

Change is Difficult and Takes a Long Time¹

By Susan Gammage ²

Many of us like living in our comfort zone, and don't want to change, but whether we like it or not, everything in life changes. If we're not changing, we're dead!

We have a choice either to change or wait for God, the Unfastener to do it for us.

Most people have tried to change and found they couldn't; or they changed and then the old pattern came back; or they needed a lot of reinforcement; or the change took a long time or required a lot of effort.

'Abdu'l-Bahá describes how this works:

Just as the earth attracts everything to the centre of gravity, and every object thrown upward into space will come down, so also material ideas and worldly thoughts attract man to the centre of self. Anger, passion, ignorance, prejudice, greed, envy, covetousness, jealousy and suspicion prevent man from ascending to the realms of holiness, imprisoning him in the claws of self and the cage of egotism. The physical man, unassisted by the divine power, trying to escape from one of these invisible enemies, will unconsciously fall into hands of another. No sooner does he attempt to soar upward than the density of the love of self, like the power of gravity, draws him to the centre of the earth. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í Scriptures, p. 546)

What are some of the reasons we put up resistance. Perhaps some of them will resonate with you:

- I don't want to change if it means leaving my comfort zone.
- I don't want to change because you tell me I have to
- I don't want to change because I don't trust the people who are asking me to change.

These are habits of thought coming from your lower nature that need to be looked at differently.

4 alternative beliefs to consider:

- Change is difficult given the tools and techniques we've tried so far. That doesn't mean it can't happen if we find the right tools and techniques.

¹ Based on a talk by Morty Lefkoe. <https://www.mortylefkoe.com/about/>

² Prepared by David Bowie (2023) for posting, with permission of author, at https://bahai-library.com/gammage_various_essays

- Though we aren't able to produce the change we wanted by ourselves, or with the people we relied on so far, doesn't mean that someone else can't help us change.
- Maybe we couldn't change because we weren't ready before, but that doesn't mean we'll never be ready.
- If we had first eliminated the beliefs that caused the behaviour, or the emotions we wanted to change, change could have been very easy.
- It's possible that change has been difficult so far because we haven't eliminated the beliefs that kept the old emotions in place.
- The events that led to the belief were only events. I brought the meaning to them. The meaning wasn't inherent in the belief. There are many other beliefs I could have chosen but I latched on to the one that served to punish me and keep me trapped in the prison of self.

For example: One of my earliest memories was of my mother saying "I wish she'd never been born." It was a careless remark, made in the heat of a frustrating moment. It was just an event. But I gave it meaning. I put it on the hamster wheel and believed it as a fact, which stayed with me for more than 50 years. Needless to say, it damaged my relationship with my mother, who may have never known I took her comment to heart. If she was still alive to ask, she probably wouldn't have even remembered saying it. I gave it meaning, though. It meant I was unloved, unloveable, unwanted, and with every interaction I had with her or others, I looked for (and found) evidence to prove this belief.

Once I understood this, I could change the belief.

I know nothing for sure about change based on the difficulty I've had so far in trying to change. All I know for certain is that I've had difficulty changing in the past because I was limited in the tools at my disposal and hadn't eliminated the negative belief first.

O Lord, Thou hast said in Thy manifest Book and in Thy great Glad Tidings with explicit statement: "God does not change that which a people have, until they change what is within themselves." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í Scriptures, p. 407)

The messengers of God came so that we could change and be reformed.

It is evident therefore that counterfeit and spurious religious teaching, antiquated forms of belief and ancestral imitations which are at variance with the foundation of divine reality must also pass away and be reformed. They must be abandoned and new conditions be recognized. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 229)

For this reason it's important for us to investigate the Teachings.

Therefore it is our duty in this radiant century to investigate the essentials of divine religion, seek the realities underlying the oneness of the world of humanity and discover the source of fellowship and agreement which will unite mankind in the heavenly bond of love. This unity is the radiance of eternity, the divine spirituality, the effulgence of God and the bounty of the Kingdom. We must investigate the

divine source of these heavenly bestowals and adhere unto them steadfastly.
(Abdu'l-Bahá, Baha'i World Faith, p. 229)

If we don't, it will lead to the destruction of the human race.

For if we remain fettered and restricted by human inventions and dogmas, day by day the world of mankind will be degraded, day by day warfare and strife will increase and satanic forces converge toward the destruction of the human race.
(Abdu'l-Bahá, Baha'i World Faith, p. 229)

Change can't come too quickly or it would be harmful.

Too sudden and abrupt a change is, indeed, harmful. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 425, #1399)

We try to change but sometimes it never happens.

We try to change, to let the Power of God help recreate us make us true Bahá'ís in deed as well as in belief. But the process is slow, sometimes it never happened the individual does not try hard enough. But these cause us suffering and are a test to us in our fellow-believers, most especially if we love him and have been their teacher! (Shoghi Effendi, The Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá'í Community pp. 440-441)

It's an evolutionary process requiring patience, education and time in order to discard negative beliefs and conform to the unifying beliefs of the Cause.

Change is an evolutionary process requiring patience with one's self and others, loving education and the passage of time as the believers deepen their knowledge of the principles of the Faith, gradually discard long-held traditional attitudes and progressively conform their lives to the unifying teachings of the Cause. (The Messages From The Universal House of Justice, 1963 to 1986, p. 634, #402.6)

A negative past doesn't prevent spiritual transformation.

Since times and circumstances change, it has always to be remembered that a reprehensible past does not necessarily prevent individuals, including those like your parents, from building a better future through spiritual transformation.
(Universal House of Justice to an individual, 7 August 2001)

Ways of thinking have a deep influence on what we do and how we act.

Commonly held and pervasive patterns of thought are part of the character of any society. Ways of thinking about life that are common to a culture - its well-worn mental habits - have a deep influence on what a society does and how its people act. For example, a society that holds the belief that life is a competitive struggle for existence will organize its economy, its educational system, its social services

and its provision for security in very different ways from a society that holds the belief that mutual service and reciprocity are essential characteristics of living beings. The conviction that humans are merely sophisticated animals leads to principles of commerce, government, and law that are very different from those that flow from the conviction that human beings have a capacity to reflect the qualities of God, which can only unfold through a conscious act of will. Ideas - bad ones as well as good ones - are expressed in the structures and patterns of a society. (Hooper C. Dunbar, Forces of Our Time, p. 27)

This is probably why the House of Justice is encouraging us to change our habits of thought.

Apart from the spiritual requisites of a sanctified Baha'i life, there are habits of thought that affect the unfoldment of the global Plan, and their development has to be encouraged at the level of culture. There are tendencies, as well, that need to be gradually overcome. Many of these tendencies are reinforced by approaches prevalent in society at large, which, not altogether unreasonably, enter into Baha'i activity. (Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010 to the Continental Boards of Counsellors)

All the more reason to keep every thought captive; make sure we know if it's coming from our lower or higher nature; beg God for His forgiveness and find a new way of thinking.