

Creating Environments that Enhance Spirituality *by Dawn Staudt*

Abstract

This paper sets out to explain that all of the teachings, laws and ordinances of the Bahá'í Faith are there to advance both the individual and society spiritually. Its purpose is to highlight three areas that particularly lend themselves to creating the environment for individual spiritual development: the use of personal prayer, the use of the arts (with a description of Tranquillity Zones) and the use of encouragement (focusing on the Virtues Project).

Introduction

Since it is obvious that spiritual development of the individual is what the Bahá'í Faith is fundamentally about, it seems fair to say that it could likely be that the conditions that encourage one person to develop along the path of spirituality could well apply to others. In fact, the Writings confirm this view. It is this outlook that has inspired this author to attempt to share and support the view that certain factors can indeed lend to this all-important goal of individual spiritual development.

The most fundamental principle of this spiritualization process is to obey the basic tenants of the Faith. Obviously, the more one is able to be firm in the Covenant – that is, obey all the laws and ordinances of Bahá'u'lláh – the more one will progress. It is not within the scope of this brief work to go into details of this vast ocean of requirements and possibilities. The assumption is made that the reader is well aware of the many basic concepts involved, namely: twice daily reading of the Word of God, daily reciting of one of the three Obligatory Prayers, observing the ordinances of the Bahá'í calendar, i.e. the Fast, Feasts and Holy Days. Obedience to all Bahá'í laws and to the Bahá'í institutions, as well as observation of the teachings on consultation, are but a few of the many other specific ways that one can internalise the teachings of the Faith and become a more spiritual person – that is, draw closer to God.

There are three specific areas this paper will address regarding ways to create or to enhance an environment for spiritual development. These will include: the use of personal prayer, the use of the arts, and the use of encouragement.

The Use of Personal Prayer

The Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá tell us many things about prayer:

There is nothing sweeter in the world of existence than prayer. Man must live in a state of prayer. The most blessed condition is the condition of prayer and supplication. Prayer is conversation with God ... It creates spirituality, creates mindfulness and celestial feelings, begets new attractions of the Kingdom and engenders the susceptibilities of the higher intelligence.¹

This one quote alone says so many profoundly spiritual things: 'nothing sweeter in the world of existence.' It was this quote that recently made this author wish to try harder to *feel* that connection with God when praying when, in fact, 'conversing with' Him. Surely, if this is considered 'the most blessed condition' and if we are specifically told 'it creates spirituality,' this must be something that we can strive to do for ourselves more and more seriously, more and more steadfastly. Bahá'u'lláh tells us this exactly and very clearly when He says:

At the dawn of every day he should commune with God, and, *with all his soul, persevere in the quest of his Beloved* (author's emphasis).²

This shows that daily prayers – whether the Obligatory Prayer or other personal prayers – should not consist of 'casual' conversation with God. 'Communing' with God and 'the quest' of our Beloved do not imply a simple 'chat' with God, merely reciting the words of prayers, merely running through our list of requests and our few words of thanks. 'Communing' implies, rather, a deep connection of our heart and soul to our Lord. It implies a real *desire* to make that connection. Bahá'u'lláh refers to this longing with a promise of reward: 'whenever thou shalt long for Me, thou shalt find Me close to thee.'³ Is this not the object of our lives – to be close to God? It seems so simple, but too often we don't seem to find it so.

As this quotation shows, communing is a condition of our heart, a yearning, a true longing. It is simply, yet so profoundly,

the love in our hearts for our Creator and for Bahá'u'lláh, His Manifestation for this age. Of course, God knows what's in our hearts, so it doesn't necessarily have to be put into words. We do, however, have to create the feeling or awareness of that longing. It would seem that the phrases above, 'communing with God' and 'with all his soul,' do not imply a mere intellectual knowing that we love God and trusting that He knows that we know. Love is, again, a matter of the heart and soul.

The Báb tells us that it is indeed the condition of our hearts that matters most when we pray. He writes: 'The most acceptable prayer is the one offered with the utmost spirituality and radiance ... The more detached and the purer the prayer, the more acceptable is it in the presence of God.' The word 'radiance' seems to imply joy and brilliancy. If this radiance is truly with us when we pray, surely we will feel the result of this communing, this conversation with God. It is as we are told in the Hidden Word: 'Love Me that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee. Know this, O servant!'⁴ We know God created us because He loves us, but this aphorism tells us that if we don't love Him, His love cannot reach us. Prayer, then, is one of the ways we show our love for God.

It seems that when we are aware of this radiance and this love when we pray, it is then that 'It creates spirituality, creates mindfulness and celestial feelings, begets new attractions of the Kingdom,' as stated above. It seems that these qualities of spirituality, mindfulness and new attractions is what will go out with us from our prayers for the rest of the day. Is this not what makes us 'spiritually attractive' to others, what will make us the 'magnets' of the hearts of men? Is this not what it means in that same first quote above when it is stated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: 'Man must live in a state of prayer?'

Perhaps these are not new insights to the reader on prayer. One can say that one is already well aware of these quotations and the fine implications they make. So why is it so difficult to cultivate this attitude of prayer on a regular basis? Shoghi Effendi tells us:

It is often difficult for us to do things because they are so very different from what we are used to, not because the thing itself is particularly difficult ... Bahá'u'lláh would not

give us these things if they would not greatly benefit us ... we must accept to obey these ordinances even though at first we may not see any need for them. As we obey them we will gradually come to see in ourselves the benefits they confer.⁵

This is precisely what this author is proposing: that we do not, in fact, follow the advice given closely enough. The Guardian refers to it as 'obedience' and that really goes back to the introductory comments relating to firmness in the Covenant, which is a far greater topic than this paper will endeavour to cover. Instead, I will examine this in another light with details of practical assistance that can aid us toward this with this gradual obedience.

There are several examples of details which we might try to improve. One is the timing of our personal prayers. In addition to the specific time required for the Obligatory Prayers, we are specifically enjoined to pray 'at the dawn of every day', as indicated in the quotation above, while in another quote we are told 'at times, such as midnight, when freed from daily cares.'⁶

'When freed from daily cares ...' This denotes that by following this advice of either of these two certain times of the day, our minds will be less occupied with other thoughts and concerns. It makes sense that this will thus make it easier for us to concentrate and give our full attention to this communing with our Lord. This last quotation, as well as the one following, refers to another important point in creating this environment for spiritual development through prayer, namely, offering our prayers in private:

The reason why privacy hath been enjoined in moments of devotion is this, that thou mayest give thy best attention to the remembrance of God, that thy heart may at all times be animated with His spirit, and not be shut out as by a veil from thy Best Beloved.⁷

This, of course, does not mean praying with one's children playing in the same room or with one's spouse reading a book there. How can we possibly get into this special frame of mind described above as 'communings' with God and this longing in our heart with someone else present who is not in the least in that same

condition? (Of course, praying in a larger gathering of Bahá'ís is a different matter.)

Cleanliness is another condition we are told in the Writings that affects our spirituality and should be considered when approaching prayer:

Wings that are besmirched with mire can never soar.⁸

When man in all conditions is pure and immaculate, he will become the centre of the reflection of the manifest light ... The channel must be cleansed before it is filled with sweet water ... External cleanliness, although it is but a physical thing, has a great influence upon spirituality.⁹

The point is this: the Divine Physician not only tells us what the remedy is, He also tells us how to apply that remedy. The details of the 'how to' pray are actually what create the proper 'environment' for prayer. The more closely we can try to apply the various details given to us regarding prayer, the more likely we will feel these sacred effects in our hearts and the more they will effect our behaviour in spiritual ways.

What is it that gets in the way of putting into practice these small details that can make such a difference? Obviously, each person needs to consider this for themselves. Is it lack of detachment from the material world, namely, our precious sleep? We may see ourselves as being either a 'morning lark' or a 'night owl', so one specific time of the day or night must be appropriate to seek this 'quest of our Beloved' when 'freed from daily cares.' Are we not organized enough to properly wash and dress ourselves before we set out to recite our prayers? Perhaps our homes are small, but, again, with thought and consultation with those with whom we live, privacy is likely to be attainable.

Two other details of how to administer the remedy and how to create this special environment relates to what is learned in Study Circles, namely, that to 'intone' means 'to say out loud.' We have also learned that 'recite' means 'to say from memory.' Perhaps learning the prayers we use most often by heart can also contribute to creating this atmosphere of yearning to be close to God, simply because we can close our eyes, block out distractions in the room around us and not have to fumble with a prayer book. The Báb tells us: 'every breast which committeth His Words to

memory, God shall cause, if it were that of a believer, to be filled with His love ...'¹⁰ Is this not what we are seeking in our prayers – ‘to be filled with God’s love?’

We are told that when we make a sacrifice, we receive a gift. The sacrifice involved in any of these issues will be well rewarded with this increased connection of our hearts to our Beloved in those precious moments of prayer. We must remind ourselves that the prolongation of prayer is not what God requires from us; however, the more one experiences the true condition of prayer, as described in the Writings, the longer, in fact, one wishes to remain in it! The bounties it bestows are priceless. The effects in our daily lives are tangible.

The power of Divine Assistance gained through prayer can never be underestimated. The Writings contain many references to the benefits of prayer – strengthening in divine virtue, healing, awakening, mindfulness, protection, preservation from tests, to name but a few. It seems that most often we miss numerous opportunities because we have not relied on this power of prayer. We may and must consciously strive more faithfully to attain this ‘best of conditions’, which in fact is within our own power to achieve. This author proposes that it is the daily acquiring of the details of how to pray that will help us create the special environment that will enhance our own spirituality. Perhaps we can begin by asking God’s assistance in this matter of enhancing the quality of our prayers.

In the Five Year Plan (2001-2006), where we are to be systematic in all that we do, perhaps we can choose but one of these little details of how we should pray to start us on our way to creating this condition of spiritual development. One can work toward that one little detail first, whether it be:

- the special time of day,
- the spotless cleanliness,
- the intonation of our prayers,
- memorizing prayers or
- seeking privacy while praying.

If we can master first just one of these details, we are likely to feel some effect, some improvement. Once one is mastered, we can add in another one; and so, as the Master tells us, ‘little by little, day by

day,' we will see this very special area of our lives improve and move forward in precious spiritual ways and thus affecting our lives in ways we never thought possible before.

The Use of the Arts

There have been one kind of events over the last couple of years that have highlighted to this author that the use of the arts can contribute to creating tremendous spirituality. (We know, of course, as well, that this point has been made in recent plans from the Universal House of Justice, notably in the Ridván letter of 1996.) This event includes what have come to be called 'Tranquillity Zones,' which will now be described and discussed.

Most Irish Bahá'ís are probably familiar now with the Tranquillity Zones. These were developed over several years by the Bahá'ís in Swindon, England. The original premise was to offer an opportunity to raise spiritual awareness among the people of Swindon. This was done by setting up a truly beautiful environment to which the public was invited. Special music, flowers, candles, and fragrance were combined with verses from the Writings to create this atmosphere of heightened awareness of the spiritual within us all.

Among the Bahá'ís thus involved in Swindon there was a question for quite some time as to whether the Tranquillity Zones were a teaching project or a service project. In the end the Bahá'ís seemed to feel that it is one and the same. The following quotation from their 40-page report entitled 'From Events to Environments' shares the insights they gained on this special approach to teaching:

Therefore in teaching, two processes can be seen at work. The first is the process of spiritual growth, which every human being is capable of developing in their heart; much like the seed of a tree that has the capacity and potential to grow. This is between the individual and Bahá'u'lláh. The second process is creating the environments in which this spiritual capacity has the opportunity to grow and this is something that we as Bahá'ís can help to create. The term 'teaching' then refers to a process that creates environments of spiritual growth.

Notice that this last phrase is the same as the title of this paper. This is what it is all about: creating the environment for spiritual growth. When each of the senses are awakened – when the eyes behold the beauty of the flowers, when the nose inhales the sweetness of the scent, when the ear is touched by the sound brought forth by the musician – then is the heart and soul enabled to feel the spirit of the Word of God.

This verse from the Writings tells us that first there must be purity. Perhaps the beautiful environment of the Tranquillity Zone contributes to creating the pure heart at that particular moment:

in all his actions and conduct there must first be purity, then beauty...The pure eye comprehendeth the sight and the meaning of God; the pure nostril inhaleteth the perfumes of the rose-garden of bounty; the pure heart becometh the mirror of the beauty of truth ...¹¹

Of course, Bahá'ís know that the Word of God has the power to touch the hearts and souls of the whole human race:

The Word of God is the king of words and its pervasive influence is incalculable ... The Great Being saith: The Word is the master key for the whole world, inasmuch as through its potency the doors of the hearts of men, which in reality are the doors of heaven, are unlocked ... It is an ocean inexhaustible in riches, comprehending all things.¹²

In a Tranquillity Zone, the beautiful surroundings simply enhance the opportunity for the hearts to be touched by the Word of God – *both* our own hearts and those of our friends. When our own hearts are moved at a Tranquillity Zone, as well as the heart of our friend attending, a special bond of unity is created that is endowed with spirit.

When inviting a friend to a Tranquillity Zone, one can describe it as a 'kind of meditation.' Often a particular theme or topic is chosen for each occasion (e.g. happiness), so it would be a meditation on that theme. However, it is important to make it clear that there is no one kind of meditation in the Bahá'í Faith, no set format to be rigidly followed. To Bahá'ís, drawn from diverse backgrounds, meditation is simply an opportunity to contemplate

the Writings. One might want to explain the simplicity of the occasion as follows: a lovely environment will be created with candles, flowers, scents and music and one person will slowly read some verses for your contemplation. This is all a Tranquillity Zone is and people coming may like to have a clear understanding of this at the outset. This can be especially important as other traditions invoke various images of what meditation will involve and may not necessarily be the sort of event to which they are attracted!

Tranquillity Zones are a very effective way to open the hearts of our seeking friends. (In fact, as the Swindon project developed over those months and years, their community doubled in size.) Thus, it can be seen that we can become more 'natural' teachers, more naturally able to share this precious Faith of ours with others in such a specially created environment that enhances spirituality. It is the beauty of the environment created from the beauty of the gifts God has given to us – including the Word of God – offered in an attitude of service that has this effect on the hearts of those attending. (Of course, the beauty and serenity of the souls offering the Tranquillity Zone is another important condition that they will have presumably prepared with their prayers prior to the event.)

The arts and the beautiful environment combined with the sincere love and fellowship of the friends serve to create this atmosphere of spirituality. It is, or can be, a glimpse of heaven on earth. The stranger has become a friend. The friend has become like a lover. This closeness of hearts has been brought about by this spiritually created atmosphere. The hearts of all those in attendance were truly uplifted, as the Writings well attest to this possibility: 'We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your soul, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high ...'¹³ Another verses tells us:

Whatever is in the heart of man, melody moves and awakens. If a heart full of good feelings and a pure voice are joined together, a great effect is produced. For instance: if there be love in the heart, through melody, it will increase until its intensity can scarcely be borne ... The meaning is that melody causes whatever feeling is in the heart to increase ...¹⁴

Regarding all art, including music and poetry, 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us:

All art is a gift of the Holy Spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies. Again, shining through the mind of a poet, it is seen in fine poetry and poetic prose ... These gifts are fulfilling their highest purpose, when showing forth the praise of God.¹⁵

The Writings support this idea and clearly encourage the use of these arts for the gatherings of the friends and tell us of the great benefits to be received, both in this quotation, as well as from several others from the same source, though not all cited here:

Continue as long as thou canst this melody in the gatherings of the beloved; thus may the minds find rest and joy and become in tune with the love of God. When eloquence of expression, beauty of sense and sweetness of composition unite with new melodies the effect is ever great, especially if it be the anthem of the verses of oneness and the songs of praise to the Lord of Glory.¹⁶

As long ago as 1933, Shoghi Effendi stated:

The day will come when the Cause will spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings will be presented on the stage or in art and literature as a whole. Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalising, especially among the mass of the people.¹⁷

Those who have seen or been part of the Diversity Dance Theatre groups that have toured around Ireland over the last couple of years can recall how these dancers have touched many hearts. Over several years, there has also been an increased emphasis on the use of the arts from the institutions of the Faith. This has been seen from the Training Institute programmes prior to the use of the Ruhi materials, as well as now in the Ruhi

materials with the 'gift of oneself' used during Study Circles, from the National Spiritual Assembly at its recent Institutional Meetings, and from speakers at Summer Schools. We are slowly but surely getting the idea that the use of the arts is a very powerful way to create environments for spiritual growth.

The Use of Encouragement

The third area that is conducive to creating spiritual growth is that of the use of encouragement. One might think this a rather simplistic approach, but attempts will be made to show how truly powerful this can be. The author recently did an hour-and-a-half session at the annual conference for a national organisation (not Bahá'í) on this topic, and was rather overwhelmed with the positive response received afterwards. This prompted the inclusion of this topic in this paper.

If one first looks at the definition of the word 'encourage,' one will find in The Oxford Dictionary: 'to give support, confidence, or hope to; to help or stimulate the development of.' There it is – 'stimulate the development of' something. In this case, I will look at spiritual development. From the definition, we can see that by offering encouragement we are simply offering support and hope to others. Is this not what all of us need in our everyday lives? Certainly we need it in all that we undertake that is good, but if we could receive encouragement in all that pertains to spiritual development, then all the rest would much more easily fall into place.

At the conference just mentioned, this author coined the phrase of an 'encourager' as being someone who is 'a bringer of light' to others. We all know how wonderful we feel when someone – stranger or loved one – tells how well we did at something. It is as if a magic wand touched us and our heart feels warm and happy. It is sweet to know that someone thought it went well, that someone noticed the effort made (even though we are to offer our deeds as service to God), that someone else benefited in some way from what we have tried to do. In all humility, we may well know that it was accomplished only by the aid of the Almighty. But still it can even be the comment made that makes us more fully *aware* of this. It is then that *this* realization fills us with a special glow that warms heart and soul. So, such

simple words as 'well done' can help us to develop radiance of spirit, a deeper dedication to try to be of service and also humility.

We should not underestimate the worth of such simple words of encouragement. The Writings offer definite support for this:

Thus it is incumbent upon us, when we direct our gaze toward other people, to see where they excel, not where they fail.¹⁸

Never speak disparagingly of others, but praise without distinction.¹⁹

See nothing but good in one another, hear nothing but praise of one another, and speak no word of one another save only to praise.²⁰

The Writings go on to tell us that it is not enough only to speak encouragingly of others, but, as both the quotes above and below show, we should also see only what is good in others:

Thus it is incumbent upon us, when we direct our gaze toward other people, to see where they excel, not where they fail.²¹

One must see in every human being only that which is worthy of praise.²²

This is indeed a tall order, but we remember that 'Abdu'l-Bahá has told us that even our thoughts have power. For example, we are told that we must replace a thought of war with a stronger thought of peace, a thought of hatred with a more powerful thought of love.²³ So, even our *thinking* should be of a positive, encouraging nature.

These few quotations give us insights into how we can go about encouraging others, as well as ourselves, to bring about this development of spirituality. This way of speaking and thinking that keeps us looking to the positive/spiritual side of life and not letting the negative/unspiritual side dominate are again habits that we can consciously strive to acquire. Let us now turn our attention to the point of encouraging children.

The dictionary definition said that to encourage also was about giving confidence. We all would be aware of the extreme importance of giving confidence to children. This is what develops their self-esteem, i.e. how they feel about themselves. Sociology and psychology studies have long ago shown that a child's self-esteem affects them in many ways: how they learn, how they make friends, how they progress in fulfilling their potential both academically and socially. It boils down to how happy and content they will be in life.

These studies also clearly indicate that it is the home environment that has the biggest influence on the development of this self-esteem. (Perhaps this is no longer true in modern Western societies where many or most mothers work full-time out of the home and children under the age of five spend the vast majority of their waking hours with people who are not their parents.) We know as Bahá'ís, however, that the mother is considered the 'first educator' of the child. A great deal of responsibility is clearly placed on her in this capacity:

The mother is the first teacher of the child. For children, at the beginning of life, are fresh and tender as a young twig, and can be trained in any fashion you desire. If you rear the child to be straight, he will grow straight, in perfect symmetry. It is clear that the mother is the first teacher and that it is she who establisheth the character and conduct of the child.²⁴

Of course, fathers have a very responsible role to play as well:

Ye should consider the question of goodly character as of the first importance. It is incumbent upon every father and mother to counsel their children over a long period, and guide them unto those things which lead to everlasting honour.²⁵

We know clearly, as well, that 'those things which lead to everlasting honour' refer to all that pertains to the spiritual development of the child. Again, 'Abdu'l-Bahá delineates this as follows:

It is the bounden duty of parents to rear their children to be staunch in faith ... For every praiseworthy deed is born out of the light of religion.²⁶

From the very beginning, the children must receive divine education and must continually be reminded to remember their God. Let the love of God pervade their inmost being.²⁷

Encouraging the child in the development of praiseworthy character and habits is, therefore, of the utmost importance in family life. This is not an easy task, when we, sadly, live in a world that tends to dwell on 'the unpleasant things of life'. News broadcasts, newspaper headlines, soap operas, gossip columns and magazines, backbiting: so many negatives surround us that it is not always easy to take the positive, encouraging approach. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us:

Know that this matter of instruction, of character rectification and refinement, of *heartening and encouraging the child*, is of the utmost importance, for such are basic principles of God (author's emphasis).²⁸

Certainly, all the above quotations regarding seeing the good in others and not speaking disparagingly of them are applicable to our child-rearing practices. At the same time these must be tempered with the important realization that the child does, in fact, need to be corrected when misbehaving. It is not enough to see only the good and ignore the bad. Perhaps we can distract a child to create a more positive situation at times, but certainly at other times the child must be lovingly, patiently, but definitely corrected and made to understand clearly that his or her negative deeds are not to be repeated. The parent must obviously see where the child 'fails' in order to correct him or her and guide them on the path of proper spiritual development. The Writings tell us:

Whensoever a mother seeth that her child hath done well, let her praise and applaud him and cheer his heart; and if the slightest undesirable trait should manifest itself, let her counsel the child and punish him.²⁹

Perhaps the following quotation will help parents keep this discipline, this training issue in better perspective: ‘Love the creatures for the sake of God and not for themselves. You will never become angry or impatient if you love them for the sake of God.’³⁰

Again, this is a tall order when one is spending an entire day with a two-year old. Much more could be said of these matters, but space does not permit. The author refers readers to the book *Bahá’í Education: A Compilation* as an excellent and detailed source from the Writings on many various aspects of the parenting and training of children.

To conclude this section, I would like to offer an example of how to encourage children and fellow adults in very positive ways that highlight the spiritual development of each and every individual. This concept comes from the Virtues Project. The concept, as well as many others from this Project, can create an atmosphere of spiritual development both within our homes and broader community environments, both within and outside the Bahá’í community.

The Virtues Project, developed by three Bahá’ís in the United States in the early 1980s, uses this quotation from Bahá’u’lláh as a premise: ‘Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value.’³¹ The virtues latent within us all are considered those ‘gems.’ The virtues are universally valued by all cultures as the content of our character. They run ‘like a silver thread’ through the Scriptures of the world’s great religions. Bahá’ís know that part of our purpose in this life is to develop ‘divine attributes’, which, of course, are these virtues. Bahá’u’lláh says:

The purpose of the one true God in manifesting Himself is to summon all mankind to truthfulness and sincerity, to piety and trustworthiness, to resignation and submissiveness to the Will of God, to forbearance and kindness, to uprightness and wisdom. His object is to array every man with the mantle of a saintly character, and to adorn him with the ornament of holy and goodly deeds.³²

The Virtues Project proposes that we can learn the ‘language of the virtues.’ The idea of a ‘virtues acknowledgement’ is used to

thank or honour a person – child or adult – for the virtue that they have just demonstrated in their behaviour. For example:

- 'I would like to thank you, Johnny, for your kindness and co-operation in helping Sally pick up.'
- 'I would like to honour you for the courage it took to tell me the truth.'
- 'I thank you for your perseverance in making sure that all community members were aware of the Local Assembly's plans for the Holy Day.'
- 'I would like to honour your trustworthiness and thank you for having kept this matter confidential.'

In all of these statements, the positive is being acknowledged. Praise, support, confidence, in a word, *encouragement* is being given for a specific spiritual behaviour. By specifically naming that behaviour with the virtue, the development of that virtue is reinforced, particularly in a child. Sometimes we simply classify all such behaviours as 'good', rather than being specific. So, we then fall into the trap of saying to a child, 'What a good boy!' The child may not be sure exactly what he did that was so good. Meanwhile, if this is used frequently, he has now become 'labelled' as being a 'good' boy. This exerts pressure on the child and can create a lot of guilt when he does fall off the wagon of being a 'good' boy. Use of specific labels for the behaviour – as distinct for the person – can help healthy growth occur.

These same techniques offer encouraging interactions with adults. More importantly, for adults as well as for children, the specific positive spiritual qualities are encouraged and reinforced. As mentioned above, this is part of our purpose in life – part of what we should always be striving to work toward. It can be seen how such a simple concept of learning to 'speak the language of the virtues' helps to create an environment that enhances spiritual development.

Specifically in relation to child-rearing, this 'language of the virtues' can be used to encourage positive behaviour when it is lacking and thereby avoid the more commonly used negative expressions of anger and impatience. Consider these examples:

- 'Johnny, you need to be more considerate and kind to your sister. Stop doing that, please, now.'
- 'I think you need to develop more courage and trustworthiness so you can learn to tell the truth the first time you are asked a question. You know how important truthfulness is.'
- 'You need to be more generous and learn to share your sweets with your friends.'
- 'You need to be more courteous and not interrupt me when I'm on the phone, please.'

These sound perhaps rather strange because they are so different than what would normally be said in our current culture of negativism. Try to imagine the positive outcomes that could develop with this kind of straightforward approach if applied across the board at home and in schools. A greater awareness of the virtues would result, which couldn't help but increase a greater recognition of the need to develop spiritually.

It is important to point out that using this 'correction' or 'instruction' approach of the Virtues Project is not appropriate for adult-to-adult interactions, as the Writings make it very clear that we should not see the faults of others, as indicated above. Thus it is not appropriate for any adult to tell another that he or she needs to develop trustworthiness. We should use a sin-covering eye at all times in other adults' behaviour and, instead, concentrate fully on developing our own spiritual qualities. Using the language of the virtues with children in either a home or school setting would have a positive effect on the spiritual attitude of adults present, however, as mention of the virtues would remind the adults themselves that they, too, should possess those attributes.

It is also perhaps worth considering that possibly in marriage relationships, use of this instruction/correction technique might be possible, since couples are to be as spiritual 'helpmates' to each other 'who should be concerned about the welfare of each other'³³ and 'loving companions ... that they may ever improve the spiritual life of each other.'³⁴ This would not be on an ongoing daily basis, presumably, but at times of consultation. Of course, consultation is the specific tool for Bahá'ís with which to communicate fully and directly about problems and difficulties and should be used in marriage. Always the guidelines of using

‘moderation’ and ‘purity of motive’ in consultation should be employed. Perhaps use of the virtues correction could be part of consultation in a marriage.

To assist the reader to realize the credibility of this innovative and spiritual approach, it should be mentioned that the Virtues Project was honoured as a model programme for families at the World Conference of Cities, Local Governments and Private Sector Partners on Families in association with the United Nations Secretariat during the International Year of the Child. It has been used on many Native Reservations in the States, in many prisons, by many different denominations of the Christian Church, as well as by the personnel departments of many large US businesses to promote healthier, more wholesome – in fact, more spiritual – environments for all concerned.

Conclusion

Spiritual development is fundamentally all about bringing out the best in each and every one of us. Whether it is through the most personal spiritual exercise of all, namely prayer, where we truly feel connected with our Creator; or whether it is the spiritual enlightenment that a beautiful environment coupled with the Word of God can bring us; or that breath of the Holy Spirit that has inspired the artist’s work that in turn touches our own soul; or the gentle, kind words that cheer and encourage another person’s heart on their way in life – whatever it is that assists in drawing each of us closer to pursuing our own spiritual destiny, that is something that we need to actively seek to create and sustain in our own environments.

‘All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition.’³⁵ This is exactly what distinguishes us from all of the other mammals that make up the animal world: we have been endowed with the *will* to determine our own actions, i.e. the ability to choose either to live as the other beasts with our animal nature ruling our lives or to chose to live as the spiritual beings God created us to be. It does require a decision, a choice, a will to act as we are more naturally inclined toward our lower nature. By not consciously deciding to act, we abnegate our free will and miss the precious opportunities to change, go forward and improve our lives in spiritual ways. Such choices and use of our volition are, in fact, a daily process, as

some of the various ideas presented in this paper have sought to illustrate.

Spirituality is a deeply personal affair that is enacted between each individual's heart and his or her Creator on a daily basis. Yet the spirituality of the individual has great influence on all aspects of that person's own life – in both this world and in the world to come. The spirituality of each individual influences, in turn, all the other people with whom he or she will come into contact every day. Indeed, 'human happiness is founded on spiritual behaviour.'³⁶ It is hoped that some small part of this paper may assist in that process in each reader's life as we all strive to create environments that will enhance spirituality.

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