

Being vs Doing

By Susan Gammage ¹

A few years ago we started to see the House of Justice refer to "being and doing", both words I thought I understood. Indeed the dictionary defines them as:

Being: to exist or live

Doing: to perform (an act, duty, role, etc.); to accomplish; finish; complete; to put forth; exert

It seems to me that one is passive and the other is active.

Here's how the House of Justice describes the two.

The importance of "doing", of arising to serve and to accompany fellow souls, must be harmonized with the notion of "being", of increasing one's understanding of the divine teachings and mirroring forth spiritual qualities in one's life. (Universal House of Justice, to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 29 December 2015, Framework for Action, pp. 224-225, #35.36)

So here we see:

- Being is increasing our understanding of the divine teachings and mirroring forth spiritual qualities in our lives
- Doing is arising to serve and to accompany fellow souls

But these definitions seem to both be active.

In a materialistic culture obsessed with "doing", it is believed that as we "do" the correct things, success will follow. In fact who we are while "doing" is more important than "being". I wondered: Is there a dangerous side of goal-setting, to-do lists, and being efficient? How much time do we need to spend in "doing" at the expense of just "being"?

As a recovering workaholic and perfectionist, the concepts of being and doing are synonymous in my mind! Working is my form of play!

It's been pointed out by many people over the years that I need to slow down and take time for rest and recreation. They tell me that work and play are different and it's hard for me to get my head around this concept even though Shoghi Effendi tells us that:

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You should ... force yourself to take time, and not only for prayer and meditation, but for real rest and relaxation. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 297, #1013)

As always, whenever I'm puzzled about something, I take my question to the Bahá'í Writings.

In contrast to the dictionary definition, "being and doing" seem to have different meanings in the Faith.

As previously mentioned the House of Justice wrote to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors on 29 December 2015.

The importance of "doing", of arising to serve and to accompany fellow souls, must be harmonized with the notion of "being", of increasing one's understanding of the divine teachings and mirroring forth spiritual qualities in one's life. (Universal House of Justice, Framework for Action, pp. 224-225, #35.36)

Thus we are told that:

- Being is increasing our understanding of the divine teachings and mirroring forth spiritual qualities in our lives
- Doing is arising to serve and to accompany fellow souls

Unlike the dictionary definition, both of these definitions appear to be active. The House of Justice tells us that "being" has to do with the acquisition of knowledge (studying the Writings) and "doing" is applying what we've learned. And in a message to the Continental Board of Counsellor on, 28 December 2010 they warn us against false dichotomies:

Every effort is being exerted to ensure that the process reflects the complementarity of "being" and "doing" the institute courses make explicit; the centrality they accord to knowledge and its application; the emphasis they place on avoiding false dichotomies ... (Universal House of Justice, Framework for Action, p. 104, #16.16)

Later in that message the House of Justice reiterated a warning from Shoghi Effendi.

Closely related to the habit of reducing an entire theme into one or two appealing phrases is the tendency to perceive dichotomies, where, in fact, there are none. It is essential that ideas forming part of a cohesive whole not be held in opposition to one another. In a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi warned: "We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between, there are links uniting the two". (Universal House of Justice, Framework for Action, p. 115, #16.38)

So they want us to find the link between being and doing.

Ruhi Book 5 (Releasing the Powers of Junior Youth) was the first place I found that really addressed this issue head on, and I had a total meltdown going through that section!

In section 9 of that book I found the following statement.

If we are not careful and adopt such a fragmented approach to our lives, we can create all kinds of dichotomies that are largely imaginary. Work, leisure, family life, spiritual life, physical health, intellectual pursuits, individual development, collective progress, and so on become pieces that together make up our existence. When we accept such divisions as real, we feel pulled in many directions, trying to respond to what we consider to be the demands of these different facets of life.

In my training as a life coach, I learned that it's important to have a balance between the materialistic view of "being and doing" in life. In fact, I often help people set goals in each of these areas, to help people live a life in moderation. And now you're telling me these divisions aren't real? That got my attention. Of course, it's the opinion of the writers of the Ruhi material and not from the Sacred Writings of our Faith, so that brought me some comfort.

The statement in book 5 continues:

We are bewildered by apparently conflicting aims: Should I sacrifice my family life to serve the Cause? Will not serving the Faith interfere with my efforts to raise my children? These are two examples of the myriad of questions that can arise.

These questions certainly arose in my life and I've spent many decades trying to resolve them. As a single mother with clinical depression, serving as an assistant to the Auxiliary Board member in 2 clusters, I frequently sacrificed my family life to serve the Cause. I would get up in the morning; get my son fed and made sure we said prayers together. Once he was on the school bus, I would go back to bed, pull the covers over my head and stay there until it was time to meet the school bus again. Many nights I would take him to Bahá'í meetings. He could see I wasn't well, and at times he just wanted to hang out with me, but the Faith always came first. I would make a herculean effort to rouse myself from my depression to make sure his needs were met and put a smile on my face as I went to the Bahá'í meetings. I frequently wonder if this is why he didn't become a Bahá'í.

Maybe there are ways to serve the Faith while raising children as a single parent, but I do wonder, especially in light of the fact that the World Centre will not accept single parents, and when a couple has children, only one parent will serve.

If I had my life to do over again, I would spend more time with my child, and focus the bulk of my service after he'd left home. That would be how I would balance being (time with my son) and doing (time for service, later on). Service to my son would also be "doing" as I was fulfilling the most important work there is – raising the new generation.

However the statement in book 5 continues:

To resolve the dichotomies we have created, we sometimes try to divide our time equally among the various demands placed on us. On other occasions, we attempt to prioritize responsibilities and focus our energies on those we believe to be the most important at any particular moment. A careful allotment of time and energy is of course necessary. But it is only fruitful when we remain conscious of the interconnectedness of the many aspects of our lives. If we fail to see the whole, the tension created among all the parts can give rise to anxiety and even confusion.

I certainly feel anxiety and confusion whenever I struggle to understand this concept. Shoghi Effendi, the best example of a goal-setter and planner on a grand scale, reminded us that:

'Abdu'l-Bahá said we must sacrifice the important for the most important. (Shoghi Effendi, *The Unfolding Destiny of the British Baha'i Community*, p. 448)

So he focused his energy on what he believed to be the most important at any particular moment.

Ruhi Book 5, Section 9 continues with a series of questions to consider. My personal responses follow each example.

Below are various aspects of life placed in pairs that should reinforce each other, but which are sometimes thought to be in conflict. For each one of the sentences that follow the pair, decide whether it represents the kind of thinking that is conducive to an integrated way of life or whether it is indicative of a tendency towards fragmentation.

Family and Work

- My family life will suffer if I work hard at my job.

This may be a fragmented way of thinking but I believe it to be true. How can we possibly fulfil the roles set out for parents while working hard at a job? You just have to look at the rate of divorce in the Bahá'í community to see that family life is suffering; and educating our children is so important that 'Abdu'l-Bahá warns us:

Should they neglect this matter, they shall be held responsible and worthy of reproach in the presence of the stern Lord. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 127, #98)

- I often discuss with my family my accomplishments at work and the challenges I face there.

Yes, this is an integrated way of thinking.

- Of course women can excel in their careers, but the children always pay the price.

This may be a fragmented way of thinking, but again, I believe it to be true.

- If I want to raise my children well, I will have to forget about my profession.

Yes, this is a fragmented way of thinking. I think we can do both well, at different times in our lives. If children are being encouraged to marry young (sometimes as early as 15) and understand that the purpose of marriage is to have children, it's easy to see that the parenting role could be fulfilled with plenty of time to build a career later.

- I can advance in my profession and fully attend to my family responsibilities.

Yes, this is a fragmented way of thinking and I believe it's not possible.

'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us we can combine service with marriage:

As to the terminology I used in my letter, bidding thee to consecrate thyself to service in the Cause of God, the meaning of it is this: limit thy thoughts to teaching the Faith. Act by day and night according to the teachings and counsels and admonitions of Bahá'u'lláh. This doth not preclude marriage. Thou canst take unto thyself a husband and at the same time serve the Cause of God; the one doth not preclude the other. Know thou the value of these days; let not this chance escape thee. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 100, #64)

I think this means rethinking how we can make our family life a priority by thinking of it as the most important service we can render to humankind.

There is an interesting article worth reading on this subject at:

<https://www.bahaiblog.net/articles/bahai-life/to-work-or-not-to-work-a-personal-reflection-on-the-role-of-mothers-and-paid-work/>

Education and Service to the Cause

- I have to choose between pioneering and education, since it is not possible to do both.

Of course it's possible to gain an education in a pioneer post, so this can easily be integrated.

- Academic achievement is a prerequisite for entering the field of service.

Absolutely not! Junior youth are being encouraged to enter the field of service long before they've completed their academic education.

- The knowledge I gain through my studies is an asset in the field of service, and the experience I gain in the arena of service enhances my abilities.

Yes, this is an integrated way of thinking.

- I have to abandon my studies if I really want to devote myself to the Cause.

Not true! You can easily find ways to be of service while continuing your studies. For example, studying with others; sharing meals; trading chores; being a friend; living the life; teaching the Cause, etc. Service to humanity comes in many forms, not just participation in the core activities. It's all part of community building.

A quote to consider, to make this more integrated is:

All humanity must obtain a livelihood by sweat of the brow and bodily exertion, at the same time seeking to lift the burden of others, striving to be the source of comfort to souls and facilitating the means of living. This in itself is devotion to God. Bahá'u'lláh has thereby encouraged action and stimulated service. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 187, #66.4)

- One of my greatest aspirations is to learn to apply the teachings of the Faith in endeavours that promote the betterment of the world.

Of course, this is an integrated approach.

- The period of service that I dedicate to promoting the Faith or participating in a Bahá'í-inspired social and economic development project will assist me in choosing a suitable field of study.

Of course! Here is a quote to balance these ideas:

It is a compromise between the two verses of the "Aqdas", one making it incumbent upon every Bahá'í to serve the promotion of the Faith and the other that every soul should be occupied in some form of occupation that will benefit society. In one of His Tablets Bahá'u'lláh says that the highest form of detachment in this day is to be occupied with some profession and be self-supporting. A good Bahá'í, therefore, is the one who so arranges his life as to devote time both to his material needs and also to the service of the Cause. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 624, #2109)

Intellectual Development and Development of Spiritual Qualities

- The independent investigation of truth requires the cultivation of the intellect, as well as the acquisition of spiritual qualities.

- In teaching the Faith to others, we should just show them love; what we say is not important.
- Intellectual development requires justice, honesty, and lack of prejudice.
- To develop spirituality, one has to let go of one's intellect.
- Our minds and hearts are not separate from each other; they represent complementary and mutually interactive aspects of one reality—our soul.
- Spiritual qualities are developed through conscious knowledge and the exercise of good deeds.

These all make sense to me and it's easy to distinguish integrated from fragmented.

Material Life and Spiritual Life

- I must deny myself material pleasure in order to develop spiritually.
- Spiritual matters should be put aside until we are old; during our youth we should take advantage of every opportunity to advance materially.
- The material needs of people have to be satisfied before they are ready to pay attention to spiritual matters.
- The purpose of my life on this material plane is to develop my spiritual qualities and powers.
- We should enjoy all the bounties that the world has to offer but should not allow earthly desires to take hold of our hearts and prevent us drawing nearer and nearer to God.

I found something to consider in Paris Talks where 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that some people's lives are occupied only with the things of this world, and their minds are so constrained by exterior manners and traditional interests that they are blind to any other realm of existence or to the spiritual significance of all things. He gives us examples I'm sure we can all relate to:

- they think and dream of earthly fame, of material progress
- sensuous delights and comfortable surroundings bound their horizon
- their highest ambitions centre in successes of worldly conditions and circumstances
- they don't curb their lower propensities
- they eat, drink, and sleep! like the animal, they have no thought beyond their own physical well-being

Some men's lives are solely occupied with the things of this world; their minds are so circumscribed by exterior manners and traditional interests that they are blind to any other realm of existence, to the spiritual significance of all things! They think and dream of earthly fame, of material progress. Sensuous delights and comfortable surroundings bound their horizon, 99 their highest ambitions centre in successes of worldly conditions and circumstances! They curb not their lower propensities; they eat, drink, and sleep! Like the animal, they have no thought beyond their own physical well-being. It is true that these necessities must be

despatched. Life is a load which must be carried on while we are on earth, but the cares of the lower things of life should not be allowed to monopolize all the thoughts and aspirations of a human being. The heart's ambitions should ascend to a more glorious goal, mental activity should rise to higher levels! Men should hold in their souls the vision of celestial perfection, and there prepare a dwelling-place for the inexhaustible bounty of the Divine Spirit. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, pp. 98)

Conclusion

This issue of "being and doing" as presented in Ruhi Book 5 certainly caused a lot of anxiety and confusion in my life, particularly in the area of family life, and as I faced my life as a workaholic in burnout, I was even more confused! As time goes by, though, I'm starting to learn the difference, and I am grateful to remember this quote from the Bible: Be still, and know that I am God, and this quote from the Writings: Let "my movement and my stillness may be wholly directed by Thee." Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh, p. 240)