

A New Understanding of My Lower Nature

By Susan Gammage ¹

Shortly after I became a Bahá'í, I learned that I had a lower nature, out of which can develop all the negative qualities seen in man. Truthfully, I didn't give it much thought until one week when I got together with a group to study the nature of man. What I discovered was a real eye opener, as I came to realize that even though I strove to implement all the Bahá'í teachings to the best of my ability, most of my time was spent dwelling in my lower nature. The experiences of abuse I lived through as a child left me with a poor self-image, a lot of fear and self-pity, anxiety and depression, none of which are from God. And the best news of all, now that I knew about it, I could finally do something about it! Let's take a look at some of the things I learned.

We have two selves:

...self has really two meanings, or is used in two senses, in the Bahá'í Writings; one is self, the identity of the individual created by God. This is the self mentioned in such passages as "he hath known God who hath known himself", etc. The other self is the ego, the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 113, #386)

Our lower nature is sometimes referred to as our ego:

The ego is the animal in us, the heritage of the flesh which is full of selfish desires. (Shoghi Effendi, Unfolding Destiny, p. 453)

Our lower natures include our five senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell), by which we receive information from the world, and sadly, much of it is not entirely accurate when filtered through the Bahá'í Writings. I can look at you, hear what you are saying, and try to filter out if what you are saying is coming from your higher or lower nature. God's Word helps us discern truth from falsehood. Here is a process we've been given for discerning truth from error:

Consequently, it has become evident that the four criteria or standards of judgment by which the human mind reaches its conclusions (senses, intellect, traditional or scriptural and inspiration) are faulty and inaccurate. All of them are liable to mistake and error in conclusions. But a statement presented to the mind, accompanied by proofs which the senses can perceive to be correct, which the faculty of reason can accept, which is in accord with traditional authority and sanctioned by the promptings of the heart, can be adjudged and relied upon as perfectly correct, for it has been proved and tested by all the standards of

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judgment and found to be complete. When we apply but one test, there are possibilities of mistake. This is self-evident and manifest. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 255)

We're caught between our lower and higher natures, because our lower nature uses the same pathway to speak to us as God does – through our thoughts. At any given moment we might be listening to God or to our own idle fancies. So it's inevitable that we sometimes get confused about who we are listening to, which is why God asks us to listen with our inner ear.

Improper thoughts, feelings and emotions are part of our lower nature. For example, the law of God tells me to forgive my parents, and my lower nature says that what they did was unforgiveable. But I know that God's law is superior to my faulty belief system, because it's the truth.

I'm learning that my mind is renewed by the choices I make. For example, every time I choose to forgive, I'm building forgiveness into my soul, and with enough practice, it becomes a way of life. Every time I don't choose to forgive, that also builds into my soul and it too becomes a way of life. So I have to ask myself: which law do I want to choose?

I may have been trained by my lower nature, but God gave me free will to rise above it. So again, I ask myself: Whose voice am I going to listen to?

It's my lower self that I must battle against:

It is this self [lower nature] we must struggle against ... in order to strengthen and free the spirit within us and help it to attain perfection. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 113, #386)

There's a battle going on inside each of us, all the time, but the battle is not with "ourselves" (both higher and lower). It's only with our lower nature. The source of conflict arises when we become one with an evil thought, believing it to be true. For example, when I was a baby, I overheard my mother say: "I wish she'd never been born" and for many years I believed I was unwanted and unloved. I became one with this belief, and it fed my desire to die.

We can't serve both "masters" (God and our lower nature) at the same time. When we try, we become unstable in all our ways. For example, I can't believe that I am unlovable and teach that I was created out of God's love for me. I can't effectively teach the faith while waiting to die! I'm sure this is the origin of my post-traumatic stress symptoms!

There'll be no end to longing till I find my heart's desire
Either I'll win my own Heart's Life or lose my life entire.
(Hafiz, quoted in Marzieh Gail, Dawn Over Mount Hira, p. 42)

I'm learning that shame and guilt are caused by believing the battle is with myself, causing me to hate myself. These thoughts are coming from my lower nature, and are not true. Recognizing this, I must cast these negative beliefs out and cling to what's true:

How well hath it been said; "Cling unto the robe of the Desire of thy heart, and put thou away all shame; bid the worldly-wise be gone, however great their name."
(Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 69)

Each one of us, if we look into our failures, is sure to feel unworthy and despondent, and this feeling only frustrates our constructive efforts and wastes time. The thing for us to focus on is the glory of the Cause and the Power of Bahá'u'lláh which can make of a mere drop a surging sea! (Shoghi Effendi: *Unfolding Destiny*, page 447)

What's true is that God loves me, just the way I am:

Out of the wastes of nothingness, with the clay of My command I made thee to appear, and have ordained for thy training every atom in existence and the essence of all created things. Thus, ere thou didst issue from thy mother's womb, I destined for thee two founts of gleaming milk, eyes to watch over thee, and hearts to love thee. Out of My loving-kindness, 'neath the shade of My mercy I nurtured thee, and guarded thee by the essence of My grace and favor. And My purpose in all this was that thou mightest attain My everlasting dominion and become worthy of My invisible bestowals. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Persian Hidden Words* 29)

Of course, we're all a mixture of both lower and higher natures. None of us are saints or pure evil. Even when we try to rid ourselves of one sin, another will crop up:

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. The only power that is capable of delivering man from this captivity is the power of the Holy Spirit. The attraction of the power of the Holy Spirit is so effective that it keeps man ever on the path of upward ascension. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Scriptures*, p. 546, #986)

We are not immune to our lower nature by becoming Bahá'í. We embark on an active lifestyle as we strive to "conquer ourselves" and rebuild who we are in God, at the same time. Like everything, it's a process:

The House of Justice asks us to point out that the recognition of the Manifestation of God is but the beginning of a process of growth and that as we become more deepened in the Teachings and strive to follow His principles, we gradually approach more and more the perfect pattern which is presented to us. Bahá'u'lláh recognizes that human beings are fallible. He knows that, in our weakness, we shall repeatedly stumble when we try to walk in the path He has pointed out to us. (Homosexuality, p.6, a 1993 compilation from the World Centre available at https://bahai-library.com/compilation_homosexuality_bwc#s3)

We're all prone to temptation, but God doesn't hold us responsible for the thoughts that cross our minds; only for the actions arising from the thoughts. For example when someone speaks about me with evil, I may be tempted to repay evil with evil, but that's just temptation. The Bahá'í Writings teach us how to treat our enemies:

You must consider your evil-wishers as your well-wishers. Those who are not agreeable toward you must be regarded as those who are congenial and pleasant ... ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 470)

It's not quite as easy as it sounds, though:

Bahá'u'lláh has clearly said in His Tablets that if you have an enemy, consider him not as an enemy. Do not simply be long-suffering; nay, rather, love him. Your treatment of him should be that which is becoming to lovers. Do not even say that he is your enemy. Do not see any enemies. Though he be your murderer, see no enemy. Look upon him with the eye of friendship. Be mindful that you do not consider him as an enemy and simply tolerate him, for that is but stratagem and hypocrisy. To consider a man your enemy and love him is hypocrisy. This is not becoming of any soul. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 267)

We can free ourselves from these negative thoughts by submitting ourselves to God, resisting the vain imaginings, and over time, with lots of practice, the thoughts won't hold us captive anymore. Many people try to do this on their own and don't succeed. We can't defeat our lower natures alone. We need to submit to God first, and rise into our higher nature, using a process such as the one described in this quote:

Through sincere and sustained effort, energized by faith in the validity of the Divine Message, and combined with patience with oneself and the loving support of the Bahá'í community, individuals are able to effect a change in their behaviour; as a consequence of this effort they partake of spiritual benefits which liberate them and which bestow a true happiness beyond description. (Homosexuality, p.8, a 1993 compilation from the World Centre available at https://bahai-library.com/compilation_homosexuality_bwc#s3)

In order to become doers of God's word, we can ask ourselves:

- Do my thoughts line up with the teachings of God?

- Do they line up with the nature of God?
- Would 'Abdul-Bahá think or act the way I am thinking or want to act?

Sometimes my past gets in the way of separating me from my lower nature, even if I know better. Sometimes I do things contrary to God's will, even when I don't want to, so it was comforting to come across this quote, which might tell me why:

For once a bird hath grown its wings, it remaineth on the ground no more, but soareth upward into high heaven -- except for those birds that are tied by the leg, or those whose wings are broken, or mired down. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 58)

But now that I'm aware, I can choose differently. I'm coming to see that my lower nature has no blessings to offer – I'm just following a chimera:

...the one who compromises with the law for the sake of his own apparent happiness is seen to have been following a chimera: he does not attain the happiness he sought, he retards his spiritual advance and often brings new problems upon himself. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 359, #1209)

Living in a materialistic society challenges my ability to separate light from dark. Sometimes my lower nature appears as right, when viewed through the standards current among mankind. For example, one of the ways I coped with the abuse was through perfectionism, workaholism and being driven. These were all qualities valued in the workplace, but they weren't coming from God.

They follow their own desires and walk in the footsteps of the most imperfect and foolish amongst them. (Will & Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 18)

...perfection - which man can never completely attain (Shoghi Effendi, The Compilation of Compilations vol II, p. 11, #1295)

Regarding the questions you asked in your letter: The only people who are truly free of the "dross of self" are the Prophets for to be free of one's ego is a hallmark of perfection. We humans are never going to become perfect, for perfection belongs to a realm we are not destined to enter. However, we must constantly mount higher, seek to be more perfect. (Shoghi Effendi, Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá'í Community, p. 453)

I'm learning that what I feed grows, and what I neglect, passes away. The more I meditate on the words of God, the more it becomes ingrained into me, and becomes who I am. Rising above my lower nature is one way I can participate in the process of bringing the Kingdom of God to earth.

I adjure Thee by Thy might, O my God! Let no harm beset me in times of tests, and in moments of heedlessness guide my steps aright through Thine inspiration.
(Selections from the Writings of the Báb, p. 210)

When I follow my lower nature, I'm taking direction from it and making it my God. This causes great anguish in the Abhá Paradise, as we read in this edited excerpt from the Tablet of the Holy Mariner:

Thereupon the countenance of the favored damsel beamed above the celestial chambers ... She bestirred herself and perfumed all things in the lands of holiness and grandeur... When she reached that place she rose to her full height in the midmost heart of creation ... And sought to inhale their fragrance at a time that knoweth neither beginning nor end ... She found not in them that which she did desire ... She then cried aloud, wailed and repaired to her own station within her most lofty mansion ... And raised the call amidst the Celestial Concourse and the immortal maids of heaven ... By the Lord! I found not from these idle claimants the breeze of Faithfulness! ... She then uttered within herself such a cry that the Celestial Concourse did shriek and tremble ... And she fell upon the dust and gave up the spirit ... Thereupon the maids of heaven hastened forth from their chambers ... They all gathered around her, and lo! they found her body fallen upon the dust ... And as they beheld her state and comprehended a word of the tale told by the Youth, they bared their heads, rent their garments asunder, beat upon their faces, forgot their joy, shed tears and smote with their hands upon their cheeks, and this is verily one of the mysterious grievous afflictions ... (Bahá'u'lláh, Tablet of the Holy Mariner, Bahá'í Prayers, pp. 225-228)

Finally, I'm learning it's important to separate the person from the sin. Instead of thinking "there goes an angry person", I'm learning to say: "there goes a person who has anger".

This isn't just semantics. If anger and rage are removed from a person, what's left? Just the person. This subtle shift allows for compassion. For example, my father had a lot of rage but he wasn't (as I formerly insisted) a rage-aholic. He chose to act in evil ways but he wasn't evil. I can hate what he did to me without hating him. He was only reflecting the evil that was taught to him.

When we recognize we're coming from our lower natures, and sincerely ready to move into a higher plane, we can ask God for forgiveness, using a prayer such as this:

O God, my God! Have mercy then upon my helpless state, my poverty, my misery, my abasement! Give me to drink from the generous cup of Thy grace and forgiveness, stir me with the sweet scents of Thy love, gladden my bosom with the light of Thy knowledge, purify my soul with the mysteries of Thy oneness, raise me to life with the gentle breeze that cometh from the gardens of Thy mercy -- till I sever myself from all else but Thee, and lay hold of the hem of Thy garment of grandeur, and consign to oblivion all that is not Thee, and be companioned by the sweet breathings that waft during these Thy days, and attain unto faithfulness at

Thy Threshold of Holiness, and arise to serve Thy Cause, and to be humble before Thy loved ones, and, in the presence of Thy favoured ones, to be nothingness itself. Verily art Thou the Helper, the Sustainer, the Exalted, the Most Generous.
(Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, pp. 4-5)