

SOUNDING: The Web and Weft of Civilisation – Art and Learning in the Bahá'í Community by *Aodhán Floyd*

The Irish National Spiritual Assembly has identified the need to pursue the “enhancement of the intellectual and artistic life of the community.”¹ The responsibility for this has devolved upon the Association for Bahá'í Studies, the National School Board, the Adib Taherzadeh Training Institute and the National Educational Committee. In doing so, the point is made explicit that an intellectual and artistic culture is a consequence of systems of education. One of the challenges, therefore, of the Five Year Plan is the systematic enhancement of the relationship between education and art.

To an artist, intellectual and artistic activity are complementary. Ideas cross-fertilise and stimulate. To a Bahá'í, all aspects of thought and inquiry are linked by the principle of independent investigation of truth and by insights gained from the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Shoghi Effendi, in reference to Bahá'í scholarship, calls for “the truths enshrined in our Faith” to be presented “intelligently and enticingly.”² This advice can apply equally to arts practitioners. Such an approach will “widen the range of people attracted to its truths, greatly enhance its prestige and influence, and broaden the foundation of the world civilisation to which the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh will ultimately give rise.”³ In addition, learning and experimentation through the integrated use of the arts will energise and enrich Bahá'í communities; it can also provide a model of community arts for educational programmes and activities. This is especially suited to activities aimed at promoting broader social integration.

Education, both formal and informal, is the most effective way to shape people's values, attitudes and skills. To “educate” is to draw out of a person something potential or latent. From

this older pedagogic sense comes the central metaphor of individual and social transformation in the Bahá'í Writings:

Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. Through a word proceeding out of the mouth of God he was called into being; by one word more he was guided to recognise the Source of his education; by yet another word his station and destiny were safeguarded. The Great Being saith: 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.⁴

‘Abdu’l-Bahá defines human and spiritual education as follows:

Human education signifies civilisation and progress, that is to say ... the activities essential to man. Divine education is that of the Kingdom of God: it consisteth in acquiring divine perfections, and this is true education; for in this state man becomes the focus of divine blessings, the manifestation of the word, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, and after Our likeness.’⁵

This *becoming* is the essence of the Bahá'í vision of education. It is “the gradual discovery of what it means to be human, the search for a personal identity, an identity which brings individual autonomy within community structure.”⁶ This discovery is safeguarded on the condition “that man’s river flows into the mighty sea, and draw from God’s ancient source this inspiration. When this cometh to pass, then every teacher is as a shoreless ocean, every pupil a prodigal fountain of knowledge.”⁷

This search is dependent upon moral and intellectual discipline. Its true purpose is spiritual – to learn to be free from

prejudice and ignorance. The appropriate framework for this ideal development can be located in community structure: as part of study circles, children's classes, the Nineteen Day Feast, and the Summer School programmes. Bahá'ís are increasingly aware of the capacity of creative arts to become part of a process of imaginative and rigorous expression and inquiry.

'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the investigating mind as attentive and alive: "Through the processes of inductive reasoning he is informed of all that appertains to humanity, its status, conditions and problems and weaves the web and texture of civilisation."⁸

To my mind, this is the domain of the artist. The value of the creative arts is their unique capacity to offer not only knowledge about a subject but an active participation in it. They challenge us to move from being passive consumers and, instead, to create meaning. Art is revolutionary in that it seeks to change consciousness, to refine, elaborate, and deepen it. Meaning is gained through the critical interaction between individual vision and greater cultural narratives. Art is so much more than luxury objects or an entertainment industry. Now, more than ever, it is a human necessity, a function of the attentive self, active in the face of the commodified and alienated experience of late capitalism. It grows out of, and reflects, illuminates and integrates our inner selves. It is an act of hope and, potentially, it is prayer.

In the Idealist tradition from Plato to Goethe, "Fine art is not real art till it is in this sense free, and only achieves its highest task when it takes its place in the same sphere as religion and philosophy, and has become simply a mode of revealing to consciousness and bringing to utterance the Divine Nature, the deepest interests of humanity, and the most comprehensive truths of the mind."⁹

Of course, there are limits. I don't think artists should ever claim to offer salvation or explain away that which can never be known: "Souls shall be perturbed as they make

mention of Me. For minds cannot grasp Me nor hearts contain Me.”¹⁰ Great art extends into unknown areas. It is precisely this open-ended quality which tends to reject fixed literal meanings and accommodates ambiguity, which can be confusing and disturbing. The situation can be complicated by further confusion between the stating of solutions to a problem and the artist’s role, which is to pose problems and reorientate perspectives. An artist as a facilitator does not prescribe, but instead leads. Reflective questions are asked rather than statements made.

The writer Bahíyyih Nakhjavání finds that “theatre provides a natural means to resolve the questions it raises through the dramatic use of interruption or delay. Theatre does not answer questions: it allows them to be heard; it permits for differing, sometimes contradictory interpretations; it invites the clash of opinions and recognises the difference as dramatically necessary.”¹¹ The example she chooses from Bahá’í history is the Conference of Badasht. Significantly, Shoghi Effendi interprets this moment of crisis as a dramatisation of the spiritual struggle within the Bábí community between Old and New Dispensations, orchestrated by Bahá’u’lláh, “Who steadily, unerringly, yet unexpectedly, steered the course of that memorable episode and ... brought it to its final and dramatic climax.”¹² The movement of drama can blur the distinction between audience and actors and subvert habitual expectations. Edward Said, in conversation with the conductor Daniel Barenboim, observed of Barenboim’s Weinmar masterclasses with young Israeli and Arab musicians that simply by playing together as an orchestra will change their lives; “it’s really quite subversive, isn’t it?”¹³

The Kildare Reminiscence Theatre Project also encourages participants “to engage in imagining a space in which new definitions and concepts of who we are can take place.”¹⁴ Reminiscence Theatre draws on the memories and experiences of older people to honour their lives. In creative co-operation (or play) with different age groups, these

workshops use drama “as a means of physical, mental and spiritual exercise.”¹⁵ Such community arts practice advocate the foundation principle of social integration, unity in diversity.

The arts are “disciplined forms of inquiry and expression through which to organise feelings and ideas about experience.”¹⁶ It is important that we recognise the creative arts as a particular form of intelligence and a mode of learning of “great educative power.”¹⁷ Bahá’u’lláh makes clear that reality is essentially symbolic or metaphorical: “Whatever is in the heaven and whatever is on earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God.”¹⁸ Art and religion share a similar “veiled” language to illuminate reality. In the view of the poet Robert Hayden: “When we speak of Bahá’u’lláh as being a poet, in a sense it is very true, because a Prophet uses symbols, speaks in parables, uses metaphor and all the devices we associate with poetry.”¹⁹ Metaphor is an expressive device which elliptically illustrates one thing by reference to another: their meanings are fused. The newly created relation bridges and reveals the relation between reality and imagination. For example, in William George’s deeply moving and funny play, *The Kingfisher’s Wing: The Story of Badí’* (which toured Ireland in 1996), the image of a kingfisher’s wing becomes, in my reading, a metaphor for Badí’ ’s sacrifice. The associations – fleeting life, fleeting movement, the flash of scarlet, the allusion to kingship – all strike with the force of insight. The experience is total. To achieve a similar sense of revelation is the ambition of any conscientious artist. The challenge as a Bahá’í is to consciously do so in light of the knowledge of Revelation. In this process, the intellect is a harmonising or disciplining influence. However, I believe, it is a spiritual impulse that produces an essential tension and emotional urgency. It is the only agency that quickens: “The ... arts which the ablest hands have produced ... are but the manifestations of the quickening power released by His [Christ’s] transcendent, His all-pervasive, and resplendent Spirit.”²⁰

Humanity's primary duty is the independent search for truth. As Edwin McCloughan reminds us in the previous issue of *Solas*: "The independent investigation of truth ... is first and foremost a process of spiritualisation."²¹ Aesthetic experience has a part to play in our spiritual lives. Sensuous engagement amplifies the soul's response, as in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's beautiful description of the effect of music: "... if there be love in the heart, through melody, it will increase until its intensity can scarcely be borne."²² Taking responsibility for our own learning is vital in this process of spiritualisation: "Whoso ariseth among you to teach the Cause of his Lord, let him, before all else, teach his own self, that his speech may attract the hearts of men that hear him. Unless he teaches his own self, the words of his mouth will not affect the heart of the seeker."²³

The Bahá'í Faith teaches that we are all potential seekers. We all possess an innate desire to know and to love God. Bahá'u'lláh assures us that "every man hath been, and will continue to be able of himself to appreciate the Beauty of God, the Glorified."²⁴ The attraction for beauty and thirst for knowledge should shape both our moral purpose and our teaching methods. The most successful way is through guided self-discovery. Facilitators and participants are involved as co-artists. It should be a process that is flexible, empowering, collaborative and illuminating.

An enhanced intellectual and artistic life is a measure of the maturity and health of the Bahá'í community. It is a testament to an essential quality of the spirit – an imaginative and questing mind. If, as T.S. Eliot thought, "The truth has to become my truth before it can become truth at all"²⁵, then art is "a way to work to the truth"²⁶ and to embody understanding.

In conclusion, it is a cultural imperative that an education that will initiate critical enquiry, stimulate individual spiritual growth, and consolidate community identity should be one that will harness people's creativity. The source of our talents is the power of reflection:

Make ye every effort that out of this ideal mine there may gleam forth such pearls of wisdom and utterance as will promote the well-being and harmony of all the kindreds of the earth.²⁷

References

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27. *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 72.