

Bahá'í Youth and Sexuality A Personal/Professional View

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of Bahá'í youth with respect to prevailing attitudes towards sexuality found in Western society. Drawing on the results of a survey of 3,600 Canadian teenagers, the paper delineates some current attitudes in the general population. The role of youth and the process of spiritual growth, as described in the Bahá'í writings, are explored with particular attention to the concept of sexuality and the principle of chastity. A number of practical suggestions are made for both individuals and institutions who must deal with matters of sexuality.

Résumé

Ce travail examine le rôle de la jeunesse bahá'ie face aux attitudes courantes vis-à-vis la sexualité dans la société occidentale. En se basant sur les résultats d'une étude de 3,600 adolescents canadiens, les attitudes courantes de la population en général sont présentées. Le rôle des jeunes et le processus de croissance spirituelle, tels que décrits dans les Ecrits bahá'ís, sont approfondis avec une attention particulière au concept de sexualité et au principe de chasteté. Plusieurs suggestions pratiques sont développées pour aider les individus et les institutions qui doivent s'occuper de questions concernant la sexualité.

Resúmen

Este artículo examina el papel de la juventud Bahá'í con respecto a las actitudes prevalentes encontradas en el occidente hacia la sexualidad. Basandose en los resultados de una encuesta de 3,600 jóvenes de 13-19 años, el artículo delinea algunas de las actitudes corrientes de la población en general. El papel de la juventud y el proceso del desarrollo espiritual, según descrito en las escrituras Bahá'ís, son explorados con particular atención al concepto de la sexualidad y el principio de la castidad. Se dan un número de sugerencias prácticas, tanto para individuos como para instituciones que tienen que ver con asuntos de la sexualidad.

As the Bahá'í Faith becomes well known, its members will increasingly be called upon to justify the position of the Bahá'í Faith on all matters including sexuality. Drawing on some recent data on current attitudes among teenagers towards sexuality, this paper will examine the role of Bahá'í youth with respect to sexuality in the light of Bahá'í teachings. It will also offer some practical suggestions for dealing with these issues on a day-to-day basis. The authors, having grown up as Bahá'í youth in a Western society, have written this paper both from the experience of their personal struggles and from their perspective as family physicians now having to counsel adolescents, Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í.

Some Current Attitudes

To "set the scene," it may be helpful to look at some data concerning attitudes and trends among youth. Bibby and Posterski have published the results of a 1984 survey of 3,600 teenagers age fifteen to nineteen from 152 randomly selected schools across Canada. The survey was undertaken to provide "a comprehensive profile of young people regarding their attitudes, values, beliefs, outlook, expectations and behavior" (xix), and the data on sexuality are particularly illuminating. When asked the question, "If two people on a date like each other, is it all right for them to...", the responses were as tabulated below:

Table 1

"If two people on a date like each other, is it all right for them to..."

	Yes, first date	Yes. after a few dates	No	Other response
Hold hands	92	8	0	
Kiss	82	18	0	
Neck	50	45	5	1
Pet	28	56	15	3
Have Sexual Relations	11	42	44	

Source: Bibby & Posterski, *The Emerging Generation: An Inside Look at Canada's Teenagers*. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

Note: In the "other response" column were "Yes" responses with the qualifier, "If they love each other," written in by the respondents. (76)

The data show 11 % of the teenage population endorsed having sexual relations on the first date. Another 42% (for a total of more than half of Canada's teenagers) feel that intercourse is appropriate after a few dates.

Furthermore, the survey determined that 80% of Canadian youth are of the opinion that premarital sex is all right when people love each other (see below), with more than 50% feeling that sexual relations are also acceptable within a few dates when individuals like each other. These attitudes are not particular only to Canadian youth, as a variety of North American studies indicate that approximately 50% of fifteen to nineteen-year-olds have engaged in premarital intercourse, with the range running from about 33% for fifteen-year-olds to 67% for nineteen-year-olds (77). Some further data on sexual attitudes from the study appear in Table 2.

Table 2

	% Agreeing
(1) Sex before marriage is all right when people love each other.	80
(2) Birth control information should be available to teenagers who want it.	93
(3) It should be possible to obtain a legal abortion when a female has been raped.	86
(4) It should be possible for a married woman to obtain a legal abortion if she does not want to have any more children.	39
(5) Sexual relations between two people of the same sex is sometimes all right.	26
(6) Homosexuals are entitled to the same rights as other Canadians.	67
(7) It is sometimes all right for a married person to have sexual relations with someone other than a marriage partner.	12

Source: Bibby & Posterski, *The Emerging Generation: An Inside Look at Canada's Teenagers*. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

Lest it be thought that these are just "youth phenomena," the study also found that these percentages were virtually identical to adult attitudes, and on some issues (e.g., homosexuality, extramarital sex) youth were more conservative than adults (82).

Only a cursory examination of these data is needed to show that in many areas these "current" attitudes conflict with Bahá'í teachings on sexuality. Bahá'ís are not immune to the forces of the societies in which they live, and Bahá'ís of all ages living in a Western society will be affected by these attitudes to one degree or another—even as far as some having adopted them outright. In trying to help Bahá'í youth cope with the issues of adolescence and sexuality, the Bahá'í community is continually striving to reflect in their purest form the concepts inherent in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh concerning the character and role to be attained by youth. We recognize that we are in an embryonic stage of our development and that we are far from perfect, especially in the very private realm of intimacy and interpersonal relationships where traditional beliefs and crystallized concepts are the most difficult and painful to be rooted out and transformed by the new Revelation. What follows is an attempt at understanding concepts whose full meaning and implication will likely only become evident to future generations.

The Role of Youth

First, what standards of behavior are expected of Bahá'í youth, and why are these standards so important? If one looks at the Bahá'í writings, there is universal recognition that these standards are very high. Bahá'u'lláh has stated:

A race of men, incomparable in character, shall be raised up which, with the feet of detachment, will tread under all who are in heaven and on earth, and will cast the sleeve of holiness over all that hath been created from water and clay. (Qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 26)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls upon humanity:

...let each one of you be as a lamp shining forth with the light of the virtues of the world of humanity. Be trustworthy, sincere, affectionate and replete with chastity. Be illumined, be spiritual, be divine, be glorious, be quickened of God, be a Bahá’í. (*Promulgation* 453)

No more explicit guidance for youth can be found than in the May 1985 message from the Universal House of Justice:

The words, the deeds, the attitudes, the lack of prejudice, the nobility of character, the high sense of service to others—in a word, those qualities and actions which distinguish a Bahá’í must unfailingly characterize their [the Bahá’í youth] inner life and outer behavior.... Rejecting the low sights of mediocrity, let them scale the ascending heights of excellence in all they aspire to do. May they resolve to elevate the very atmosphere in which they move.... (*Unrestrained* 187)

One function of the mission of Bahá’u’lláh is to provide the spiritual power and guidance for the creation of a “new race of men” from all strata of society, including all ages. Youth must be in the vanguard of this transformation. A movement is truly progressive and “intensely alive” (Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 58) when youth are found to be putting its fundamental principles into practice with enthusiasm and devotion. Shoghi Effendi states that if the youth “are not distinguished for their high conduct, they cannot expect other young people to take the Cause very seriously” (*Bahá’í Youth* 8).

Youth are less attached to outdated concepts and traditions and provide the basis for inner change that will lead to the transformation of society as a whole. Therefore, at this rapidly evolving stage of transition in the evolution of humanity from its adolescence to its maturity, the youth of this generation will, before the end of this century, “stand at the helm of the Cause... in a period when the forces of history are moving to a climax, when mankind will see the establishment of the Lesser Peace, and during which the Cause of God will play an increasingly prominent role in the reconstruction of human society” (Universal House of Justice, *Message* 1983). Succinctly, Bahá’í youth have been appointed as the vanguard in the establishment of the New World Order, and the character transformation required to perform this task successfully “can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age” (Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 25).

The issue for Bahá’í youth is not how to deal with peer pressure but to realize that they themselves are the peer pressure. Shoghi Effendi eloquently states:

Upon them rest the supreme and challenging responsibility to promote the interests of the Cause of God in the days to come, to co-ordinate its worldwide activities, to extend its scope, to safeguard its integrity, to exalt its virtues, define its purpose, and translate its ideals and aims into memorable and abiding achievements. Theirs is a mighty task, at once holy, stupendous and enthralling. (Qtd. in *Bahá’í Youth* iii)

Given the powerful statements in the Writings concerning the role of youth and the high standard of behavior they must exemplify, it is easy to understand how an individual Bahá’í youth may feel overwhelmed and helpless at this prospect. These feelings are particularly enhanced in the realm of sexuality where the Bahá’í principles and laws governing the topic may appear to be unreasonable, dogmatic, and difficult to apply in Western society.

The Process of Spiritual Growth

The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh provides the method required for the process of spiritual change from what we are to what we must become. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

...that in every kind of excellence the people of God shall surpass all other human beings; that both outwardly; and inwardly they shall prove superior to the rest; that for purity, immaculacy, refinement, and the preservation of health, they shall be leaders in the vanguard of those who know. And that by their *freedom from enslavement*, their *knowledge*, their *self-control*, they shall be first among the pure, the free and the wise. [Emphasis added.] (*Selections* 150)

True freedom, as defined in the Bahá’í writings, is attained by obedience to the ordinances and precepts of God. These laws are not arbitrary or dogmatic. They have a purpose, which is to liberate human beings from the bondage of uncontrolled or misdirected instincts or urges. By following these laws, a person becomes truly free to channel his or her full capacities towards the more essential goals of life—the most primary of which are the search for truth and the attainment of knowledge.

Chaste eyes enjoy the beatific vision of the Lord and know what this encounter meaneth.... ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 146)

Knowledge is not blind acceptance of memorized recitations devoid of meaning. In the spirit of the Bahá'í teachings, knowledge is the result of the process by which the seeker arrives at a true understanding of reality. In this context, we grasp the significance of the laws and principles and their relevance to our well-being. These newly attained insights generate changes in our being that increase our love for God, for his Manifestations, and for his creation. We know why we should change; we have confidence in our ability to change; and we are inspired to align our actions with these laws and principles. This is the process by which an individual grows spiritually. Like any learning process, it is developmental in nature and therefore requires discipline, patience, and above all self-control. It can be painfully slow, but it is the most assured way of internalizing laws and enjoying their benefit rather than "enduring their burden." The gift of understanding is viewed by the Bahá'í writings as the foundation of this growth process. Therefore, before even asking what the Bahá'í Faith tells its followers to do about sexuality, it is fundamental to consider the Bahá'í concept of sexuality.

The Bahá'í Concept of Sexuality

The Bahá'í Faith does not have a puritanical view of sex. Sexuality's scope extends beyond solely for procreation and is seen as a God-given "natural right of every individual" (Shoghi Effendi qtd. in *Bahá'í Marriage* 14).

Shoghi Effendi states:

It must be remembered, however, that the maintenance of such a high standard of moral conduct is not to be associated or confused with any form of asceticism, or of excessive and bigoted puritanism. (*Advent* 28)

Furthermore, the Bahá'í writings do not view the sexual impulse as arising from a sinful, guilt-ridden part of an individual. Therefore, "The Bahá'ís do not believe in the suppression of the sex impulse but in its regulation and control" (Shoghi Effendi qtd. in *Bahá'í Marriage* 14). We often pay lip-service to this principle, but many Bahá'ís attempt to obtain control of their sexual feelings through complete suppression, perhaps unaware that there may be more creative ways of channelling these feelings keeping within the Bahá'í framework. This perhaps is a natural reaction to the excessive misuse of the sex instinct so prevalent in our society, especially among youth where sex can be unconsciously viewed not only as a means for physical gratification but also as a vehicle to obtain secondary gains such as friendship, love, self-confidence, and acceptance so desperately needed during adolescence. When sex is pursued in this way, it generates conflict and profound unhappiness.

In a Bahá'í context, sex is viewed as primarily a spiritual phenomenon that uses the tool of the body for expression. The Báb writes:

As this physical frame is the throne of the inner temple, whatever occurs to the former is felt by the latter. In reality that which takes delight in joy or is saddened by pain is the inner temple of the body, not the body itself. (*Selections* 95)

Unquestionably, the body, with all its senses, experiences pleasure through sex, but it is the soul that translates this experience into meaningful fulfillment. Sex is a very powerful force with enormous potential to bond two individuals on a very deep level. When illumined with the light of spirituality as a physical expression of a spiritual union, sex augments love, unity, companionship, dignity, and is a source of happiness and upliftment. Divorced from spirituality and a true understanding of God's purpose for man, the individuals involved run a serious risk of being left with unwanted attachment, estrangement, and abasement.

The Bahá'í teachings explain that union and oneness are essential attributes of the Creator and that the principal generating impulse of creation is to manifest this oneness at increasingly more advanced levels. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

From the pairing of even the smallest particles in the world of being are the grace and bounty of God made manifest; and the higher the degree, the more momentous is the union.... And above all other unions is that between human beings, especially when it cometh to pass in the love of God. Thus is the primal oneness made to appear (*Selections* 119)

It is indeed a powerful testimony to the beauty of God's creation that all the elements exist within human beings for this union to occur—the diversity and uniqueness of individuals; the complementarity of male and female qualities; and finally the power of attraction, including the force of sexuality.

The Principle of Chastity

Once we understand the role of sexuality in human interaction, it is easier to comprehend the Bahá'í principle of chastity.

Chastity implies both before and after marriage an unsullied, chaste sex life. Before marriage absolutely chaste, after marriage absolutely faithful to one's chosen companion. (Shoghi Effendi qtd. in *Bahá'í Marriage* 14)

This principle assures that the physical and spiritual union of woman and man will serve as the basis for one of the most positive and productive units of society: the institution of marriage, considered by Bahá'u'lláh as a "fortress for well-being" (*Bahá'í Prayers* 105). The meaning of the Bahá'í concept of chastity extends beyond mere restriction of sexual intercourse to marriage. It is an attribute to be integrated into the character of every individual that frees one to relate to all human beings, including one's spouse, as noble and spiritual beings rather than as sex objects. It endows us with internal controls that enable us to form connections between hearts and "to establish bonds of comradeship and love which are eternal and founded on the spiritual life of man, not on his physical life" (Shoghi Effendi qtd. in *Bahá'í Marriage* 14). In the words of Bahá'u'lláh, "The brightness of the light of chastity sheddeth its illumination upon the worlds of the spirit, and its fragrance is wafted even unto the Most Exalted Paradise" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 27).

Finally, one must always remember that the spirit of Bahá'í law lies in the principle of moderation.

The standard inculcated by Bahá'u'lláh, seeks, under no circumstances, to deny anyone the legitimate right and privilege to derive the fullest advantage and benefit from the manifold joys, beauties, and pleasures with which the world has been so plentifully enriched by an All-Loving Creator. (Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 28)

Some Practical Points

Having dealt with some of the Bahá'í concepts and principles on sexuality, the question now arises as to how to apply these principles practically on a day-to-day basis. What might be some of the do's and don'ts of meeting the challenge of sexuality as a Bahá'í youth, parent, or institution?

Don't Assume

All of us have been, are, or will be adolescents, hence any discussion of adolescence is necessarily subjective. For those who have passed through or are currently passing through this period, there is a danger in the tendency to generalize and assume that the experience and challenge of the one is the experience and challenge of the many. It is here that any discussion of adolescence, including this one, risks being biased, superficial, and simplistic. Sider and Kreider in their article, "Coping with Adolescent Patients," write:

Each individual handles the challenges of adolescence in his own unique way, and no schematic outline can account for the fits and starts, the inconsistencies, contradictions and vicissitudes of these years. Adolescence is never traversed in the abstract. It is experienced in the most personal terms, an exquisitely idiosyncratic journey. (840)

Quite simply put, if the individual or institution attempting to help Bahá'í youth through this period is not acutely attentive and observant of the individual Bahá'í youth, the helper risks being "out in left field" when the play is in the right. Given that adolescence is a distinctly unique and individual experience, its challenges by necessity require unique and individual approaches and solutions. The approach taken by a particular individual or institution in a particular instance may be completely inappropriate in a similar but slightly different situation. A lack of detailed "cookbook" responses to the various challenges of adolescence should be expected and welcomed and never be cause for anxiety;¹ for it is through the utilization of the creative process liberated by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh that individuals and institutions have arrived and will continue to arrive at unique and creative responses to any problem. As demonstrated throughout Bahá'í history, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh have shown their ability to surmount any obstacles; they have the potential to turn "ashes into roses." The challenges of adolescence are no exception.

Another frequent pitfall is the assumption about the period of adolescence itself. All too frequently adolescence is portrayed as a perilous journey, fraught with tempests, every moment a life and death struggle, with no guarantee of safe arrival at the port of adulthood. This frankly melodramatic attitude can leave those to whom adolescence was a positive and rewarding experience in the ridiculous position of feeling guilty or somehow deprived of a "normal" adolescence. Again to quote from Sider and Kreider:

In spite of the experts' dire predictions, most adolescents survive and do tolerably well. Many appear to be

relatively unperturbed by the profound biological and psychological changes occurring in them and give every evidence of thoroughly enjoying their adolescent years. Some in fact do so well that they surpass their progenitors. Adolescence is not the only difficult phase of life; nor is it clear sailing thereafter. Every stage of life has its unique stresses as well as its share of those experiences common to human beings of any age. ("Coping" 840)

The period of adolescence brings new resources to the individual: enormous physical energy, a large repertoire of social, intellectual, and physical skills that can all be channelled and brought to bear on productive activities. Indeed, the Bahá'í writings accentuate the potential of Bahá'í youth rather than the problems, and hence for Bahá'í youth, this period has ever more potential to be a rich, rewarding, and productive experience.

The endurance of youth under arduous conditions, their vitality and vigour, and their ability to adapt themselves to local situations, to meet new challenges, and to impart their warmth and enthusiasm to those they visit, combines with the standard of conduct upheld by Bahá'í youth, [to] make them potent instruments for the execution of the contemplated projects. (Universal House of Justice qtd. in *Lights* 507)

Spiritualize, Spiritualize, Spiritualize

He should consume every wayward thought with the flame of His loving mention.... (Bahá'u'lláh, *Book of Certitude* 194)

Spiritualization of one's life with daily prayer and deepening is the cornerstone of spiritual development and the key to the response to any challenge, the challenges facing Bahá'í youth being no exception. Spiritualization is given paramount importance in the Bahá'í writings, particularly those of Shoghi Effendi and in the writings of the Universal House of Justice on the subject of Bahá'í youth.² All too often, however, individuals will sabotage their own efforts by "skipping" this crucial first step.

The following quotation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is probably one of the most illuminating explanations of the primacy of spiritualization:

Just as the earth attracts everything to the centre of gravity, and every object thrown upward into space will come down, so also material ideas and worldly thoughts attract man to the centre of self. Anger, passion, ignorance, prejudice, greed, envy, covetousness, jealousy and suspicion prevent man from ascending to the realms of holiness, imprisoning him in the claws of self and the cage of egotism. The physical man, unassisted by the divine power, trying to escape from one of these invisible enemies will unconsciously fall into the hands of another. No sooner does he attempt to soar upward than the density of the love of self, like the power of gravity draws him to the centre of the earth. The only power capable of delivering man from this captivity is the power of the breaths of the Holy Spirit. (Qtd. in *Bahá'í Readings* 305)

Clearly any program, counsels, or efforts that are not linked to a regular program of spiritualization are ultimately doomed to failure. Even success in overcoming a particular weakness or fault, if not linked to a process of spiritualization, risks leaving an egotistical and undesirable rigidity and pride in its wake rather than wisdom, compassion, and flexibility.

It's All in Your Perspective

Closely linked to the concept of spiritualization is the question of perspective. When involved in the throes of a problem, particularly one linked to sexuality, the perspective on that problem can become extremely distorted. Feelings of guilt and shame lead to depression and despair. This, in turn, generates a very negative self-image, and even the smallest problem can seem insurmountable. How does one use spiritualization in this instance?

O SON OF MAN!

Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* 4)

O SON OF SPIRIT!

Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* 9)

The distinguishing characteristic of a human being is his nobility of character. No matter what the circumstance or the condition, the underlying reality remains that of a nobility of character in the image of God Himself. Negative self-images have no place in a Bahá'í context, and self-abasement is contradictory and forbidden (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* 37). Struggles and frustrations should be expected as the result of the nobility striving to express itself, and the spiritualization process in these instances must be directed towards strengthening this image of nobility, as opposed to a tendency to cripple oneself with guilt and self-flagellation. During these struggles it may be helpful to focus on the “gentle writings,” those that encourage rather than those that chastize, i.e., in the middle of a struggle it may be encouraging to be addressed as “O My Friend,” “O Companion of My Throne,” or “O Banished and Faithful Friend,” rather than “O Weed that springeth out of Dust,” or “O Ye that are lying as dead on the couch of heedlessness.”

The Bahá'í principle of overlooking the bad qualities and focusing on the good applies to oneself as well as to others—a fact that is often overlooked. The Universal House of Justice, quoting the Guardian, wrote to an individual:

We must be patient with others, infinitely patient! But also with our own poor selves, remembering that even the Prophets of God sometimes got tired and cried out in despair! He urges you to persevere and add up your accomplishments, rather than to dwell on the dark side of things. Everyone's life has both a dark and bright side. The Master said: Turn your back to the darkness and your face to me.³

As important as gaining a proper perspective of oneself is developing a proper perspective of the problem. Overzealous efforts to purify one's life and to overcome obstacles of a personal nature can be compared to trying to get rid of a beachball by forcing it underwater. The more one pushes, the more the ball resists until finally inordinate amounts of energy are expended in trying to keep the ball underwater. Sometimes it is appropriate simply to leave it alone for a while, to turn one's attention to other concerns, or perhaps to consider alternative methods to the “head-on frontal assault.” In a letter to an individual struggling with a problem related to sexuality, the Universal House of Justice wrote:

Your problem, therefore, is one against which you should continue to struggle, with determination and with the aid of prayer. You should remember, however, that it is only one of the many temptations and faults that a human being must strive to overcome during his lifetime, and you should not increase the difficulty you have by over-emphasizing its importance. We suggest that you try to see it within the whole spectrum of the qualities that a Bahá'í must develop in his character. Be vigilant against temptation but do not allow it to claim too great a share of your attention. You should concentrate, rather, on the virtues that you should develop, the services you should strive to render, and, above all, on God and His attributes, and devote your energies to living a full Bahá'í life in all its many aspects. (Qtd. in *Lights* 270)

Clearly, there is an appropriate amount of energy to be devoted to surmounting any problem and keeping it in proper perspective. The “most grievous error,” after all is backbiting. Everything else is secondary. Too little effort and no progress is made; too much and the problem can assume unwieldy proportions. The challenge is determining the appropriate amount of energy and persevering in its application.

Little by Little—Day by Day

To try and to persevere is to achieve ultimate and complete victory. (Shoghi Effendi, *Messages* 17)

Perseverance is the hallmark of any spiritual struggle, and struggles with sexuality are no exception. It is important to remember that purity of thought and motive are for the most part acquired traits and not inherent. As well, it should be remembered that victory is very often achieved in the long term over months and years and is usually a collection of “minor virtues garnered in a sweeter time” (White, *Another Song* 111)—a series of small victories on a battleground littered with defeats and setbacks. Bahá'u'lláh Himself poignantly alludes to the frustrations that are the necessary lot of all who would advance toward God:

The companions of all who adore Thee are the tears they shed, and the comforters of such as seek Thee are the groans they utter, and the food of them who haste to meet Thee is the fragments of their broken hearts. (*Bahá'í Prayers* 192)

In this frustration, however, there is great wisdom and purpose, for the defeats and setbacks themselves are as important a part of the process as the victories. Combined with a process of spiritualization, they bring patience, humility, a lessening of reliance on self and a turning to God, and a great compassion for all those who struggle.

It's the constant chipping away, the perseverance, that eventually destroys all obstacles. One would well

remember the story of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who when approached by a believer in the depths of discouragement despairing of ever acquiring the qualities and virtues that Bahá’ís are required to possess, replied with the greatest compassion and encouragement, “little by little; day by day” (qtd. in *Bahá’í World* 12: 704).

God Loves Laughter

Joy gives us wings! In times of joy our strength is more vital, our intellect keener, and our understanding less clouded. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 109)

Are you happy? Be Happy! (‘Abdu’l-Bahá qtd. in *Vignettes from the Life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 110)

There are very few situations, no matter how difficult or tragic, that do not have their humorous aspects—even if sometimes only in retrospect. The history of the Bahá’í Faith provides examples time and again of how humor was used to rise above trials and tests. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was renowned for his sense of humor. Hají Mirzá Haidar-‘Alí, the “Angel of Carmel,” who, after being abused and beaten by authorities hostile to the Faith, had his beard burnt off and was slung sideways over a mule with another companion to be taken to prison. All along the way the two laughed at how ridiculous the other looked. Zaynu’l Muqarrabín, the companion of Bahá’u’lláh, was treasured because of his ability to make Bahá’u’lláh laugh.

In the midst of a struggle, when weary “of battle far prolonged” (White, *Another Song* 112), a bit of laughter, even gentle self-ridicule, can push back the shadows and banish the darkness. Might one not imagine even the Concourse on High looking on, smiling knowingly at our furious activity and concern with what are, in final analysis and considering the grand order of the universe, very minor and ordinary problems? Might we not join in with them to let the laughter “refresh and gladden our spirits” and in so doing gain fresh perspective and a new resolve?

There is Strength in Numbers

To return to the study on attitudes by Bibby and Posterski, one of their questions concerned values and what teenagers viewed as important. Topping the list of responses were “Friendship” and “Being loved,” rated as “Very important” by 91 % and 87% respectively. These values were viewed by teenagers as being more important than “Freedom” (84%), “Success” (78%), and “Excitement” (58%), and, perhaps surprisingly, far outranking “Recognition” (41 %) and “Being Popular” (21 %) often identified as the major concerns of adolescence (*Generation* 17). For many, this information comes as no surprise and will simply confirm personal experiences or intuition. Nevertheless, it deserves very special attention. Adolescence is a period of tremendous change in the socialization of the individual. In a Western society, in particular, it usually represents one of the first steps in “leaving the nest.” The adolescent begins to develop emotional bonds outside his or her immediate family of a depth and intensity not previously known.

These bonds (particularly when developed between Bahá’í youth and especially in the context of Bahá’í activities) can be a source of encouragement and strength, love and harmony that can last over a lifetime and indeed through all the worlds of God. It is the rare individual who, having grown up as an active Bahá’í youth, does not have several of these bonds that span distance and time and from which they derive great comfort and strength in time of difficulty.

If friendship, as Bibby and Posterski have found, has such a primary importance for young men and women, then it is imperative that Bahá’í communities pay particular attention to their youth, to make an extra effort to extend the hand of real friendship and understanding, of support and encouragement. The communities should make an extra effort to involve the youth in meaningful ways in Bahá’í activities and to encourage as much contact with other Bahá’í youth as possible. The investment of time and effort at this crucial period will payoff a thousand-fold in the future.

... the believers have not yet fully learned to draw on each other’s love for strength and consolation in time of need. The Cause of God is endowed with tremendous powers, and the reason the believers do not gain more from it is because they have not learned to duly draw these mighty forces of love and strength and harmony generated by the Faith. (Universal House of Justice, *Unrestrained* 169)

Don’t Be Afraid to Ask for Help

Whenever ye fall ill, refer to competent physicians. (Bahá’u’lláh qtd. in Universal House of Justice, *Selections on Health*)

According to the explicit decree of Bahá’u’lláh one must not turn aside from the advice of a competent doctor. It is imperative to consult one even if the patient himself be a well-known and eminent physician. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 156)

Occasionally some of the problems of sexuality in adolescence will assume rather more serious dimensions, either because of the nature of the problem itself or the way it was handled. Homosexuality would be a case in point. In these instances any personal efforts on the part of the individual or on the part of friends, family, or institutions should be supplemented by professional advice. It often takes much courage to approach a “stranger” to discuss a personal problem, and more often than not it will be difficult to find a professional sympathetic to the Bahá’í viewpoint or to convince a therapist of the value of a particular course of action and the sincerity of an individual’s desire to overcome a problem. These difficulties may present obstacles to effective therapy but should not be considered as insurmountable or as excuses for not seeking help.

Conclusion

Dealing with sexuality is not easy. It is neither easy for youth nor for those counselling them in a given situation to understand the spiritual principles involved, to discover an appropriate solution, and to carry through with the necessary action. For Bahá’í health professionals, in particular, it represents a special challenge. What is an appropriate response, for example, after getting a phone call at midnight from a Bahá’í mother who is frantic after having just found a box of birth control pills in her fourteen-year-old daughter’s top drawer? Or conversely, what is appropriate advice to give to the teenager who arrives in the office having already decided to have premarital sex? To what degree is it desirable, permissible, or necessary to allow one’s principles and beliefs to direct the behavior of those who may not share them?

Whatever the situation, with patients both Bahá’í and non-Bahá’í, it is imperative that the Bahá’í health professionals, or for that matter all Bahá’ís, have credible explanations for their points of view and practical ways to apply them. This is only possible when one has deepened and clarified beforehand one’s understanding of the Bahá’í concepts involved. We hope that this paper has contributed in some way to this process.

Notes

1. See, for example, the Universal House of Justice in a letter to an individual believer October 17, 1968, cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá’í Reference File*.
2. See, for example, the subsection entitled, “Youth,” in *Lights of Guidance* 507-17.
3. The Universal House of Justice in a letter to an individual believer April 19, 1979, quoting Shoghi Effendi in a letter to an individual believer October 22, 1949.

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