

Human Nature and Mental Health: A Bahá'í-inspired Perspective¹

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Abstract

The Bahá'í Faith is the newest of the world's religions and has articulated a concept of the human mind that is likely to have a significant impact on the practice of psychiatry and psychotherapy in the decades and centuries ahead. This impact will result from the increasing number of researchers and practitioners whose work is influenced by Bahá'í-inspired theories of mind and identity. The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief and generally accessible overview of one research-practitioner's understanding of the nature of mind from the perspective of the Bahá'í teachings and to explore some of the implications of this view for understanding mental health and mental illness.

Resumé

La foi bahá'íe est la plus récente des religions mondiales et elle a formulé un concept de l'esprit humain qui est susceptible d'influer de façon notable sur l'exercice de la psychiatrie et de la psychothérapie pour les décennies et les siècles à venir. Cet impact découlera de ce que des chercheurs et

des praticiens de plus en plus nombreux réaliseront des travaux qui seront influencés par des théories d'inspiration bahá'íe sur l'esprit humain et l'identité. Cet article se veut un aperçu de la compréhension d'un chercheur et praticien au sujet de la nature de l'esprit humain du point de vue des enseignements bahá'ís. L'article examine en outre quelques-unes des implications que cette perspective pourra avoir sur la façon dont on comprend la santé mentale et la maladie mentale

Resumen

La Fe Bahá'í es la más nueva de las religiones mundiales y ha articulado un concepto de la mente humana que probablemente tenga un impacto significativo en la práctica de la psiquiatría y psicoterapia en las décadas y siglos por venir. Este impacto resultará del número creciente de investigadores y profesionales cuyo trabajo es influenciado por teorías inspiradas por los conceptos bahá'ís acerca de la mente y la identidad. El propósito de este ensayo es proveer una visión global breve y accesible en general de la comprensión de un investigador-profesional acerca de la naturaleza de la mente desde la perspectiva de las enseñanzas Bahá'ís y explorar algunas de las implicaciones de la misma para entender la salud y la enfermedad mental.

A BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE ON HUMAN ONTOLOGY

During the nineteenth century when analysts were articulating the basic principles that would animate psychoanalytic psychiatry for much of the twentieth century, an alternative view of human nature began to appear in

¹ In honor of Dr. Jane Faily, a clinician of wisdom and compassion and a speaker of profound eloquence.

the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith.² The Bahá'í perspective sought to recover the soul that was lost to the materialistic philosophies of the era, while also harmonizing with the rational and evidential demands required of modern empirical science. At the heart of the Bahá'í model is an ontological order that provides for causality and law in the sphere of nature, and for a relatively high degree of freedom and responsibility in the human realm. It insists upon an essential harmony between the principles of science and those that animate the world's religions and affirms that human beings belong both to the impermanent world of nature and to a transcendent dimension of existence made possible by the unique capacities associated with the human soul.

The Bahá'í Writings suggest that the human soul is the most essential and enduring aspect of human identity. It is described as “a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp” and is among the most profound of all mysteries³; and yet, like all other

² For a discussion of these themes, see Penn and Wilson.

³ Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, has written, “Verily I say, the human soul is, in its essence, one of the signs of God, a mystery among His mysteries. It is one of the mighty signs of the Almighty, the harbinger that proclaimeth the reality of all the worlds of God. Within it lieth concealed that which the world is now utterly incapable of apprehending” (*Gleanings* 160).

phenomena, it can be known, in part, by the effects that it produces in the world. The soul provides each human being with the core identity that is the *self*, and it is through the instrumentality of the human brain and body that the character and capacities of the soul are revealed. Inasmuch as the soul is not a thing, it cannot, in the Bahá'í view, either enter or leave the body. Rather, it is said to enjoy a relationship with the body that is akin to the relationship that light has to a mirror. It is useful, in this regard, to consider the nature of light as described by the physicist Arthur Zajonc:

As part of what I call “Project Eureka,” a friend and I have designed and constructed a science exhibit in which one views a region of space filled with light. It is a simple but startling demonstration that uses only a carefully fabricated box and a powerful projector whose light shines directly into it. We have taken a special care to ensure that light does not illuminate any interior objects or surfaces in the box. Within the box, there is only pure light, and lots of it. The question is: What does one see? How does light look when left *entirely* to itself?

Approaching the exhibit, I turn on the projector, whose bulb and lenses can be seen through a Plexiglas panel. The projector sends a brilliant light through optical elements into the box beside it. Moving over to a view port, I

look into the box and at the light within. What do I see? Absolute darkness! I see nothing but the blackness of empty space.

On the outside of the box is a handle connected to a wand that can move into and out of the box's interior. Pulling the handle, the wand flashes through the dark space before me and I see the wand brilliantly lit on one side. The space clearly is not empty but filled with light. Yet without an object on which light can fall, one sees only darkness. Light itself is always invisible. We see only things, only objects, not light. (2)

From a Bahá'í perspective, the human soul or spirit (and here we shall use these terms interchangeably), like light, cannot be known directly. In order for it to manifest itself, a vehicle is required. Thus the human brain and body make possible the manifestation of the powers of the human spirit in much the same way that a mirror provides a means for the manifestation of the qualities of light.

In the empirical sciences, we call phenomena that can only be known by the signs that they produce "hypothetical constructs." Hypothetical constructs include forces like love, intelligence, memory, and so forth. These phenomena are never accessible to direct sense inspection, and so we must intuit their existence by examining the effects that they produce in the world. For example, we know that some force that we call "gravity"

must exist because we observe that all unsupported objects move toward the earth. This ordered behavior, this systematic deviance from chance, justifies our invocation of a cause. And so we say that this behavior is due to gravity—even though no one has ever seen or heard or touched or smelled gravity. Similarly, from a Bahá'í perspective, because the soul is not a thing, its existence can only be known by its effects. The greatest sign of the soul's existence is human civilization and all of the arts and sciences that are the harvest of human thought. Lacking the unique capacities associated with the human soul, no other creature known to nature has been able to produce such signs.

During the period of human existence, when the immortal soul is in relation to the body, it produces the human "mind." The mind, notes 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "is the power of the human spirit." He goes further to note that the human spirit may be likened to a lamp and that the "mind is the light which shines from the lamp" (*Some Answered Questions* 208). Light provides a particularly apt metaphor here for several reasons. For example, though the properties of light may be seen through the instrumentality of a mirror, the mirror and the light that it reflects are independent of one another. If the mirror is harmed, no harm can come to the light. However, if the full spectrum of light is to be seen in a mirror, a clear and polished mirror is required. In a similar way, if the capacities and properties

of the soul are to be fully revealed in the mirror of the mind (in the mirror of the self), then the brain and body must be healthy and sound. Thus, any imperfections in the structure or functioning of the body may be reflected in the functioning of the mind. To use another metaphor, one could also liken the body to a musical instrument. The only way that a great musician can reveal fully her musical prowess is by having a sound, finely tuned instrument. The instrument becomes the vehicle through which the spiritual and wholly abstract creative capacities of the artist become manifest.

There are other reasons that light, in particular, provides an especially excellent metaphorical device for reflecting on the capacities of the human soul. Light has the peculiar quality of being both wave-like (much like pure energy) and particle-like (much like matter) in its nature. That is, it manifests, as does the human brain and mind, attributes commonly associated with both the material and nonmaterial dimensions of existence. In addition, just as the light of the sun serves to cultivate potentialities that are latent in nature, so also does the light of a healthy and well-developed mind serve as a creative force in the life of a family, society, or civilization.

The body and the mind develop together. Indeed, the existence and development of the body render the development and refinement of the mind possible. In this sense, the relationship between the mind and the body reveals a fundamental truth about the

relationship between the physical and spiritual aspects of human existence. That is, from a Bahá'í point of view, the physical world provides the concrete foundation upon which spiritual understandings and insights are gradually built. It is, perhaps, for this reason that 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms that the mind comes to comprehend the abstract "by the aid of the concrete" (Tablet 8).

In his book *The Purpose of Physical Reality*, Bahá'í scholar and educator John S. Hatcher has explored the role of the physical world in the development of spiritual knowledge and wisdom. He notes that the natural world provides the metaphorical tools that enable us, as sign users, to begin the process of understanding the metaphysical truths, abstract laws, and spiritual principles that are reflected in the things and processes of nature. The Founder of the Bahá'í Faith testifies to the pedagogical value of the natural world by noting, "I . . . have ordained for thy training every atom in existence and the essence of all created things" (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Persian n. 29).

In other words, the mind is not a passive recipient of the forces that operate upon it. Drawing on the unique, rational powers of the soul, the human mind is endowed with the capacity to understand those forces and to resist and overcome whatever would be a source of physical or existential harm. Yet, on the other hand, because the mind is at once a reflection of the human soul, the human body, and the

society into which it is born and develops, the powers of the mind can never be fully revealed in an individual or a society that is not physically sound or morally healthy.

While the human soul is not a composite entity, the properties and capacities of the human mind are, in part, the epiphenomenal byproduct of the *composition* of the human brain and body. Properties exist by composition when their existence depends on the proper blending of diverse elements. For example, water exists by the composition of hydrogen and oxygen in the proper proportion. So long as these conditions are satisfied, the properties of water will be manifest. As soon as the bond between hydrogen and oxygen is broken, all of the properties associated with water disappear. Thus we say that the properties of water are compositional qualities.

In a similar way, the properties that are associated with the functioning of the human mind depend on the blending of diverse elements in a precise fashion because the brain and nervous system are vital instruments in the manifestation of the powers of mind. Indeed, deviation from the ideal complement of elements will result in illness and sometimes death. It is well known, for example, that if levels of naturally occurring neurotransmitters (such as serotonin, dopamine, GABA, and so forth) are not in the proper amount and proportion, the human brain will often lose its capacity to manifest reason or sound judgment. One may lose the capacity to control

one's emotions or may be overwhelmed by inordinate degrees of anxiety, depression, and worry. The Bahá'í Writings point out that these disorders result from improper composition of the body's essential elements and have nothing to do with the life or health of the human soul.

In this regard, 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes that "the soul of man is exalted above, and independent of all infirmities of body or mind . . ." and that "every malady afflicting the body of man is an impediment that preventeth the soul from manifesting its inherent might and power. When it leaveth the body, however, it will evince such ascendancy, and reveal such influence as no force on earth can equal." The human soul is immortal because it is not a composite entity and does not come into being through the affinity of molecular elements. Since it is not composed, it cannot be decomposed and is thus "not subject to disintegration" (Zarqání 195).

Thus from a Bahá'í point of view, the mind is not a thing that is coequal with the brain; nor is it simply the by-product of the evolution of organic matter. Rather, it is said to be a spiritual power that is drawn to the human form even as the rays of light are drawn to a mirror: "Human reality is the same reality which is given different names, according to the different conditions wherein it becomes manifest," notes 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "Because of its attachment to matter and the phenomenal world, when it governs the physical functions of the body, it is

called the human soul. When it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called the mind. And when it soars into the atmosphere of God and travels in the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit.”⁴ Shoghi Effendi, the appointed Head of the Bahá'í Faith between 1921 and 1957, clarifies this idea further: “What the Bahá'ís believe is that we have three aspects of our humanness, so to speak, a body, a mind and an immortal identity—soul or spirit. We believe the mind forms a link between the soul and the body, and the two interact on each other” (*Arohanui* 89).

Without the unique and transcendent powers of the human soul, human beings are logically unable to transcend the iron law of causality that determines and governs the phenomena of nature. At the same time, without the unique features and limitations of “mind”—which serves as an intermediary between the natural world of the body and the spiritual reality of the soul—there could be no way to resolve the paradoxical problem of causality and determinism on the one hand, and human agency and freedom on the other. Understood as neither solely an emergent property of biological processes, nor as a force separate from, and alien to, the forces inherent in all of reality, the human mind can be viewed as a unique construct with great heuristic value. It enables us to understand how biological

and social forces can influence the health, development, and expression of the human psyche, while at the same time affirming that the psyche or mind cannot be reduced to a series of biochemical events.

In contrast, therefore, to the existing nature-nurture, bi-partite conceptualization current among most Western intellectuals, the competing ontology referenced in the Bahá'í teachings affirms that three processes interact to form and shape human identity: (1) compositional and evolutionary processes, which include biological and genetic influences (nature); (2) social processes, which include experiential, educational, and cultural forces (nurture); and (3) innate processes associated with the life, development, and activity of the human soul or spirit. In order to provide a more adequate account of the notion of the human spirit as described in the Bahá'í Writings, it is helpful to explore a few philosophical concepts.

THE CONCEPT AND ROLE OF “SPIRIT” IN A CONCEPT OF MIND

Aristotle, whose work is praised in the Bahá'í Writings for some of the contributions it makes to the foundations of philosophy,⁵ held that if we want to know the true identity of a thing we must know its four causes: the material, formal, efficient, and final cause. Material cause is existence itself. It is that

⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in *Star of the West* 7.19 (1917): 190.

⁵ See Kluge for a full and thoughtful discussion of this claim.

passive, undifferentiated matter that makes possible all other causes—it is the “stuff” of existence without form or function. Aristotle held that inasmuch as something cannot be brought forth from nothing, to “create” simply means to add to material cause formal cause (or structure) and final cause (or purpose). That cause that transforms unformed matter into “something” is thus the efficient cause for that thing’s existence. All processes of creation, suggested Aristotle, operate according to this same principle.

For example, an artist creates a sculpture by adding his or her conscious vision of form to unformed clay. In this case, the sculptor’s hands and consciousness become the organizing energies that are the proximal sufficient cause for the coming-into-being of the sculpture. And although the clay certainly had existence prior to the work of the sculptor, it did not have existence as art. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes that existence is thus relative, rather than absolute, and depends on the attributes, qualities, and capacities of the entities under consideration.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes, for example, that persons exist and so also do stones, but there are significant differences between the existence of a person and that of a stone. Though a stone exists, in relation to the existence of a person, it is nonexistent. Thus do we say of a person who has passed from the human kingdom to that of the mineral that he or she has died. Of course, inasmuch as everything in the natural world is made of

fundamentally the same matter (or the same basic elements), the capacities of an entity are determined not solely by the substance (or material cause) but by the energy, information, or consciousness responsible for an entity’s organization and functioning.

A modern version of Aristotle’s perspective is captured in the Second Law of Thermodynamics, or Carnot’s theorem. This principle requires that if matter is to have form and order, it must be organized by some force or energy.⁶ Manifested in one of its simplest forms (e.g., electromagnetic energy, the strong nuclear force, and/or gravity), this organizing energy is the cohesive force that results in the capacities apparent in the mineral kingdom. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that in the plant kingdom this same force manifests itself in the capacity for both cohesion and growth; in the animal kingdom, this power or force is manifested in the power of cohesion, growth, plus sense perception. Last, in the human person, this force is manifested as the power of cohesion, growth, sense perception, and the unique qualities of consciousness required for rationality and meta-cognition—or the consciousness of consciousness.

Let us note that at each level of

6 According to Carnot’s theorem, order is improbable while disorder is probable. This is the case because order represents a limited number of stable configurations (e.g., a brick house), whereas any possible configuration represents disorder (e.g., a pile of bricks).

ontology, moving from the mineral to the human kingdom, there is a corresponding increase in freedom. Relative to the plant, which has, for example, the capacity to reorient its leaves and roots in order to take advantage of the light and water resources available in the environment, the mineral is a captive of its immediate circumstances. Similarly, as we move from the plant kingdom to that of the animal, we observe another significant leap in the degree of freedom. The powers of mobility and sense perception that characterize the animal kingdom permit animals to exercise a wider range of freedom in interacting with their environment; they have the capacity to explore and adapt to a wider range of the ecological context, and, with awareness, they may form relational bonds with other beings of the same or different species. The “kingdoms,” often referred to in many of the world’s wisdom and philosophical traditions, may thus be understood as spheres of awareness, freedom, and capacity that determine the essential identity of living things.

In the human kingdom, the power of consciousness gives the human person the potential for development along unique lines. This special type of consciousness is referred to in contemporary psychology as the power of meta-cognition—or the consciousness of consciousness. Meta-cognitive powers enable us not only to know the nonmaterial aspects of ourselves (such as our values, beliefs, attitudes, and so forth) but to have objective

knowledge of metaphysical principles, laws, and processes—such as the abstract laws that govern the universe; the principles and qualities associated with assessments of beauty; and the underlying logic of systems of governance, ethics, and value. Our knowledge (as opposed to mere experience) of the operation of non-sensible forces, such as the forces of gravity and intelligence, requires the use of meta-cognitive powers that appear to be unique to human beings. Indeed, abstract thought, a characteristic of the human spirit, is the source of human creativity, of all arts and sciences.

This organizing force is, perhaps, referred to as “spirit” because the concept of spirit enables one to capture the multidimensional nature of this organizing energy across different levels of ontology, or different qualities of existence. We may therefore speak of the qualities of existence that characterize the mineral, plant, animal, and human kingdoms as being due to the presence of different qualities (or manifestations) of a single, unitary force responsible for life.

Viewed from the foregoing perspective, as the most evolved, complex, and refined entity in nature, the human brain and body naturally provide for the manifestation of spirit in its highest form. This highest form is the appearance in nature of the phenomenon of “self.” Bahá'í psychiatrist and educator Dr. Hossain Danesh has commented on the unique powers of the self:

Experience of selfhood is uniquely human. . . . As human beings, we all have certain instincts that we share with animals. These instincts are essential for survival and continuation of the species. We get hungry and search for food; we experience pain, realizing something is wrong, and seek remedy for the pain. We have the capacity to sense danger, so we either face the danger and fight it, or escape the danger and seek a secure situation. We also have sexual drives, which under normal circumstances attract us to a member of the opposite sex, frequently resulting in pregnancy and the continuation of our species. Furthermore, we have bonding instincts that connect us very firmly to our newly born and motivate us to care for, protect, and nurture our young.

At the instinctual level most advanced animals do the same. There is, however, a very fundamental difference between humans and animals. Animals do not deviate from instinctual laws. Humans, clearly, have a choice. Our response to basic instincts of hunger, pain, fight or flight, and sex are quite different from animals. We may decide to fast or diet rather than eat. Some may decide to fast to death to make a point, often to seek justice. Some people eat even when they are not hungry. Others do not eat even though hunger and food is

accessible (as in anorexia nervosa). Still others do not share food with the starving masses even when they themselves have more food than they need. These are all unique to human behaviors.

The same is true of pain. It should be added here that not all pain is a sign of illness. For example, growth is painful. The same is true of the pain we experience following strenuous physical activity. Masochistic human beings intentionally inflict pain upon themselves. Sadistic people inflict pain upon other people. From these few examples it is very clear that the human approach to pain is very complex and does not follow the simple laws of instincts.

The fight or flight reaction is also different in humans. There are many occasions in which we choose to face dangerous situations even though we know that we would not be able to protect ourselves. This is the way the followers of Ghandi faced the threat of British forces. In South Africa today, unarmed or poorly armed black children, youth, and adults face the powerful, heavily armed police, knowing full well that they are in physical danger. . . . With regard to sex, humans also do not exclusively follow the laws of instinct. There are people who choose to be celibate. There are those who choose to have sex but not to procreate, those who go the route of homosexuality, and

still others who combine sex with violence and death. . . . We may ask why human beings respond so differently to these basic instincts. The answer, of course, lies in the fact that humans have consciousness and will. We have the capacity to choose . . . (*Psychology of Spirituality* 45–46)

In the life of the individual, when the powers of the self and the animating forces of the human spirit are eclipsed by an unhealthy body, unhealthy ideas, unhealthy relationships, or other impediments, the mind shows signs of illness and dysfunction and the processes of personal development may also suffer. Freud's discovery of the social roots of hysteria, which contributed greatly to the emergence of modern psychiatry, for example, can thus be viewed as a discovery of the impact of oppression, injustice, and immorality on the life of the mind and the developing self. His patients were not, as he himself clearly established, suffering principally from biological disorders; rather, they were grappling with assaults to the psyche brought on by sexual exploitation and violence.⁷ Of course, inasmuch as matter and spirit (or body and mind) constitute an integrated whole, psychological injuries will naturally have somatic consequences, and vice versa.

Integrating Bahá'í metaphysics into the broader scope of the natural and

clinical sciences is a task that awaits Bahá'í-inspired researchers and clinicians of the future. For example, identifying mechanisms and/or principles that help illuminate how the soul, mind, and body might interact—especially insofar as these interactions may have clinical implications—is an important aspect of theory and research. Useful, perhaps, in our understanding of the soul/body relationship will be an integration of neuroanatomy, neurochemistry, and the ancient notion of the “subtle body” found principally in Eastern mysticism.

The subtle body, as discussed in the yoga traditions and in various other disciplines—such as the martial and healing arts of the East (i.e., shiatsu, reiki, and acupuncture)—refers to the energy currents that flow through and around and emanate from all beings. The subtle body may be conceptualized as existing between the physical and metaphysical realities in much the same way that light exists as a phenomenon that unites the attributes of the material and nonmaterial worlds. Within human beings, the subtle body is said to be sensitive and responsive to the physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of life, and plays a mediating role between the conditions of the physical body and the conditions of the psyche.

Understood as energy currents, or energy fields (“chi” or “prana” in Eastern healing arts), the subtle body is described by various traditions as constituting a continuum of different energy layers and densities. If there

⁷ See Penn and Wilson for a full discussion of these themes.

is an ailment in either the physical or psychological dimension of human existence, that ailment will be reflected at the level of the subtle body in the form of energy disturbances or obstructions. Following this line of reasoning, it is possible, through treatment at the level of the subtle body, to provide therapy for both the physical and psychological dimensions of the human person. If left untreated, by contrast, disturbances in the subtle body may influence other dimensions, resulting, for example, in a psychological ailment manifesting itself as a pathophysiological process. Indeed, these aforementioned ailments have been described in the Western medical tradition as somatoform disorders, psychosomatic illnesses, posttraumatic stress disorder, or functional somatic syndromes.

In Bahá'í metaphysics, every spiritual phenomenon is said to have a correspondence in the physical world. A reasonable assumption, worthy of further study, is that the sympathetic nervous system, and the neurotransmitters that are responsible for the life and energy of the nervous system, are the physical correlates of the subtle body in the material world.

Neurotransmitter systems may be likened to the subtle body in five important ways. First, neurotransmitters are present in the human body in such small amounts that until very recently they were not directly measurable. They could only be detected by measuring the metabolites that they produce. Indeed, neurotransmitters

appear in the body in traces equal to approximately one eye-drop in a 10,000-gallon pool of water. Yet, their presence in the body is so essential that if levels of neurotransmitters rise or fall to even an infinitesimal degree, either apathy, lethargy, and profound depression occur, or hyper-excitability, confusion, irritability, and motor dysregulation can result.

Second, neurotransmitters, like light, behave at the synapse—both as particles and as waves. They behave as particles in that they act as “keys,” unlocking ion channels that are critical for the transmittal of neuronal signals, and they act as waves because they manifest neuroelectrical properties that stimulate receiving neurons into action. Without this neuroelectrical stimulation, all human activity, both of a physical and a psychological nature, would immediately cease. Third, and most important, neurotransmitters are responsible for the activity of the sympathetic nervous system, which is described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as being both of a physical and spiritual nature: “The powers of the sympathetic nerve are neither entirely physical nor spiritual,” He writes, “but are between the two. The nerve is connected with both. Its phenomena shall be perfect when its spiritual and physical relations are normal” (*Tablets* 730).

Fourth, abuse, injustice, and other trauma-related pathogens tend to lead to psychoneurobiological disorders with corresponding somatic and psychological symptoms, and finally, psychoneurobiological disorders are

particularly responsive to nonmaterial or spiritual therapies. 'Abdu'l-Bahá observes,

There are two ways of healing sickness, material means and spiritual means. The first is by the use of remedies, of medicines; the second consists in praying to God and in turning to Him. Both means should be used and practiced. Illness caused by physical accident should be treated with medical remedies; those which are due to spiritual causes disappear through spiritual means. Thus an illness caused by affliction, fear, nervous impressions, will be healed by spiritual rather than by physical treatment. Hence, both kinds of remedies should be considered. (*Tablets* 730)

THE HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

Development is gradual. During early stages of human development the essential and universal capacities of the human spirit—which include the power to know, to love, and to will—are manifested in ways that are indistinguishable from the qualities of mind that characterize other species. The power of knowledge during infancy, for example, tends to be limited to “instinctual awareness,” and classical conditioning tends to be the primary mode of learning. Similarly the power of will at early stages is marked by automatism, and love is manifested

primarily in the instinctual form of “bonding.” As childhood emerges out of infancy, an individual's innate intelligence becomes manifest and expresses itself in explorations of the world and the expansion of sensory-motor capabilities. Reactions, which, under healthy physical and environmental conditions, are increasingly mediated by a maturing will, tend to be emotion-based, and bodily desires, which are centered on the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, tend to provide the primary incentives for action. In these early stages, love, too, appears to be under stimulus control and fluctuates as a function of that which provides sensual gratification.

In early adolescence, as the powers of consciousness expand and the capacity for meta-cognition strengthens, healthy individuals begin to reflect on the abstract dimensions of life. During this stage of development, the capacities that distinguish humans from other forms of life begin to become more pronounced. The human capacity to know, for example, transcends knowledge of that which is concrete and begins to encompass abstract systems of thought and of value. The power of will blossoms into the power to decide, based on consideration of an array of aesthetic, intellectual, and moral features, and love, which was previously a largely sensual and emotion-based phenomenon, becomes more consciously associated with a set of values and a worldview.

If the powers of mind broaden further, consciousness is illumined

by universal ethical principles, and an individual may begin to manifest wisdom. Love also becomes enlightened by a genuine concern for the well-being and happiness of others, and the capacity for self-sacrifice becomes increasingly manifest. Under conditions that are optimal for human development, large groups of individuals begin to show evidence of what the sacred traditions refer to as “spirituality.”

THE CONCEPT OF SPIRITUALITY

From a Bahá'í perspective, concern for the spiritual dimensions of existence is uniquely human; that is, only humans concern themselves, in any conscious way, with the nonmaterial aspects of life. On the most basic level, spiritual concerns are embodied in our attraction to that which is perceived to be good, beautiful, and true. We seek the good, not only because that which is good brings pleasant feelings but also because it attracts us in the way that the gravitational pull of the earth attracts those things that belong to it.⁸

8 From a Bahá'í perspective, there are at least three expressions of the “good.” The first manifestation of the good is revealed in the attributes of God. These attributes are reflected both in nature and in human behavior. When these attributes are manifested in human behavior they are called “virtues.” In the same way that we are attracted to nature because of its intrinsic beauty, the human heart is attracted to virtues because of their beauty. A second way that the good is

Indeed, we may pursue that which is thought to be good, even at considerable cost of comfort and personal well-being. We are attracted to the good because we belong to the good and cannot really be at peace unless we come to rest in it: “Wither can a lover go,” writes Bahá'u'lláh, “but to the land of his beloved, and what seeker findeth rest away from his heart's desire? To the true lover reunion is life and separation is death, his breast is void of patience and his heart hath no peace. A myriad lives he would forsake to hasten to the abode of his beloved” (*The Hidden Words*, Persian n. 4). As humans, we want our lives to be in harmony with the good; we generally want it said of us that we are reflections of the good, and when we are healthy and mature, we wish our days to be spent in promoting that which is good. Humanity's attraction to the good is embodied in the universal human concern for values.

Every society seeks to impart to its children its values, not only as a strategy for protecting the social order but also because we believe that by

conceptualized relates to the transcendent spiritual teachings that animate the lives of the Founders of the world's religions and that are left in the form of the Sacred Texts and Writings that express the love, knowledge, and will of God to humanity and around which a great civilization forms. Last, in the Bahá'í view, the good is expressed by social institutions whose policies and practices seek to protect and advance social justice.

adhering to values, the inherent potentiality of our children—that which is fundamentally good in them—will best be realized. Values are thus taught in every society as part of the humanizing process. Our concern for spirituality is a concern for those transcultural, transhistorical values that would redound to the fullest development of human potential. When we speak of the cultivation of spirituality, we are speaking, in part, of the creation of the moral context in which human development can most effectively take place.

According to the world's spiritual traditions, there are certain moral conditions without which healthy human development is nearly impossible. Among the most important of these moral prerequisites are truthfulness, trustworthiness, compassion for other living beings, commitment to social justice and freedom from the tyranny of selfish desires. The cultivation of these social goods, or virtues, has been seen as important throughout the ages and across all civilizations. It is the eternality and cross-cultural nature of their importance to human life that leads us to regard virtues as spiritual qualities, without which human civilization is impossible.

In addition to a concern for the good, spirituality also expresses itself in the human concern for truth or knowledge. As is noted by Noguchi, Hanson, and Lample, an innate desire for knowledge motivates each human being to acquire an understanding of the mysteries of the universe and its

diverse phenomena, both on the visible and invisible planes. An individual motivated by a thirst for knowledge, observes Nagouchi, Hanson, and Lample, approaches life as “an investigator of reality and a seeker after truth” (5).

While a Bahá'í-inspired perspective is congruent with the postmodern observation that truth is always relative rather than absolute, a Bahá'í point-of-view suggests that the relativity of truth results not from *its* state but from ours. In other words, truth is always relative to us because we necessarily approach it with the limitations of human consciousness, human maturation, and human needs and concerns. As human consciousness matures, and as our instruments for investigating reality advance, we naturally come to recognize that what we once regarded as true requires modification and sometimes even outright rejection. In addition, as the number and diversity of truth-seekers who are given voice expand, what we understand as truth must necessarily undergo change. Nevertheless, it is our striving to attain an apprehension of truth that has inspired both our scientific and our religious quests throughout the ages. The spiritual hunger for truth is reflected in our disdain for those who wittingly distort the truth for personal gain; it is reflected in our dissatisfaction with our own selves when we fail to be truthful, and it is manifested in the vast personal and collective resources that we expend in the search for truth as we explore the natural, social, and spiritual worlds.

Spirituality is manifested in our capacities of heart or feeling. These emotional capacities reflect themselves most potently in our longing for connection with other human beings, with our quest for union with God, and with our striving to surround ourselves with what is beautiful. Indeed, as Nagouchi, Hanson, and Lample note, an attraction to beauty—the beauty of an object, an idea, an act—in many cases activates our will and motivates us to work and to strive so that we might be the creative authors of beauty or manifest beauty in the quality of our own lives. When we speak of spirituality, we are thus speaking, in part, of the heart's attraction to beauty.

Noguchi, Hanson, and Lample suggest that when it is properly developed, the attraction to beauty may serve not only as an aesthetic lens through which to view the world but as a guiding light or standard whereby individuals may judge their own work and behavior. Attraction to beauty, they note,

manifests itself in love for the majesty and diversity of nature, the impulse to express beauty through visual arts, music and crafts, and the pleasure of beholding the fruits of these creative endeavors. It is also evident in one's response to the beauty of an idea, the elegance of a scientific theory, and the perfection of a good character in one's fellow human beings. On another level, attraction to beauty underlies the

search for order and meaning in the universe, which extends itself to a desire for order in social relations. (5)

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT

The human soul provides humanity with another important power—the capacity to have a felt or phenomenological sense of the *presence* of spirit. Such a sense is what shall be referred to here as *a consciousness of the sacred*. A consciousness of the sacred may be manifested in a variety of ways. It may be manifested in the uniquely human emotions of awe, wonder, and humility that accompany the perception of the presence of forces of truth, beauty, and/or goodness that transcend the self; it may be awakened by an encounter with what Rudolph Otto refers to as the *mysterium tremendum* in his classic work *The Idea of the Holy*; or it may be a more regular part of a highly developed person's consciousness as described by William James in his discussion of "saintliness" in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Whatever their nature, encounters with the sacred have been an undeniable feature of human development and transformation from the earliest days of recorded history. Indeed, an encounter with the sacred often has generated in many human beings the courage, commitment, and vision necessary to begin their lives anew and to contribute in selfless ways to the evolution and development of society.

In the Bahá'í view, at least two expressions of spirit embody a sense of the sacred. These are referred to as the "heavenly spirit," or the "spirit of faith," and the "Holy Spirit." The heavenly spirit or the spirit of faith is manifested when an individual's thoughts, actions, and intentions are in harmony with that which is good, beautiful, and true, as set forth in the holy texts. This convergence of the human will with the Will of God is said to attract to the center of human action a transcendent spiritual force that serves to contribute to human advancement while also edifying the souls of humans.⁹ Bahá'ís often refer to this unique form of spiritual assistance as "the confirmations of God," and they believe that such confirmations are enjoyed by anyone of any faith or philosophy who labors for the good of the world.¹⁰

9 See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets*, vol. I, p. 186.

10 In a talk delivered in New York and recorded in the *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá made the following statement: "Consecrate and devote yourselves to the betterment and service of all the human race . . . for when your motives are universal and your intentions heavenly in character, when your aspirations are centered in the Kingdom, there is no doubt whatever that you will become the recipients of the bounty and good pleasure of God. . . . Therefore, be ye assured and confident that the confirmations of God are descending upon you, the assistance of God will be given unto you. . . . Be ye confident and steadfast; your services are confirmed by the powers of heaven,

Without the capacity to serve that which is sacred, or that which is, in some abstract sense, authentically and enduringly true, beautiful, and good, civilization would be impossible. Indeed, unless a significant proportion of a people are inspired on the level of the heart to be seekers after truth, lovers of beauty, and doers of good, the social order deteriorates into a discordant cacophony of competing interests, useless ideas, and vulgar acts. In such a context, the larger project of human development is neglected, and the civilizing process retards or reverses. For this reason, the Bahá'í Writings affirm that spiritual inclinations, unencumbered by superstitious ideas and useless ideologies, are as vital to the protection and development of civilization as are sciences, arts, and technologies.¹¹

for your intentions are lofty, your purposes pure and worthy. God is the helper of those souls whose aim is to serve humanity and whose efforts and endeavors are devoted to the good and betterment of all mankind" (447).

11 In his explication of this principle, 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes, "Among other principles of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings was the harmony of science and religion. Religion must stand the analysis of reason. It must agree with scientific fact and proof so that science will sanction religion and religion fortify science. Both are indissolubly welded and joined in reality. If statements and teachings of religion are found to be unreasonable and contrary to science, they are outcomes of superstition

One should note that in the Bahá'í view, the body, brain, and mind are not ends in themselves; rather, they are means for the manifestation and cultivation of spiritual capacities. The Bahá'í Writings claim that spiritual capacities constitute the real (or ideal) forces or powers of existence and that they represent the enduring harvest of a human life. "In the world of existence," according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "there is nothing so important as spirit, nothing so essential as the spirit of man. The spirit of man is the meeting between man and God. The spirit of man is the animus of human life and the collective center of all human virtues. The spirit of man is the cause of the illumination of this world" (*Promulgation* 239). Thus the cultivation of the human spirit (or of human consciousness) may serve as a discernible *telos* of evolution and development. Viewed in the light of this perspective, it may be argued that "progress is the expression of spirit in the world of matter" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 90) and that the central role of society is to provide the moral, political, economic, and institutional resources that best

and imagination. . . . That which is found to be real and conformable to reason must be accepted, and whatever science and reason cannot support must be rejected as imitation and not reality. Then differences of belief will disappear. All will become as one family, one people, and the same susceptibility to the divine bounty and education will be witnessed among mankind" (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 175–76).

facilitate the protection, development, and refinement of the human spirit as it struggles in its self-conscious effort to evolve.

MENTAL HEALTH AND HUMAN NEEDS

If the human mind is to develop and function well, human needs must be satisfied. Simply put, a need may be conceptualized as a form of assistance that is required for the development of a capacity. If the need is not satisfied, the capacity may be poorly developed or may never appear. In an earlier work on this theme, we provided the following example:

If we plant an acorn and wish to see it develop, we will have to satisfy the acorn's needs. These needs include a certain amount of soil above, beneath, and around it. If the acorn is buried too deeply, it will never grow; if it does not receive sufficient water or sunlight, it will not grow; and if the spring winds do not blow upon it during its life as a sapling, it will not acquire the strength needed to stand against the fall and winter winds in its maturity. The evidences of its healthy development are its capabilities as an oak tree. If it does not develop bark and leaves and branches, and if it does not produce sap or acorns for the development of other oak trees, then we know that there has been a failure of development. Further, we would never plant an acorn

and expect it to produce oranges, grapes, or bananas. The capacities of an entity thus fix both what it can and cannot become. When the legitimate needs of a living system are satisfied it comes forth according to its nature. So it is also with human beings. (Penn 668)

The human capacities to know, love, and will, which constitute the powers of the human spirit, implicate needs. The capacity to know, for example, implicates a need for education. Unless this need is satisfied, the capacity to know will not develop fully or properly. The capacity to love creates the need to belong, as well as the need to connect with nature, with other human beings, and with that which is sacred. Without the satisfaction of these needs, the capacity to love is stillborn or distorted. The capacity to will implicates the need for a certain measure of freedom. Without the proper exercise of freedom, the inner capacity for autonomy cannot unfold. In the satisfaction of legitimate needs we protect the development and refinement of the human mind and spirit.

From this perspective, the ability to achieve happiness and good mental health depends, to no small degree, on the satisfaction of human needs at every stage of life—during gestation, infancy, childhood, youth, and adulthood. One must inherit healthy genes, be exposed to proper nutrition and loving relationships, and exercise the powers of the human spirit in ways that are in harmony with the ethical

principles that animate the universe. To the degree that these conditions are satisfied, one's capacity for sound mental health and well-being are greatly enriched. Since we can never know all of the biological and social forces that have shaped an individual's mental health status, the Bahá'í Writings encourage an attitude of humility and compassion when confronting one's own suffering and the suffering of others.

THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF MANY FORMS OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Serious mental illness may be distinguished from the everyday fluctuations in psychological well-being that is a normal and inevitable part of human life. Indeed, the Bahá'í Writings point out that life is often both difficult and painful and that suffering is an integral part of the development of many living systems. Even as stressing muscles causes the body to become stronger, so can suffering contribute to character development. Some forms of suffering, however, are not a normal part of the developmental process; instead of strengthening resolve and character, they may be so debilitating as to threaten life itself. Some of these forms of suffering result in psychological disorders that must be addressed at the level of society.

Across the world, for example, one of the most widespread forms of mental disability is posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). And while this debilitating disorder may develop as a

consequence of exposure to natural disasters, the overwhelming majority of cases arises from exposure to violence in the home, in the community, or in response to wars. These well-established sources of PTSD reveal much about the moral and spiritual consciousness of the generality of humankind and tell us much about how delicate the human spirit actually is. Further, if this pervasive illness is to be adequately addressed, what will be required is a transformation of the values, attitudes, and beliefs that make it possible for large numbers of human beings to harm others—often while justifying acts of brutality by invocation of some high moral principle.

Other forms of mental illness that may be related to humanity's collective moral and spiritual health include such disorders as narcissistic personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, and various forms of addiction. And while all human beings should be treated with respect and dignity no matter what illness they may have and no matter how such an illness may have been acquired, the Bahá'í Writings suggest that many of these disabilities may be impossible to eradicate or to significantly reduce without consideration of the moral and spiritual responsibilities that are an inevitable concomitant of human freedom.

A PRESCRIPTION FOR THE BODY POLITIC

Aware of the importance of a noble vision if humanity is to develop in

safety, Bahá'í Writings overflow with beautiful descriptions of the powers and capacities that lie hidden within the human spirit. Bahá'u'lláh writes, "O friends! Be not careless of the virtues with which ye have been endowed, neither be neglectful of your high destiny. . . ." He continues, "Ye are the stars of the heaven of understanding, the breeze that stirreth at the break of day, the soft-flowing waters upon which must depend the very life of all men" (*Gleanings* 196). I dwell here on this theme because psychology, in its materialistic heyday, has sought to divorce itself from its spiritual and philosophical roots. In doing so, it has also severed itself from the primary sources of the vision for humanity as articulated in all major religious traditions. It thus contributes, unwittingly, to the very ills that it seeks to remedy.

The human psyche is not a closed system; neither is it self-sufficient. If it is to remain vital, the psyche must be fed the food of meaning and understanding. The teachings and insights provided by the great seers, poets, and prophets are as food for the human spirit. Thus have the words of Christ been likened to bread from heaven; thus did the ancient Greeks describe the universe as the embodiment of the Logos; thus did Islam and Judaism liken the "book" to an ark of human salvation; and thus does Bahá'u'lláh affirm, "should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue" (*Tablets* 125). At a time in history in which violence, prejudice, materialism, and social despair are so acutely

felt, no psychology that fails to tap the mysterious well-springs of the human spirit can possibly hope to serve as a catalyst for the regeneration of either the world or the individual. In stressing the oneness and interdependence of all humankind and the power of collective, unified action across lines of race, class, culture, and religion, the Bahá'í Writings endeavor to awaken and nurture a social vision that is necessary for lifting humanity to a new stage of collective development.

In addressing the sorely distressed body of humankind, Bahá'u'lláh offers counsel: "The best beloved of all things . . . is justice. Turn not away therefrom . . . and neglect it not" (*Hidden Words*, Persian n. 2). One might ask, why is justice regarded as "the best beloved of all things," and what, for our purposes here, is the relationship between justice and the health of the psyche?

One might say that in nature, justice is compelled and is manifested in the operation of the laws of causality. Precisely because of the causal laws, the universe is ordered and can be rendered meaningful. The wisdom traditions assert that the laws of nature are but a manifestation of the commandments of God in the contingent world. Because of the higher degree of freedom manifested in the human kingdom, justice is not compelled but must be consciously chosen. The sacred laws—which are articulated by the prophets and founders of the world's great religions and which have traditionally provided a pattern for the

articulation of civil law—are offered to mankind so that there might be justice and order in the world of humanity as there is in the world of nature. For without order, without justice in social relationships, the human spirit cannot properly develop. The fact that human consciousness depends on the operation of justice at every stage of its development has been validated by more than a century of research on the impact of violence, oppression, and uncontrollability on the expression and development of the human spirit.

"The purpose of justice," Bahá'u'lláh affirms, "is the appearance of unity . . ." (*Tablets* 67). He consummates this weighty counsel by pointing out that inner, interpersonal, and international unity is the cause of human development, the source of human prosperity, and the sign and cause of all forms of life. Inner, interpersonal, and intercommunity conflict, by contrast, is a major source of destruction, disability and disease. The strong emphasis placed on the role of justice in the attainment of human happiness and the importance of unity for development and prosperity suggests that human beings are so fundamentally interdependent that no one can fully realize his or her potential as long as the body politic is diseased. Bahá'u'lláh's prescription, therefore, is one directed not primarily at securing the well-being of the individual but at securing the felicity of all humankind.

MENTAL HEALTH AND
HUMAN HAPPINESS

In addition to the bounties conferred by good physical and mental health, the Bahá'í Writings affirm that human happiness is conditioned by moral and spiritual behavior. In a series of lectures offered in Paris in 1911, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá observed that "Man is really a spiritual being, and only when he lives in the spirit is he truly happy" (*Paris Talks* 72). Referencing the moral laws that animate the Bahá'í teachings, the Universal House of Justice notes, "The laws do not represent a sterile and inhumane legal code, but rather the divine prescription, a definition of how an individual must act in order to achieve true freedom and spiritual happiness in this world and the next."¹²

In this respect, the Bahá'í teachings are in harmony with a perspective on happiness that has animated the world's wisdom traditions since the period of history known as the Axial Age.¹³ Such a perspective suggests that enduring happiness is not an inevitable by-product of material conditions—such as a healthy brain and body, good weather, access to the resources necessary to sustain life, and so forth—but is conditional upon the development and exercise of moral

and spiritual faculties. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, Aristotle avers, "The good of man is the active exercise of his soul's faculties in conformity with excellence and virtue" (12). Similar sentiments are expressed in *The Analects* of Confucius, the moral teachings of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the Zoroastrian faith, and Buddhism. In our own work we have begun to explore the role of what are called "moral emotions" in human happiness and mental health.¹⁴

Moral emotions are "those complex emotions that reflect or arise in response to thoughts and actions that are ordinarily thought of as touching on concerns of right and wrong, or that can influence or motivate actions that touch on moral concerns" (Kroll 682). At the core of moral emotions are self-assessments and self-reflective judgments that center on what one has done or failed to do, or the kind of person one has become.¹⁵ From a clinical perspective the moral emotions that are of greatest interest include guilt, shame, regret, and remorse, because these emotions may play important roles in the pathogenesis or exacerbation of a range of psychopathological states—including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and vulnerability to suicide. Acts of *akrasia*, which are acts that are voluntarily performed but that violate one's own moral standards,

¹² Letters of the Universal House of Justice, 5 June 1993.

¹³ For a discussion of the Axial Age, see Robert Bellah and Hans Joas (eds.), *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*.

¹⁴ See Hall, Gow, Penn, and Jayawickreme, and Hall, Gow, and Penn.

¹⁵ See Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment*.

have long been hypothesized to awaken negative moral emotions.

The concept of *akrasia* was first articulated by the Greeks and refers to the problem of moral weakness or weakness of will. An agent's will is said to be weak if he or she acts, and acts intentionally, in ways that are contrary to his or her own best judgment. Under such circumstances it is sometimes said that the actor lacks "self-mastery," or the willpower to do what he or she knows or believes would be best. The Roman poet Ovid captures the problem of *akrasia* in *Metamorphoses*: "I am dragged along by a strange new force. Desire and reason are pulling in different directions. I see the right way and approve it, but follow the wrong" (quoted in Haidt 4).

A growing body of empirical research has found that when people act in ways that are inconsistent with their values they tend to experience intrapsychic discomfort that arises out of awareness that one's behavior and one's moral longings are incongruent. Indeed, *akratic* behavior may awaken negative emotions that are strong enough to disturb happiness for significant periods of time and may also act as diatheses (or risk factors) in the development of psychological disorders—such as anxiety and depression.

Human emotions are useful because they orient us to our values and make it possible for us to protect those aspects of life that we perceive to be important. In this respect, negative moral emotions—such as guilt, shame, regret, and remorse—may play especially

important roles in protecting our personal dignity while empowering us to pursue our highly valued "hoped for selves" (Markus 955). Given, however, the potentially corrosive, health-compromising influence of negative moral emotions, the Bahá'í Writings tend to emphasize moral growth as a *process* that is beset by difficulties, setbacks, and disappointments.¹⁶ The Bahá'í teachings thus encourage a spirit of compassion, patience, and persistent effort in the pursuit of moral and spiritual development.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON
A BAHÁ'Í-INSPIRED APPROACH
TO PSYCHOTHERAPY

We close with brief reflections on some of the factors that might animate a Bahá'í-inspired approach to psychotherapy.

As we begin to outline the main features of such an approach we will need to be mindful of the central teaching of the Bahá'í Faith: the principle of the oneness of humanity. Such a principle necessitates a conceptualization of the human person that is essentialist enough to be applicable to persons everywhere and yet flexible enough to account for the unique psychosocial and cultural characteristics

¹⁶ One might also note that these emotions are simply feedback about a condition of internal conflict, and are thus neither good nor bad in themselves, but rather information that can be utilized to achieve desired objectives.

that distinguish individuals and cultures from one another. In this sense, Bahá'í-inspired psychotherapists are, at once, metaphysical realists and cultural relativists. We are realists in that we affirm our commitment to the reality of the unseen and register our awareness of the role of spiritual forces in all aspects of life. Furthermore, we are also keenly aware of the spiritual potentialities and challenges that face all human beings—irrespective of language, culture, class, or ideological commitments. We are cultural relativists, however, in that we appreciate the profound influence of culture and individuality on the way that the human spirit manifests itself over time.

Given the description and purpose of human nature that appears in the Bahá'í Writings, Bahá'í psychotherapists are apt to engage in their work mindful of the fact that we are concerned, ultimately, with the journey and development of the human spirit, which is a sacred trust. Thus, whatever the presenting complaint, under ideal conditions, the client's spiritual health and development will be given prime consideration throughout the therapeutic process. Inasmuch as spiritual health and development require the presence of a healthy body, brain, and social environment, these dimensions of life must also be managed. In this regard, Bahá'u'lláh's injunction that Bahá'ís seek the assistance of competent physicians lays a moral responsibility on Bahá'í psychotherapists to treat only those conditions for which they have received the proper training.

The fulfillment of this moral responsibility comports with the understanding that the healing process depends on the integration of the knowledge proffered by science with that mystic spirit inspired by the practice of true religion.

In their work, Bahá'í psychotherapists may well call on the transcendent nature and power of the human spirit. This is perhaps realized by invocation of archetypal stories of triumph over hardship; the sharing of holy odes, meditations, and prayers; the well-timed recitation of mystic sayings and of poetic verse. Cultivation of the capacity for meditation and “mindfulness” are also apt to be important therapeutic tools.

Bahá'í-inspired psychotherapists undertake their practice, not so much in the interest of techniques, methods, or “schools,” but in the practical interest of understanding and growth. The goals of a Bahá'í-inspired approach to psychotherapy may be understood as hermeneutical, pedagogical, and emancipatory. The hermeneutic goal is advanced when therapists are able to read with another his or her history in a way that endows the present and past with enriched meaning. Armed with the unique insights provided in the Bahá'í Writings, and free of that proselytizing and moralizing spirit that has no place in psychotherapy, there are moments when the therapist can be as an “eye to past ages . . . and as a light unto the darkness of the times” (Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 79). Enriched by a

deeper understanding of the interplay between hardship, crises, and development, clients can potentially leave therapeutic care with new perspectives on the past and with renewed courage for the challenges that lie ahead.

The pedagogical responsibilities of Bahá'í-inspired psychotherapists are discharged as they share some of the skills that are needed in order to better cope with the difficulties of life. Any assistance that can be provided in terms of the development of a capacity for meditation, for example, will enable clients to better metabolize anxiety, anger, and a number of other potentially debilitating emotions, while also expanding consciousness of the depth and complexity of the self. Furthermore, when spiritually informed social tools—such as the basic principles and processes that animate the art of consultation—are shared, Bahá'í-inspired psychotherapists may provide tools that will be useful long after the therapy sessions have ended. And as they share knowledge of the basic powers of the human spirit, they provide an interpretive framework for understanding how challenges to our knowledge, love, and will provide opportunities for self-development.

Perhaps no knowledge will prove more valuable than a working knowledge of the importance of justice and unity for life and development. As the Bahá'í Writings explain, justice and unity are sovereign remedies. But unity is not easy to come by, and justice is not easy to effect. Indeed, the struggle to become a cause of unity

and a source of justice is equivalent to the struggle to develop the human personality. This cannot be done without the mysterious influence of love. Our hunger for love, especially when we are discouraged or ill, draws us into relationships, while the power of love gives us the strength necessary to transcend our difficulties, to overcome the pernicious influences of the past, and to utilize the inherent powers of the soul more effectively. Whether working with individuals, families, or groups, the Bahá'í-inspired psychotherapist will thus endeavor to provide a transformative space wherein is reflected the love of God.

Finally, the emancipatory interests of psychotherapy are realized as the human spirit is liberated from the limitations imposed on it by materialistic notions of the self. The nineteenth century closed with many of the founders of psychiatry affirming, with great confidence, the death of the soul. Now a new generation of psychotherapists stand at the beginning of the twenty-first century—with the benefit of one hundred years of greater maturity and insight—and affirm, with confidence, what Bahá'u'lláh affirmed when our young discipline was yet born: “the soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel” (*Gleanings* 158).

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