sky as the seen. We cannot be separated without destroying the two—nor can we ???

be merged. We must be distinct even as we must be one, just as the moments of my life make up the unity of who I am, without any moment ever being the duplicate of another. Even unity and distinction are parts of a whole, for if there were no distinction, there would be no unity.

All of this completely changes my view of what is “real”. There is no underneath, anymore. There might still be, in the existential sense, but not in the experiential sense; because although I can never know the essence of reality—how to see without perception?—I am always part of it by my role in the greater unity. I am what I seek, as the son is the reality of the father. It is not the world which makes me feel apart, but my seeking to be united with it! It is a goal which, because it’s already met, cannot be satisfied if one doesn’t believe it. It would be like seeing a person who should be happy, but isn’t. What can you do? It’s not the circumstances that need changing, but their basic relationship to life. How that happens, I think, is the next step along this path. . .

Meditate on what the poet hath written: “Wonder not, if my Best-Beloved be closer to me than mine own self; wonder at this, that I, despite such nearness, should still be so far from Him.”. . .

Two sides of a coin

If I seek pleasure, and reject pain, I lose what both are a part of: my depth of feeling.

But to an artist, depth of feeling is all. If pain and pleasure both contribute to it, how

can either be shunned? It depends on what one seeks: feelings of pleasure—which

must diminish in the absence of contrast—or a greater depth of feeling itself.

The interplay of opposites hones awareness. Nothing makes a meal taste better than hunger. Anyone who has fasted knows the sublime taste of water at the end of

the day. What could compare to it? But it needs a day of toil to reach that moment

of perfection; a day of loss to feel the beauty of the gain.

Always moving from opposite to opposite, what is the point? Perhaps it is the unity these two are a part of: consciousness. Repetition of one state leads to familiarity, which breeds forgetfulness. They say, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder."

Our fondness for life would diminish without its trials, just as our amazement at the

sunrise would lessen without the endless monotony of physical existence.

Between

extremes we are shaped, formed, and bred to a higher state of being: an awareness

of the reality pointed to by those extremes. That is, not just a keener sense of pain,

or of pleasure, but "the marrow of life": the depths we reach by the interplay of the

two.

In the book *Zen and the Art of Archery*, Eugen Herrigel talks about his experience learning archery from a Zen teacher. At one point, the teacher talked about

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how the archer and the target are two parts of one thing. In one sense, the archer

shoots an arrow at the target; in the other, the target draws the arrow from the archer.

They are not contending opposites, but two parts of a single thing: Archery.

When

the archer acts as if he were apart from it, he is not able to manifest

"Archery" by his

actions. He can only do it if he gives himself up to what he wishes to be a part of. At

that moment, Archery comes into being. It cannot be said where it begins or where

it ends. It is the man, the bow, the arrow, the target, all of it. To say it begins at the

bow, and ends at the target, only divides it again. As Archery, it is one, indivisible;

as separate parts, they each have their role.

Sometimes, when Eugen would allow Archery to appear by his actions, the teacher would stop and bow, saying "It" had shot. If Eugen thought he had done

it—as if the man alone were Archery—the teacher would tell him all their practice was for nothing. He was not learning to shoot a bow, but to become a part of Archery, until there could be no distinction between himself and the target, or any other part. There is only Archery, if the archer allows himself to participate, and to share that reality with all the other parts.

This is my understanding of what the book was saying; I'm paraphrasing because the book is in storage, but it seemed also to be saying: the many and the one are the same; we only go wrong is by disbelieving this.

I am going to put these thoughts to the test by seeing if I can participate in the systems of life. I'm accustomed to thinking that I'm essentially separate from them, which means I do not easily accept my role. What would happen if my foot rejected playing its part in the operation of my body? But I do something similar when I separate myself from the unities I am a part of. Let's see what happens if I yield, and stop trying so hard to establish "myself" as apart. . .

The movement of being

Both pleasure and pain are equal parts of a unity which might be called "the being of feeling". This being includes pain, pleasure, the feeler, the object producing the feeling, and the setting in which it occurs. It is all of these things.

But this only pictures that unity within a single moment of time. The being of feeling also includes the movement of feeling, which is the avoidance of pain and

the pursuit of pleasure. All that "pain" means is, "a feeling we seek to avoid." It is "pain" because of our aversion, and "pleasure" because of our attraction.

So to avoid pain is also the being of feeling; it is part of the drama that makes

up feeling. The attractive nature of pleasure would not be as sweet if there were

not other feelings to repel us just as strongly. Pulled between like and dislike, these

opposites become part of another being, perhaps "the being of desire".

Without
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attraction and repulsion, the being of feeling would be disconnected from the

being
of desire.

The critical difference lies in whether we love the being of feeling as a unity, or only some of its parts. Take for example the contrast between good and evil: A being arises which is both good and evil, as well as the movement of championing good and battling against evil. However, without evil—though we seek to defeat it—the greater unity of which they're a part would not be (in the sense of becoming a being of consciousness). The champion of good, whose true love is this greater being, will honor evil even as he defeats it for the role it plays toward that being. Another example: Illness and health are, together, the being of life, which is a constant movement from birth to decay. A doctor who serves the being of life, plays his role by championing health and fighting disease. However, it is critical to the being of life that he not succeed completely. If a doctor were able to eliminate all illness from birth, he would leave the patient incapable of facing other, unknown illnesses that also exist in the world. By granting perfect health, the patient would cease to be robust, and thus real health a would be impossible. For a genuinely healthy person must face illness. It is never desirable to seek to become ill—part of the movement of the being of life is that we encourage health and promote illness—but without facing illness, a person could not be hardy. A doctor who strives for the being of life will champion health, but also honor illness for the role it plays in that being. It is because we fall ill at times, that we are healthy the rest of the time. In this way, as a unity, the being of life is able to be. The same with pleasure and pain. If we desire to feel deeply, we must seek out pleasure and avoid pain, but also honor pain when it comes, because it must come if we are to really feel. If we grow too comfortable with pleasure, to the point of feeling nothing at all, we (or God) must push us from our confinement to seek other pleasures, an activity which carries the risk of encountering other pains. To be truly alive—a lover of life—we must embrace all the parts of experience,

honoring

them for their role, even if the function of those roles seems contradictory.

I am not saying pain and pleasure are equal, or to be regarded equally. Such an identity would end the very being I refer to! The idea is that all parts—even those

whose roles are diametrically opposed—are together that being. The movement of

being means relating both to the parts (avoiding pain and preferring pleasure) and

the whole (appreciating that both pain and pleasure are the life of feeling).

In this

way we honor injustice even as we strive to defeat it; we honor illness even as we

develop medicines to counter it; we honor pain even as we take steps to avoid it.

In fact, if we did not seek to avoid pain, we would be denying its role in the fuller

aspect of its being! If everything were pleasant, feeling would start to diminish. So

the love of being is a love of all its parts, even if some of the roles of those parts

demand that we fight against them.

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(On a mystical level, I believe one can develop a deeper appreciation of pain and

pleasure so that, despite avoidance and attraction, we bear a deep appreciation for

both. When pain must come, we cherish it even as we avoid it; and when pleasure comes, we cherish it similarly even as we revel in it. This is when the soul relates

directly to the being of the two, while the body relates to one or the other part).

Since some of the parts of unity require the behavior of opposition, we see how necessary it is to being that we fail at times. Without imperfection, there could

not be a consciousness of the higher being of which imperfection and perfection are

both a part. That is, it may be the role of imperfection that I constantly seek to

improve it, but it is also necessary to that greater being that sometimes I fail at this

task. If ever I were to perfect my elimination of imperfection, I would also eliminate

the unity I seek, since it is by imperfection that its being becomes known to me.

This does not mean that I will not continue, for the rest of my life, to seek perfection. The movement of the greater being of perfection and imperfection is that

I struggle from one to the other. But it does mean that I will honor imperfection,

even love it for the role it plays in making me conscious of my goal—even if that love

is expressed by my seeking to undo imperfection; for by seeking to undo imperfection,

I play my role in the movement of being.

This is fundamentally a philosophy of love, where even hate is loved because both hate and love together—and the lover, the beloved, and all the other parts—

make up the greater unity to which this philosophy addresses itself. The being of

true love could not be known without hateful things to test it (see “The steed of

pain”, below). Thus, what is hateful is also loved, because its role in the being of

love is that love will seek to overcome hatred with itself.

This is a world-view in which destruction and upbuilding are both one being.

It does not matter that building destroys destruction, or that destruction lays the

foundation for building. The two principles are, in their separateness, opposed; but

as parts of a higher unity, they are interdependent. The two are intimately bound;

just as with the Yin-Yang, they are two, but two aspects of one symbol, two sides

of a single coin. They depend on each other, even though that dependence requires

the giving way of each to the rise of the other.

As separate parts this could never make sense. The parts describe a universe fundamentally at odds with itself, an unresolvable paradox. But as members of a common unity, the parts are shown to serve the being of something more than themselves—which is also themselves. Through their opposition, the many in fact

fulfill the being of the One.

It requires such a higher unity to resolve these warring parts, or else the paradox

would never end. If creation and destruction are always at odds, as they must be,

how can there ever be harmony? It is in the higher unity—the being of which these

two are a part, and which they express by their conflict—that resolution is found.

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If that be the case, it argues for a resolution of all the manyness and inexplicability of life in a greater unity encompassing them all: a unity that includes temporality, limitation and finitude, as well as eternity, boundlessness and the infinite. Whatever that being is, it is what all this chaos and paradox refers to, in which they must all find their fulfillment. Unknowable essences

If we ponder a moment, we realize that the essence of light is not knowable. I do not mean the many manifest lights that we see here on Earth, but that essential quality of light which imparts to material light its meaning. Without this quality, light would not be light—light would not exist. In life, we encounter many different kinds of light: bright, dim and colorful. Some we consider more truly light than others. For instance, the brighter and whiter a light is, the more we liken to light; while the dimmer a light is, the more we regard it as something nearer to darkness.

Of any light that we can imagine, there exists another which is closer to being called true light. If we consider a one hundred watt light bulb, wouldn't the brightness of a one million watt light bulb cause this smaller bulb to appear even dim?

And if a one million watt bulb is our standard, how about one billion, or a billion times a billion? No matter how great the light that we imagine, another even greater exists—so much greater, in fact, as to force our previous conception to retreat into comparable darkness.

This is how the essence of light stands in relation to our understanding of it.

In its true form it is imperceptible, yet it manifests itself in varying degrees according to the possibilities of this plane of existence. It would be even truer to say that it manifests its qualities—i.e., those of brightness, whiteness, etc.—than to say that it manifests itself, since we have already said that its own essence was imperceptible.

In the physical world, then, our world, we are able to perceive the existence of light's essence by recognizing the varying degrees of its attributes as they

manifest

themselves on this material plane.

I testify also that there exists one single light which exhibits these attributes

flawlessly in the degree to which it manifests them. This most great light we call the

Sun. Next to the Sun, which is composed of almost nothing but pure light, all other

sources of illumination seem like darkness. And yet, it is because of the light of the

Sun that these other, lesser lights have a chance to exist. Without the Sun we would

have no life, no awareness, and no understanding of the meaning of light.

I testify further that the pure light which shines from this Sun contains all the

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possibilities of color. If one were to say that the colors that we see on the Earth occur

here, and exist within the things which manifest them, I would say that this is true,

for an apple appears red in no matter what place we view it. But it would also be

true to say that the color does not exist here, because if the sun ceased to shine and

all lights were extinguished, colors also would cease to be. Everything would appear

uniformly black. Thus we we should be able to say that the colors exist in the sun,

and we merely become aware of them through the agency of material objects.

In a similar way, I testify that we, as human beings, are rays of the Divine Sun,

and are as varied and beautiful in hue as the many different colors. If one were to

say that we each have an independent soul, and that this soul is related (though

not contained within) our physical bodies, I would agree that we each possess our

own, unique individuality in this respect. But were one to then state that we are

all contained within the Sun, that we are all born of the same essence and thus are

inherently united, and that, like the colors, we merely become aware of each other

through the agency of our physical bodies—for in this sense we would be like

one

soul living in many bodies—I think this is also true.

Without the light of the Sun, we would not exist; without the essence of that light, the Sun would not exist. And deprived of the existence of the unknowable and unsearchable Divine Essence, the essence of light itself would find itself without

even a name to be.

Thoughts on the Valley of
Knowledge

Perceiving with divine insight

The Valleys depict different world-views. As Bahá'u'lláh states:

Thus it hath been made clear that these stages depend on the vision of the wayfarer. In every city he will behold a world, in every Valley reach a spring, in every meadow hear a song.?

To have knowledge of each Valley is not enough. One cannot comprehend it from the outside. To be a “wayfarer” is a question of residence, not familiarity.

This is a good time to review something from the Valley of Knowledge. In Persian there are two words commonly used for knowledge, ‘Ilm and ‘Irfán.

They

are as different as studying about the ocean, and swimming in it.

The translation “valley of knowledge” is not really accurate, given the common

meaning of this word. The Persian text says “Ma‘rifat”; which my dictionary translates as meaning “insight into divine matters” (the word is derived from ‘Irfán, which can mean wisdom or insight).

It means that those in the valley of knowledge have come to fully appreciate and trust God’s planning. This is no simple matter. Even Moses failed this test, as

Muhammad relates in the story of Khidr:

So [Moses] found one of Our servants (Khidr), on whom We had bestowed Mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own Presence.

Moses said to him: “May I follow thee, on the footing that thou teach me something of the (Higher) Truth which thou hast been taught?”

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(The other) said: “Verily thou wilt not be able to have patience with me!”

“And how canst thou have patience about things about which thy understanding is not complete?”

Moses said: "Thou wilt find me, if God so will, (truly) patient: nor shall I disobey thee in aught."

The other said: "If then thou wouldst follow me, ask me no questions about anything until I myself speak to thee concerning it."

So they both proceeded: until, when they were in the boat, he scuttled it. Said Moses: "Hast thou scuttled it in order to drown those in it?"

Truly a strange thing hast thou done!"

He answered: "Did I not tell thee that thou canst have no patience with me?"

Moses said: "Rebuke me not for forgetting, nor grieve me by raising difficulties in my case."

Then they proceeded: until, when they met a young man, he slew him.

Moses said: "Hast thou slain an innocent person who had slain none?"

Truly a foul (unheard of) thing hast thou done!"

He answered: "Did I not tell thee that thou canst have no patience with me?"

(Moses) said: "If ever I ask thee about anything after this, keep me not in thy company: then wouldst thou have received (full) excuse from my side."

Then they proceeded: until, when they came to the inhabitants of a town, they asked them for food, but they refused them hospitality. They found there a wall on the point of falling down, but he set it up straight.

(Moses) said: "If thou hadst wished, surely thou couldst have exacted some recompense for it!"

He answered: "This is the parting between me and thee: now will I tell thee the interpretation of (those things) over which thou wast unable to hold patience.

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"As for the boat, it belonged to certain men in dire want: they plied on the water: I but wished to render it unserviceable, for there was after them a certain king who seized on every boat by force.

"As for the youth, his parents were people of Faith, and we feared that he would grieve them by obstinate rebellion and ingratitude (to God and man).

"So we desired that their Lord would give them in exchange (a son) better in purity (of conduct) and closer in affection.

"As for the wall, it belonged to two youths, orphans, in the Town; there was, beneath it, a buried treasure, to which they were entitled: their father had been a righteous man: So thy Lord desired that they should attain their age of full strength and get out their treasure—a mercy (and favour) from thy Lord. I did it not of my own accord. Such is the interpretation of (those things) over which thou wast unable to hold

patience.”?

Bahá'u'lláh also refers to this story in the Seven Valleys, by quoting Rúmi's verse:

If Khidr did wreck the vessel on the sea,
Yet in this wrong there are a thousand rights.?

All events happen for our benefit

God works mysterious good in our lives, which is not fathomable to those lacking

“insight into divine matters”. It has been stated often that all of God's workings,

whether they appear good or evil to us, benefit His faithful ones in the end:

Whatsoever occurreth in the world of being is light for His loved ones and fire for the people of sedition and strife. Even if all the losses of the world were to be sustained by one of the friends of God, he would still profit thereby, whereas true loss would be borne by such as are wayward, ignorant and contemptuous. Although the author of the following saying had intended it otherwise, yet We find it pertinent to the operation of God's immutable Will: “Even or odd, thou shalt win the wager.” The friends of God shall win and profit under all conditions, and shall attain true wealth. In fire they remain cold, and from water they emerge dry. Their affairs are at variance with the affairs of men. Gain is their lot, whatever the deal. To this testifieth every wise one with a discerning eye, and every fair-minded one with a hearing ear.?

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It is not so hard to “understand” that God's means us well in all things.

It is

an entirely different thing to “know”—to have the necessary insight—to behold

something terrible occurring, and yet praise God for allowing it. The atrocities of

war are most often used as proof of this. Yet the Seven Valleys say of the wayfarers

in the path of Knowledge: “And if he meeteth with injustice he shall have patience,

and if he cometh upon wrath he shall manifest love.”?

I will copy here the story of the lover and the beloved, from the Seven Valleys,

since it shows Bahá'u'lláh's own elucidation of this theme:

There was once a lover who had sighed for long years in separation from his beloved, and wasted in the fire of remoteness. From the rule of love, his heart was empty of patience, and his body weary of his spirit; he reckoned life without her as a mockery, and time consumed him away. How many a day he found no rest in longing for her; how many a night the pain of her kept him from sleep; his body was worn to a sigh,

his heart's wound had turned him to a cry of sorrow. He had given a thousand lives for one taste of the cup of her presence, but it availed him not. The doctors knew no cure for him, and companions avoided his company; yea, physicians have no medicine for one sick of love, unless the favor of the beloved one deliver him.

At last, the tree of his longing yielded the fruit of despair, and the fire of his hope fell to ashes. Then one night he could live no more, and he went out of his house and made for the marketplace. On a sudden, a watchman followed after him. He broke into a run, with the watchman following; then other watchmen came together, and barred every passage to the weary one. And the wretched one cried from his heart, and ran here and there, and moaned to himself: "Surely this watchman is Izrá'íl, my angel of death, following so fast upon me; or he is a tyrant of men, seeking to harm me." His feet carried him on, the one bleeding with the arrow of love, and his heart lamented. Then he came to a garden wall, and with untold pain he scaled it, for it proved very high; and forgetting his life, he threw himself down to the garden.

And there he beheld his beloved with a lamp in her hand, searching for a ring she had lost. When the heart-surrendered lover looked on his ravishing love, he drew a great breath and raised up his hands in prayer, crying: "O God! Give Thou glory to the watchman, and riches and long life. For the watchman was Gabriel, guiding this poor one; or he was Isráfíl, bringing life to this wretched one!"
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Indeed, his words were true, for he had found many a secret justice in this seeming tyranny of the watchman, and seen how many a mercy lay hid behind the veil. Out of wrath, the guard had led him who was athirst in love's desert to the sea of his loved one, and lit up the dark night of absence with the light of reunion. He had driven one who was afar, into the garden of nearness, had guided an ailing soul to the heart's physician.

Now if the lover could have looked ahead, he would have blessed the watchman at the start, and prayed on his behalf, and he would have seen that tyranny as justice; but since the end was veiled to him, he moaned and made his pliant in the beginning. Yet those who journey in the garden land of knowledge, because they see the end in the beginning, see peace in war and friendliness in anger.?

We are all familiar with this "watchman", and some of us have found the "beloved"

on the other side of the wall. But how many can say that we pray before the discovery?

O Son of Man! 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.?

O Son of Man! For everything there is a sign. The sign of love is fortitude under My decree and patience under My trials.?

The elimination of fear

Each Valley seems to represent a spiritual station. Knowledge (divine insight), appears to be the station of: “God doeth as He pleaseth.” As someone else wrote, we

become like the Sufi who is delighted at being thwarted, because he knows that God

is pushing his life in a better direction—albeit invisibly at the start.

This station is called “the last plane of limitation” in the Seven Valleys.

A question: Do you think this station is also being described in the following quote, from

the Kitáb-i-‘Ahd?

We fain would hope that the people of Bahá may be guided by the blessed words: ‘Say: all things are of God.’ This exalted utterance is like unto water for quenching the fire of hate and enmity which smouldereth within the hearts and breasts of men. By this single utterance contending peoples and kindreds will attain the light of true unity.

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If so, might this verse—this Word, this station—be the one that Bahá’u’lláh

refers to elsewhere in these words?

In the treasures of the knowledge of God there lieth concealed a knowledge which, when applied, will largely, though not wholly, eliminate fear. . . . A word hath, likewise, been written down and recorded by the Pen of the Most High in the Crimson Book [this refers to the Kitáb-i-‘Ahd] which is capable of fully disclosing that force which is hid in men, nay of redoubling its potency. We implore God—exalted and glorified be He—to graciously assist His servants to do that which is pleasing and acceptable unto Him.

What is fear but apprehension of the unknown? And what is the station of “All things are of God” but that of welcoming the Unknown? I’ll end by including a

verse from the Valley of Knowledge, which so completely epitomizes this attitude:

The wayfarer in this Valley seeth in the fashionings of the True One nothing save clear providence, and at every moment saith: “No defect canst thou see in the creation of the God of Mercy: Repeat the gaze: Seest thou a single flaw?” He beholdeth justice in injustice, and in justice, grace. In ignorance he findeth many a knowledge hidden, and in knowledge a myriad wisdoms manifest.

Quotes from the original Valley of Knowledge

The Conference of the Birds, Mantiq’u-t-Tayr, is a story of thirty birds who

are all seeking to reach the immortal King. Their guide, the Hoopoe bird, describes to them seven valleys which all must pass through before they can achieve their final destination. It is these seven valleys which Bahá'u'lláh elaborates in His text "The Seven Valleys".

As a side note, in case some were wondering, the word for "valley" in these texts does not mean a lush ravine between mountains. The word "vádí" refers to what people in the Southwestern USA know as an arroyo. It is a dry river, useful as a guide when making one's way through a desert.

The following quotes come from two different translations of the Conference of the Birds; all of them are from that book's Valley of Knowledge (which is also translated as Valley of Understanding, and Valley of Mystic Insight).

When the mystery of the essence of beings reveals itself clearly to [the wayfarer] the furnace of this world becomes a garden of flowers. He ???

who is striving will be able to see the almond in its hard shell. He will no longer be pre-occupied with himself, but will look up at the face of his Friend. In each atom he will see the whole; he will ponder over thousands of bright secrets. . .

Real knowledge becomes the possession of the true seeker. If it is necessary to seek knowledge in China, then go. But knowledge is distorted by the formal mind, it becomes petrified, like stones. How long must real knowledge continue to be misunderstood? This world, this house of sorrows, is in darkness; but true knowledge is a jewel, it will burn like a lamp and guide you in this gloomy place. If you spurn this jewel you will ever be a prey to regret. If you lag behind you will weep bitter tears. But if you sleep little by night, and fast by day, you may find what you seek. Seek, then, and be lost in the quest.

Of those who dwell in this Valley it is said:

He will perceive the marrow, not the skin—the self will disappear; then, from within the heart of all he sees, there will ascend the longed-for face of the immortal Friend.

A hundred thousand secrets will be known when that unveiled, surpassing Face is shown—a hundred thousand men must faint and fail till one shall draw aside the secret's veil.

Perfected, of rare courage, he must be
to dive through that immense, uncharted sea.
If you discern such hidden truths and feel
joy flood your life, do not relax your zeal!

Though thirst is quenched,
though you are bathed in bliss
beyond all hypothesis,
though you should reach the throne of God,
implore Him still unceasingly:

“Is there yet anymore?”

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The Seven Valleys is “a guide for human conduct”

The following tradition, attributed to the Imám ‘Alí, is from the book *The Way of the Sufi* by Idries Shah:

You probably seem to yourself to be a believer, even if you are a believer in disbelief.

But you cannot really believe in anything until you are aware of the process by which you arrived at your position.

Before you do this you must be ready to postulate that all your beliefs may be wrong, that what you think to be belief may only be a variety of prejudice caused by your surroundings—including the bequest of your ancestors for whom you may have a sentiment.

True belief belongs to the realm of real knowledge.

Until you have knowledge, belief is mere coalesced opinions, however it may seem to you.

Coalesced opinions serve for ordinary living. Real belief enables higher studies to be made.

This theme of self-examination is echoed in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words, where he calls the Seven Valleys “a guide for human conduct”:

It is my hope. . . that you may search out your own imperfections and not think of the imperfections of anybody else. Strive with all your power to be free from imperfections. Heedless souls are always seeking faults in others. What can the hypocrite know of others’ faults when he is blind to his own? This is the meaning of the words in the Seven Valleys. It is a guide for human conduct. As long as a man does not find his own faults, he can never become perfect. Nothing is more fruitful for man than the knowledge of his own shortcomings. The Blessed Perfection says, “I wonder at the man who does not find his

own imperfections.”?”?

Related meditations from the Hidden Words

Here are some meditations from the Hidden Words which seem to relate to the themes of the Valley of Knowledge:

???

O Son of Man! Thou art My dominion and My dominion perisheth not; wherefore fearest thou thy perishing? Thou art My light and My light shall never be extinguished; why dost thou dread extinction? Thou art My glory and My glory fadeth not; thou art My robe and My robe shall never be outworn. Abide then in thy love for Me, that thou mayest find Me in the realm of glory.

O Son of Man! For everything there is a sign. The sign of love is fortitude under My decree and patience under My trials.

O Son of Man! The true lover yearneth for tribulation even as doth the rebel for forgiveness and the sinful for mercy.

O Son of Man! If adversity befall thee not in My path, how canst thou walk in the ways of them that are content with My pleasure? If trials afflict thee not in thy longing to meet Me, how wilt thou attain the light in thy love for My beauty?

O Son of Man! 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.

The worlds of the “beginning” and the “end”

There is another recurring theme in the Writings, both Islamic and Bahá’í, of four

divine states which are referred to in the verse: “He is the first and the last, the Seen

and the Hidden.”?? It is also found in the New Testament, where it says “I am Alpha

and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.”??

Bahá’u’lláh expounds on this theme in the Valley of Unity, yet it is also found in

the Valley of Knowledge. In the story of the lover and his beloved, the lover starts in

the “world of the beginning”. After he is pursued by the watchmen, he comes upon

his beloved and is transported to the “world of the end”.

These two worlds exist in the vision of the wayfarer. Between them is the illusory

reality of Time, through which men must pass. Owing to these two worlds, change is witnessed. Because of them, the Prophets appear to have different names, and speak in different tongues. Otherwise, in the realm of unity, “This is the

changeless

Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future.”.??

Consider yourself in a difficult situation. Without knowing the outcome, you may be seized by fear, or wonder at what may happen. You are in the “world of ???

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firstness”. In this condition “the end is veiled to you”, and people are wont “to make their pliant in the beginning.”

After the passage of time, and the appearance of change, we learn the outcome of our situation. We may be happy, or sad, but now things are complete. We have entered “the world of lastness”, and come to the end of our waiting.

It is possible, through faith, and insight into the ways of God, to perceive “the end in the beginning”. That is, while dwelling in the world of the first, it is as

though we look across a gorge, and see the details of the world of the last. We take

heart in what we see, and our apprehension of the unknown leaves us. Because God “[has] ordained for thy training every atom in existence and the essence of

all created things”,?? we come to perceive even the next life from the vantage point

of this life, and learn that everything which occurs materially is for the benefit of

spiritual progress. Thus the gap of death is bridged, and we are filled with a spiritual joy that is beyond this world.

This is the station of those in the valley of Knowledge, and by such insight the

wayfarer can reach across the boundaries of Time. It is an attribute of those who

see the large in the small, the tree in the seed, the future in the present.

This is the

last world of limitation, for limitations require separation, and separation implies

differences.

He says, “. . . the people of the Valleys above this see the end and the beginning

as one. . . ” In this condition, the world of the beginning is not different from the

world of the end. Whatever situation we find ourselves in, and however we may seem to other people, we are actually dwelling in the world of the end, though

our

surroundings have the appearance of the world of the beginning.

To give a concrete example of this: In the game of chess, players are ranked

according to their ability on a scale from ? to ????. The greater the numerical separation between players, the greater the likelihood that the higher player will win.

At a tournament, where people are playing to win, let's assume that you are rated ????, and your opponent is rated ?. This means that you have no possibility of losing. Although no pieces have been moved, and you sit in the world of the first, because of your certitude you already count the game as won. You already experience the joys and emotions of the world of the last. Indeed, no matter what apparent "changes" occur on the board, they have no reality, and time in this case is just a show.

Likewise for the other player. The end and the beginning are one, and while we may see the players at the "beginning", they themselves already dwell in the "end".

They do not just see the end in the beginning; their emotions, vision, and reality concerning the end and the beginning is one.
???

This is the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá saying "The Temple is already built." For Him, Who saw the condition of the believers at that time, the Temple already existed in its full splendour. I imagine He was able to revel in the creation of the believers, and experienced joy at what they had/will build. Time was but a show, a non-thing. In the spiritual worlds, the cornerstone and the Temple were one. This implies a complete transcendence of the conditions of this life, which seems so ruled by boundaries and temporal causation. It is no wonder that Bahá'u'lláh said that the valley of Knowledge "is the last plane of limitation". Here the spirit is free, and appearances no longer affect it. Owing to the saying, "Verily we are from God, and to Him shall we return", he sees the Face of God everywhere, for has he not already returned? Bahá'u'lláh says, ". . . what life have words, on such a plane, that 'first' and 'last' or other than these be seen or mentioned! In this realm, the first is the last itself, and the last is but the first."??

He then continues, “Nay rather, the denizens of the undying city, who dwell in the green garden land, see not even ‘neither first nor last’; they fly from all that is

first, and repulse all that is last.”?? In *Gems of the Mysteries*??, Bahá’u’lláh writes,

“In this station change and alteration are pure idolatry and unadulterated belief.”??

In this realm of the Infinite, change is not only unreal, it is uncreate.

“Knowledge is

a single point, but the ignorant have multiplied it.”?? Here there is no believer, for

as He said, “There was God and there was naught beside Him”. And further, “This

is the plane whereon the vestiges of all things are destroyed in the traveler, and on

the horizon of eternity the Divine Face riseth out of the darkness, and the meaning

of ‘All on the earth shall pass away, but the face of thy Lord. . . ’ is made manifest.”??

Even love, which implies a lover, debars one from this realm, as it says in the poetic, “Love is a veil betwixt the lover and the loved one; more than this I am not

permitted to tell”.??

I hope this will stimulate any ideas the reader may have on the mysteries of “the

beginning and the end,”. Given our subjection to time, and the tricks it plays on

us, I find it heartening that Bahá’u’lláh foretells a spiritual station in which these

limitations can be transcended.

. . . We supplicate God to submerge us in these surging oceans, to encompass us in these spray-laden gales and to bestow upon us a divine stairway for our ascent. In this way might we cleanse our human temples of everything we have acquired from our base selves and divest ourselves of the shameless garments that we have stolen from our peers, that God may clothe us in the cloak of His grace and the raiments of His guidance. Then might He cause us to enter the city of knowledge; for everyone who sets foot therein knows all branches of learning even before he becomes aware of their inner secrets. He comprehends all ???

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knowledge and wisdom by means of the mysteries of divinity deposited in the creation—for he reads in the leaf the secrets of the tree. Praise be to God, the Maker and fashioner of the universe, above all that was created and preordained therein.??

“Even Gabriel cannot know by trying to know”

The following poem affectedly me profoundly, since it ties in so well with Plato’s

theory of wisdom?? . In it Rumi highlights the fact that we cannot reach the Beloved

merely through “trying”, or the accumulation of knowledge, but rather by other

ways, other means. . .

This piece of food cannot be eaten,
nor this bit of wisdom found by looking.

There is a secret core in everyone;
not even Gabriel can know by trying to know.

Action and spiritual pursuit

I think this question of “action” in relation to spiritual pursuit deserves much consideration. For there are both dependent and independent forms of action, each of

which have a different character, and very different implications.

For example, the Indian philosopher Krishnamurti seems to associate the desire for change with hatred. That is, if we love something, why would we want to change

it? The desire for change implies a desire for Life to become other than it presently

is. This represents a longing to be apart from the “now”, and a wish to live in an

unrealized future. This distances man from reality, since the only real thing we can

ever connect with is the Here and Now.

When I talk about this with others, almost always the argument is brought up, “Well, does that mean we should do nothing then?”

It is an interesting dilemma, for even Muhammad asserts, “No defect canst thou

see in the creation of the God of Mercy: Repeat the gaze: Seest thou a single flaw?”

The fact is, change—as it relates to the world of phenomenal experience—is unavoidable. We couldn’t stop change from happening if we tried. Thus, it is only

“independent change”—change for the sake of change; the instigation of change

without cause—that Krishnamurti seems to denounce. This type of change happens

when we look at the world, and see it as faulty and in need of correction.

Dependent change, however, constitutes the very flow of life from moment to moment. Day changes into night, and night into day. Seasons change, the hours ???

change. Believers change, and everyone else too. This category of change

precedes

from a cause, the generation of which was not in itself a desire for change.

The key example is love. Where there is love, there cannot BUT be change, for the lover burns so ardently to do something, anything! to show his love. Change per se goes unnoticed by the lover, yet change flows constantly from his very being.

In fact, the power of love is a magnet for change, affecting all those he comes into

contact with. This is a dependent change, since it arises as the by-product of a

present reality, and not as an end in itself.

Perhaps spiritual action is similar: to act without intent to change, such that it

results in radical change. I find a connection here to the Chinese concept of “wuwei”

(non-doing), in which a person accomplishes things without the intention of doing

them. It connotes an effortless flow, a combining of “within” and “without” that

dissolves the barrier between self and non-self. There is only the All, the great flow;

only things which obey this flow have lasting effect. This mirrors the idea of Tao,

and the common use of water as a metaphor to explain it.??

Hence “action” is like a fruit of the lovers longing. But action itself is not the

focus or motive. Change is nowhere desired, yet everywhere achieved. It is the middle road between stillness and moving, a mode of being very tricky to discover—

and the quest of many a Japanese ko’an.??

I find this beautifully summarized in the following Zen poem Cheng-tao Ke, which appears in Alan Watt’s book, *The Way of Zen*:

Like the empty sky it has no boundaries,

Yet it is right in this place, ever profound and clear.

When you seek to know it, you cannot see it.

You cannot take hold of it,

But you cannot lose it.

In not being able to get it, you get it.

When you are silent, it speaks;

When you speak, it is silent.

The great gate is wide open to bestow alms,

And no crowd is blocking the way.

All necessary things are provided by God

I believe if we abandon all procedure, all expectation, all method, and simply focus

on purifying our heart from everything but God, He will grant us the assistance

we

seek. There are many quotations which appear to me related to this Theme:

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The true seeker hunteth naught but the object of his quest, and the lover hath no desire save union with his beloved. Nor shall the seeker reach his goal unless he sacrifice all things. That is, whatever he hath seen, and heard, and understood, all must he set at naught, that he may enter the realm of the spirit, which is the City of God.??

In this quote, I throw away all my past learning and experience. It is not necessary for seeking God.

The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit. This is evidenced by those who, today, though without a single letter of the accepted standards of learning, are occupying the loftiest seats of knowledge; and the garden of their hearts is adorned, through the showers of divine grace, with the roses of wisdom and the tulips of understanding.??

In this quote, he frees me from the need for knowledge or skill, and makes my progress wholly dependent on my purity, chastity and freedom. These are attributes which oppose acquisition! Purity is being free from obstruction, chastity is being free from lust or inordinate desire, and freedom is of course being free from restriction.

Fear God, and God will give you knowledge.??

Here I need only fear God. In Arabic the term is “Khashíyyatu’lláh”, which implies a reverential awe, such as a Knight of the Round Table would have had for King Arthur. The devotion of such a knight which cause him to prefer death before dishonoring or disobeying his Lord. In fact, the mere suggestion of deceit would feel like a physical sickness. This is different from “tarsídan”, which means fear as one might fear spiders or some threat.

Now is the traveler unaware of himself, and of aught besides himself. He seeth neither ignorance nor knowledge, neither doubt nor certitude; he knoweth not the morn of guidance from the night of error. He fleeth both from unbelief and faith, and deadly poison is a balm to him.??

?? Valley of Search

?? Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. ???

?? quoted in the second of the Four Valleys

?? Valley of Love

???

In this quote, questions of station, knowledge and attainment are simply not the seeker's focus. In fact, whatever draws one's attention away from God is not worthy of consideration. As He wrote:

They say: 'Where is Paradise, and where is Hell?' Say: 'The one is reunion with Me; the other thine own self, O thou who dost associate a partner with God and doubttest.'??

I interpret this to mean that our self, since it can become a focal point of attention, causes us to turn our eyes away from God, which is the essence of Hell. This is an interesting emphasis, since it means that self-perfection and self-development are not the goal of religion. They are means to an end. That end is reunion with God, which is being so completely absorbed in and by the Divine that there is nothing else. In order for this to happen, as was quoted above, there must be purity, fear of God, etc.—in other words, virtue. But this virtue is functional, not qualitative. We gain nothing if the result of such virtue is that we focus even more intently on our own progress.

So, we progress until we reach a point where we abandon all notion of progress, all hope (for ourselves) of attainment. When there is only the Beloved, and then:

O My Brother! A pure heart is as a mirror; cleanse it with the burnish of love and severance from all save God, that the true sun may shine within it and the eternal morning dawn. Then wilt thou clearly see the meaning of "Neither doth My earth nor My heaven contain Me, but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me." And thou wilt take up thy life in thine hand, and with infinite longing cast it before the new Beloved One.

Whensoever the light of Manifestation of the King of Oneness settleth upon the throne of the heart and soul, His shining becometh visible in every limb and member. At that time the mystery of the famed tradition gleameth out of the darkness: "A servant is drawn unto Me in prayer until I answer him; and when I have answered him, I become the ear wherewith he heareth. . . ." For thus the Master of the house hath

appeared within His home, and all the pillars of the dwelling are ashine with His light. And the action and effect of the light are from the Light-Giver; so it is that all move through Him and arise by His will. And this is that spring whereof the near ones drink, as it is said: “A fount whereof the near unto God shall drink. . .”??

?? Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. ???

?? Valley of Knowledge

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Further along this theme, He writes:

In this realm, to search after knowledge is irrelevant, for He hath said concerning the guidance of travelers on this plane, “Fear God, and God will instruct thee.” And again: “Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth.”??

In other words:

Muhammad is our first, Muhammad our last, Muhammad our all.??

The secret of life is to become like a moth, circling around the Best-Beloved of

all worlds, the Ancient Beauty. In that state, “they swim in the sea of the spirit, and

soar in the holy air of light. Then what life have words, on such a plane, that ‘first’

and ‘last’ or other than these be seen or mentioned!”?? From this state all knowledge

and all things proceed, as He wrote:

. . . for everyone who sets foot therein knows all branches of learning even before he becomes aware of their inner secrets. He comprehends all knowledge and wisdom by means of the mysteries of divinity deposited in the creation—for he reads in the leaf the secrets of the tree.??

So why should we worry ourselves over the details of attainment, when attainment itself grants all things? Therefore, the only question, the only worry, the only

point of focus worthy of attention, is God Himself as manifested in the Primal Point:

the Manifestations of God. There is absolutely nothing else to consider, or concern

oneself with, beyond this.

?? from the second of the Four Valleys

?? Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. ???

?? Valley of Unity

?? from “Gems of the Mysteries” (Javáhiru’l-Asrár), provisionally translation by Juan Cole

Thoughts on the Valley of Unity

Qualities of the wayfarer

It has been mentioned before that Bahá'u'lláh gives three qualities as the sole requisites for fathoming the depths of divine reality: “. . . purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit.”?

In addition, as a soul progresses, he acquires—or discovers—new qualities within

himself as he ascends through the veils that oppress our discovery of Truth.

I find evidence that a soul must embody four spiritual qualities before he can make his way through the Valley of Unity. All of these are to be found in the Short

Obligatory Prayer; they are: knowledge, devotion, powerlessness and poverty.

The

obligatory prayer reads:

I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth.

There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.

These qualities are certainly meant, not in a materialistic sense, but a spiritual

one. By knowledge is meant spiritual knowledge, or insight into divine mysteries;

by devotion is meant a whole-hearted praise not comprehended by words, but only signified by them; by poverty is meant spiritual poverty, independent of the possession or lack of material means; and by powerlessness, something other than the

absence of mortal sovereignty is meant.

Three out of these four qualities we have already encountered by the time we reach the shores of the Valley of Unity. That is, in the Valley of Search we learn

about the nature of poverty, of divesting ourselves of all things: love, hate, knowledge, “whatever he hath seen, and heard, and understood”: that we might prepare

ourselves to recognize the glory of God's Manifestation when we encounter Him.

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The state of mind resulting from such poverty is one of complete receptiveness, of extreme sensitivity to one's surroundings and to the evidences of truth or falsehood inherent in any statement. Modern parlance calls this “a learning mode”.

In the Valley of Love, we are taught the secrets of devotion, and the ways of a lover's hope and despair. And in the Valley of Knowledge, our most recent

field of

discovery, we are educated in the varied forms and mysteries of divine wisdom.

This

leaves but one quality unachieved, as found in the daily prayer: powerlessness.

If there really is a relationship here, between our daily acknowledgement and

the

course of the Valleys leading to Contentment and Wonderment, and from thence

to the supernal station of faná, it follows that powerlessness is a spiritual

quality we

will find indicated in the Valley of Unity.

Already, I have found a few intimations of this theme:

He seeth in himself neither name nor fame nor rank, but findeth his
own praise in praising God.

He beholdeth in his own name the name of God; to him, “all songs are
from the King,” and every melody from Him.

He sitteth on the throne of “Say, all is from God,” and taketh his rest
on the carpet of “There is no power or might but in God.”

For thus the Master of the house hath appeared within His home, and
all the pillars of the dwelling are ashine with His light. And the action
and effect of the light are from the Light-Giver; so it is that all move
through Him and arise by His will.

How can utter nothingness gallop its steed in the field of preexistence,
or a fleeting shadow reach to the everlasting sun? The Friend hath said,
“But for Thee, we had not known Thee,” and the Beloved hath said,
“nor attained Thy presence.”

O thou dear one! Impoverish thyself, that thou mayest enter the high
court of riches; and humble thy body, that thou mayest drink from the
river of glory, and attain to the full meaning of the poems whereof thou
hadst asked.

What sort of powerlessness is this? To address that question, we must inquire
into the nature of power, and why people seek it.

Power, in its most basic form, is that which allows us to assert our existence.

Being shorn of all power—and I mean all power—is something we ought to be
too

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frightened to contemplate for those accustomed to it. Imagine having no food
and

being unable to find any, with death the immediate result. Worse is the
frustration

of knowing that if only we had the means, we could prevail! I think people are
even

more afraid of powerlessness than they are of death, since to fail from lack of
power

is one the most deeply humiliating experiences of life.

As “humiliation” is close to humility in its verbal origins, which in turn reflects on our desire to become spiritually humble, perhaps this degradation resulting

from insufficient power—or rather the deep awareness of our powerlessness—is not

something to be feared, but an aspect of spiritual growth. In one of His prayers,

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Behold me, then, O my God, fallen prostrate upon the dust before Thee, confessing my powerlessness and Thine omnipotence, my poverty and Thy wealth, mine evanescence and Thine eternity, mine utter abasement and Thine infinite glory.?

Even deeper in this vein His states:

He, indeed, is endued with understanding who acknowledgeth his powerlessness and confesseth his sinfulness, for should any created thing lay claim to any existence, when confronted with the infinite wonders of Thy Revelation, so blasphemous a pretension would be more heinous than any other crime in all the domains of Thine invention and creation. Who is there, O my Lord, that, when Thou revealest the first glimmerings of the signs of Thy transcendent sovereignty and might, hath the power to claim for himself any existence whatever? Existence itself is as nothing when brought face to face with the mighty and manifold wonders of Thine incomparable Self.?

We are presented here with our sheer powerlessness to assert our own existence. How can we reconcile our horror at such a fact with its inherent truth? I feel the

resolution of this dilemma lies in the Valley of Unity.

Unity in its essence implies an abolishment of “here” and “there”, “then” and

“now”, “I” and “He”. To accomplish this, even the veils of love must be burnt and

cast away. At the end of the Valley of Knowledge He quotes:

Love is a veil betwixt the lover and the loved one;

More than this I am not permitted to tell.

Unity requires that we forgo insisting on any distinct, any separate awareness from God. So also this directly indicates a state of utter powerlessness, since

all

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power thus resides in God. As long we bear any claim to power, or any wish to acquire it, we create the very separation that bars us from realizing this essential

spiritual union.

I encourage all to meditate upon your own relation to power, whether manifested as a desire for control, or to achieve, or for the goodwill of others, or by any

other means. Then, meditate on what life would feel like without this power, and

without any future hope of it. If this results in a deep, despairing loneliness, a sense

of shocking futility at the prospect of continuing, please delve into the nature of

this emptiness, and why it might exist. If you have a different reaction, I would be

interested to hear it, and what you understand from it.

In closing, consider the following prayers for meditation, which relate poignantly

to the theme of powerlessness:

Inspire them, O my Lord, with a sense of their own powerlessness before Him Who is the Manifestation of Thy Self, and teach them to recognize the poverty of their own nature in the face of the manifold tokens of Thy self-sufficiency and riches, that they may gather together round Thy Cause, and cling to the hem of Thy mercy, and cleave to the cord of the good-pleasure of Thy will.?

Glorified, immeasurably glorified art Thou, my Best-Beloved! Inasmuch as Thou hast ordained that the utmost limit to which they who lift their hearts to Thee can rise is the confession of their powerlessness to enter the realms of Thy holy and transcendent unity, and that the highest station which they who aspire to know Thee can reach is the acknowledgment of their impotence to attain the retreats of Thy sublime knowledge I, therefore, beseech Thee, by this very powerlessness which is beloved of Thee, and which Thou hast decreed as the goal of them that have reached and attained Thy court, and by the splendors of Thy countenance that have encompassed all things, and by the energies of Thy Will whereby the entire creation hath been generated, not to deprive them that have set their hopes in Thee of the wonders of Thy mercy, nor to withhold from such as have sought Thee the treasures of Thy grace. Ignite, then, within their hearts the torch of Thy love, that its flame may consume all else except their wondrous remembrance of Thee, and that no trace may be left in those hearts except the gem-like evidences of Thy most holy sovereignty, so that from the land wherein they dwell no voice may be heard except the voice that extolleth Thy mercifulness and might, that on the earth on which they walk no light may shine except the light of Thy beauty, and that within every soul ???

naught may be discovered except the revelation of Thy countenance and the tokens of Thy glory, that haply Thy servants may show forth

only that which shall please Thee and shall conform wholly unto Thy most potent will.?

The elusive meaning of poverty
Bahá'u'lláh says in the seventh Valley:

Wherefore, if those who have come to the sea of His presence are found to possess none of the limited things of this perishable world, whether it be outer wealth or personal opinions, it mattereth not. For whatever the creatures have is limited by their own limits, and whatever the True One hath is sanctified therefrom; this utterance must be deeply pondered that its purport may be clear. “Verily the righteous shall drink of a winecup tempered at the camphor fountain.” If the interpretation of “camphor” become known, the true intention will be evident. This state is that poverty of which it is said, “Poverty is My glory.” And of inward and outward poverty there is many a stage and many a meaning which I have not thought pertinent to mention here; hence I have reserved these for another time, dependent on what God may desire and fate may seal.

As He states, poverty is a concept with many stages, and many shades of meaning. If we stop prematurely anywhere along our road, and give in to our conclusions,

I believe we will miss out on yet deeper meanings that could inspire us.

In fact, I see one element of poverty as exactly this shunning of conclusions, this

divesting ourselves of the belief that “we have found our answer”. Such possessions

never serve us, since God forever remains in the realm of the Unknown with respect

to our limited vision. And the Unknown is approached through poverty, not acquisition (i.e., emptying one’s cup to receive, not by filling it).

Krishnamurti, a modern

Indian philosopher, wrote:

Most of us are rich with the things of society. What society has created in us and what we have created in ourselves, are greed, envy, anger, hate, jealousy, anxiety—and with all these we are very rich. The various religions throughout the world have preached poverty. The monk assumes a robe, changes his name, shaves his head, enters a cell and takes a vow of poverty and chastity; in the East he has one loin cloth, one robe, one meal a day—and we all respect such poverty. But those men who have assumed the robe of poverty are still inwardly, psychologically, rich ???

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with the things of society because they are still seeking position and prestige; they belong to this order or that order, this religion or that religion; they still live in the divisions of a culture, a tradition. That is not poverty. Poverty is to be completely free of society, though one may

have a few more clothes, a few more meals—good God, who cares? But unfortunately in most people there is this urge for exhibitionism.

Poverty becomes a marvellously beautiful thing when the mind is free of society. One must become poor inwardly, for then there is no seeking, no asking, no desire, no—nothing! It is only this inward poverty that can see the truth of a life in which there is no conflict at all. Such a life is a benediction not to be found in any church or any temple.

In the commentary to the “Book of Five Rings” (a Japanese text by a master swordsman in the 1600s), something similar was said most poetically:

To posit “beauty” or “book” or “unicorn” or “chiliagon”? is to have your mind stop. To think of death when you are faced with your enemy is to have your mind stop. This is why the swordsman must remain detached from “worldly” thoughts. . . If you can rid yourself of the “stopping mind,” you will achieve Satori? , and experience the moment as if it were your own.

The mind that wants ownership is the “stopping mind”, whereas poverty implies a mind who is reintroduced to the entirety of life at every moment, reborn in every second. The present contains all realities— was it not created by God?—and even in the seed or the leaf there are written all the mysteries of the tree.

Poverty is a preparedness to receive whatever inspirations God may wish to send, and to be carried by the flow of each moment into the novelty of the next. The opposite of poverty is wishing to stand against this flow, to own it: even if only conceptually!:

to look around and see things from the standpoint of one who is other than they,
and thus capable of ownership (and power).

Even in the comments that have been made saying “we already have everything”,

I wonder about the existence of “we”. There is neither having nor not having, being

nor non-being; the Japanese call this state of dependent reality “ku”.

Unfortunately,

such simple words are too trite to mean much, so we must continue in our delightful, verbal dance.

So even as I write these words, I erase them from my heart. Like the monks from Laos who create sand-paintings to their best ability, only to throw them into the river

afterwards, our wish is to be filled in the moment with a deep love of God’s

reality,
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to let all these understandings course through us in an ever-intensifying
expression
of praise and gratitude.

It is like the lover bestowing a gift on his beloved: she sees nothing of the
gift,
only the fact of the giving; and thus they carry each other away in their ship
of arms
to a sea that refuses any name. . .

O my friend, look upon thyself: Hadst thou not become a father nor
begotten a son, neither wouldst thou have heard these sayings. Now
forget them all, that thou mayest learn from the Master of Love in the
schoolhouse of oneness, and return unto God, and forsake the inner
land of unreality for thy true station, and dwell within the shadow of
the tree of knowledge.?

The Way of Love

Humanity stands in dire need of a mystical approach: the way of love.
The universal crisis affecting mankind is. . . essentially spiritual in its
causes. The spirit of the age, taken on the whole, is irreligious. Man's
outlook on life is too crude and materialistic to enable him to elevate
himself into the higher realms of the spirit.?

These days we are caught in a crisis of how to relate to the present. During
such
a time of upheaval and change, and faced by a world filled with imperfection,
we
find ourselves challenged to respond.

I believe this challenge lies at the heart of the "mental tests" foretold
by 'Abdu'l-

Bahá. Beholding such a present, our spirit's resolve is tested in how we
react. Which
is the right way?

Given an imperfect world, and a knowledge and understanding of the perfections
promised, there appear to be two possible reactions:

The first is to strive to rise above that world, objectively analyze it, assess
its
needs, and begin instructing it how not to be what it is, since what it is is
imperfect.

The second is to descend into that community, see it from within as an
intimate,
share its pain, assess its needs, and offer the message of how to love itself
as it is, since
the appearance of such love is the real objective.

Love cannot appear if it wait for a better day; it cannot outshine the
enshrouding

lantern if the bearer be unwilling to open it. In order for love to become the order of the day, it must begin today, with things as they are today—by loving the reality of today.

What is love? We have heard that love is unconditional and all-accepting. Love loves the one who does not love. If others seek to harm us, they do so for reasons of their own: the night is cold and chill, and some grow jealous of the fading embers of their dying hope. Only love can unveil the Sun, and put away all need for earthly fires.

If the world is ravaged by dispute, in the hands of people governed by ancient modes of thinking, there is only one solution: Love both as if such love were the

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only reason to exist. It is amazing what effect such love has on the human heart;

because beneath all superficial coverings, we are God's children.

No matter how depressing the scene around us—which indicates the state of a dying world—it does not alter this spiritual imperative. If joy is lacking in the

world, and we become aware of this lack, the mandate is to expend one's soul in

bringing this joy back to humanity, by reflecting the divine grace from the mirrors

of our hearts.

So if there is sadness in the world around us, we are being summoned as its lover and champion. Those who care, who recognize what's at stake, are in the best

position to succeed. But if we also succumb to complaint, how will succor reach the

dark places? God's religion must work through individual hearts.

Thus, a loving community begins when people in that community love each other. For this to happen, we must love without reference to each other's state. If

the situation must wait for our satisfaction, this is not love. Love does not wait for

you to come to me. God put us on this earth so our souls could learn love, and for that to happen we need a proving grounds. If everything were perfect, our soul

would be deprived of its training.

True love appears when the Holy Spirit makes its home in the human heart.

“Show love to all; ‘Love is the breath of the Holy Spirit in the heart of Man’. Take courage! God never forsakes His children who strive and work and pray! Let your hearts be filled with the strenuous desire that tranquillity and harmony may encircle all this warring world. So will success crown your efforts, and with the universal brotherhood will come the Kingdom of God in peace and goodwill.”? Loving all humanity—the pugilant and peaceful alike—requires seeing that all are God’s children, and He loves them equally. If He loves them, how can we not? This kind of love is the teaching of the Manifestations of God: “It is the warmth that these Luminaries of God generate, and the undying fires they kindle, which cause the light of the love of God to burn fiercely in the heart of humanity.”? Avoiding all judgment, criticism, and dwelling on the faults of others: this is love’s challenge. Nor does love wait for anything or for any day; it can exist between souls independently of material conditions. There is only ourselves, God, and God’s children. If the heart is filled with love towards them—as God loves them—we will find ourselves inspired by whatever is needed. Let the soul be satisfied by God. If it is freed from seeking satisfaction in others, there will be little cause for resentment—and events will start to mysteriously conspire toward the goal. And there is another wonderful side to the reality of love: The qualities of love described so far—of passionately embracing the world regardless of its faults—must also be applied to one’s self! After all, we are His beloved children also. It does not matter if one is imperfect, or filled to the brim with difficulties and shortcomings. To love, this means nothing. We have been given these imperfections ??? to demonstrate our love for God by striving to overcome them. Having or not having them is unrelated to love—whether from others in the community, from God. . . or from ourselves. Loving one’s self in such a complete way is the easiest path to loving others, for it is difficult to treat others with graciousness and magnanimity if we are harsh to

ourselves. Some may fear that loving and accepting one's self will cause spiritual progress to slow, but since the appearance of love is the purpose of God's Faith, then to really love is the meaning of progress. Where there is love and faith, the smaller details take care of themselves; we are inspired and assisted to find the right course.

It is exactly like the mother and her difficult child: if the mother showers that child with love, in most cases it will benefit the child and assist his growth, rather than ever cause him to worsen.

The last piece of this wonderful puzzle is that when we manifest such love, we allow ourselves to believe—from the depths of our heart—that God loves us also,

in much the same way. “Thou art more friend to me than I am to myself.”? Does

He examine our faults, or pay attention to our shortcomings? This is not the nature of love. No matter what has happened, or how much one has fallen on his face, it

is the Parent's wish to pick us up and shower us with warmth and solace—never to scold us as we lie there, stricken with sorrow.

Consider how Bahá'u'lláh responded to Mírzá Yahyá, who had poisoned a Manifestation of God, produced a counter-claim to be the True One, whom Bahá'u'lláh

Himself had reared from childhood, and yet who tried to damage Him and the Bahá'í community.

Which one of us, by trying, could cause so much harm? Yet how does Bahá'u'lláh

address Mírzá Yahyá? In the Most Holy Book He says, “Turn unto Him, and fear

not because of thy deeds.”? If this is not of the nature of love, and of the God Whom

we adore, what other proof is there?

When such a love burns like a fire “in the midmost heart of creation”, all are warmed. The problems of the world are due to its fierce winter, its rampant irreligion—meaning, the lack of true religious sentiment. This cannot be solved by

bringing more logs to the firepit, or arranging the logs, or seating people correctly.

Without the fire burning, no one will understand the meaning of the logs, or of the seating.

But once the least bit of kindling has started, souls will catch on. Suddenly

the
perspective is right, and everything we have worked so hard to accomplish will
begin
naturally, collaboratively to appear. Without asking, others will bring more
logs, seat
themselves correctly, and perfect their hand warming techniques. . .
So with ourselves. We needn't move an inch from our present state of
development to receive this love. Like the wind, the sun, and the rain, it
comes to high and
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low alike. Once we open ourselves to it, God may inspire us, assist us, and
guide us
in whatever direction is necessary.
With eyes directed toward God, assured of His love, forgetting our own selves,
we may at last respond "Yea, verily!" such that it resounds in every heart.
And the
form such a response must take is that undying love for humanity of which
'Abdu'l-
Bahá spoke when He said: "Put into practice the Teaching of
Bahá'u'lláh, that of
kindness to all nations. Do not be content with showing friendship in words
alone,
let your heart burn with loving kindness for all who may cross your path."?
What hell might be

Imagine that our lives were like that of a foundling bird in its nest. Newly
born, he
sees around him only a tall, thatched wall of brown and a blue sky above. He
shares
his nest with several other little birds who are just like him. And every once
in a
while a much Greater, Grander Bird (and also exceptionally kind, for She is
their
mother) comes along to bring them all food and keep them warm.
Imagine further that one of these birds (a brother to the one whom we're
imagining) has fallen in love with the idea of feathers. Every day, he picks up
the fallen
tufts from the bottom of the nest and stores them away in a little corner of
the nest.
Over time, however, he is not content merely with collecting the discarded
bits.
He wants clean, shiny feathers, like those found on the wings of his brothers
and
sisters. So he makes them an offer. To our little bird he offers all the
wonders that
he's found in the nest—bits of wood and flowers, maybe a tiny crystal of

quartz—

and in return, baby bird must allow him to pull off his wings, so that his brother

can own all of those shiny feathers for himself.

Now our little bird has a choice to make. In his mind, of what value are his wings, anyway? He cannot do anything with them; they only get in his way from time to time. In fact, they do not appear to have any use whatsoever, relative to his

life in the nest.

On the other hand, brother bird has offered him real, concrete things; things which are pretty and might be valuable. It doesn't seem like a very hard question

to answer: trading something pointless and cumbersome, for the interesting objects

offered by his brother.

So baby bird cuts the deal. And because his wings are so fragile, and so tiny, removing them is not even painful. He definitely thinks that he is a winner in the

bargain—and his brother is happy too. Everyone seems to have come out well.

So the weeks go by. Baby bird is the envy of the nest because of all of the wonderful things he has. And perhaps, because he is a nice bird, he is even generous

with them, distributing his wealth among the nest. Indeed, he is a most popular and

regarded bird, seemingly in possession of all that an aspiring youngster could want.

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Until that fateful day comes, as it always must. The nest is not big enough for everyone now; it is time to leave. With great sorrow and travail, each one of

his brothers and sisters is helped up to the edge of the nest by the Great Bird, and

disappears. One cannot see where they go, but one by one the nest is emptied.

Soon it is baby bird's turn. He approaches the rim with great pride and satisfaction. After all, whatever it is, it must be full of opportunities for him! Hasn't he

lived his life well? Hasn't he taken full advantage of whatever was available to him?

He walks toward the edge and is very nervous—although delighted— with anticipation. The Great Bird helps him to the rim of the nest, and finally he discovers

what each bird before him has already seen: the Great Beyond.

Imagine that you are that bird, and have just now placed one foot into a world far different from any you had ever imagined. Picture the wide expanse of blue

that
must have seemed endless; or the exciting world of terra firma, so varied in
hue and
color, not at all like the brown, drab domain you had just come from.
Yet, imagine also the inconceivable, indescribable sadness that must have
worked
its way slowly into the mind of our little bird: the mental weight of
realizing, after
it was too late, exactly the mistake he had made on that miserable day, when he
had
sold something, apparently meaningless, for something else which had appeared
valuable; imagine how his perception of the world was now suddenly reversed:
what
had seemed large was now small, what had seemed useless was now full of
utility,
and what had seemed attractive was now deserving only of contempt.
The state of consciousness into which our bird must resign himself— for he
will
never be able to fly without wings—perhaps this we would call hell: to
realize fully
what one had lost, and that such loss was the result of one’s own conscious
decisions.
And yet, even as no story in this world seems truly to be final— since
everything
is contingent on the Mercy of our Father—the following words of
Bahá’u’lláh come
to mind:

I am the Royal Falcon on the arm of the Almighty. I unfold the drooping wings
of every broken bird and start it on its flight.?

What is logic?

Logic is a sure way of finding the relationship between a set of statements.
For example, if I know that my cat is fuzzy, and fuzzy cats always shed, then I
also “know” that my cat will shed. This may seem obvious, but only because
the

example is simple.

Put another way, the sentence “my cat will shed” is implicit, given the
first two
sentences “my cat is fuzzy” and “fuzzy cats always shed”.

In a way, it’s hidden there; it’s between the lines; it’s really there,
you just can’t
see it yet.

Logic is a light, that can shine into the darkness between statements. It can
root

out hidden conclusions with perfect accuracy, because that’s what it does.

Assuming

your initial sentences make sense, logic will find any hidden sentences that

also

make sense.

How can this be? It works because logic relies on the special meaning of words like “always”, “sometimes” and “never”. These words—when spoken accurately—

contain very potent pieces of information.

For example, if I say that I sometimes eat ice cream, you automatically know two things for certain:

?. I have eaten ice cream before.

?. I am not always engaged in eating ice cream. What you don't know, is that:

?. I will eat ice cream again.

?. I also eat other things besides ice cream.

For many people, the statement “I sometimes eat ice cream” implies ?,

?, ? and

?. But logic is very precise, and this precision is what allows it work. In logic, you

only know that my statement means ? and ?—not ? and ?—because of the rigid

definition of the word “sometimes”.

There are many special words and phrases (such as: always, never, at least once,

sometimes, etc.), and different ways of building connections between them. Some

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are connections between if/then statements, and others look are derivations like the

example of my cat being fuzzy.

Anyway, learning logic is basically a process of:

Learning what certain key words really mean.

For example, if I say, “All the women I've ever killed loved me very much”: I'm not

actually admitting anything. Because the number of women I've killed is zero, so

whatever I say about them is not false, because there is no counter-example. We say

the set is “empty”.

Learning what correlations imply what.

If I say “all A is B” and “all B is C”, logic defines the result to be “all A is C”. This is

sylogistic logic, of the “Barbara” form (you're bound to run into that soon).

Learning how to evaluate an argument's validity.

What if I'd ended my example above by saying, "All A is D". How do you know it's NOT true? The test of a correctly executed piece of logic is something to be learned.

"Invalid" results, which are made to look "cogent", but are really "specious", are what we call "fallacies".

Learning how to evaluate an argument's worth.

A valid argument simply means the terms fit into place as they should. But do the

terms themselves make sense? No one can dispute that my cat is fuzzy, but what if

I were using logic with statements far more vague? How can I tell how much more vagueness has crept into my results?

Learning other types of associations.

In the statement, "If I go to the store, I will buy candy", there is a piece of evidence,

which you can link to other statements, such as, "If I buy candy, I will eat it". You

now have the ingredients necessary to derive a valid logical conclusion: "If I go to

the store, it will result in my eating candy."

And so on. Logic also gets into proofs (formal presentations of your logical derivations), using logic to manipulate symbolic terms, etc.

You will also find that logic is very close to mathematics, and in fact, there is a

stage at which some mathematical symbols are even used. Math doesn't deal with

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ideas such as "if/then", but computer programming sure does. Logic is a fundamental tool for discerning unstated information from raw data. At this, it excels, and is

one of the foundations of human knowledge.

There are many things it cannot do, however, as you've likely seen on this newsgroup. While it can derive conclusions from valid input, it cannot be used to prove

the validity of that input. This would be like "asserting" that what you say is true

because you say it. Logic can be applied in circular situations, where it likewise fails.

It cannot derive meaning from meaningless statements. As a tool, it's a wonderful

thing, but it's scope is limited. It has tremendous breadth of application in human

life, but can go no deeper than its wielder's eye.

This is my own poor summary of logic, from someone who finished only the first course. Most of what I understand today is derived from other understandings

(pun fully intended). I hope it offers you something.

What is philosophy?

This is an opinion of mine which is perhaps not shared by many, but comes from my own view of what philosophy means, and why it's important.

A system of thought which seeks to propound a set view of things is not "philosophy" (the inspecific noun). It is a product of philosophy, or "a philosophy" (the

specific, yet indefinite noun). Since these two uses of the word sound very close,

there is often confusion.

Philosophy is that love of wisdom which propels one to escape ignorance in pursuit of the Truth. It also includes the means by which we verify the products

of that search. That is, are we headed down a blind alley? There are certain tools

to help answer such questions, but they are not useful if enmired in ambition and

emotion. It is an exceedingly difficult path to tread.

The fruits of philosophy are related to it in the same way a building is related to

architecture. The individual architect is always striving for a perfect design, and each

building he creates is a step along that path. But if he wraps himself up in the building itself, and declares to everyone that, "This is the ultimate goal of architecture",

we rightly should look at him with eyes askance, to hide our embarrassment.

Truth is inclusive enough that we cannot properly discuss it. This lesson came from Plato. So we examine our experiences, and question the validity of what we currently know, and how long we should employ it before moving on. There is always movement toward the more perfect, the more encompassing. To one extent, this unifies with the quest of the mystics, who seek absorption in the absolute. They

say that our most divine attainment initially is a perfect understanding of our own

ignorance. Once that is achieved, we become the perfect student, while the world

around us is a perfect teacher, because in its reality, it truly "is".

Plato called this,

"learning to see things-as-they-are."

But how does one become a student, so as to learn from experience? Does this transformation occur randomly, with no prior consideration? Surely if truth were so

commonplace as to contain us all, at every moment, no one would seek any answer

to these questions.

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It then stands to reason that our ignorance is deep enough that we are ignorant even of this fact. Hence philosophy, for it is a discipline that invites only those whose love of wisdom exceeds their love of self. In fact, it implies a devastating abandonment of that cursed companion, and an entry into regions both frightening and utterly unpredictable. It is our love that conquers our fear, and emboldens us to charge headlong onto the spear of that most implacable enemy: our illusion that we already possess the Truth.

Anyone who stops along the way, to turn around and descant upon the “realities” of things, does so, I believe, for one of two reasons: Either they are impatient of the goal and want it now; or else, during the course of their search, they witness the extreme travail of their fellow man, and seek to offer some tidbit of what they’ve found.

Unfortunately, these ideas are always only half-formed (compared with the Ultimate we desire). Maybe the author even conveys this, or seeks to temper the zealotry of his compatriots. But humanity at large desperately and impatiently desires this goal, consciously or not, and will grasp hold of its traces with severe determinacy, intent on calling it master. Yet these errors should not be confused with the begetter of such a tragedy.

The human spirit/soul/mind/being (whatever) is capable of perceiving realities not evident. This is true even on a basic level, for look at how many people concern themselves over greenish paper with printed numerals! We exist in a world of symbols and portent. This is a decidedly human trait. It also reflects our potential to go further and deeper into this well of experience, therewith to broaden our definition of what “true” means.

I would say in this context that any “philosophy” is utterly rubbish in the absolute sense. I assume even the author of such a thing would agree, given ten more years to pursue their art (that is, if their intentions toward Sophia be pure).

Otherwise, it's just snake oil, a false panacea, with which they strive to convince others of their self-superiority. I judge harshly, because what fools we are to consider that the end is found! and the territory finally mapped! There are only six thousand years to our collective, conscious history, and we would plant our stake on the plane of the absolute?

Philosophy is, in a sense, "the self-effacing discipline", in that every discovery made should immediately be followed by a keen lookout for what comes next.

Plato

termed the philosopher as "one who already has one foot in the grave", since he

contemplates the mysteries of the soul (that part of us related to Truth) while yet possessing a body.

It is true that philosophy also includes techniques of discernment, and methods of analysis, which are quite rigorous and exact. They demand self-criticism, and a

constant review of motive and method. But alas the method, being something easily

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graspable, is often mistaken for the whole. There can be no spoken philosophy, just

as a love of anything is jejune, if that beloved be not present.

Ultimately, we each discover Sophia/Good/God/Truth on our own— definitely guided by the thoughts of others, certainly aided by discussion and debate—but

unless one feels that reality touching upon his most inward essence, all that he has

gained is a craftily worded hope.

— Collected Essays (Used by permission of the curator)