

Creating Intimacy;

In the Community and With the Seeker

Phyllis K. Peterson, 1998

The three conditions of teaching the Cause of God are the science of sociability, purity of deeds and sweetness of speech. I hope each one of you may become confirmed with these three attributes. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Star of the West, Vol. XII, No. 11, p. 177)

Creating Intimacy:

In May of 1994 I attended a meeting at Louhelen Baha'i School that was called by then Counselor Billy Roberts and Auxiliary Board member Curtis Russell. Billy Roberts told us there that individual members of the Universal House of Justice have said that we should create intimacy for best possible teaching results. They said that mankind today hungers for intimacy.

I wanted to know more about intimacy, why mankind hungers for intimacy, since it is a key principle in teaching. What follows is the result of my search for understanding.

We have three basic needs as our identity develops: 1) to be accepted by those who count, 2) a need to be ourselves - authentic, imperfect and undeveloped, and 3) to learn that our identity (what we think, feel, desire, or choose) must be obedient to the Covenant of God. These three needs are fulfilled through intimacy. We crave intimacy. And true intimacy produces a calming of the soul in the presence of an accepting other. That is what humanity is hungering for. And that is the need that only our obedience to Bahá'u'lláh's message can slake.

Erik Erikson and Capuchin Priest Keith Clark define intimacy as the fusing of two or more people and the counterpointing of identities through self-awareness, self-disclosure, and the power of hearing. One person who has an awareness transmits that awareness to another individual through self-disclosure. That individual, after hearing the other, has an increased self-awareness which he or she then discloses in counterpoint fashion, if they trust the individual, and intimacy is created.

Intimacy has been defined, but what is self-disclosure? It is communicated personal self-knowledge, the revealing of identity imperfect and undeveloped; it is the revealing of the individual's reality. Our reality is based upon what we assume to be real, our perspective of how things really are, what we are really like, and what the world is like. It also includes our value system: what we think is right or wrong, good or bad, and the values we think are important and believe that everyone else should adopt.

From the viewpoint of God self-disclosure is revelation. In essence God has been self-disclosing through the millennia by sending us Manifestations who reveal not only knowledge about God and His purpose, but knowledge and verities about humankind. Our place as his creatures is to acknowledge God's Revelation and serve Him by teaching His cause.

"Know thou that he is truly learned who hath acknowledged My Revelation, and drunk from the Ocean of My knowledge, and soared in the atmosphere of My love, and cast away all else besides Me, and taken firm hold on that which hath been sent down from the Kingdom of My wondrous utterance. He, verily, is even as an eye unto mankind, and as the spirit of life unto the body of all creation. Glorified be the All-Merciful Who hath enlightened him, and caused him to arise and serve His great and mighty Cause. Verily, such a man is blessed by the Concourse on high, and by them who dwell within the Tabernacle of Grandeur, who have quaffed My sealed Wine in My Name, the Omnipotent, the All-Powerful." 1

This quotation is an example of the poetry of God's Revelation through Bahá'u'lláh. It's not surprising that God would choose to reveal himself through the language of poetry; because poetry is the language of intimacy. Poetry is the removal of the veils that conceal the Reality or the Identity of the Creator/Poet. Those who are open to the Word of God and are vitally sensitive to righteous beauty will see in God's Revelation, beyond the words, into the intimacy God is drawing us to, compelling us to enter.

There are really only 110,000 true poetry readers across our nation. That's how small the market is for poetry. What does that say about us as a society? Intimacy comes hard in a materialistic society. We are focused on possessions rather than intimate relationships. However, if we consider how many millions of people are drawn to the poetry of God via the scripture of all the great world religions, it becomes apparent that the followers of each of these disciplines are truly attempting intimate union with the Beloved, as have the Concourse on high and those who dwell in the Tabernacle of Grandeur, as mentioned above.

The True Poet writes with abandon, inviting us to share in a state of exultation. If we read with abandonment, we have met the true Lover; and it is frightening, unbalancing. We are in danger of losing our very soul to the bliss of unity, which is a state of powerlessness. We have to become vulnerable and powerless to enter into intimacy with the poet. The natural tendency when fear arises in intimacy is to seek to reestablish the balance in our minds and hearts by returning to what we know and feel secure in - defenses and critical thinking. Then we are comfortable again because we don't feel so vulnerable.

However, if we approach intimacy with the purpose of learning and experiencing that which is foreign and that which is not "fixed," willing to shake in our powerlessness and vulnerability, we will realize that there is no use for rigidity, criticism, backbiting and self-protection in a revolution of love. If we cast them off quickly, we will find our souls reshaped by the reality of the Poet. For to be a poet is to constantly remake our identity and thereby facilitate the remaking of the identity of others through the intimacy of the poem.

I will examine in this work how intimacy, self-disclosure, acknowledgment, and identity all have a bearing on achieving greater unity in our community and with the seeker. An expansion of consciousness regarding the concept of intimacy is necessary to examine some of the needs that are going unmet out of unawareness.

Five Levels/Aspects of Intimacy

Keith Clark says there are five distinct levels of intimacy. The lowest level is information. "I live in Rockford, Illinois. I was born in 1941. I like the color blue." We discover things about each other when we exchange this type of basic information, however, we do not really get to know one another. The next level of intimacy is the sharing of opinions. This exchange can also be impersonal. I may have an opinion about abortion which I cannot share with someone who has absolute pro-life views. Therefore I cannot go beyond the first level with a pro-life person. I would have to trust that I would not be judged and condemned. The third level is sharing feelings. If I feel that a person could care less about my feelings, I would think, "Why bother?" and not make the attempt. It is important to note that inability to share feelings with anyone would indicate an undeveloped identity.

The fourth level is sharing my attitude. This is a pretty high level of trust. I would really be opening myself up to the judgment and criticism with this one, especially with an authoritarian employer. And the fifth and highest level of intimacy is sharing the personal, spiritual level of my faith, that which gives me hope, insight and freedom, which also includes spiritual vulnerability or powerlessness.

Bear in mind that this is just one premise, one tool among many, to help us describe how we get to know one another on different levels of trust. Other people see intimacy not so much a hierarchy of different levels, but as different aspects of the concept of intimacy. Fear and abuse can affect where these aspects appear in an "intimacy continuum" that ranges from "zero trust" to "complete trust." For example, some people in Japan may be reluctant to divulge their home address due to old in-culture prejudices; they would feel vulnerable revealing information, which an American may give freely. So whatever cultural experience you have had, you can examine these aspects from that viewpoint. However we examine it or define it, spiritual vulnerability is still the deepest or highest level of intimacy, for which we would have to exhibit the greatest amount of trust.

In short, we create intimacy through the process of revealing our identity to another human being via these aspects of intimacy; and they in turn reveal their identity to us. Surely, we Baha'is would want to achieve the highest level of intimacy with one another, take pride in one another's accomplishments, and know the beauty of one another's souls. This is at the heart of Bahá'u'lláh's mission to unite the whole world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "Should one soul from amongst the believers meet another, it must be as though a thirsty one with parched lips has reached to the fountain of the water of life, or a lover has met his true beloved. For one of the greatest divine wisdoms regarding the appearance of the holy Manifestations is this: The souls may come to know each other and become intimate with each other."²

Baha'is have spent decades building a foundation through proclamation, consolidation, direct teaching and Firesides. We have joined every club, organization, and association imaginable that supports the principles of our beloved Faith. There is a certain distance among organization members and participants that is practical and necessary for structure and purpose. However, we do not find true intimacy there. We often don't find it in our Baha'I community either. Shoghi Effendi instructs the followers of Bahá'u'lláh: "In their relations amongst themselves as fellow-believers, let them not be content with the mere exchange of cold and empty formalities often connected with the organizing of banquets, receptions, consultative assemblies, and lecture-halls. Let them rather, as equal co-sharers in the spiritual benefits conferred upon them by Bahá'u'lláh, arise and, with the aid and counsel of their local and national representatives, supplement these official functions with those opportunities which only a close and intimate social intercourse can adequately provide."³

Old World Order Barriers to Intimacy

Our society is a strange, fragmented mixture of authoritarian, totalitarian, and autocratic beliefs that we haven't entirely rooted out, mixed with an immature democracy, that makes for an inconsistent intimacy. We're always defending ourselves or judging others by these old world beliefs, systems, and values. They prevent intimacy in the sense that there is separation between those who hold power and those who are ruled and have no power. There is also separation between those who use power and authority with force, which is a paradox because, although there was separation, boundaries were neither respected or honored by these systems of domination.

Intimacy is the ability to enter into connectedness with others without the fear of domination or the desire to dominate. It is the moral integrity to commit to unity of identity collectively without the fear of losing authority of self⁴ or its component power of identity.

Because authority that was unjust has shaped our identities, we still fear domination. A history of force, racism, sexism, nationalism and war has made us distrust intimacy and power. Indeed, until Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, no Prophet has ever defined the powers of humankind. Our challenge now is how to use these powers, the resources of the supreme Talisman, without force, how to establish intimacy without force blocking our efforts, as we slowly and sometimes painfully, exit a paradigm of domination or perceived domination.

We need to be able to clearly see the nuances of force that all are guilty of using without being conscious of it. For these nuances subvert our efforts at intimacy. We need to have "power as a resource", instead of power as force, effectively modeled for us. We find that modeling in the life of Bahá'u'lláh, and stories of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Bahiyyih Khanum. This book will examine that modeling in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings in the hopes that each one of us will become conscious of our defenses and discover the pathway to creating intimacy in the community and with the seeker.

We also need to be taught what it means to make a commitment to consistent "loving." Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book titled, "I Am the Clay," which takes place during the Korean war. It is a wonderful illustration of inconsistent love. A wounded boy is taken in by an elderly childless couple who are in danger of starving with thousands of others during an enforced exodus from their homes. The woman saves the child's life but every page is filled with her husband's inability to make a total commitment to nurturing and loving the boy.

He is a burden, a stranger, taking food out of their mouths; they would be better off without him; they should leave him to die. Then, as the story evolves, the man sees an advantage to saving his life, but with every challenge that arises, he wishes the boy gone. The boy can do nothing right. As he matures, it becomes apparent that he will become a gifted poet, something the man believes is useless for putting food on the table. He criticizes and vilifies the boy endlessly, unwilling to make a total commitment to him.

Then slowly, he begins to waver in his hatred. Now for a paragraph he may see that the boy has goodness, but on the next page he discounts that goodness, reaming him out for the extra burden he's brought into their life. Kushner describes page after page of conflict within the man's heart until finally, at the end of the book, the old man finds himself grieving that this child he has raised alone after the death of his wife, is leaving him to go to school to study poetry. He has made a total commitment to love the young man, and he feels genuine loss in his absence.

This story is an excellent example of how difficult it is to make a total commitment to intimacy with those who are outcast, oppressed and rejected, those who are difficult to love because of their great need. They are "different than us; and the ark upon which we currently sail is soon going to be a testing ground of the strength and the depth of our commitment. Could this be what Bahá'u'lláh meant when He stated in the Tablet of the Holy Mariner, "Wherein the ark of the Cause remaineth motionless even though to its dwellers be declared all divine attributes."⁵

Commitment to intimacy is difficult when we think people unlovable because they are hostile, immoral and uneducated. A story about 'Abdu'l-Bahá provides an effect contrast to Rabbi Kushner's. This one is from "Abbas Effendi: His Life

and Teachings: When the Master came to Akka there lived there a certain man from Afghanistan, an austere and rigid Mussulman. To him the Master was a heretic. He felt and nourished a great enmity towards the Master, and roused up others against him. When opportunity offered in gatherings of the people, as in the Mosque, he denounced him with bitter words.

"This man," he said to all, "is an impostor. Why do you speak to him? Why do you have dealings with him?" And when he passed the Master on the street he was careful to hold his robe before his face that his sight might not be defiled.

"Thus did this Afghan. The Master, however, did thus: The Afghan was poor and lived in a mosque; he was frequently in need of food and clothing. The Master sent him both. These he accepted, but without thanks. He fell sick. The Master took him a physician, food, medicine, money. These, also, he accepted; but as he held out one hand that the physician might take his pulse, with the other he held his cloak before his face that he might not look upon the Master. For twenty-four years the Master continued his kindnesses and the Afghan persisted in his enmity. Then at last one day the Afghan came to the master's door, and fell down, penitent and weeping, at His feet.

"Forgive me, sir!" he cried. "For twenty-four years I have done evil to you. For twenty-four years you have done good to me. Now I know that I have been in the wrong." The master bade him rise, and they became friends."6

We need to look at these two stories very closely and see that the heart of the old man in Korea and the heart of the Afghan were developing the ability to love in an inconsistent, haphazard way, until they came to believe their hostility was blocking their ability to love completely. I know I have hostile remnants of both old men in my heart, too. I monitor my hostile thoughts daily. They are there, close to the surface; and they can prevent me from entering into a vulnerable intimacy if I don't remain conscious.

Somehow we must awaken to the fact that hostility is born of anger at injustice, that the root cause of immorality is ignorance, that insatiable need is precipitated by extreme deprivation, and continue walking sure-footed into a vulnerable intimacy, conscious that we may experience pain, rejection, hostility, or attack. There is no other way. "Thou seest the hearts are filled with hate, and to overlook is Thine, O Thou Concealer of the sins of the worlds. When the swords flash, go forward! When the shafts fly, press onward! O Thou Sacrifice of the worlds!"7,8

Intimacy and Identity

"It (intimacy) is the deepest personal need we have, and it is a spiritual need. We long to come together with other human beings so that our spirits touch and our identities fuse without being lost in each other. In intimacy the expanse which separates us from every other human being is bridged and the separateness, the insufficiency, the neediness which we inherit from our birth is temporarily alleviated."9

If intimacy is a key principle of teaching the Faith, so is an understanding of identity for we cannot create intimacy without expressing our identity. Since one of the definitions of the word "integrity" is firm adherence to a code of moral values, it has special application to the power of identity. "Unity of identity" is being able to integrate or form into a unified whole all the component parts of identity: What you think, feel, believe, fantasize, speak, are, desire and do, with obedience to the Covenant of Baha'u'llay governing each of these components.

Four Barriers to Intimacy

Fixed identity, multiple identities, conflict of identity, and a disempowered identity, are the first four barriers to intimacy. Some people think that identity is fixed. This is an unconscious assumption that keeps us from really opening ourselves up to not only strangers in our own culture but people from other cultural and religious backgrounds. However, if we understand that identity or the self is a power of the soul, then we can conclude that it can continue developing in this world and the next.

How is "unity of identity" different than a "fixed identity?" A fixed identity is not open to multiple perspectives, and often believes that to even investigate another culture is to commit identity suicide. Blind adherence to traditions, unexamined, unquestioned hands down a fixed identity. Closed groups, closed religions, exclusive organizations have fixed identities.

The fixed, immutable self who is stable and enduring has no need of tolerance because he or she does not enter into community or relationships beyond the traditional or approved. She has a guaranteed-for-a-lifetime identity and total stability because her identity is fixed. However, he or she may be very angry, resentful and may manipulate and control to sustain the stability. Unity of identity regards self as a process that welcomes and requires fresh insights, new experiences and opportunities for tolerance and flexibility in relationships, allowing for multiple perspectives.

Another barrier to intimacy, both within the Faith and without, is that multitudes of people are operating from multiple identities. I'm not talking about Multiple Personality Disorder, but the tendency to observe and indiscriminately reflect without consciousness and discernment another person's identity or a fictional concept of identity.

'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "Let all be set free from the multiple identities that were born of passion and desire and in the oneness of their love for God find a new way of life."¹⁰ One interpretation of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá is saying here is that these "multiple identities" with their multiple desires and passions, need to fix their inmost true selves to Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to find oneness in plurality and purpose.

Individual Baha'is are still populated with a plethora of identities, each having their own conflicting emotions, passions and goals. It is because we have the capacity to mirror whatever is placed in front of us, including other identities, whether on television or in books or in real life, that it is possible to have multiple identities. We mirror indiscriminately in an authoritarian (becoming automaton traditionalists) and democratic (free to be whatever we want to be) society, because, respectively, the power of choice was in the hands of an external authority, and because we thought democracy meant we had freedom to mirror cart blanc and develop every potential we have indiscriminately. Potential and gifts carry responsibility.

To be a human being is to do this. Children do it; it's the way they learn. They put on a cape at 3 years old and suddenly they are Superman. Here's the danger: My three year old cousin put on a cape and jumped from a two story building because he really thought he was Superman. He had his identity as a child, as Superman, as Mighty Mouse, as any television figure or storybook figure to which he'd ever been exposed. He also had a broken leg!

Adolescents do it, too. Look at the Madonna wannabes of a few years back; and the followers of every guru who are ready to jump off a building, trying on a unique, exciting identity at a moment's notice. I've described it as the Mirroring Principle in my work titled, "The Role of the Mirroring Principle and the Word of God in Recovery from Child Abuse."

And now, on my on-line service, they're advertising: "Be someone else for a change! The Improve Games of Persona!" Women and men who fall victim to multiple identity may be saying, "What's just one more role out of the multitude I'm expected to fulfill?" Is it any wonder that those who are rewarded for conformity would strain at their tether, break it and escape into doing something, being someone exciting? As far as intimacy is concerned, we can only be intimate with the true self that lies deep in our soul.

It is the person who has developed multiple identities in the old world order who eventually crashes and destroyed by the many directions in which he is pulled. The balance of power and powerlessness within him careens out of control. However, the self in process, that has achieved unity of identity has a mooring called "service" that can stabilize and balance the power of the individual.

Bahá'u'lláh has place volition back in our hands! Make no mistake, each of these fragments of multiple identities have the capacity of emotion, reasoning, desire, evaluation, criticism and judgment; and the inconsistency of our actions and behavior stems from the fact that our powers are dissipated and confused because we cannot have a clear, unclouded perception upon which to base discernment, and then to exercise volition. No wonder there is so many prayers for detachment in the prayer book!

The more we seek unity of identity through a closer walk with the Writings, prayer and daily bringing ourselves to account, the more our multiple identities, in fact the only identities we have ever known, whether sexualized, dependent/passive, frivolous, bold, adventuresome-without-limits, potential-seeking-without-discernment, materialistic-without-limits, violent, victim, or gender-confused, will be set aside; and our true identity, our inmost true self, remolded, reconstructed, regenerated, will be empowered to step forth in unity with others.

The inmost true self has been crowded out by these passion thirsting and passion directed identities and cannot work consistently toward developing the gifts that are important to community and an ever-advancing civilization.

Bahá'u'lláh strongly urges us, "Tear asunder, in My Name, the veils that have grievously blinded your vision, and, through the power born of your belief in the unity of God, scatter the idols of vain imagination. Enter, then, the holy paradise of the good-pleasure of the All-Merciful. Sanctify your souls from whatsoever is not of God, and taste ye the sweetness of rest within the pale of His vast and mighty revelation, and beneath the shadow of His supreme and infallible authority. Suffer not yourselves to be wrapt in the dense veils of your selfish desires, inasmuch as I have perfected in everyone of you My creation, so that the excellence of My handiwork may be fully revealed unto men."¹¹

We can taste the sweetness of rest only in a state of oneness, for which 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls us to pray: "O Thou God! Manifest and make evident the signs of Thy oneness which have been deposited in all the realities of life."¹² This is the antidote for the multiple identities through which we exhaust ourselves.

The servant or handmaiden, infused with the love of God, abnegates the confusing multiple desires which is the individual, frenetic dance of "self" and, in divine acquiescence, while bearing the individual gifts and treasures of their

souls, disappear into the greater dance of community. This is an illustration of how the individuality of the West integrates with the collectivism of the East.

A non-integrated identity can keep us from teaching effectively and from bringing a wholeness of identity to those with whom we want to share the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. A non-integrated identity can also be called a conflict of identity, the third barrier to intimacy. Our behavior conflicts with our beliefs; our beliefs conflict with our feelings; our desires conflict with what we profess with our speech; our fantasies conflict with the principles of the Baha'i Faith. We are truly in a conflict of identity, because there is not a fundamental agreement in the form of a stabilizing code of moral values, between all of these interdependent and varied components of our identity.

In other words, we can't be considered whole until all of the component parts of our identity are unified firmly to a code of moral values. Therein lies another meaning or layer for the principle of unity that runs through Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. It is when we, individually, have unity of identity, integrity of identity, that we can achieve oneness or unity collectively which allows us to achieve singleness of aim, purpose or action within ourselves and in community with others. And this would allow us to consistently achieve the intimacy we are called to create.

And the fourth barrier to intimacy is a disempowered identity. We're afraid we are going to lose something of ourselves - that mysterious, elusive something is power and thereby balance. Our psychological balance is maintained by our power, our authority of self. For example when we abdicate the power of volition in a relationship, the relationship becomes unbalanced, one-sided. When we abdicate the power of reasoning and the power of intellectual investigation of truth, we are in a relationship in which we cannot achieve growth and development.

The highest level of intimacy - spiritual vulnerability - is impossible if we have been disempowered. Each attempt at unity and intimacy would result in the abdication and denial of our own powers. What a tragic risk! We would no longer trust. The self would become reclusive, estranged and isolated.

Criticism: the Sixth Barrier to Intimacy

Power can be taken from us through criticism of our inmost true self. Criticism destroys or fragments the identity of the individual. I also believe criticism is one of the root causes of fixed, multiple and conflicted identities.

There's another thing criticism does. Criticism destroys the relational, the community. This means criticism actually helps to create the "individualist," who could say: "I offer this inmost true self, the only one I have to offer. If you reject it by criticizing it, I have nothing else but fantasy or a false self to give you, and thereby remove my inmost true self from community and hide it. Because I remove myself from the community, I must create or adopt values and rules for myself that are individualist instead of collectivist. I have to create my own rules and values, because the mind is a rule demanding instinct."

If we define relationship in oneness as a principle by which two or more persons are identified and regarded as one and the same; or a connection between persons that arises out of the natural ties of the oneness of humanity, then criticism is a breach in that oneness; it severs the tie that binds.

Bahá'u'lláh forbids us to criticize other religions, because criticism is a breach of the covenant of oneness. "We have erewhile declared - and Our Word is the truth - "Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship." Whatsoever hath led the children of men to shun one another, and hath caused dissensions and divisions among them, hath, through the revelation of these words, been nullified and abolished." 13

We have to heal the parts of our identity and community that have been criticized instead of empowered in order to achieve intimacy. This is why a thorough understanding of identity is important and why I have used pointedly descriptive language to define identity. We have to root out the elements of criticism, become conscious of criticism of ourselves and others, so that our inmost true self, our identity made in the image of God, the seat of our gifts, will be regenerated and step forth fearlessly in service to His Cause.

For example, if we criticize another human being, we are in conflict with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and we prevent intimacy. We may impatiently discount people's authentic stage of development; our criticism becomes our opinion of the other; we then have feelings of hurt and an attitude of estrangement, rather than drawing them into our inner circle of intimate friends.

During a deepening on the Investigation of Reality at Green Acre, these five steps were suggested for the improvement of difficult relationships:

1. Pray sincerely for the person involved.
2. See yourself as a servant of God - praying for the person involved.

3. See the other person as a servant of God, and keep praying for the person involved as a servant of that servant of God.
4. Do acts of pure-hearted service on behalf of that person, for that person, or in that person's name - either openly or secretly.
5. If after accomplishing these steps, you feel it is wise to speak to the person openly about resolving your differences, the way is prepared to do so. In many cases the differences will have already resolved themselves. In other cases it may take more time to get to this stage. "Be patient, for Thy Lord is patient."

We cannot both criticize and serve them. We cannot criticize them and share our Faith and expect them to become spiritually vulnerable in the highest level of intimacy. They are diametrically opposed behaviors. This is where our behavior conflicts with our beliefs. Criticism dissipates intimacy. So does seeing others as different. And discounting another's life experience or reality by neglecting to acknowledge it also dissipates intimacy.

In order for the Baha'i community to grow, we have to rise to a new level of intimacy and a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of criticism since fear of criticism leads us to self-concealment and our criticism of seekers leads them to self-conceal. Criticism is often socially acceptable, carefully justified ill-will that covers a lifetime of smoldering resentment and bitterness that has never been made conscious. We see the behavior of others through the mental filter of our bitterness, resentment, and prejudice and we criticize. Criticism is a veil, a mental filter that shuts us out from the beauty of God's servants.

And if we spiritually mature Baha'is think we don't participate in it, all we have to do is monitor our thoughts and impatience while we are driving our cars. Criticism in a car of the other driver is socially acceptable. Try as we may, we still erupt unexpectedly at the person who is coming his or her hair instead of responding when the light turns green. Or we may become extremely impatient if they slow down in front of us and we cannot determine why. Criticism is instantaneous, non-reflective. Like passive aggressiveness, this criticism masks our unconscious desire for vengeance or restitution for a past injustice. Constructive criticism can also be used to carefully justify our hidden motives.

But we are called by Bahá'u'lláh, to "Hear no evil, and see no evil, abase not thyself, neither sigh and weep. Speak no evil, that thou mayest not hear it spoken unto thee, and magnify not the faults of others that thine own faults may not appear great; and wish not the abasement of anyone, that thine own abasement be not exposed. Live then the days of thy life, that are less than a fleeting moment, with thy mind stainless, the heart unsullied, thy thoughts pure, and thy nature sanctified..."¹⁴

We have to "resist the natural tendency to let our attention dwell on the faults and failings of our own. Each of us is immeasurably far from being 'perfect as our heavenly father is perfect' and the task of perfecting our own life and character is one that requires all our attention, our will power and energy. If we allow our attention and energy to be taken up in efforts to keep others right and remedy their faults, we are wasting precious time."¹⁵

The Roots of Criticism

What do we know of criticism? We know that it is inherently negative. We know that it is finding fault with another and forming judgments; that it originates in the hierarchical systems of autocracy, authoritarianism, totalitarianism and patritism, in which the superior judges the subject or the inferior. The one who criticized was higher in station than the recipient of the criticism.¹⁶

If you have been raised in an environment in which an authority figure has criticized you in any of the following 10 ways, you will have insight into the self-concealment of the oppressed.¹⁷ You will also have insight into your own strong desire to self-conceal and avoid intimacy.

1. All-or-nothing thinking: Your parent said, "You have to be everything I hoped for in a child or I am a failure and you are rebellious and disobedient." This is perfectionism. It is unjust criticism because each person has a right to his or her own identity, the seat of the gifts they have been endowed with.
2. Over-generalizations: The authority figure said, "You always rebel! You never listen to me!" This type of criticism caused you to feel very defensive because you knew you didn't always rebel and sometimes you did listen. This was unjust criticism. Be alert to the times you refer to the behavior of others as "he always," "she never."
3. Disqualifying the positive: The authority figure disqualified all the positive qualities of your character and behavior. This type of criticism taught you to be self-critical.
4. Jumping to conclusions: Without any facts at all and because generations of family members were denied the right to independently search for truth, your parent's habit was to jump to conclusions with little or no details as they criticized your choices and behavior.
5. Mental filter: Your parent had a mental filter that saw the image of his or her own negative life experience superimposed on your true identity and character. He or she then criticized you unjustly as they saw character traits in you that were simply not there. They were a projection of their own unconscious, unprocessed, and unresolved issues.
6. Magnification-minimization/Catastrophizing: Your parent magnified your faults and minimized your good qualities as he or she criticized you. They also catastrophized that the worst was going to happen to you if you made a mistake.

You may have internalized the tendency to catastrophize upon trying something new, criticizing yourself every step of the way. We also criticize and catastrophize LSA decisions.

7. "Should" statements: The authority figure criticized you by telling you, "You should be a better daughter/son than that to me because of all I have done for you." You "should" and you "must" are often used during criticism of ourselves. And of course we extend these "should not" or "shoulds" to other Baha'is

8. Emotional reasoning: The authority figure facilitated emotional reasoning by shaming and guiltting you while criticizing you. The result of this is that when you feel guilty today for something that couldn't possibly be your fault, you believe it is true based on the way you feel. You are reasoning with your feelings.

9. Labeling: Your parent criticized you by attaching a negative label to your identity. "You are fat, lazy, ungrateful, retarded, stupid, rebellious, disobedient, worthless, selfish, slow, etc." You may use these word to internally criticize yourself or others.

10. Personalizing: A parent made you personally responsible for their loss of temper, the family falling apart, their illness, their divorce, their loss of status, thus criticizing you and blaming you for whatever went wrong. This is the reason that you self-criticize and self-blame internally. The pattern is thus set to criticize and blame others as well.

These ten cognitive distortions, reframed from Dr. David Burns book "Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy" 18 are at the root of why many criticize themselves and others. We must be conscious of the origination of these critical thoughts in order to be free of them. Since a majority of us have been criticized in these ten ways, it is understandable that we have tension and anxiety that comes up for us when we are criticized. We feel that it is unjust, and it is because it is a distortion of the truth. Whenever we give ourselves the freedom to speak what we think is the whole truth about what we see without loving discernment, there we will find a lack of love as well as a lack of truth.

Because there is a larger picture which includes variables and nuances of both capacity and lack of capacity, development, lack of development, family baggage, lack of consciousness, youth, age, health, internal intention and God's will, rather than simply right or wrong. Actually, the truth is not always manifest. Sometimes it is hidden and can only be found by showing grace, love, courtesy and wisdom during intimacy with those whom we're tempted to criticize.

The Sixth Barrier to Intimacy

Criticism: The Roots of Gossip and Backbiting

It stands to reason that if we were not criticizing others, we would have nothing about which to gossip and backbite. The National Spiritual Assembly of Canada addressed the issue of backbiting and criticism in a letter written in 1969:

"We want to speak to you this month on a subject, which despite its negative aspects, is of very great importance in the development of a Baha'i community. This subject is the widespread social disease which Bahá'u'lláh calls "backbiting."

The great difficulty in all such matters is to "see with His eyes" and not with your own. As the Physician of the soul, the Manifestation of God not only re-creates moral values, but sets these values in a new scale of priorities which correspond to our deepest spiritual needs. It is to be expected that this scale of values will be different from the ones in which non-Baha'i society has trained our individual consciences. Our spiritual development depends on our willingness to gradually detach ourselves from the standards of the past, however eternal or "right" these standards may seem, and to make the new standard a part of our inmost beings.

Most of you are familiar with the extremely severe words which Bahá'u'lláh uses in prohibiting backbiting. He says that it is a spiritual blight which "quenches the light of the heart and extinguishes the life of the soul." There are only one or two other subjects about which He spoke with such severity. What we must bear in mind is that these words are not a threat; rather they represent the urgent advice of the Divine Physician Who alone "perceiveth the disease and prescribeth the remedy." He is telling us that, whatever the various spiritual diseases of our times may be, there are some diseases that are fatal, and our greatest danger lies in ignorance.

It is not only the individual who is threatened by backbiting. In a society like the Baha'i community, which is based on unity, the effect of continued criticism of others is to destroy the very essence of community life. The power of the Baha'i Cause is that, out of love for Bahá'u'lláh, we willingly suspend our inbred suspicion of our fellow men. By doing so, we permit our fellow believers to become the spiritual beings they really are. It is this process which backbiting attacks. Like certain drugs which are said to affect the genetic code within the cells of the body, backbiting dissolves the mutual trust on which community life depends.

Perhaps the most damaging of all the many forms which backbiting takes is criticism of Baha'i Institutions. The faith of the believers in their National and Local Assemblies is the breath of life to these central organs of the community. Ultimately, our success in establishing Bahá'u'lláh's Kingdom on earth will depend on our capacity to commit ourselves heart and soul to the decisions of these divinely-guided institutions.

Obviously, we cannot hope to cure ourselves overnight, particularly not in a society like the present one. Nor does the answer lie in a campaign of mutual censure. Rather, we are called upon to begin gently, patiently, lovingly, but firmly and persistently to train our private consciences.

Essentially, backbiting is criticism of others. It is irrelevant whether the criticism is true or untrue. It is equally irrelevant whether or not the criticism was maliciously intended. What causes the damage is criticism itself."19

It is reasonable to assume that since the 10 cognitive distortions are the basis for the negative criticism that was modeled for us, that we haven't yet eradicated all the traces of it out of our own thinking and belief system in respect to the way we evaluate others. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "The people therefore, must be set completely free from their old patterns of thought, that all their attention may be focused upon these new principles, for these are the light of this time and the very spirit of this age."20

We have to uproot this belief system of criticism out of our being; our hope to attract new seekers depends upon it. Criticism may be the way of many societies but it is not 'Abdu'l-Bahá's way. We have to have a clear picture of what can replace it.

New World Order Substitutes for Criticism

As criticism has an old world order definition and is an old world order experience, it is necessary that a new definition of how to assist others in their transformation, and how to correct children without creating fear and diminishing courage, come out of the Baha'I Writings.

In my research I found that the word "criticize" comes from the Greek word "Kritikos," which originates in the word "Kritane," which means to discern. Here's where I had that "Aha!" experience. The "power of discernment," one of the powers of the supreme Talisman, is mentioned in the Baha'i Writings. I define the power of discernment as being able to see and distinguish the difference between good and evil, degrees of perfection and imperfection, light and darkness, and truth and error, and being able to use this discernment to make choices that reflect spiritual values or the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. 'Abdu'l-Bahá confirms this concept, "...the helpless masses, who know nothing of religion or its laws and basic principles and therefore have no power of discrimination, [i.e. discernment]."21

When you are denied the facts or given false information or if others make your choices for you, you are unable to develop your power of discernment. Discernment must be fostered, guided and modeled externally throughout childhood until this power is transferred to us as young adults. We make discernment ours through reflection and will, and often through trial and error. Then it becomes an internal power or process.

To replace the old world order concept of criticism I propose using the "power of discernment," which would be combined with these seven components:

1. Power of Discernment
2. Self-disclosure
3. Enter their reality: Powerlessness, Courtesy and Trust
4. Listening - Reframing - Magnanimity
5. Acknowledgment
6. Righteous praise
7. Become a servant to them: provide nurturing experiences

Here's what the power of discernment does: It creates a tranquil consciousness in the hearer because it is offered with praise instead of judgment or disapproval. It confirms us in our true path by helping us focus on our internal intention that is connected with our gifts. It acknowledges the skill that is manifest to create awareness of the skill that is hidden. It looks at the need that is manifest in unconscious self-destructive behavior to make conscious the power that is hidden or undeveloped. It is encouragement of inherent but hidden abilities and powers. It creates expansion of consciousness and fearlessness.

I am reminded of the time that a member of the Universal House of Justice wrote to me about a manuscript I was still developing. I felt fearless in the presence of his examination of a concept that clearly needed to be rethought! There was no shaming criticism! I felt gratitude instead of shame. I saw a direction in which to channel my energy and thoughts, rather than feeling as though I had missed the mark and the desired approval. When someone uses the power of discernment with us, it emboldens, energizes and empowers. It results in certitude. It knowingly and with courtesy separates authentic developmentally delayed behavior from the excellence that is hidden within the person. Therein lies the hope to help others to manifest and firmly establish their inherent nobility. (I am not my behavior. It is not the whole of me.)

Imagine two types of coaches. One is the stereotypical Little League coach who vilifies his young player, shaming him and disqualifying every positive thing he has done, magnifying his errors, because of his personal interest in competition and winning, and his "all-or-nothing" Knute Rockney thinking that says, "Anything less than winning is failure!"

Now imagine the type of coach that is a true servant to the athlete. The servant/coach praises the player and uses his discernment to create expanded consciousness of every movement of hand or foot, acknowledging every positive skill, focusing the athlete's attention on every positive power because that's the behavior he knows it is vital for her to concentrate on and repeat. She has certitude of where to improve. She runs and jumps and turns and moves with encouragement.

I have a young Baha'I friend who gets a government check monthly because he has a disability. He is overdrawn at the bank. Imagine his disbelief and desperation when he discovers that the check he deposited after 3 PM on Friday was not credited to his account until Monday! When he challenges the bank, he is told that he should manage his account better, implying that the error is entirely his because of a deficiency within him. The clerk could have said that "sometimes the rules and operating procedures of the bank may seem unjust, how can we assist you in understanding them better in future transactions?" Or, "this has happened to others, too, and here's what you can do next time to protect yourself."

Instead he is criticized and takes it hard; he is anxious and cannot share it with his family because in the past some of them have tried to institutionalize him because they thought him retarded and incapable. This is clearly unjust; we can serve this Baha'I by acknowledging the injustice and his anxiety. We can serve him by disclosing the fact that this, too, happens to people who do not have disabilities, it happens to us! We can praise him unconditionally for the efforts he puts into keeping his checkbook balanced.

However, these may be the thoughts that run concurrent to our uncertain desire to acknowledge, enter his reality, self-disclose and serve him: "Am I going to have to bail him out? Is he really competent? He should go to his family anyway; they can't be that shaming. This isn't really my responsibility. He shouldn't spend so much money." Our identity is clearly divided between a belief system that is based on old world order principles of shaming and criticizing as opposed to serving with acknowledgment, self-disclosure, praise, and the power of discernment. When we extend a hand equally to another person in obedience to the Covenant, we no longer act superior. We achieve an identity as a servant of God. This is confirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in this quotation: "My name is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My reality is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My identity is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My qualification is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My praise is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Thralldom to the Blessed Perfection is my glorious and refulgent diadem and servitude to all the human race is my perpetual religion." (World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 139) Again, He admonishes, "Follow the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in servitude to the Holy and exalted Threshold." (Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 164) And who can ignore or forget the heartfelt power of one of the songs we sing: "Look at me. Follow me. Be as I am."

Self-Disclosure, a Step toward Intimacy

Self-disclosure is a necessary step toward achieving intimacy and unity because it creates self-awareness in both the listener and the speaker.

Baha'is must commit to sharing the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Message through self-disclosure, knowing that disclosure begets disclosure. It means letting others know us as we really are in the context of an ongoing dialogue that builds trust. For example I recently shared a personal story with a Baha'i who feels extremely exposed every time he enters a family setting. He feels drawn into unhealthy family dynamics at holidays; and he is angry that he slips into old patterns of behavior automatically; he cannot understand how it happens.

I told him that after opening presents with my family of origin one Christmas, it was time for my grandson Hunter to go to his mother's family celebration. He would not go. He could not be convinced to cooperate in putting on his coat. In my childhood, manipulation of children was modeled and approved of by authority. I have never manipulated my grandson in all the years that I have taken care of him. However, I was surrounded by family members, had entered into family bantering, had taken my place and taken up my role in my family of origin. In a moment of unconscious relaxation I was pulled into the family pattern.

Hunter had received a sword of which he was very proud for Christmas; and I said, "Hunter, maybe there's another sword for you at Nana's house." He immediately wanted his coat on. I tricked him and manipulated him and felt great shame. I was devastated by my behavior. I shared this story with my friend because I wanted him to see that someone he cared for and respected could also be pulled into family patterns.

We have to be willing to show ourselves with all our warts and blemishes rather than conceal our imperfections. If Baha'is hid their authentic anger or authentic immaturity from those with whom they want to create intimacy, then they are actually blocking the process of intimacy that they desire. We simply must stop portraying ourselves as more than human. Portraying ourselves as less than human is not the answer either. We can't hid our "being" anyway. Spontaneous self-disclosure by the Baha'i is a necessary pre-condition for authentic self-disclosure by the person with whom we are seeking to establish intimacy. If we have no fault or imperfection, or similar experience of reality to disclose, we place ourselves in a position of superiority and you can bet that others who are seeking to improve their lives are going to feel less than!

To self-disclose is to open the doors of perception within the other person. They receive our reality and it creates an expansion of their consciousness. And as the door of perception is opened, they dare for a moment to believe that their voice is important, that their voice will be heard, that their identity will be accepted instead of discounted, or ignored, or disempowered.

When we are not accepted as children, we become estranged from our identity, or inmost true self. Out of a need for self-protection, we then, practice self-concealment and remain isolated even in the company of others. Self-disclosure, in the presence of an accepting and trusted other, creates self-awareness that was formerly discounted and forbidden. The new self-awareness when it is acknowledged and affirmed by others and the Writings, becomes a bridge to like our consciousness to experience and enable our identity to heal, which is in reality the integration of its fragmented facets. It also becomes a bridge for the chasm that separates us from the inmost true self of another. Teaching/sharing with intimacy, true intimacy, therefore, heals us and transforms us.

Without that self-awareness that comes through self-disclosure, which is the expansion of consciousness 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls us to, we remain isolated even though we teach the Faith, even though we may be on a Local Spiritual Assembly. There is no expansion of consciousness without the power of speech.

What will it take for me to disclose the mystery that is my identity or my reality to you, and you, in turn, to disclose your mystery to me? It takes risk. This deepest level of intimacy can be a communion between souls.

As children we may have been taught to hide our needs, our wants, our beliefs, or true identity, our feelings, and our thoughts for fear of having our reality discounted, criticized, and rejected. However, we cannot understand each other unless the life experiences we have had are taken into account. We have known that our very reality and beingness has often been traded for a rewarded conformity, teaching us to be indifferent to our own identity, our intrinsic intention and our needs.

The difficulty of "teaching" the Faith results in the fact that when we "teach" we practice concealment of our identity. When we "share" the Faith with another, we practice self-disclosure. I have been told by a Persian woman that the Persian word that is used to encourage us to "teach" the Faith, translates more into the meaning of "share." We certainly don't teach our life experiences. But we share how our life experience has been enriched by the teachings of God, by Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, by God's own self-disclosure. What kind of self-disclosure creates self-awareness in another?

- * Disclosing how you are distinguished from others, such as your parents, spouse, children, or friends, by attributes of your own.
- * Disclosing what is important to you as a separate identity with your own internal intention.
- * Disclosing your true self without hypocrisy or constraint and being accepted for who you are not what you can do for the other.
- * Disclosing who you are and where you fit into this world by revealing the hopes, dreams and goals you have, the sorrows you have experienced, the beliefs you have, the knowledge you have sought, the questions you have about life in this world and the next, and the spiritual truths you have discovered.
- * You can share the lessons of obedience you have learned, what causes you pain, what makes you grateful, what makes you feel angry and how you resolve your anger.
- * You can even disclose to trusted friend mistakes you wish you hadn't made as long as it doesn't become the type of confession that would cause you humiliation.
- * We can share with the seeker the fruits of our quest for an expansion of consciousness and for a fuller life.
- * We can share how Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation makes life more meaningful for us.
- * We can also share how it has shattered our limited perception of the world at large and how it has challenged us to transcend social and cultural training to welcome those of other cultures, colors and religions; that it is from God's new Revelation that we have found ways to reinvent our identity; and guidance to fulfill that new invention.
- * We can share how each expansion of consciousness we've experienced has caused us to re-evaluate all the principles, truths and knowledge we had acquired up to that point. So that then we had to ask yet again: How do I want to live, how do I want to be, how do I want to use my time? How can I stop participating in an established class structure that is resistant to change? How can I liberate myself from the bondage of habit, cultural pressure and the past, of only one mode of perceiving and experiencing others and expressing my identity?
- * We will be doing a lot to share the critical moment of discovering that our perspective is totally different than that of another and still another; and that there may be truth in all three perspectives, which means that all three must be honored, revered and acknowledged. All of this is self-disclosure that can lead the other person into a greater self-awareness as he or she examines his or her own identity and life experiences.

As God, our Creator, wished to make Himself known to men, we also, as His creation, made in His image, have an inner, compelling desire to make ourselves known to each other. We do this through the power of utterance, which

causes our power of identity to grow and develop. We self-disclose information about ourselves, our opinions, our feelings and attitudes and Faith (the five levels of intimacy); and through that self-disclosure we discover the mystery that we are. "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom." (Bahá'u'lláh, GL, p. 260) Those who avoid being known are deprived of the mystery that lies within them. They are self-alienated. Think how powerfully God has sought to be known through the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, as well as the former Prophets He has sent.

Powerful as the Baha'i Writings are, and as important as they are to attracting the seeker, we cannot create intimacy without self-disclosure. Self-disclosure nurtures self-awareness in the other if a total commitment is perceived through your behavior. Otherwise there is no safety to support self-awareness. Self-awareness is perceiving the truth of our "self," our identity, undeveloped and imperfect. That's a pretty scary thing to perceive when you're with someone who doesn't care about you, hasn't made a total commitment to you, and who may discount the life-experience of others in your presence.

There is a condition for disclosure, however, and that is that others respect our privacy until we decide when and where and to whom we will disclose more of our authentic reality.

Entering the Reality of Another: The Third Component of Intimacy

Often times we shut down other people who are not adept at using their power of speech, because we don't know how to enter their reality. We attribute their lack of receptivity to "their" not being ready yet, or as being "their test," instead of looking within and bringing ourselves to account for our insensitivity. Baha'is are great debaters, but our power of speech may actually overwhelm them. If we enter their reality preprogrammed with our own agenda, ignoring their unique life experience, cultural background and quote circles around them, we will also be ignoring their critical emotional needs.

We have to understand the spiritual drama that is ongoing in the lives of each of the seekers coming into the Faith, whether they have been oppressed, whether they are in crisis. We have to be willing to enter and participate in that drama, their reality, with its accompanying belief system, without criticism and judgment of it. This belief system will not go away simply because they read the Writings and pray. It need daily intimacy, daily contact, daily establishing of trust, daily risk, daily follow-up, daily commitment, daily affirmation of their inherent worth.

If we make an attempt at unity and then walk out of the spiritual drama in judgment of the honest and vast, uncontrollable spectrum of life experience across widely different peoples, cultures, times and places, then we cling to our ignorance, habits and traditions, forgoing the knowledge of God and humankind. And we are the poorer.

This is what I mean by vast, uncontrollable spectrum of reality. Answer the following questions:

1. Can you enter the reality of a person with a disability without offending them?
2. Could you enter the reality of a man or woman who chose prostitution as a way of acting out his or her childhood trauma?
3. Can you enter the reality of someone who has been sexually abused?
4. Someone who has suffered racial abuse?
5. Someone who is suffering from addictions that include alcohol, drugs, sex, work, exercise or money?
6. Can you enter the reality of someone who expresses their anger passive/aggressively?
7. Do you know how to set a boundary with someone who is passive/aggressive when you are tempted to give up and abandon him or her?
8. Do you know how to enter the reality of someone who is angry without getting defensive, converting, fixing, or judging and becoming totally logical to try to control the situation in order to "help" them change?
9. Do you know how to listen to someone who keeps repeating the same lifetime grudges everytime you meet with him or her without losing patience?
10. Do you know how to instantly help someone save face?
11. Can you show grace at irreverence, or reverence that is less reverent than yours, or disorderly reverence, or absolute lack of knowledge of worship?
12. Can you sit outside a Feast or Fireside with someone who is terrified of community; and the front porch is the closest they can come to participating?
13. Can you be alert to their hyper-vigilance and discreetly ask "What's wrong?" "How can I help you right now?" "What do you need right now?" instead of ignoring their anxiety?
14. Can you ask them, "How did you come to that belief?" and listen for an hour without offering an alternate belief?
15. Can you tolerate the kind of inconsistent commitment that changes its mind every 15 minutes so you never know from day to day what kind of reception you're going to have when you go to pick them up for a Feast or Fireside?
16. Will you be willing to take them home immediately if they change their mind about being there 15 minutes after they arrive at Feast or Fireside?
17. Can you smell body odor, bad breath and house odor, up-close-in-your-face, for ten years without criticizing?

There is no preconceived formula that will meet all the needs of the questions I've posed here. However, it would behoove every community to sit down to consult on these and similar questions so that we would be prepared for the uncontrollable spectrum of life experience that is soon to enter our community.

I read this aloud to a Baha'i who tends toward estrangement. He began to relate his experience to me of being shut down and turned off by members of our community who judged him and criticized him without ever establishing the kind of intimacy that would have allowed them to really know him. What he had to say, I believe, has importance to our preparation for a steady influx of believers. He speaks with the voice and life experience of someone who has been traumatized because he had a disability, was treated as though he was an embarrassment to certain members of his family, and had his power of choice withheld from him until he was in his 30's.

"When I first came into the Faith, it had a calming influence on me. I was attracted to this loving community. They showered attention on me; and my heart expanded in pride and gratitude that I was accepted at last. That was the honeymoon period. I came with a unique set of problems that members of my community had not yet experienced, not unlike the thousands of people who are waiting to enter the Faith. I had never developed an identity beyond the "baseball/football/sports" identity that my family accepted and approved of. I could talk sports. I could explode in anger; I certainly had a vocabulary, but being severely disempowered, not knowing my true identity and deathly afraid of self-disclosure, I could write and speak only indirectly and symbolically (unconsciously) for fear that I would be criticized, punished, teased mercilessly, laughed at and controlled. I spoke indirectly and evasively in order to avoid conflict.

I did not take direction well and I have a stubborn streak that I used to be ashamed of, until I found out that my stubbornness was directly related to my being severely over-controlled. I wasn't accepted by my family unless I was a carbon copy of my brothers and sisters. I couldn't even cognitively understand this or verbally express it until about my 6th or 7th year as a Baha'i.

Intimacy, unity and community were a terrifying experience to me. I soon found out that my unique problems were misunderstood and felt that they were unwanted in my community. I perceived that I was wanted to be a carbon copy of all the other Baha'is and that they wanted me to hurry up and change, hurry up and become spiritually mature so that I wouldn't be an embarrassment to the community. I began avoiding meetings because I was overwhelmed where I was emotionally and mentally and the fact that everyone in the community seemed to be so far advanced spiritually.

Considering my continuous conflict avoidance, regular flash backs of my abuse, plus terrifying nightmares, plus constantly projecting my community members as being my abuser, plus having a mental filter that caused me to see only my own confused perspective and outlook, I'm amazed that I have lasted 13 years as a Baha'i. It is only through the strong commitment at least three members of my community have made to me to help me gain verbal skills, create an identity based on my internal gifts, learn how to set boundaries with others and tell others openly what I need that it has been possible. Therein has there been creative tension in what I previously thought there was only negative tension. I now am able to see that there has been some incredible good mixed in with what I had seen as only bad. Had there not been those few Baha'is who loaned me their vision and helped me expand my consciousness, I would have left the Faith and never returned. I was that "defended" and isolated.

For each step forward, I would sink back into a deep depression, unable to find words to define my state of mind or emotion. There were years that I didn't believe, couldn't conceive that I was making any progress. Though I craved intimacy I was intensely afraid of it. Intimacy held only conflict for me. Intimacy in my family meant losing my identity, having my identity overpowered by authority. Never having had my own perspective and identity fostered, acknowledged or validated, I didn't have a model for extending that courtesy to others; and I couldn't reconcile that there could be validity to two or more differing perspectives. Every single moment of community life held conflict for me. I agonized over every gaff I imagined I made, terrified that I was going to be abandoned. If this was Baha'i life, I wanted no part of it. Yet where could I go? I was helpless, powerless and confused and I knew it. Community life held excruciating pain and at the same time was my salvation.

Here's an example: I have a vision problem and reading is a slow, laborious process for me. I am very self-conscious about reading in public because I am extremely sensitive to criticism, yet I courageously tackled reading out loud the Writings at a deepening. My eyes jump from line to line; and I was doing my best. Yet how do you read Huquq'u'llah or other Persian words when you've never heard them spoken aloud or seen them in print? I was criticized! I was told to go home and learn how to read before I came back. Had the person who criticized me entered my reality and seen my reading ability from my perspective and from my life-experience, he would never have criticized me. But he did not know how to self-disclose or how to enter into intimacy; and I become discouraged easily. I wanted to resign from the Faith! But I couldn't because I believe in Bahá'u'lláh; I just didn't believe in the sincerity of Baha'is to make a total, unconditional commitment to me.

I have also been criticized because of the condition of my shoes while guiding at the House of Worship, though I walk with crutches and drag one foot. Someone who told me I should bathe, wash my clothes and brush my teeth has criticized me on separate occasions."22

People who have been this oppressed have experienced only the extreme end of a vast continuum of possibilities - the extreme of mental, spiritual and material deprivation; the extreme of emotions; the extreme of black dark depression, the extreme of loss of faith, the extreme of loss of identity, the extreme of negativity and self-punishment, the extreme of abuse, the extreme of disempowerment, the extreme of enmeshment of boundaries, the extreme of isolation and separation.

And though that sounds very oppressive, Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation provides the contrast that can attract the seeker or the new believer to the other end of the continuum, "the home of eternal reunion. From the pages of the Kitáb'i'Iqán there is another example of remoteness and separation: "...that haply the sore athirst in the wilds of remoteness may attain unto the ocean of the divine presence, and they that languish in the wastes of separation may be led unto the home of eternal reunion. Thus the mists of error may be dispelled, and the all-resplendent light of divine guidance dawn forth above the horizon of human hearts."²³

Remoteness and reunion are incredible contrasts! God teaches us through contrasts. He's a master at it: light and darkness, good and evil, perfection and imperfection. We have to know this in order to understand why Bahá'u'lláh calls us to deeds. Teachers now know a lot about different learning styles. Some people learn through math, music and art, others learn through movement, visually or through sound. But I would say that the most impactful learning style of the oppressed is through "contrasting learning experiences." While we do not think of love as an extreme, to the oppressed it is. And as a result of reaching out to that extreme, they will lose their balance. Their reality will be endangered, a reality based upon defense, protection and isolation. Everything they have believed will be up for grabs. Unity is frightening and challenging for them.

Therefore, our love has to shine so brightly and blaze so consistently that it provides the contrasting learning experience that causes them to turn their gaze upon the Baha'i Revelation and believe that Bahá'u'lláh has the Divine Elixir for their suffering. So He tells us, "Let deeds, not words, be your adorning" and "Guidance hath ever been given by words, but now it is given by deeds."²⁴ What kind of deeds? Holy deeds, not deeds the purpose of which are to convert, fix, change, control - holy deeds of acknowledgment of a reality of which we know not how it was formed or how to fix it. Deeds of powerlessness and trust that will attract their reality toward first the love of God within our hearts, then the love of God within the Writings.

Here's an example of the degree of powerlessness we must achieve when entering the reality of another:

"Thanks for sharing your reality with me. I honor it. I will not dishonor it by debating it, by sticking my own reality out there with words and ideas and concepts that are foreign to your experience. I can only offer you my reality in deeds of service. I respect your reality. I will not disrespect it by refusing to allow your reality to stand within my heart because internally I am ashamed of it, discounting it, criticizing it, disapproving of it, and examining it for worth and value. I just want to experience your reality in my heart through the love of God, as His servant - acknowledging its difference without discounting it, acknowledging its presence without debating its rationality, acknowledging its development without controlling the development of it, serving its presence without ordering it, enlightened by it without fixing it, accepting your history and life experience without refuting it."

Anything else is a veil of idle fancy, which is the cause of our weariness and trouble in the presence of the oppressed. When we free ourselves of these idle fancies, we not only enter the reality of the oppressed, we enter the court of God with the spirit of enlightenment, breathing in the Sinai of our hearts. "O SON OF MAN! The light hath shone on thee from the horizon of the sacred Mount and the spirit of enlightenment hath breathed in the Sinai of thy heart. Wherefore free thyself from the veils of idle fancies and enter into My court, that thou mayest be fit for everlasting life and worthy to meet Me. Thus may death not come upon thee, neither weariness and trouble."²⁵

"O SON OF DUST! The wise are they that speak not unless they obtain a hearing, even as the cup-bearer, who proffereth not his cup till he findeth a seeker, and the lover who crieth not out from the depth of his heart until he gazeth upon the beauty of his beloved. Wherefore sow the seeds of wisdom and knowledge in the pure soil of the heart, and keep them hidden, till the hyacinths of divine knowledge spring from the heart and not from mire and clay."²⁶

Dare we speak to the oppressed before we actually love them? Dare we offer anything to them that springs from mire and clay before we have planted the sacred wisdom of their anguish deep within our hearts?

"Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement, which in turn is dependent upon hearts that are detached and pure."²⁷ O My Name! Utterance must needs possess penetrating power. For if bereft of this quality it would fail to exert influence. And this penetrating influence dependeth upon the spirit being pure and the heart stainless. Likewise it needeth moderation, without which the hearer would be unable to bear it, rather he would manifest opposition from the very outset. And

moderation will be obtained by blending utterance with the tokens of divine wisdom which are recorded in the sacred Books and Tablets. Thus when the essence of one's utterance is endowed with these two requisites, it will prove highly effective and will be the prime factor in transforming the souls of men. This is the station of supreme victory and celestial dominion. Whoso attaineth thereto is invested with the power to teach the Cause of God and to prevail over the hearts and minds of men."28

If we momentarily attract a seeker and do not moderate our desire to convert, fix, change and control, which in essence is how we utilize power as force, then they will manifest opposition. Fear and anger at criticism and control may be part of that life experience. For them even reading the Writings feels like the criticism of God. We must unite the Word of God with his or her life experience.

Unless we enter the reality of the seeker and each other, learning what he feels, what she's experienced, what he thinks about religion, what has caused her to lose faith in organized religion, what he believes about God, we will be discounting his reality, his identity and her perception. We have no other way to connect with him unless we connect with his perspective, and acknowledge and honor it, even if it differs from our own. To see as he does, does not mean we have to give up what we believe. To acknowledge what he sees as valid for the present point to which God has brought him is to be large souled - magnanimous - and truly a servant to the process of his transformation.

We must suspend radically evaluation, criticism, and judgment of his reality. Judgment and criticism would prevent a genuine entrance into his reality since it would be discounted, rejected by our incomplete understanding of what spirituality is. We would be condemning his reality to because it doesn't match the development we would have him have. This is to misunderstand the process of development, the creative and evolutionary process that is inherent in the powers of humankind.

We cannot strip him of his belief because his life experience is all that he has. We cannot diminish his identity because it turned out differently than our own. In order to survive he may have been forced to lie at an early age to preserve his identity from the threat of attack. This means lying, self-concealment, preserved his mental health! We must acknowledge and defend that facet of his developmentally delayed self without passing judgment on it, trusting that with time, safety and connection to the Writings he will correct it or God will create the opportunity for him to have self-awareness regarding it. We cannot force, fix, control or shame.

We cannot call his perspective or belief skewed because it differs from our belief. This is his truth and it is a precious reality and revelation upon which to slowly build a relationship and intimacy. This will bring him to safety if we see he is in danger. This will bring him to community if we see he is isolated.

Here are a few examples of what it's like to enter the reality of others. One day I was teaching an art class at a community center in which the class of 7 to 9 year old girls could switch from amiable to hostile very rapidly. We were involved in the art project when suddenly one child took another's tool. The tool owner struck the tool taker, the friend of the tool taker hit the tool owner, the friend of the tool owner struck the friend of the tool taker and we were off and running, literally. They began chasing each other in a long train around the room.

I do not yell and I do not force. I quietly called them back to the table. They would not come. They laughed uproariously at me! Not to be out done, I got up and began to run exceedingly fast! I took the lead, while they, in disbelief, began to follow me while I laughed uproariously. We ran like this for 5 minutes. Then, like comrades, exhausted in our joint discharge of energy, we sat down quietly and finished the art project. I had entered their reality. I had not criticized them. I had not discounted their need to blow off steam. I had honored the energy of anger and youth without judging them or forcing them. Most importantly, I had not yelled or forced them.

A second example of entering the reality of another involves visualizing their thoughts, values and beliefs as furniture in their mind. When you enter a friend's home, you honor their furniture and belongings because they are not yours. You would not move their furniture into a different position. You would not take their furniture out of their home. You would not force them to get new furniture or even pick it out for them at a furniture store. You would show respect for their right to use the furniture of their choice. You would acknowledge their right of ownership as inviolable.

Likewise with the "furniture" in their mind. If their thoughts, values, and beliefs different from your own, you would not forcibly remove them or demand that they remove them. Nor would you force your own thoughts into their mind. If you carefully established yourself in their life with honor and respect as their intimate friend, you would enter their reality, acknowledge it with reverence and courtesy, taking time to learn from it how their belief system was formed. Then they might trust you to introduce your own perspective.

Entering the reality of another human being is sacred and fear laden at the same time. We show respect for the sacredness of their reality by remaining powerless in its presence. It is a sacred responsibility because it implies commitment to the other's well-being and growth as a human being. Here is the heart of our fear: Once the seeker

discloses his or her reality, we then have a sacred responsibility and are called to self-sacrifice. Our fear of intimacy, which implies commitment, and the responsibility that comes with it, is the spiritual and emotional immaturity that could delay the growth of the Cause.

This calls us to a new way of life. This depth of intimacy requires a lot of self-awareness, deliberate risk, which I call spiritual vulnerability; conscious planning, sincerity, and sacrifice. It requires the setting aside of personal pursuits that lead us away from community. It guides us toward calming the soul of the outcast, the undeveloped, the traumatized, the excluded and the oppressed.

"What 'oppression' is more grievous than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?"²⁹ "...by 'oppression' is meant the want of capacity to acquire spiritual knowledge and apprehend the Word of God. By it is meant that when the Day-Star of Truth hath set, the mirrors that reflect His light have departed, mankind will become afflicted with 'oppression' and hardship, knowing not whither to turn for guidance."³⁰

"Let it not be imagined that expedience is the essential motive arousing this sense of urgency. There is an overarching reason: it is the pitiful plight of masses of humanity, suffering and in turmoil, hungering after righteousness, but "bereft of discernment to see God with their own eyes, or hear His melody with their own ears." They must be fed. Vision must be restored where hope is lost, confidence built where doubt and confusion are rife."³¹

This is why humanity is consumed with hunger right now. Who, in this individualistic society that has trained us to be little, disconnected islands floating in the sea of humanity, wants to be responsible for another man's hunger? That verges on pop psychology's over-used, value free term co-dependency. However, relationships do carry responsibility. We can't have unity unless we have relationship. And this is why we must have an expansion of consciousness of the kind of nurturing experiences for which mankind is hungering, consciousness of the sacredness of intimacy.

'Abdu'l-Bahá demonstrated reverence for the sacredness of another's reality. He revered the soul behind the reality whether distorted or true. "No matter what subject was brought up He was perfectly at home in its discussion, yet always with an undercurrent of modesty and loving consideration for the opinions of others. I have before spoken of His unfailing courtesy. It was really more than what that term usually connotes to the Western mind. The same Persian word is used for both reverence and courtesy. He 'saw the Face of His Heavenly Father in every face' and revered the soul behind it. How could one be discourteous if such an attitude was held towards everyone!"³²

We revere that which is sacred! To revere is to be reluctant to do something through a feeling of respect. Reverence is a deep respect for a person as having an exalted, divine or sacred character. 'Abdu'-Baha showed through his actions that that which is sacred is deemed secure against violation, infringement and encroachment; that it is not to be lightly intruded upon or handled.

In this statement is embedded yet a third example of entering the reality of another: If you want to understand me, I invite you to enter my world and see me not from your experience but my own. Stretch your vision in order to share my vision. If you can believe with me an instant, the truths I value will be revealed to you. You don't have to retain my beliefs - just hold them as your own for a while until the value of them becomes apparent to you. I have examined the truth of my experience and have found myself worthy of my own love. If you look at me through the loving eyes I cast upon myself, I will unfold myself to you and live my truth unafraid before you. If not, I stand unafraid and loving within myself.

This next story from Portals to Freedom, is a vivid illustration of the fact that 'Abdu'l-Bahá honored the reality of the person with whom he was conversing. "And He never argued, of course. Nor did he press a point. He left one free. There was never an assumption of authority, rather He was ever the personification of humility. He taught as if offering a gift to a king.' He never told me what I should do, beyond suggesting that what I was doing was right. Nor did He ever tell me what I should believe. He made

Truth and Love so beautiful and royal that the heart perforce did reverence. He showed me by His voice, manner, bearing, smile, how I should be, knowing that out of the pure soil of being the good fruit of deed and words would surely spring."

"There was a strange, awe-inspiring mingling of humility and majesty, relaxation and power in His slightest word or gesture which made me long to understand its source. What made Him so different, so immeasurably superior to any other man I had ever met?"³³

This is a wonderful example of respecting the sensitive reality of another. We see the fact that he acknowledged the person without telling him what to believe. The word humility is astounding to me in this story. The root word for humility is "humus," which means soil. 'Abdu'-Baha was demonstrating Bahá'u'lláh's exhortation that we should evince the same humility and submissiveness as the earth, "Notwithstanding the honor conferred upon me, and the

unnumbered evidences of my wealth - a wealth that supplieth the needs of all creation - behold the measures of my humility, witness with what absolute submissiveness I allow myself to be trodden beneath the feet of men..."34

"Show forbearance and benevolence and love to one another. Should any one among you be incapable of grasping a certain truth, or be striving to comprehend it, show forth, when conversing with him a spirit of extreme kindness and good-will. Help him to see and recognize the truth, without esteeming yourself to be, in the least, superior to him, or to be possessed of greater endowments."35

Again Mr. Ives writes of how 'Abdu'l-Bahá sought the "reality", the soul of everyone he met: "In all of my many opportunities of meeting, of listening to and talking with 'Abdu'l-Bahá I was impressed, and constantly more deeply impressed, with His method of teaching souls. That is the word. He did not attempt to reach the mind alone. He sought the soul, the reality of everyone He met. Oh, He could be logical, even scientific in His presentation of an argument, as He demonstrated constantly in the many addresses I have heard Him give and the many more I have read. But it was not the logic of the schoolman, nor the science of the classroom. His lightest word, His slightest association with a soul was shot through with an illuminating radiance which lifted the hearer to a higher plane of consciousness. Our hearts burned within us when He spoke."36

And in the most vivid description of the meeting of two souls of uniquely different cultures and languages, Mr. Ives expresses the poignant discovery of having had the needs of his reality profoundly met by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "...as I approached the door where still He stood, He motioned others away and stretched His hand to me as if He had always known me. And, as our right hands met, with His left He indicated that all should leave the room, and He drew me in and closed the door.

Still holding my hand, 'Abdu'l-Bahá walked across the room towards where in the window, two chairs were waiting. Even then the majesty of His tread impressed me and I felt like a child led by his father, a more than earthly father, to a comforting conference. His hand still held mine and frequently His grasp tightened and held more closely. And then, for the first time, He spoke, and in my own tongue: softly came the assurance that I was His very dear son.

Then we sat in the two chairs by the window: knee to knee, eye to eye. At last He looked right into me. It was the first time since our eyes had met with his first beckoning gesture that this had happened. And now nothing intervened between us and He looked at me. He looked at me! It seemed as though never before had anyone really seen me. I felt a sense of gladness that I at last was at home, and the one who knew me utterly, my Father, in truth, was alone with me.

He put His two thumbs to my eyes while He wiped the tears from my face: admonishing me not to cry, that one must always be happy. And He laughed.

I could not speak. We both sat perfectly silent for what seemed a long while, and gradually a great peace came to me. Then 'Abdu'l-Bahá placed His hand upon my breast saying that it was the heart that speaks.

Suddenly He leaped from His chair with another laugh as though consumed with a heavenly joy. Turning, He took me under the elbows and lifted me to my feet and swept me into His arms. No mere embrace. My very ribs cracked. He kissed me on both cheeks, laid His arm across my shoulders and led me to the door. That is all. But life has never been quite the same since."37

Surely we, too, can be silent in the presence of each other or the seeker, taking time for that sense of gladness in the embrace of the oneness of reality. It's ours to reach for if we will release our identity in exultation, its natural state. We get a sense of how simply and innocently 'Abdu'l-Bahá lived - the sweetness of rest, the joy that came to him as a Servant of the Glory. Baha'is are meant to share each other's life experience in joy, to set aside cares and rejoice in each other's presence and reality.

The last example of entering the reality of another teaches us more about the reverence that is necessary when a seeker reveals his or her life experience to us. The sharing of a life experience is like a spiritual drama on the stage of a theatre unfolding and revealing itself to you. It is not something that needs to be fixed. You don't fix a theatrical drama, only the Creator and the Director of it is allowed to fix it. The purpose of the drama is to draw us nearer to the truth so that we may achieve a shared reality. The people in that life experience are like the characters in the drama. The sequences of events in community are the stage upon which the drama is acted out. And the qualities and emotions they reveal to you are the dynamics of the drama.

There is a resonance between the person who is disclosing their spiritual drama and the one who is listening. The drama reverberates in the heart of the listener, and if he can set aside his objectivity - love and sorrow, joy and empathy will be regenerated within his soul. At that point, the ultimate purpose of the drama is achieved - the actor will have shared his reality and become a source of knowledge to the listener. When we revere the spiritual drama before us as a

source of knowledge, then we can say we have entered the reality of the drama and we can acknowledge what it has taught us! Thus the Creator/Director brings us together in unity.

When we revere the unique reality of each member of the community, each seeker, remaining powerless in the presence of its spiritual drama instead of forcing, we may discover what 'Abdu'l-Bahá referred to as the key of knowledge: "That is to say, there is a key of knowledge which will unlock any door and enable us to enter with the message of Truth. This may sound difficult, but it is easy to prove if you possess it. You must lead the seeker into the right rood, then progress is straight ahead."38

I wonder if we get a glimpse of this "key of knowledge" in Gleanings where Bahá'u'lláh reveals that, "The soul hath remained faithful to the Cause of God, and stood unwaveringly firm in His Path shall, after his ascension, be possessed of such power that all the worlds which the Almighty hath created can benefit through him. Such a soul provideth, at the bidding of the Ideal King and Divine Educator, the pure leaven that leaveneth the world of being, and furnisheth the power through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest. Consider how meal needeth leaven to be leavened with. Those souls that are the symbols of detachment are the leaven of the world. Meditate on this, and be of the thankful."39

Leaven is the servant to the reality of the meal. It detaches itself from its individual properties and power: and sacrifices itself to the whole, the meal. It is the key to the whole achieving its potential. Likewise, those souls who are able to be detached from the limitations of their own reality are able to achieve a oneness with the reality of others, thereby permeating, like leaven, the reality of others with a transforming influence. By serving the whole with a detached reality, truth is revealed, mysteries disclosed and secrets unraveled.

'Abdu'l-Bahá taught us to pray: "O Lord, help Thou Thy loved ones to acquire knowledge and the sciences and arts, and to unravel the secrets that are treasured up in the inmost reality of all created beings. Make them to hear the hidden truths that are written and embedded in the heart of all that is."40

How can we do this if our "controlling reality" makes it unsafe for others to self-disclose whatever distortion is blocking the treasures and truths that are embedded within their inmost reality? That would be like leaven trying to make meal into leaven. Acknowledgment makes it safe for them to disclose their reality; so do praise, reframing, discernment, faith and powerlessness.

To use these tools in a loving, righteous way is to act as a leavening agent that permeates with a transforming influence. It is a greater accomplishment to acknowledge and serve the reality of others than to serve your own. This is true renunciation of self. "O SON OF SPIRIT! Burst thy cage asunder, and even as the phoenix of love soar into the firmament of holiness. Renounce thyself and, filled with the spirit of mercy, abide in the realm of sanctity."41

Being a true servant is to be detached from your reality which includes your identity, your inherent and acquired knowledge, and your cultural experience; because these act as a mental filter withholding you from the greater reality of oneness, "celestial sovereignty."

If you are willing to allow your individual reality to remain powerless (except for being a loving leaven which permeates the whole with joy, faith, courtesy and the power of discernment), then you will be able to deal confidently with a steady stream of strangers in your life without losing your balance. You will accept that Firesides and Feasts are going to be different and pretty uncontrollable; and that's the way its going to be, meant to be, in all of the Baha'i communities as the process of teaching escalates; and until we reach a plateau and the Teaching Institutes and individual deepening stabilizes the whole.

Listening with Magnanimity:

Paraphrasing and Reframing

We can confirm or acknowledge the other by paraphrasing and reframing what they've said without judgment, interpretation, fixing, evaluating or cross-examining. These listening responses are controlling in themselves and have the potential for making the speaker feel defensive or in a one-down position. These styles can induce arguments, because they delay the ability of the speaker to become conscious of his or her reality. Further, if I allow others to give me advice, fix me, convert me, or interpret my words for me, I abdicate my powers and perpetuate the disempowerment that was begun when I was a child. I also participate in an injustice toward myself, because these styles of response toward me do not allow me to see with my own eyes or hear with my own ears. These are the ways authority has sought to disempower me. These are the innocuous and covert ways that I have been forced to think with another's reality rather than becoming conscious of my own. This is boundary enmeshment.

So what do we do when we hear them shame, blame or guilt themselves? We can reframe their shame, reframe their guilt, and reframe the blame they heap upon themselves so that they are no longer locked into a harmful perspective, a harmful reality, blind to the powers that shame, blame and guilt are veiling. This requires magnanimity, the one quality 'Abdu'l-Bahá stressed over and over again in the Tablets of the Divine Plan. Magnanimity means noble of mind and

heart, generous inn forgiving, above revenge or resentment, unselfish, gracious, to be great souled. Some examples of generous and noble reframing are:

* I'm an extremely stubborn person. That's why I have these problems. That's why God is punishing me.

Reframed response: Did you know that if you feel or act stubborn all the time, it could be because others are trying to control you too much?

* I'm always making mistakes.

Reframed response: Did you know that a person should give themselves space to make as many mistakes as they want when they are trying something new or something that feels foreign to them?"

* I'm a very selfish person.

Reframed response: I like it when you share with me; but I also like it when you save special things and time for yourself. I think that's important."

* Nobody would ever want to spend a lot of time with a person who is as depressed as I am.

Reframed response: I like to be around you when you're happy; and I'm hear to share the sad times too.

* I'm not a trusting person. I don't think I'll ever be able to trust anyone.

Reframed response: It's OK to trust people who respect your boundaries; I also want you to set firm limits with me if I do something that is against your values.

* I'm too greedy.

Reframed response: To ask for more may not be greedy. It may just show that your needs are very great and that you've suffered great deprivation. It's OK to get your needs met.

* I'm a hypocrite.

Reframed response: Did you know that the root of hypocrisy is that you have experienced a great injustice; and that even though you have lost hope of ever receiving justice, you still have a great longing for it?

* I've ruined every relationship I've had because of my jealousy.

Reframed response: Did you know that the underlying need of jealousy is acknowledgement? And that systematic acknowledgement from others actually helps us want to be accountable for our jealousy? The long, desperate achievement of acknowledgment and praise is recompense for the injustice that was originally perpetrated. God wants acknowledgement and praise for his creatures.

Here is an example from the life of Bahá'u'lláh: "He was approaching that dungeon (the Siyah-Chal), an old and decrepit woman was seen to emerge from the midst of the crowd with a stone in her hand, eager to cast it at the face of Bahá'u'lláh. Her eyes glowed with a determination and fanaticism of which few women of her age were capable. Her whole frame shook with rage as she stepped forward and raised her hand to hurl her missile at Him. "By the Siyyidu'sh-Shuhada (The Imam Husayn), I adjure you," she pleaded, as she ran to overtake those into whose hands Bahá'u'lláh has been delivered, "give me a chance to fling my stone in his face!" "Suffer not this woman to be disappointed," were Bahá'u'lláh's words to His guards, as He saw here hastening behind him. "Deny her not what she regards as a meritorious act in the sight of God."⁴²

Bahá'u'lláh acknowledged this woman's identity, perception, beliefs, and reality. He also reframed her desire and her act. Can you reframe the following statements, creating a positive side plus praise?

* I've been a complainer all my life.

* I talk too much.

* I'm a workaholic.

* Nobody wants me to change.

* I'm afraid to be me. What if they don't like me?

* I think the Writings are authoritarian.

* I'm a born procrastinator.

What of the person who is continually focusing on behavior that steps 5, 6 and 7 of the Twelve Step Program calls "wrongs", "defects of character," and "shortcomings?" Perhaps their negative assessment of their behavior needs to be reframed so that they could focus on their powers as a solution rather than focusing on their deficits. Here's how it would sound: This is old world order theory and theology, based on the criticism of an external authority who has disempowered us. We need to focus on the power of the supreme Talisman instead of the internal and external criticism we have experienced. We developed many of those defects of character because we are developmentally delayed because power was taken away from us. Power instilled, fostered, modeled, honored and respected in children circumvents many shortcomings. For example, look at the person from an alcoholic family who is a "born procrastinator." Doesn't that indicate the disempowerment of the power of choice/will/volition?

Never being allowed or encouraged to act or choose because the modeling wasn't there, the alcoholic father or mother could not encourage it, did not respect, honor or want to use their own power of will. They chose the bottle rather than the power of will - the power of action to bring about change in their life. We need then to refocus not on the character defect but reframe it in terms of authority of self, the personal power of the individual.

How can we empower ourselves through discerning the exact power to develop, rather than criticize ourselves and others for having a defect of character? It sheds a completely different light on the issue. The answer is, we cannot empower ourselves; we are dependent upon Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to identify and define our powers, to affirm the powers of man so that the supreme Talisman can draw upon the Divine Elixir to heal. This is the mission of the Bahá'i teacher: To self-disclose, listen, reframe and reflect. To use the power of discernment to focus on the powers that are hidden; acknowledge, praise, and quote the Bahá'i Writings. To guide others toward the powers that are embedded within the Writings, and never criticize, never focus on the defects of character, never speak of the shortcomings or wrongs that are manifested in the behavior of the seeker or the Bahá'i.

According to John Bradshaw, author of *Healing the Shame that Binds*, man has a shame-based core. According to Bahá'u'lláh, the core of man, the soul of man has been disempowered of its birthright: authority of self.

"The authority of self refers to our own ability to command approximately twenty powers, attributes, and faculties of which we are aware and many other virtues that empower us that are too numerous to mention. The words "power," "faculty," "capability," "gifts," and "virtue" are frequently used in the writings of the Bahá'í Faith to represent power. It is reasonable to assume that most of the oppressed peoples of the world have not yet developed the authority of self. They perhaps have not recognized or developed their own sense of control over these powers and gifts that have been granted to them as human beings. We can be sure that those of us who have been traumatized by physical, emotional, sexual, mental, and spiritual abuse have yet to develop many of its component powers as well.

Authority of self can be defined as the freedom and ability to use God-given mental powers to make rational and moral choices; self-regulation of the emotions; and the right or permission to act independently with the understanding that one has personal limitations. To develop a complete understanding of the extent of our powers, and our authority to use them, we must be fully cognizant of our limitations and conquer our own misbeliefs or vain thoughts about who we are, why we are here, and how we can best relate to our world."⁴³

The more powers we can bring to consultation, the greater the understanding we can achieve. The more we can help each other develop the power of understanding, the more we will be able to help release the power of will and the power of response. We must discover the mental filters that are blocking the speaker's power of reflection, discovery and the power of recognizing Him. How can we discern the exact quotations that remove those mental filters? To discern that we have to know how they have been disempowered.

Their reality is loaded with many unconscious messages by which they have been disempowered. Here's what they sound like:

Don't think. Don't talk. Don't make choices. Don't lead. Don't be different. Don't be aware. Don't be intelligent. Don't ask questions. Don't be close. Don't need. Don't be a child. Don't be weak. Don't change. Don't be happy. Don't see. Don't set boundaries. Don't trust. Don't be you. Don't try. Don't know yourself. Don't be. Don't take care of yourself. Don't like yourself. Don't disobey or challenge authority.

These are the means by which authoritarian, totalitarian and autocratic families, institutions, and societies that have tyrannous belief systems continue, overtly and covertly, to erode the powers of authority of self in childhood and adulthood. They cause us to have mental filters through which we see ourselves, the world and our relationships.

These are the messages that have shaped our belief system and block our attempts at intimacy. As long as the seeker perceives in our behavior, our teaching and the way we present the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, these underlying messages, they will reject us and Bahá'u'lláh.

How do we get beyond the mental filters of them perceiving these messages in the Writings? The first thing we have to do is try to perceive the hidden message that controls the mental filter. You will need to use your power of induction to unearth the messages, and then self-disclose in that topic to encourage their self-awareness. If they decide not to self-disclose, they will still have an internal revelation. Then you will at least leave them "thought-full" and "self-aware", even if they do not feel brave enough or comfortable enough to externally self-disclose.

And the second thing is to establish trust with the Five Freedoms. What is it that establishes trust so that intimacy with the seeker, whether oppressed or traumatized, can be achieved? The other person has to perceive through our actions that we are going to grant them Virginia Satir's Five Freedoms. The late Virginia Satir was a pioneer in family systems theory and believed that each individual member of the family should have:

* The freedom to see and hear (perceive) what is here and now, rather than what was, will be or should be.

- * The freedom to think what one thinks, rather than what one should think.
- * The freedom to feel what one feels, rather than what one should feel.
- * The freedom to want (desire) and to choose what one wants, rather than what one should want.
- * The freedom to imagine one's own self-actualization, rather than playing a rigid role or always playing it safe.

These five freedoms are compatible with this quotation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

"According to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh the family, being a human unity, must be educated according to the rules of sanctity. All the virtues must be taught the family. The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered, and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother - none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the son has certain obligations to his father, the father, likewise has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister and other members of the household have their certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained. The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each, the comfort of all; the honor of one, the honor of all."⁴⁴

This is clear support for our autonomous identity in a collective setting. The seeker must be assured that he or she will not lose their identity in the process of unity. Autonomous identity plus mutual and reciprocal self-disclosure of our reality can lead to mutual acknowledgement of the other, creating a collective identity, which produces intimacy or a calming of the soul.

Acknowledgement - the Fifth component of Intimacy

Acknowledgement of what the other says creates connection with them. Just as in the intimacy of prayer to God, we acknowledge His power and attributes, we also must acknowledge the power, the identity, the "reality" of those to whom we speak. Trusting that as they connect with Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, their reality will be reshaped in a wondrous way, as ours has been. In the Long Obligatory Prayer Bahá'u'lláh has written about those who are the most intimate inmates of the all-highest Paradise: "I testify, O my God, to that whereunto Thy chosen Ones have testified, and acknowledge that which the inmates of the all-highest Paradise and those who have circled round Thy mighty Throne have acknowledged. The kingdoms of earth and heaven are Thine, O Lord of the worlds!" We know there is a wisdom in acknowledging the claims, the Revelation, and the Authority of Bahá'u'lláh; but what is the wisdom of acknowledging the revelation of identity or reality in an individual?

And what constitutes acknowledgment? It is taking a moment to express verbal or written regard or esteem for having been the recipient of the honest disclosure of another's identity, their thoughts, their feelings, their wants, needs and hopes. Acknowledgment is entering their reality while observing and honoring boundaries that protect their freedom and privacy.

There are some who hide their identity and nobility behind fear, shame, resignation, hopelessness, hyper-vigilance, and distrust; they never entrust their identity to anyone. A non-organizational person, a child, or a spouse, cannot find the meaning, direction and purpose of the Baha'i Revelation unless he or she has experienced the self-awareness and expanded consciousness that is created by hearing his or her own voice in self-disclosure to another human being. When the Baha'I hears and acknowledges that voice, he or she shares and acknowledges that treasure within the other that is the trust of God. That is he experiences the identity of the other. This is a sacred thing. This is what we're missing when our agenda is substituted for intimacy.

Intimacy creates new perceptions and self-awareness. Failure to acknowledge what the other says, even if we disagree with it, especially if we disagree with it, is failure to validate their reality and failure to take a necessary and vital step toward intimacy. In fact, it is a discounting of their life experience.

A Model for Acknowledgement

- * I can appreciate that this belief, idea, perception is very important to you. This is the awareness I have because you have shared it with me. I've never experienced of thought of that before and I'm grateful to you for sharing it with me.
- * I appreciate your insights. They help me understand you better.
- * Help me understand your life experience by saying it in a different way.
- * That sounds very important to you and therefore, it is very important to me. Could you rephrase that so that I can understand you more completely?
- * Hearing your viewpoint helps me understand myself better. I accept the differences between us and I can also see the similarities. Thank you for sharing.

Our seekers may have had a sense of justice that has never been acknowledged by anyone before. Their insights may never have been validated or recognized. The wonder and beauty of their individuality may have gone unappreciated in

the unhealthy family system in which they were raised. We cannot afford to miss these opportunities. Never mind if it is not returned. As self-disclosure begets self-disclosure, so too, acknowledgment eventually begets acknowledgment and is one of the foundations of intimacy and bounties.

Themselves or others may never have recognized their inherent gifts. Their beliefs and attitudes based on righteousness, their purity of heart and receptivity to spiritual truth, which emerges in self-disclosure, may never have been recognized by themselves or others. These we can acknowledge. If they don't accept the Faith, at least we will have left them knowing themselves a little better.

"O SON OF BEING! Thou art My lamp and My light is in thee. Get thou from it thy radiance and seek none other than Me. For I have created thee rich and have bountifully shed My favor upon thee."⁴⁵ We miss the radiant light within the other when we don't savor the moment of intimacy. We move on too soon, forgetting to reflect the light they have perhaps timidly shared. If we love them for their own selves, we will take time to acknowledge their nobility, the light they have shared with us.

This simple act, acknowledgement, carries regard, courtesy, and esteem that is missing from what our one upmanship society models. We have to prove our wit is superior in this present society. People who have hidden agendas cannot acknowledge the reality, the identity of another. They are busy planning what to say to the person who is speaking to them.

As God wished to make Himself known to us, so, too, do seekers wish to have their identity made known in self-disclosure; and the desire for acknowledgement is there also. Formulas for "teaching" limit the Baha'is capacity for entering into that first step of intimacy which is dialogue. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "How can I know what to teach until I have seen the people?"⁴⁶ We can also ask, "How can we know what to share or acknowledge unless we have first heard their need?"

If you don't acknowledge what they have said, you have not entered their reality as it is at this very moment; you have not honored their reality born of their life experience. By not entering a reality that differs from your own through acknowledgement, you discount it.

This is one of the purposes of consultation. Consultation is a shared reality in dialogue. Authoritarian, totalitarian and autocratic systems of thought and government do not allow for the sharing of reality. They are one-way communication. We cannot share the Faith with one-way communication. We need to foster, model and create consultation within each opportunity we have of sharing the Faith, for each unique person who seeks the Faith. Sometimes, often times, we will have to lead them into sharing their reality in consultation.

Offering Righteous Praise

We know from reading the Writings, our prayer books and Bahá'u'lláh's Prayers and Meditations, that we must praise God. God wants us to know Him, acknowledge Him, Praise Him, and obey His commandments. Since we have been created in His image, we too, need praise. However, in the authoritarian, totalitarian, and autocratic systems we have been raised in, others have used praise to manipulate us and control us.

We must be powerless with our praise of others as we are in our praise to God. We must be righteous with our praise, so that we do not encourage passivity, unhealthy patterns, compliance and create a goal within others of serving us, pleasing us. Our praise and discernment must serve their internal intention and gifts, not our external intension, hopes and desires. Only then is it righteous praise! These are the boundaries of praise. Here is the paradox again: It is both a powerful act to empower or make manifest with praise, the internal intention of their gifts; but we have to become powerless to do it (not have a self-interest in it).

"Through the effect of their pure breath, they must change the stone into a brilliant ruby and the shell into a pearl. Like unto the cloud of vernal shower, they must transform the black soil into the rose-garden and orchard. They must make the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the extinguished one enkindled and set aglow, and the dead quickened."⁴⁷ A pure breath of righteous praise would be like a vernal shower that transforms the garden of their heart. It can happen with praise, as well as with the next tool: Nurturing.

Nurturing: Becoming a Servant to them

Many of the seekers with whom we will share the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh have been severely wounded. In order to not wound the oppressed because of unawareness of belief systems that are structured differently than your own, here's what you should know about their belief systems. Many people operate out of this reality:

1. I am evil. I must isolate myself from humanity, which will assure the withering of my soul.
2. I am unworthy. I must choose lesser good/lesser rights, or I must be grandiose so that I don't feel my unworthiness.
3. I am not enough. I must do something overwhelmingly good for all people at all times to prove that I have value.

4. I am powerless. I cannot make any decisions, be assertive, or choose my own pathway. Or I must be controlling. Or I must be a victim. Or I cannot risk. Or I must be dependent.
5. I am thwarted everywhere I turn. Why try at anything? Or I must think about suicide constantly because life is too hard for me. Or I must be aggressive.
6. I am imperfect. I must be perfect. I must not make any mistakes. Or I must point out others' mistakes continuously.
7. I am condemned. I must condemn myself and punish myself if I make any mistakes. I have to be in continual denial of my mistakes so that I am not condemned with external or internal criticism.
8. I am immoral. I must be extremely, rigidly moralistic and hyper-vigilant so that I do not act out verbally or physically. Or I must be promiscuous to prove how bad I am.
9. I am an object of hatred. I must hate myself. Or I must provoke others to hate me. Or I must hate others.
10. I am unaware. I must repeat this pattern of victimization until I become aware of it or others become aware of it. I must be a denier of reality or truth.
11. I am deprived. I must continually take from others, or I must continually hoard. Or I must be constantly reassured.
12. I am you. You are the one to please and care for since I have not concept of self.

This nobility-denying belief system is tightly intertwined with how they treat themselves; and since this is their reality, it is also how they expect to be treated and perhaps even provoke others to treat them.

Several threads come together now to reveal the core reason the Baha'i Community has failed to be united and to be intimate. Now that we have examined the fear that is entrenched in a distorted belief system, and know that it stems from criticism, the next step is to become aware of the fact that this fear of criticism drives us to self-conceal to avoid intimacy -even when we are not being criticized.

These twelve points illustrate that self-criticism is part of our belief system. The majority of us have been oppressed by criticism that was a distortion of reality when we were children, before we had the cognitive developmental skills to define it as unjust, to verbally defend ourselves, or to advocate for ourselves. We also may never have had anyone advocate for us. Therefore, we made a very early decision, perhaps as early as three or four years old, to avoid intimacy and to self-conceal since we identify intimacy with criticism.

Nurturing experiences build trust. They help us stop self-concealment and to begin to take risks with one another. How can we create nurturing experiences that will build trust and produce a calming of the soul within the seeker and within our Baha'i community?

- * By providing them with assurance of respect and acceptance of their identity as it is now as well as while they reinvent or reconstruct it by exercising their power of choice in concert with their understanding of the Writings.
- * If we acknowledge and respect their identity, they will feel they have been heard with understanding. This produces a calming of the soul and increases and fosters development of the powers of identity, speech and reasoning.
- * By acknowledging with compassion instead of discounting the life-experience that has helped shape the seeker's identity, such as acknowledging the life-experience of homosexuality. We cannot focus purely upon sharing the Writings that condemn it as a distortion of nature. We have to do more than that.
- * When we extend care of their being and protection of their esteem in a consistent manner whether they or you are spouse, parents, teacher, employer or friend.
- * We nurture by singling them out, through our visible deeds, as being important and having value.
- * They will also feel nurtured if someone important to them has heard and understood them.
- * We nurture by helping them realize that Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation gives them the freedom to tap their inner powers and gifts that are important to discovering the mysteries of the universe to meet the needs of an ever-advancing civilization.
- * We nurture by always calling attention to their personal meaning and purpose.
- * We nurture by showing them instant grace and patience at an embarrassing or awkward moment.
- * We nurture by encouraging them to develop meaningful goals that lift them out of dwelling on the past and move them into the future.
- * By helping them recognize their intrinsic value of which they may be unaware.
- * By helping them experience the freedom to expand their identity in order to welcome people of color and members of the many world religions.
- * By providing opportunities for them to have their need for love, safety and esteem to be fulfilled.
- * By providing experiences that liberate, expand and activate consciousness of their unique perceptions, gifts and goodness.
- * By providing safety that encourages them to acknowledge their flaws without shame even if only to themselves.
- * By reassuring them that the only purpose of guilt is to alert them that it is necessary to correct their path or change their behavior, and that it should be limited to just that amazing purpose, rather than for the purposes of self-punishment.

This is what our hidden agenda must be. We must be carefully plotting nurturing and acknowledgement of their reality instead of criticism, ignoring, discounting, or judging of it that is so common in the old world order. This is the spiritual maturity that Bahá'u'lláh and the Universal House of Justice are calling us to expand ourselves to achieve so that we may attract seekers.

"In short, the breakdown of the present order wreaks havoc and chaos in every life. It is no wonder that everywhere one looks, one sees conflict and heartache, lives full of difficult tests and heartbreaking struggles." "Perhaps the most difficult test we face is to be indiscriminately loving and kind, forgiving and encouraging to every soul in a society of people who pride themselves on being bitterly critical in order to justify their conflicts with others." "Perhaps it all boils down to this: the primary job of a Baha'i is to learn to love in a hateful world, to share that learning with others, and to tell them Who it is that taught us how to love again. We must love everyone - our enemies, those different from ourselves, those who do not appear to be lovable. Love is the immutable condition of the Divine Plan, the gift that Baha'is must give to a world completely divided by carefully justified conflict. The world is waiting and suffering, as it waits."48

We must stop carefully justifying the conflicts that prevent our continued commitment to intimacy. The moment we criticize instead of providing nurturing experiences as I have described above, the seeker or new Baha'i feels his or her unlovableness. "O COMPANION OF MY THRONE! Hear no evil, that thou mayest not hear it spoken unto thee, and magnify not the faults of others that thine own faults may not appear great; and wish not the abasement of anyone, that thine own abasement be not exposed."49

'Abdu'l-Bahá did not magnify the faults of others. He looked only to the goodness of others. He saw no evil in them and thereby created the possibility for them to rise to the goodness that was within them. He believed in them and caused them to believe in themselves. He was a Master at displaying the nurturing experience even to those who turned against Him and the Cause of God. What a contrast: Acknowledging the reality that a human being can attain their highest possibilities vs. seeing them and judging them incapable of progressing because of evil.

Here's the second part of that Hidden Word: "Live then the days of thy life, that are less than a fleeting moment, with thy mind stainless, thy heart unsullied, thy thoughts pure, and thy nature sanctified, so that free and content, thou mayest put away this mortal frame, and repair unto the mystic paradise and abide in the eternal kingdom for evermore."50 If we share the Faith with our mind stainless, our heart unsullied by judgment, condemnation, the need to convert, change, or fix, our secret thoughts purified from magnifying the faults of other Baha'is and seekers, and our nature sanctified (made holy from our justified self-concealment and alienation), we will make progress because of a powerful attraction. We have to transform every resentment into love, every irritation into acceptance and resignation to the Will of God, and shining obedience to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh; and thereby juxtapose a truly intimate, nurturing community with the havoc and chaos of the present order. There is no other way! Because when we withhold friendliness, opportunities to help each other deepen, when we withhold nurturing and the kind of intimacy that draws the outsider into the inner circle of friendship, we are in essence withholding a key part of their transformation that is within our ability to extend to them.

Many therapists have loving hearts and have the ability to coach, encourage, affirm and support us in a way that opens a pathway for us to heal. The safety they create through the quality of their listening and the fact that they may never criticize us, makes it possible for us to self-disclose the shameful memories that keep our wounds festering in the dark. It's the loving listening, the suspension of criticism and judgment that creates the exquisite safe place where healing can occur. For large scale growth to occur in the faith, all of us must develop loving and tender hearts and become able to listen with the sensitivity and courtesy of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Courtesy

Courtesy is designated as the prince of virtues and is called a "robe." A robe covers all the unhelpful solutions, judgments, expectations, evaluations, fixing and forcing that we human beings in our imperfection are prone to conceive in our internal self. These kinds of thoughts are irrelevant to the spiritual drama we see before us. We are told that the need is love. Our robe of courtesy conceals everything that would dim the light of love. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was our model for courtesy. It's not that he didn't see the imperfection. With courtesy he reframed it so that the latent powers could, in the presence of His acceptance, emerge in safety from the consciousness of the individual. He concealed behind His robe of courtesy, perhaps with the Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh "Hear no evil, see no evil..." present in His mind, every thought that would be an impediment to the love and grace He chose to bestow upon the servant of God before Him.

"O people of God! I admonish you to observe courtesy, for above all else it is the prince of virtues. Well is it with him who is illumined with the light of courtesy and is attired with the vesture of uprightness. Whoso is endued with courtesy hath indeed attained a sublime station. It is hoped that this Wronged One and everyone else may be enabled to acquire it, hold fast unto it, observe it, and fix our gaze upon it. This is a binding commandment which hath streamed forth from the Pen of the Most Great name."51

"Say: Let truthfulness and courtesy be your adorning. Suffer not yourselves to be deprived of the robe of forbearance and justice, that the sweet savors of holiness may be wafted from your hearts upon all created things."52

And here is the heart of courtesy: Bahá'u'lláh is calling us to be instantly flexible and spiritually vulnerable when we are under attack, instead of perfectionistic, hypocritical (showing one face to a person and then backbiting), and shaming. At the heart of the hypocrite who is perfectionistic is the fear of being wounded, and the fear of being honest keeps them from sharing openly. The opposite of perfectionism in this sense is not imperfection but flexibility. Our perfectionism born of fear and anxiety of being criticized and shamed is released through flexibility. If we are instantly flexible with ourselves, we silence the shaming internal critical voice. If we are instantly flexible with others, we also silence our internal critical backbiting voice. That's powerlessness! Inwardly saying: I'm defenseless before this person who has been oppressed and is oppressing me. And the only way I can share my reality of healing love with someone who is so wounded is to be flexible with their ignorance or vindictiveness. To not judge it or evaluate it.

The word "disarming" is very attractive to me. To remove the suspicion and hostility first from our own hearts is to disarm ourselves, because suspicion and hostility are powers of defense. To disarm "them" is to take your power of love, give it to them freely, making yourself powerless. We don't need the physical Taikwondo and Tai Chi. Their purpose is that they are a metaphor for mentally and emotionally sidestepping a verbal blow, deflecting its intended meaning, and using it to reframe the attack, the wound, the stab, to be the advocate your "opponent" never had, rather than backbite, criticize, retaliate, label, judge, and evaluate. That's powerlessness! That's power! And there's the paradox.

It is also the meaning of the Noontime Prayer. "I bear witness O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify at this moment to my powerlessness and to Thy might."⁵³ We are called to manifest His might with meekness under duress. Our power is in spiritual vulnerability, defenselessness, to risk to be wounded. When others recognize the power of love that we have extended to them, it disarms their defenses and they, in turn, become willingly defenseless and spiritually vulnerable, receptive to love, hungering for more, hungering for the true intimacy that has been denied them, and the latent power of love within them begins to grow and develop. Remember, with courtesy and spiritual vulnerability, we are very powerful and becoming more powerless with each passing day. Unity, compassion, and detachment also empower us, as Dr. Jane Faily offered in a talk at Louhelen, because they give us choices that bitter people do not have. "Unity is the one healing power, the one transforming power. Encouragement in nurturing, encourage healing. Oppressed people are wounded. I am and you are. We have each other to heal. We have tasted pain. It should breed compassion. I feel that oppression gives us a choice. You look at any oppressed people, you will see faces twisted by anger, cold in bitterness, dead in apathy, or, and the choice is this: illumined with compassion, empowered with detachment. After all, pain and disappointment teach you finally that this life is a journey. You have no home, you have no totally fulfilling experience. You learn from mistakes you can't rectify, and the purpose of all that is spiritual growth. And if you believe it, you will be radiant, and if you don't you will be in despair."⁵⁴

The temptation is to lose faith, join the jaded, the cynical, the critical and rebell against not only the oppressor but rational authority as well - to lose that spark of hope we once had as children or youth - to manifest in open revolt the criticism that surrounded us and that we internalized. If we do, our backbiting will quench not only the light in the heart of others, but within our own heart, too. The sword of rebellion felling the tree of our hope.

"That seeker should also regard backbiting as grievous error, and keep himself aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting quencheth the light of the heart and extinguisheth the life of the soul."⁵⁵

It is necessary that the core of our failure to achieve intimacy be exposed, so that as a community we can enter into dialogue and consultation concerning our hurt of criticism, our fear of criticism. We must develop the power of utterance regarding our fear and hurt to rid ourselves of unconscious motivation to backbite in preparation for large scale growth. This unconscious motivation is part of our defense mechanisms that were put in place at a very early age. We cannot get rid of it. So don't worry that you keep having these impure, negative thoughts of criticism. We can only become conscious of these thoughts so that we can monitor them and make choices with the judgments and emotions that come up. Our manifesting purposeful love, regardless of the temptation to express the ever-present critical thoughts is the purging, purifying, refining, and rectitude of conduct for which the Writings and prayers call.

When you enter the reality of a seeker, remember, his or hers may be punitive, deprived and oppressed. While yours is one of privilege, a greater degree of stability and opportunity, his or her spiritual development may be greater than yours. Remember also that your reality is going to become unstable because his reality will push you, not to your limits of trust so much, but to your limits of love. His reality is going to push you to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's level of loving. "Wherefore must the loved ones of God associate in affectionate fellowship with stranger and friend alike, showing forth to all the utmost loving-kindness, disregarding the degree of their capacity, never asking whether they deserve to be loved. In every instance let the friends be considerate and infinitely kind. Let them never be defeated by the malice of the people, by their aggression and their hate, no matter how intense. If others hurl their darts against you, offer them milk and honey in return; if they poison your lives, sweeten their souls; if they injure you, teach them how to be comforted; if they inflict a wound upon you, be a balm to their sores; if they sting you, hold to their lips a refreshing cup."⁵⁶

This is an example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's unlimited patience, his unlimited understanding. Like the old man in Rabbi Kushner's book, "I am the Clay," who could not make a complete commitment to love, without the Hand of God reshaping every one of his thoughts and decisions every moment, every day, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's hands are waiting to reshape us into a vessel that is ever-ready to pour forth milk and honey to sweeten their lives. Every time we monitor those thoughts that say: "I'm giving up. I can't make an unconditional commitment to this person," we must return to the Writings of the Master to sharpen our vision and make firm our commitment to nurture, accept and love.

"Make haste to love! Make haste to trust! Make haste to give! To guidance come! Come ye for harmony! To behold the Star of Day! Come here for kindness, for ease! Come here for amity and peace! Come and cast down your weapons of wrath, till unity is won! Come and in the Lord's true path each one help each one."⁵⁷ Criticism is a verbal weapon of wrath, the use of force to either get someone to change or wound them with words.

"During the last afternoon of the True's visit, 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged Mrs. True to develop the same attitude. Gently taking her hand, He described to her the kind of love, a universal love, that extends beyond a few personal friendships to embrace all humanity. "He said it was like a lover receiving a letter...from his beloved and the letter arrives torn, soiled and almost destroyed but it is infinitely precious because it was from his beloved - That is the way you must look upon everyone, no matter what. You love them because they are creatures of God."⁵⁸

Here is an article describing Bahiyyih Khahnum's lack of criticism: "...you would not be content to describe her as motherly. Motherliness is too confining a term. Mother-love embraces and holds, however tightly; has something of possessiveness, something that asks response to the love showered. There was not hint of this in her affection. She left spirit and body alike utterly free, demanding nothing of those she loved. And she would, it seemed, have them unaware of any debt of love. So light was her touch that she woke in them no sense of responsibility or conscious gratitude. Even when she comforted, her caress was feather soft: for she knew that those in sore need can be bruised by the least pressure of compassion. She would give the balm itself and add no weight of her own hand; so that healing and comfort came as a magic gift. At the time you neither know or asked its source, and your thankfulness overflowed in a happy sharing of the gift.

She would not weigh your worth and reward you according to your desserts; nor would she consider whether your pain were self-inflicted or self-provoked, as if she know that suffering has a sanctity of its own. She never sat in judgment and was not concerned with separating the sheep from the goats. Not only did she not single out black from white in the flock, but in the inner fold of your own nature she did not call the fault dark nor see the white lamb in good action. She would not use criticism and censure. When you brought her your darkness she lit a taper. If you had done wrong or failed in your effort, or even failed to make the effort, she loved you the more, conscious of your chagrin in failure; pitying you for your weakness and defeat and pitying you, too, if you did not suffer and felt no shame in failure.

You were sure that if one tried to hurt her she would wish to console him for his own cruelty. For her love was unconditional, could penetrate disguise and see hunger behind the mask of fury, and she knew that the most brutal self is secretly hoping to find gentleness in another. She had that rarest heart-courage, - to uncover the very quick of tenderness to any need. And so deep was her understanding that she plumbed all the miseries of the human heart and read their significance, blessing both the victim and the valid pain itself.

...Her burdens appeared light because she did not bend under them, and she approached great tasks without apparent effort. She seemed never to search nor to strive because she showed no trace of tension and strain. In all her life she had known none of the hot, dusty moments of human struggle, nor its breathless, small achievements, but had gone forward unflinching, with a tranquil lifting of the heart in action, to meet a succession of difficult days."

[The passage in italics reminds me of that moment of half a heartbeat, instantaneous transforming of perfectionism into flexibility, criticism into loving acceptance, "fear into calm," anger into humor, obedience and radiant acquiescence to Bahá'u'lláh's model of unconditional love in less than a heart-beat. The oppressed are so hyper-vigilant against oppression, they give us only a heart beat to respond correctly; that's why Bahá'u'lláh calls to "stray not the breadth of a hair from the Law," not only for our progress but for the progress of the oppressed who are ever seeking safety in relationship, community and intimacy.]

To continue the passage about Bahiyyih Khahnum: "Something greater than forgiveness she had shown in meeting the cruelties and strictures in her own life. To be hurt and to forgive is saintly but far beyond this is the power to comprehend and not be hurt. This power she had. The word *mazlum*, which signifies acceptance without complaint, has come to be associated with her name. She was never known to complain or lament. It was not that she made the best of things, but that she found in everything, even in calamity itself, the germs of enduring wisdom. She did not resist the shocks and upheavals of life and she did not run counter to obstacles. She was never impatient. She was as incapable of impatience as she was of revolt. But this was not so much long-suffering as it was quiet awareness of the forces that operate in the hours of waiting and inactivity.

Always she moved with the larger rhythm, the wider sweep, toward the ultimate goal. Surely, confidently, she followed the circle of her orbit around the Sun of her existence, in the complete acquiescence, that perfect accord, which underlies faith itself."59

Lest you feel shame about not measuring up to this standard of perfection, hear this and understand. Bahiyyih Khahnum had excellence and perfection modeled for her as she was growing up. She had a spiritually complete belief system that was formed because she did not face criticism, vilification from her Father, the single, most important relationship she had in her life.

It's not so much that we are human and can't possibly measure up! She was human, too! The difference is that the majority of us had criticism, yelling, hitting, vilification modeled for us throughout our formative years. 'Abdu'l-Bahá protected Shoghi Effendi from censure and criticism. He did not want anyone to cause a perversion of Shoghi Effendi's character as he was growing up. He guarded him with extreme care. We were not guarded with extreme care. We did not have excellence modeled before us. We reflect indiscriminately what we witness in our environment in childhood before we have developed the power of choice or have authorization to use it.

Criticism is socially acceptable. We make TV sit-coms out of one-upmanship and putdowns that are nothing but criticism set to humor. We've made criticism entertainment! We pride ourselves in how fast our comebacks come out of our mouths. We have to face the fact that criticism is an authentic part of our belief system because it was modeled for us, and constantly review Bahá'u'lláh's Writings on courtesy, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example of loving-kindness and Bahiyyih Khahnum's lack of criticism. We should not shame ourselves because we are ever ready to criticize others, but embrace our woundedness as we seek to reframe our response to others' acting out their woundedness to us.

There is a science to wounded-acting-out-behavior. It does not appear out of the blue. There are roots to it that run deep in an unconscious river that threatens to exceed the banks of discipline and limits.

Take, for instance bigotry. Did you know that bigotry is a defense mechanism? It is safer to angrily attack a whole class of people than to openly and honestly express your anger toward the single person, parent, teacher, minister, employer, who wounded you! There is the fear of criticism again.

Hypocrisy is also the defense mechanism of a very wounded person. It is the want, the hunger for justice. The key to understanding hypocrisy is awareness of self-concealment. The hypocrite is concealing his or her own imperfection out of fear of criticism. We self-conceal authentic immaturity and delayed development, our faults; feigning perfection and qualities we do not possess to escape criticism and vilification. We point to the faults of others, diverting attention from our own, like a child who wants to be invisible in the face of grave danger and terrible shame. This is the underlying fear of the hypocrite, born of their having witnessed the oppression and abuse of another. Do we not share this fear? Can we not appease this hunger for safety, justice and acceptance with understanding?

Yet, Bahá'u'lláh warns: "O SON OF SPIRIT! Know thou of a truth: He that biddeth men be just and himself committeth iniquity is not of Me, even though he bear My name."60 This is an example of the hypocrite seeking justice.

And here is His prohibition of criticism: "O SON OF BEING! How couldst thou forget thine own faults and busy thyself with the faults of others? Whoso doeth this is accursed of Me."61 "O SON OF MAN! Breathe not the sins of others so long as thou art thyself a sinner. Shouldst thou transgress this command, accursed wouldst thou be, and to this I bear witness."62

"O EMIGRANTS! The tongue I have designed for the mention of Me, defile it not with detraction. If the fire of self overcome you, remember your own faults and not the faults of my creatures, inasmuch as everyone of you knoweth his own self better than he knoweth others."63 Detraction is the act of slandering, disparaging or diminishing another. Reaching further, it is also distraction, which is to cause extreme mental or emotional disturbance in another. Disparagement is an attempt to deprive one of their nobility through criticism and belittling. There comes a point during which we are raising our children that they become highly critical of us? And why wouldn't they be? They've learned criticism and therefore self-concealment at our knee! Because they are more advanced than we are, they have a greater knowledge and certitude that it was unjust.

Criticism is the reverse or flip side of discernment, the ability to discriminate degrees of right and wrong, perfection and imperfection. The dominant gifts of some individuals are the power of discernment and the power of reflection. They are so gifted in discernment and their ability to acutely reflect everything in their environment, that if they are not surrounded by consistent nurturing and justice, their power of discernment turns into the weapon of defense: Criticism! The remedy is to focus on the positive aspect of the latent power of discernment, knowing that love is the missing ingredient of that power. Guess who can supply the missing ingredient?

"O SON OF MAN! The true lover yearneth for tribulation even as doth the rebel for forgiveness and the sinful for mercy."64 "O SON OF MAN! If adversity befall thee not in My path, how canst thou walk in the ways of them that are content with My pleasure? If trials afflict thee not in they longing to meet Me, how wilt thou attain the light in they love for My beauty?"65

The true lover yearns for tribulation in community with the wounded, that he or she may simply love and lead to safety the wounded, the lost and the distracted. To do this we have to welcome the suffering, and calamity and trials of tribulation, because the wounded, lost and distracted may not be able to respond lovingly to our gentleness. And when thoughts of criticism arise in your heart as they often do during tribulation and tests, you can say to yourself: "There's my own woundedness surfacing again! There's my hunger for justice popping up again! There's my power of discernment revealing itself again! (The sense of right and wrong, good and bad, perfection and imperfection expressing itself in an undeveloped, immature way.) Let me carefully weave love into my power of discernment, reflecting 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Bahiyyih Khahnum, so that I don't express my power of discernment as a weapon of criticism when I respond to others or interact with them."

'Abdu'l-Bahá knew that criticism and faultfinding destroyed community and prevented the growth of the early Baha'i community in America. Receiving numerous requests to come to America, He made His visit dependent upon their love of one another. "If ye are yearning for my meeting, and if in reality ye are seeking my visit, ye must close the doors of difference and open the gates of affection, love and friendship. Ye must pulsate as one heart and throb as one spirit..."

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, were it not for this difference amongst you, the inhabitants of America in all those regions would have, by now, been attracted to the Kingdom of God, and would have constituted themselves your helpers and assisters. Is it meet that you sacrifice this most glorious Bounty for worthless imaginations? No, by God! Should you reflect for one moment, you shall become enabled to destroy instantly the foundation of this difference by absolutely refraining from backbiting and faultfinding amongst yourselves. Adorn with infinite love and concord the assembly of beatitude, bring about the meeting of happiness, establish the banquet of the oneness of the realm of humanity, loosen your tongues in praising each other, and then anticipate the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in your midst."66 There's that word praise again.

The Baha'i community, as it has developed to-date, cannot expect to meet the needs for intimacy of hundreds of people at a time. It is impossible! But the Word of God, Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, has that capacity. That's why it is so important to connect the seeker and the new believer to the Baha'i Writings. That is why it is so important to memorize and quote the Writings. They strike a chord in the heart of the listener. That chord is the power of recognizing Him which resides in the soul of each one of us. In some it is more developed than in others:

"Gracious God! It was intended that at the time of the manifestation of the One true God the faculty of recognizing Him would have been developed and matured and would have reached its culmination. However, it is now clearly demonstrated that in the disbelievers this faculty hath remained undeveloped and hath, indeed, degenerated."67

Once that "power" is exposed to the "Ocean of His Words," it thirsts for more. Remember the experience of sitting by the hour, absorbed spellbound, sentence after sentence, book after book when you were a seeker or a new Baha'i? That was hunger - hunger for intimacy with our Lord.

"The challenge for the Baha'is is to provide these thousands of seeking souls, as swiftly as possible, with the spiritual food that they crave..."68 When we came into contact with this "spiritual food", we then believed, acknowledged the truth of His Words and we declared, in essence: "Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, inasmuch as Thou has enabled us to recognize Thy most exalted and all-glorious Self. We will, by Thy mercy, cleave to Thee, and will detach ourselves from anyone but Thee. We have realized that Thou art the Beloved of the worlds and the Creator of earth and heaven!"69

So, too, will the troops that are waiting, eagerly absorb His Word; and the power of recognizing Him will thrill in ecstasy and rapture to its melodies, growing stronger with each passage and prayer they read. Thus will they be connected to that for which they have hungered for years!

"Those who declare themselves as Baha'i should become enchanted with the beauty of the teachings, and touched by the love of Bahá'u'lláh. The declarants need not know all the proofs, history, laws and principles of the Faith, but in the process of declaring themselves they must, in addition to catching the spark of faith, become basically informed about the Central Figures of the Faith, as well as the existence of laws they must follow and an administration they must obey."70

Our work in consolidation has a direct connection to the growth and development of the power of recognizing Him. "Consolidation is as vital a part of the teaching work as expansion. It is that aspect of teaching which assists the

believers to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the Teachings, and fans the flame of their devotion to Bahá'u'lláh and His Cause, so that they will, of their own volition, continue the process of their spiritual development, promote the teaching work, and strengthen the functioning of their administrative institutions. Proper consolidation is essential to the preservation of the spiritual health of the community, to the protection of its interests, to the upholding of its good name, and ultimately to the continuation of the work of expansion itself."⁷¹ Consolidation is also, therefore, supported by our ability to create intimacy.

"It is not enough to proclaim the Baha'i Message, essential as that is. It is not enough to expand the rolls of the Baha'i membership, vital as that is. Souls must be transformed, communities thereby consolidated, new models of life thus attained. Transformation is the essential purpose of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, but it lies in the will and effort of the individual to achieve it in obedience to the Covenant. Necessary to the progress of this life-fulfilling transformation is knowledge of the will and purpose of God through regular reading and study of the Holy Word."⁷²

To be rapturously wed to the Word of God is the deepest level of intimacy any of us will ever achieve in this world. Transformation is a dance, sometimes awkward, sometimes very beautiful, that takes place between the heart of the supreme Talisman and God; yet learning to dance with grace and unity also depends upon each one of us in the larger Baha'i community developing the tools and skills of intimacy. And what a beautiful, intimate dance it is when your loving partners acknowledge your grace, reframe your awkwardness, praise your effort, and discern the beauty and power of your inmost true self.

If we remain powerless in each other's embrace, perhaps then our souls, "inhaling the fragrance of fellowship and love," will be calmed, and "every understanding heart would apprehend the meaning of true liberty, and discover the secret of undisturbed peace and absolute composure. Were the earth to attain this station and be illumined with its light it could be truly said of it: "Thou shall see in it no hollows or rising hills."⁷³

1 Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 207

2 Tablets of the Divine Plan, pp. 52-53

3 12 April 1927 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, in Baha'I Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932, pp. 130-131

4 Authority of self is loosely defined as permission to use all of our personal powers in deference to the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. For a complete description, see "Assisting the Traumatized Soul: Healing the Wounded Talisman."

5 Baha'I Prayers, p. 222

6 Myron H. Phelps, Abbas Effendi: His Life and Teachings, 1903, p. 9-10

7 Fire Tablet, BP, p. 219-220

8 This does not apply to a person being battered by their spouse. He/she needs firm boundaries, distance and protection. There are always going to be exceptions to this. This is actually a test of our spiritual and psychological maturity. Those who act out sexually, rage, batter or use intimacy seductively cannot allow this behavior to be triggered by themselves or the situation they've entered into. That would be irresponsible. We all have certain limitations. Entering into intimacy is going to reveal those limitations.

9 Capuchin Priest Keith Clark, Being Sexual and Celibate

10 Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 76

11 Gleanings, LXXV, p. 143

12 BP, p. 111

13 Gleanings, p. 95

14 Hidden Words, Persian, #44

15 Shoghi Effendi, 1974, cited in Living the Life, p. 3

16 Please bear in mind that this is not a discussion of just authority or institutions, which may have to mete our disapproval of errant behavior. It is a discussion of old world order authority.

17 Oppression can include anything from physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual abuse to racism, sexism and religious intolerance.

18 Dr. David Burns, Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy, William Morrow and Company, New York, 1980, p. 40

19 . National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, August 1, 1969

20 SWAB, p. 253

21 SDC, p. 12

22 Adapted with permission during consultation with Ken Heral

23 Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab'i'Iqan, p. 19

24 HWP #76

25 Bahá'u'lláh, HWA # 63

26 HWP #36

27 Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 198

28 TAB, p. 198-199

29 Bahá'u'lláh, KI, p. 31

30 Bahá'u'lláh, KI, p. 32

- 31 Ridvan 1988 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Baha'is of the world.
- 32 Howard Colby Ives, Portals to Freedom, page 116
- 33 Portals to Freedom, p. 39-40
- 34 Gleanings, p. 8
- 35 Gleanings, p. 8
- 36 Portals to Freedom, p. 39
- 37 Howard Colby Ives, Portals to Freedom, p. 31-33
- 38 'Abdu'l-Bahá quoted by Julia Grundy in Ten Days in the Light of 'Akka, p. 90
- 39 Gleanings, p. 161
- 40 Baha'I Prayers, p. 103
- 41 Bahá'u'lláh, HWP #38
- 42 Nabil's Narrative, The Dawn-Breakers, pages 607-608
- 43 From Assisting the Traumatized Soul, p. 98
- 44 PUP, p. 168
- 45 Bahá'u'lláh, HWA #11
- 46 FIND THE SOURCE
- 47 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets of the Divine Plan, p. 88
- 48 National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, Feast Letter, December 31, 1994
- 49 Bahá'u'lláh, HWP #44
- 50 HWP #44
- 51 Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 88
- 52 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 305
- 53 Baha'i Prayers, p. 4
- 54 Dr. Jane Faily, Address at Louhelen
- 55 Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-I-Iqan, p. 193
- 56 Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 24
- 57 Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 273
- 58 Edna M. True, interview with author, Wilmette, Ill., September 1975; Corrine True, "Memories of 'Abdu'l-Bahá," tape recording, 30 April 1951, personal papers of Edna M. True.
- 59 A description of Bahiyyih Khahnum, Bahá'u'lláh's daughter, by Marjorie Morton, Baha'i World Volume.
- 60 HWA #28
- 61 HWA #26
- 62 HWA #27
- 63 HWP #68
- 64 HWA #49
- 65 HWA #50
- 66 ['Abdu'l-Bahá], "Tablet to the American Friends from 'Abdu'l-Bahá," Star of the West, 2, no. 4 (17 May 1911), 7.)
- 67 Bahá'u'lláh, TB, p. 52-53
- 68 27 July 1980, written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly
- 69 Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations, LXI
- 70 Universal House of Justice, Wellspring of Guidance, p. 32
- 71 17 April 1981, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies
- 72 Ridvan 1989 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Baha'is of the world
- 73 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 260