

Dimensions in Spirituality

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Introduction

Today I would like to present a few thoughts on what spirituality, which surely lies at the heart of religion, might mean in a Bahá'í perspective. I emphasize at the outset that there are many and diverse views of what Bahá'í spirituality might be, but I hope that what I propose deserves inclusion in the broad definition of Bahá'í spirituality. This topic will be treated under these heads: (1) The Attraction of Spirituality in Present Day Society (2) Spirituality and the Creation of Genuine Bahá'í Community (3) Spirituality, Wisdom and Prophetic Faith (4) Spirituality and the Value of Life Tests.

(1) The Attraction of Spirituality in Present Day Society: Empowerment, Authenticity and "Care of the Soul"

I have asked myself — and this is one of the reasons that I wrote *Dimensions in Spirituality* — what reasons might explain the current widespread interest in spirituality, which has become in contemporary society a virtual trend-setting fashion? At the outset, the detached scholar might explain the current interest in spirituality simply as one of the panoplies forming the umbrella of the diverse New Age Movement. As institutionalised religion fails, according to this explanation, cultic, psychic and metaphysical movements of all sorts thrive to satisfy the desperate masses. But this explanation still leaves our question unanswered — at least to my satisfaction. What are some of the other factors then?

First, I see something liberating in this search for spirituality, for it is a vote in favour of personal autonomy and empowerment. At its best, it is an affirmation of the individual's independent and personal search for the truth. In face of the waxing violence, corruption, injustice, increasing desperation, hopelessness and meaninglessness of contemporary society, a real hunger and thirst for genuine spirituality is making itself the object of serious investigation. Shoghi Effendi wrote these words about 50 years ago, words which still have a very contemporary ring:

The need is very great, everywhere in the world, in and outside the [Bahá'í] Faith, for a true spiritual awareness to pervade and motivate people's lives. No amount of administrative procedure or adherence to rules can take the place of this soul-characteristic, this spirituality which is the essence of man.^[1]

People are now seeking a spiritual experience that is characterised by that word once so valued by some existentialist writers and philosophers, particularly Martin Heidegger — authenticity. True

seekers desire to encounter a spiritual force that will touch their lives in a profound way, raise consciousness, redirect or purify morality and give life meaning. And they want to make this connection in their own way and on their own terms. Spirituality is, moreover, a search for the profoundly personal, for it is the personal domain which is capable more than any other of transforming our lives. The personal domain means that the universe, in Martin Buber's word, speaks to us as a "thou"^[2], as an intimate friend. Thus we find that the search for spirituality has gone hand in hand with the meeting of other thous — other human beings that are, in reality, only mirrors of oneself. Hence the development of grass roots movements of all sorts, the small-scale organisation, the institute, the house group, the prayer or study group, that assembly of souls who may congregate for a great variety of reasons to pursue their quest for spirituality.

The heightened interest in spirituality indicates, moreover, that thoughtful people are looking for that experience expressed in one of today's fashionable catch-words — *empowerment*. Spirituality is empowering precisely because it means that you are taking charge of your own spiritual and personal development, and not letting someone else do it for you. "...Look into all things with a searching eye"^[3] Bahá'u'lláh says, listen to and learn from all, but in the final analysis come to your own conclusions. In other words, be faithful to your own vision and understanding of yourself, the truth and the world.

Second, I see the search for spirituality as a revalorisation of the existence of the soul, that immortal divine essence in the human being, the divine spark that makes us essentially human. For spiritual talk is not only propositional theology, the intellectual knowledge of God. It is above all soul-talk, or in Thomas Moore's phrase "care of the soul."^[4]

I view this growing recognition of the emergence of the soul as the essentially human as such a positive move for at least three reasons. First, belief in the soul is a recognition of the divine essence or sacred reality within us that makes us, at the same time, both divine and human. Second, belief in the soul has tremendous implications for morality. For if the soul is what makes us essentially human, what — we must ask ourselves — is the life-style, the mores, the spiritual conduct that we must adopt in order to foster the development of the soul. For, if our actions and our deeds, can so profoundly affect the human soul, as Bahá'ís believe, then we must begin to ask ourselves, what are those deeds which I must choose above all to foster the care of the soul, and just as importantly, what are those actions that I must avoid in order not to imperil its sane development. In other words, what are the prominent features of a healthy and vital faith-state? Third, belief in the soul counteracts the current, growing wave of secular, scientific materialism, which aims to supplant God, faith and religion and would reduce all human phenomena and states of consciousness to Darwinian evolution, biological processes, smart genes and chemical reactions in the brain.

(2) Spirituality and the Creation of Genuine Bahá'í Community

However, I feel that there are certain cautions to be sounded in the spiritual quest. Spirituality can, I think, run the danger of becoming narcissistic. Now I am using the word narcissistic in its generally understood sense of self-absorption or preoccupation with one's needs rather than in its clinical or pathological sense. There is a danger in this search that the universe might become egocentric. We have to be cautious that **my** search, with the emphasis on my, my path to God, my understanding of things does not become our sole and unique preoccupation. Remember what Bahá'u'lláh says: "Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self".^[5] While inward-looking is a necessary and beneficial exercise in spiritual development, either as the daily examination of conscience recommended by Bahá'u'lláh,^[6] or in the practice of prayer and meditation, we have to

remember at the same time that we need to draw our vision up and away from our inward condition, a condition incidentally that carries its own risks and perils, and look outwardly to society, to the needs of our friends, to our worthwhile projects, to our professions and most of all to the execution of the plans and goals of this world-redeeming Faith.

For, if each one feels that he or she is alone in the universe and journeying on a solitary path on which we occasionally reach out to passers-by, what then becomes of *our* spirituality? Spirituality, as I understand it another of its dimensions, has a collective face. Bahá'í spirituality is not only individual spirituality, then. It is also community spirituality. This is not a theme I have pursued in *Dimensions in Spirituality*, although I have acknowledged its importance in the Introduction. But I want to pursue community spirituality briefly here and I invite others to think about such a meaningful question, to deepen on its possibilities and to explore it in scholarly writing.

Before addressing that question, however, let me now make some brief remarks about the drawbacks of the way spirituality is pursued at large today, for I think there is, at least in the Bahá'í view, a downside to the current interest in things spiritual. We sometimes hear our friends who are interested in spiritual things remark, "Well, the principles of the Bahá'í Faith are fine, but I do not believe in organised religion". Once again, we can view such remarks as an indictment of organised "religion", that loaded word which triggers such a negative reaction. We come then to this realisation, and it is a realisation that we must have in mind when we teach others the Bahá'í Faith. This Bahá'í Faith is an organised religion, a fact that all true seekers and Bahá'í teachers must squarely face.

What becomes significant, then, is not whether or not this religion is organised but precisely how it is organised. The Bahá'í Faith is after all a religion with community, collective goals, humanitarian, educational and developmental projects, with strong notions of morality, commitment and obedience to divine authority — and these are very scary concepts for many people today. In short, the Bahá'í Faith offers a vision of a world order to build. And we must never lose sight of that fact as we go on engaging in our spiritual battles. All of the plans and goals of the Faith must be pursued simultaneously and concurrently with our own individual strivings for spiritual transformation and indeed are intimately bound up with our service to the Cause, however humble or seemingly uninspiring at times such service may seem to be. Shoghi Effendi has made it quite clear that for declared believers it is only to the extent that they participate in the life of the community and the execution of the Divine Plan will they be assisted and blessed. He wrote, for example, this telling phrase which may hold interest for this topic: "If one seeks the confirmations of the Holy Spirit, they can find it in rich abundance in the Teaching Field...and if the Friends will arise with new determination, fully consecrated to the noble task ahead of them victory after victory will be won for the glorious Faith of God."^[7]

I would like to say now a word about the creation of genuine Bahá'í community. I want to examine this forging of a "real" Bahá'í community in the light of two little words: "intimacy" and "self-knowledge". Now as you know, the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is on the verge of some very exciting and extremely challenging developments. People are now entering and will be entering the Cause with all sorts of problems and afflictions inherent in the pathologies of present day society. We ourselves, as Shoghi Effendi has made clear, are not at all exempt from these problems. We know that we suffer from them in our own lives and that we are to some extent tainted with the same weaknesses that affect other human beings.

Consequently, it occurs to me that building true Bahá'í community means, in this new and challenging phase of the development of the Bahá'í Faith, being physicians, as `Abdu'l-Bahá said, to

all humanity^[8] which must also mean being physicians to one another. This does *not* mean merely, as I understand it, just sitting down and having an intellectual deepening with your Bahá'í friends on the writings or the goals of the current Plan, as important as these activities are for healthy community life. It does mean, I think, helping your friends find their way through their darkest trials and most difficult tests. This does not mean, however, putting the sacred writings aside. But it does mean listening to people very carefully. This careful listening engages us in a process of intimacy and self-knowledge which hopefully will lead us slowly to a fuller share of wisdom and detachment.

Now this is a risky business because it involves self-exposure and self-exposure means making yourself vulnerable, of letting those whom you trust or who are sharing your experience see you as you really are, and not just as a person who wears a mask of cordiality at a Nineteen Day Feast. Neither does building genuine Bahá'í community mean reminding one another to be a better Bahá'í by quoting the writings, by sounding self-righteous or by being idealistic. It means, as I understand it, relating to your friend in the place where he or she really is at the moment, listening to their pain and offering any sights that you have gleaned from your own experience to help that struggling soul along the way. And it seems to me that this kind of intimate, helpful and healing interpersonal relationship among Bahá'ís and their friends is going to necessitate new styles of communication, not just among the rank and file, but among those of our elected or appointed officials who represent the Bahá'í Faith. `Abdu'l-Bahá says, for example, in *The Will and Testament of `Abdu'l-Bahá*: “So intense must be the spirit of love and loving kindness, that the stranger may find himself a friend, the enemy a true brother, no difference whatsoever existing between them. For universality is of God and all limitations earthly.”^[9]

Now if this must be the state of love that exists between Bahá'ís and strangers, as `Abdu'l-Bahá exhorts, then we realize to what heights of intense love the Bahá'ís must manifest among themselves. This degree of intimacy and healing is surely implied in `Abdu'l-Bahá's definition of being a loving friend. In order to have real and genuine Bahá'í community, then, spirituality has to be oriented to the service and healing of other souls; that is, whatever gifts, powers, abilities or experiences we may have inherited or acquired as gifts or graces from God, these same gifts, powers, abilities or experiences have to become activated, not only in the legitimate quest for personal fulfilment, but at the same time be offered up to assist our friends and others in their self-understanding and to bring them hope and healing. Healing, I submit, is one of the greatest promoters of unity.

(3) Spirituality, Wisdom and Prophetic Faith

To be profound, insightful and enduring, in a word real, spirituality should be linked to a wisdom tradition. For me, this means a prophetic tradition or traditions and/or the wisdom of the sages, and I should add, the wisdom of the ages. The search for spirituality in present day society runs the risk of falling into the esoteric and the inconsequential, what Søren Kierkegaard called the aesthetic dimension of life; something that is mere ornamentation without real substance.

`Abdu'l-Bahá spoke of those forms of spirituality which may appear to be real but which in effect are only superficial:

Know, O thou possessors of insight, that true spirituality is like unto a lake of clear water which reflects the divine. Of such was the spirituality of Jesus Christ. There is another kind which is like a mirage, seeming to be spiritual when it is not. That which is truly spiritual

must light the path to God, and must result in deeds. We cannot believe the call to be spiritual when there is no result.^[10]

I dare say that `Abdu'l-Bahá's statement applies to many forms of the New Age movement. And while we may admire the geometric forms of crystals, their colours and even whatever healing powers they may possess, how profoundly can crystal power remedy the colossal problems that are facing humanity as humanity stands on the threshold of the third millennium? It seems to me that the powers of intellectual discrimination have to be brought to bear in the search for spirituality. And we find that these powers are best exercised when we keep in mind the teaching of the prophets. What stands out above all, and what works very much in favour of the efficacy of Bahá'í spirituality in relation to prophetic faith is the claim of Bahá'u'lláh that in His coming in 19th century Iran a new Manifestation or Messenger of God has appeared, one who rightly deserves the rank of a Founder of a new world religion, one who comes as the fulfilment of the prophets of the past.

Now, there are basically two ways in which one can identify with the Bahá'í Faith. We can approach the Bahá'í Faith on a cognitive level by relating to its principles or teachings. Through this more detached approach, we give intellectual assent or manifest conviction in the truths of the Bahá'í revelation. In other words, we believe that this body of teachings is efficient or salvific, that is capable of offering salvation to humanity. The second way is to develop a personal relationship with Bahá'u'lláh in the way that the evanescent longs for the eternal, or the needy one reaches out to the All-Possessing or the grateful child turns to receive the love and blessings of its father. Now these two methods — and there are others — are, of course, not mutually exclusive; I would hope that we are using both of them.

But I stress that spiritual transformation cannot be really effected through assent to an objective body of teachings. For we must ask ourselves — what is greater; the teachings or the source of the teachings? Transformation is best effected when the individual's spiritual passions are active and engaged and spiritual passion can be best activated by entering into a dynamic and loving relationship with such a celestial being as Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'u'lláh's coming in recent history has given a freshness, a power and an immediacy to a spirituality that is both inspirational and practicable, and suited to the modern temper of the times, a spirituality was concretely demonstrated in its every facet by `Abdu'l-Bahá as the Perfect Man of the Bahá'í dispensation. For whoever aspires to become more spiritual, must turn to those who have proven by the testimony of their own lives, by their knowledge, wisdom and saintly character that they have won the goal already and are more than capable of revealing the path to others; that they are masters of patience and fortitude, of compassion, long-suffering and love.

One of the things that strikes me as I read through some of the recent popular literature on spirituality, is the absence of two key words that have been vital to spiritual development for centuries. Those two words are God and Faith. I cite as an example Dr. Gerald Jampolsky's popular best-seller of a few years ago *Love is Letting Go Of Fear*. The title of this widely read volume is really a paraphrased echo of 1 John 4:18: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casteth out fear; because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." In the Apostle John's mind, the supreme love that overcomes fear is the love of God. In fact, the word God appears nowhere in the pages of Dr. Jampolsky's book, and it is fairly obvious what the writer's strategy has been. The author has purposely avoided the word God and substituted for it the word Love. In *Love is Letting Go of Fear*, the author's God is Love. Now normally this is a perfectly legitimate approach, except that in this case no relation is made between the two — Love and God. And if God is the source of

all love in the world as we believe, and if God is Love Himself, Herself, Itself, then why not say that God is love?

Now the purpose of this comment has not been to denigrate Jampolsky's book which judging by its sales has been meaningful and helpful to thousands, but simply to point out how categories which are intrinsically religious such as God and Faith are being ironically jettisoned in the name of spirituality because of what some view to be their loaded and negative associations. Another great gap in the spirituality question is a noticeable lack of the moral concern. There is much about meaning in the spiritual writing of today, but little of moral philosophy and guidance, even less direct talk about concrete moral issues, except by the religious right. The prophets, however, have always stood out as fearless guides, denouncing the abuses of a secular, godless age and summoning the people to live aright. Certainly, Bahá'u'lláh falls squarely within this tradition. And we imperil the state of our souls and the state of the world when we do not heed His counsel and the moral exhortations of the prophets.

Bahá'u'lláh says that not only is faith eternal but that such faith is also deeply connected with the eternal life of the believer: "Just as the conception of faith hath existed from the beginning that hath no beginning, and will endure till the end that hath no end, in like manner will the true believer eternally live and endure."^[11] Prophetic faith means, moreover, the belief that God is the creator and fashioner of the human soul, and that there is not only a collective destiny to humanity's history, that of its ultimate peace and unification, but also that there is a divine will and a special destiny for each individual soul, to be discovered in the Divine Plan by each aspiring one. Prophetic faith means that ultimately the destiny of the entire world is in God's hands and the fate of all its peoples. This reaffirmation of prophetic faith fits well Thomas Moore's description of "a spirituality of transcendence, the lofty quest for the highest vision, universal moral principles, and liberation from many limitations of human life".^[12] This is a succinct definition of Bahá'í spirituality.

(4) Spirituality and the Value of Life Tests

I would like to conclude this presentation with the question of the role of tests and difficulties in spiritual transformation. Personal tests and difficulties are a very pervasive feature on the human landscape. In the Bahá'í understanding, this is no accident, for tests and difficulties are the means, and in many instances, the chief means for spiritual growth. For they cause, when they are successfully managed or overcome, exponential growth. `Abdu'l-Bahá says: "Men who suffer not, attain no perfection. The plant most pruned by gardeners, is that one which, when the summer comes will have the most beautiful blossoms and most abundant fruit."^[13]

Bahá'í scripture suggests several meanings to situations of adversity. Making sense of them helps us not only to cope with, but more importantly to overcome the tests of life. Here are a few of the meanings of personal tests found in Bahá'í scripture:^[14]

- (1) Tests are an inescapable law of life.
- (2) Tests foster spiritual growth.
- (3) Tests and afflictions are evidences of God's loving care. This is a reflection of the conviction in a personal God.
- (4) We are confronted with tests in order to overcome some weakness or moral failure.

- (5) Tests are a punishment for sins.
- (6) Test distinguish the true believer from the false, the sincere from the insincere, the courageous from the coward, the loyal from the disloyal, and the weak from the strong. In other words, they reveal our true identity.
- (7) Tests foster detachment from the world.
- (8) Through tests, we become firm and steadfast.

The phrase "life test" as I am using it carries two meanings. First, it refers to a kind of test that in Maslow's phrase is an inverted "peak experience"^[15], an experience of being sorely tested and pushed to the emotional, intellectual or psychological limits. Second, it refers to an experience by which we stand to make great gain or loss. I consequently define the "life test" as: any severely adverse or painful condition that holds the potential for great spiritual gain or loss, or holds the promise of either moral maturity or ineptitude. The dynamics that apply to life tests apply also to any of life's less severe adversarial situations.

The first stage in the process of overcoming a test is the stage of acceptance. Acceptance, one has to bear in mind, is only one side of the coin. Rejection is the other. A test can be rendered null and void by a refusal to recognize the test. If we refuse to recognize that we are being testing, we engage in denial. In order to derive any spiritual benefit from a test, it must be accepted, and accepted in the right spirit of magnanimity. Although this attitude of acceptance is certainly difficult, since the personal test brings no small measure of psychic pain, it is the key means of overcoming the adversity and deriving the spiritual benefits of the test. `Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of this willingness to accept and endure tests in order to reap the benefits they have to offer: "Unless one accept suffering, undergo trials and endure vicissitudes, he will reap no reward, nor will he attain success and prosperity. Therefore, thou must likewise endure great tests so that the infinite divine outpourings may encircle thee...."^[16]

The value of acceptance has been recognized by psychiatrists as being of great therapeutic value for distressed souls. Psychotherapist M. Scott Peck, one of the contemporary healers of the psyche who practices a synthesis of psychotherapy and spirituality, advocates the virtue of acceptance when dealing with the tests of life: "Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult — once we truly understand and accept it — then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters."^[17]

When the believer is confronted with a life test, it is vitally important to invest the test with meaning. One must be able to determine the reason for the test, and just as importantly, discover what the response should be. This is no easy task, for often the key to overcoming the test is in posing the problem. The critical question becomes "What is really at issue here?" The script that we often write for ourselves or would like to write during a test is not the script that would bring us through to a successful resolution. So we have to engage in some serious reality therapy and ask ourselves what is really at issue.

This search for meaning is an important therapeutic measure in itself, for the rational measure of ascribing meaning to adversity will greatly assist in the acceptance and mastery of it. The logotherapy school of humanistic psychology has much to offer in the understanding and alleviation of suffering. Austrian psychotherapist Victor Frankl, who followed Freud and Adler with his "third school" of logotherapy (Gk. *logos*= meaning), applies the question of the search for meaning to the

alleviation of suffering. I caution, however, that we cannot totally rationalize the meaning of adversity. Adversity to a large extent must be endured in order to strengthen the soul.

Following the Islamic model, tests fall into two categories, either "pedagogy or punishment".^[18] The "pedagogical", which I call here a *Type 1* test, and the "punitive", called a *Type 2* test. For the *Type 1* test, `Abdu'l-Bahá follows the Islamic view of the visitation of evil as a trial which the believer must endure patiently since it is an evidence of God's wisdom or justice. *Type 1* tests are in some sense "to prove" the spiritual mettle of the believer. They would seem to follow as a consequence of belief in God, as expressed in the quranic phrase, `Think that ye can say, "I believe", and not be tested?'^[19] The *Type 2* test, however, does result from sins of commission or omission; a violation of a divine law, or the failure to observe in its integrity some spiritual virtue. The *Type 2* test, although it is retributive in nature, reflects the will of a just, wise and loving God, since correction is meted out as a means of returning the believer unto the right path through repentance for sins which `Abdu'l-Bahá has qualified as "the return from disobedience to obedience".^[20]

There is, however, no iron-clad division between the *Type 1* and the *Type 2* test. Certain tests can be subtle combinations of both. This is particularly true of interpersonal relationships. Whatever the nature of the test, however, or its origin, the result for the believer should be the same: "In both cases prayers and supplications should be offered at the sacred Threshold, so that thou mayest remain firm in tests, and patient in ordeals."^[21]

`Abdu'l-Bahá makes clear the repetitive process that must accompany a personal test that continues to go unrecognized.:

Tests are a means by which a soul is measured as to its own fitness and proven out by its own acts. God knows its fitness beforehand, and also its unpreparedness, but man, with an ego, would not believe himself unfit unless proof were given him. Consequently his susceptibility to evil is proven to him when he falls into the tests, and the tests are continued until the soul realizes its own unfitness, then remorse and regret tend to root out the weakness. The same test comes again in greater degree, until it is shown that a former weakness has become a strength, and the power to overcome evil has been established.^[22]

This seminal text of `Abdu'l-Bahá discloses a kind of pattern or process by which we fall into tests. The test is triggered by the "ego", "the subtle tempter", which can be understood as the inclination to follow self-dictated desires. This inclination to follow the desires of self betrays an ignorance of one's true nature which can only be revealed by following divine precept rather than the dictates of self. Our naivete and vulnerability are indicated by `Abdu'l-Bahá's phrase above "would not believe himself unfit unless proof were given him".

For certain decisive types of tests, there is a mysterious turning point or watershed at which the individual, to use the school analogy, either passes or fails; either finds the wherewithal to deal with the test, or does not. The tests experienced by the believers, `Abdu'l-Bahá has explained, are in direct proportion to the greatness of the Revelation.^[23] Bahá'ís can therefore be expected to be severely tested. Yet at the same time, they are promised an ample outpouring of God's protection and guidance. Shoghi Effendi has written of this passing or failing of tests in these terms:

No amount of organization can solve the inner problems or produce or prevent, as the case may be, victory or failure at a crucial moment. In such times as these, particularly, individuals are torn by great forces at large in the world, and we see some weak ones suddenly become miraculously strong, and strong ones fail.^[24]

Titanic tests often prove to be traumatic, but some of them are solved quickly. Other tests, however, lack this sudden, dramatic onset or resolution and may prove to be slow and lingering and in some cases persist for years, depending on the individual's ability to understand and overcome them. The promise, however, that tests can be decisively conquered is made clear elsewhere in the letters of Shoghi Effendi: "You will suddenly find that you have conquered many of the problems which upset you, and then you will wonder why they should have troubled you at all".^[25]

While the Bahá'í writings sometimes speak the military parlance of "victory" and "conquering tests", we should not overlook the fact that in the life of the test, the battle is sometimes won by inches. The process seems at times painfully slow, but through persistence and patience, the believer will soon discover a spiritual breakthrough, one that will more than make up for the ordeal that s/he has gone through. Although the process of working through adversity may seem slow, the results seem to grow exponentially:

In other words, every step forward is not a slow drudgery of climbing but involves a tremendous boost, a tremendous multiplication of energy, of capacity. The steps may not be easy to take, but the advantages gained after each one are so rich that they merit any amount of exertion on our part.^[26]

Although tests promote spiritual growth, it also has to be recognized that the test does not automatically ensure advancement. The test can also bring failure. Failure, however, also has to be recognized and accepted as part of the process of spiritual growth. It is important in this respect not to view failure as a decisive act, as a once and for all situation, for failure, if the individual resolves to face the weakness again with courage, can serve as the impetus for overcoming the test. It cannot be said that one has failed a test unless one consciously chooses, as a final solution, to trust the promptings of self instead of the promptings of God, unless one consciously chooses oneself as one is, rather than choosing to strive toward what one can become. Paradoxically, failure, with all its inherent dangers, may ultimately prove to be the next giant step on the path to spirituality. Repeated failures can indeed produce discouragement, but the Bahá'í teachings retain an optimistic outlook by drawing our attention to the fact that past mistakes, no matter how long they might have persisted, can ultimately further our spirituality:

We must always look ahead and seek to accomplish in the future what we may have failed to do in the past. Failures, tests, and trials, if we use them correctly, can become the means of purifying our spirits, strengthening our characters, and enable us to rise to greater heights of service.^[27]

Notes

^[1]. *Excerpts from the Writings of the Guardian on the Bahá'í Life*, p. 12.

^[2]. See Buber's *I and Thou* for his explanation of the thou.

^[3]. "The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye. Thus have We instructed thee, manifested unto thee Words of Wisdom, that thou mayest be thankful unto the Lord, thy God, and glory therein amidst all peoples. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 157)

^[4]. See Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul. A Guide for Cultivation Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life*. (Harper Collins, 1992)

- [5]. *Gleanings*, p. 94.
- [6]. "O SON OF BEING! Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds." (*Hidden Words*, n. 31, from the Arabic)
- [7]. *The Individual and Teaching*. Compilation from the Universal House of Justice.
- [8]. "Be ye physicians to the sick body of mankind."
- [9]. *The Will and Testament of `Abdu'l-Bahá*
- [10]. *`Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p. 107.
- [11]. *Gleanings*, p. 141.
- [12]. *Care of the Soul*, p. 240.
- [13]. *The Divine Art of Living*, p. 86.
- [14]. The following summary of the meaning of tests has been gleaned from "Tests" in *Star of the West*, vol. 8, nos. 18 and 19, February and March, 1918.
- [15]. For discussion of the peak experience see A. H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences*. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1978). Basically, Maslow's peak experience refers to an altered state of consciousness, fleeting but totally spontaneous "moments of highest happiness and fulfillment" and "harmonious oneness" with the universe in which the individual loses self-consciousness and ceases to be concerned by the events of the past or the future. It is a vital experience of focusing on and living in the now when all things flow with ease.
- [16]. `Abdu'l-Bahá. *Star of the West*, vol. 8, no. 19, p. 240.
- [17]. *The Road Less Travelled*, p. 15.
- [18]. From Alan L. Berger, *ibid*. Berger writes: "...in Western monotheistic religions suffering tends to be viewed as a form of pedagogy or punishment." (p. 190)
- [19]. Quran 29:2.
- [20]. *Some Answered Questions*, p. 91. (1981)
- [21]. *The Divine Art of Living*, p. 85.
- [22]. *Star of the West*, vol. 6, no. 6, p. 43. [date]
- [23]. "They [tests] are according to the greatness of the Cause, just as the size of a wave is according to the sea upon which it rises." (Julia M. Grundy, *Ten Days in the Light of Akká*, p. 60)
- [24]. *The Bahá'í Life*, p. 10.
- [25]. *The Bahá'í Life*, p. 20.
- [26]. Ruhíyyih Rabbání, *Prescription For Living*, p. 43.
- [27]. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life*, p. 38.