THE WAY TO INNER FREEDOM: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Author: Erik Blumenthal
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Judging by the wealth of "pop psychology" books and self-improvement audiocassettes and videotapes published and purchased each year in Europe, Canada, and the United States, there is widespread hunger for a practical guide to personal development. Rising rates of suicide, substance abuse, and use of prescribed psychoactive medications attest to the emotional confusion and suffering of people in the countries of the developed world. To this audience, Dr. Blumenthal brings to bear his wealth of clinical experience in Adlerian Individual Psychology and his personal understanding of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. His stated intent is not primarily to provide scientific theory but to provide practical means for "gaining a deeper understanding of ourselves and achieving personal growth" (11–12).

Dr. Blumenthal begins with an extremely brief discussion of the essential points that distinguish Adlerian Individual Psychology from other schools of psychology. He then proceeds to outline general principles that underlie actions conducive to personal development. The arguments in this chapter are developed with a remarkable balance of theory and illustration. He discusses topics such as: the importance of the individual, human goal orientation, the power of expectation or faith, and thinking in terms of levels. In the third chapter he discusses common prejudices and misconceptions. In many sections he presents a fresh slant on old ideas, as when he defines the "double standard" as judging others by their behavior and ourselves by our feelings and thoughts (64). However, in a few places, his statements seem discordant and deserve further support. For example, he proposes that "the prejudice of dualism—the presumption of two fundamentally opposed forces—lies at the root of all our conflicts" (65), yet in other sections, he poses as underlying principles such dualities as conscious and unconscious thought (13, 41) or subjective experiences and objective events (47).

The next sections of the book are increasingly focused, detailing the application of these general principles and specific techniques to the development of self-knowledge, the adoption of a positive outlook, and the building of dedication to life's central tasks: work, family, and community. He concludes with a series of cases that illustrate the uses of Adlerian concepts to understand and deal with specific life situations.

In the third chapter, the four diagrams used to illustrate general principles were excellent and provided a clarifying supplement to the text. References were infrequently given and were limited almost exclusively to Bahá'í writings and those of Dr. Blumenthal. Many interesting studies, psychological findings, and religious principles from other religions are mentioned but not documented,

making independent investigation of these interesting ideas difficult for any readers so inclined.

There are two serious flaws in Dr. Blumenthal's treatise however. The first is a clear Eurocentricity. This is most apparent where he replaces the general "our" representing humanity with the specific pronoun referring to his cultural reference group. To support his argument that "modern people . . . have not yet realized that we make decisions . . . mostly, unconsciously" he states that "there is no word in our language to describe this fact" (41). Considering the language in which this book was first published, *our* must refer to German. However, no evidence is presented that he has considered non-European peoples in this assessment. For example, many Native American languages do reflect a belief in the unity and continuity of different states of consciousness.[1] When he discusses whether wanting to be good is a useful goal, he attributes this aim to "living in a Christian society (where) we have been taught to love our neighbor" (59). It is unlikely that Eurocentric schools of psychology are yet comprehensive enough to generalize to the diversity of humanity. Women psychologists such as Carol Gilligan have shown the deficits of psychologic theories generalized from white middle-class male perspectives onto white middle-class women.[2] If the author is aware of the cultural boundaries of his arguments, these should have been stated.

The second problem has to do with use of gender stereotypes and a male-dominant worldview. After making the wonderful point that those experiences we keep from early childhood are remembered precisely because they are significant to us (79), he gives an example in which women cannot win. "If one's mother is remembered in a relatively positive role it is very likely she was an indulgent mother (80). . . . If his mother is not mentioned at all, the person probably feels that he was neglected as a child" (81). In fact his whole discussion of family roles is a litany of the negative. Only children are spoiled; the first child feels neglected rather than loved; second children are often overactive and pushy; the middle child has an insecure place within the family group; and the youngest child is not taken seriously and is usually spoiled (74–77). The use of gender stereotypes is most marked in the case-study chapter. Here women struggle with "masculine protest" (the fear of having to play an inferior role as a girl), "the tendency to dominate," and problems with marriage and boyfriends. Meanwhile, men struggle with work difficulties, anger, and speech problems (most often because of overdependence on wives or mothers) (127–37).

While it can be said that Dr. Blumenthal represents very clearly a male European understanding of human psychology, there are many such books already available. There are, however, few such books that relate current psychologic theory to the Bahá'í teachings. Unfortunately, in this case,

1. For example, Jamake Highwater, *The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America* (New York: New American Library, 1981).

2. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

consideration of Bahá'í principles serves also to illuminate the author's narrow perspective on the important topic of personal development. In the end, because of the limitations in worldview underlying many of Dr. Blumenthal's arguments, it is difficult to recommend this book.

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