

LIVING THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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ABSTRACT

The spiritual life is like the multifaceted diamond or the priceless pearl, it not only adds beauty and light to the mundane world but also serves a deeper and richer purpose ---it gives meaning and significance to everything we do. We are, according to the Bahai Faith, truly spiritual and noble beings in essence and in potential. The intent of the author is to share some of her thoughts upon this vital and important subject by asking and reflecting on what the goals are in the spiritual life in general and the Bahai life in particular, how we should live the spiritual (specifically the Bahai) life, why we do it, and who is our role model or Exemplar in our pursuit of the Spiritual life. Drawing on the great spiritual and religious exhortations and truths throughout the centuries and sharing some of her personal experiences in trying to apply the Holy Bahai Writings to urban Singaporean life, she hopes to shed some light on the questions stated above.

INTRODUCTION—GOALS IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

The first goal of most spiritual traditions and religions is Union with the Divine; be it a personal merciful God, an impersonal Law of Nature or the Eternal Transcendent Reality above and beyond the mundane and material world. The spiritual heart of man is always directed to the Good Pleasure of the Lord. We are all created in the image of God, with a spiritual void within that can only be filled by the Holy Spirit and the spiritual truths or teachings that each Divine Educator brings to the world. In the Bahai Writings, the goal is also to attain the Good Pleasure of God and to do God's Will. Our souls yearn and progress towards God and nearness to God is our Paradise and Ultimate Aim.

In most religions, we aspire to a Heaven (Christian) or Nirvana (Buddhism). In this Paradise, love, joy, peace and all blessings are showered on the sincere and faithful. In the Bahai Faith, Heaven is attained when we are near God and Hell is being far from the presence of God. It is a spiritual death we experience if we do not cultivate the virtues. Heaven and Hell are not physical places as the Christians and Islamists understand it. For Bahais, we are in Heaven when we do the Will of God and practise our virtues or Attributes of God.. Conversely, we sin and fall short of God's Glory and God's presence and that is Hell. Hence, the states of Heaven and Hell can exist on this physical earth.

We all have free will. By embracing and choosing the spiritual pathway, we allow God and His Mercy to permeate all aspects of our lives. Both the transcendent and mundane worlds take on a higher and nobler outlook. We make the world a better place because all religions exhort us to strive towards "Perfection in virtues" and to lead authentic, spiritual and noumenal lives.

This author has received much solace and blessings since she has embraced the noble Bahai Faith. The best thing that has happened is that she has found meaning and a sense of direction and purpose from the Faith. Living in the urban city of Singapore,

she had for a long time felt an inner disquiet and emptiness despite being surrounded by material wealth and abundance. This existential angst caused her to embark on a spiritual quest that led her to the Bahai Faith. The author read widely the books on religion, philosophy, meditation, prayer and self actualization and talked to and interviewed many people, from all walks of life. She would like to share her experiences, blessings and difficulties on this spiritual path and write of the application of the Bahai Teachings to her situation as a city dweller and truth seeker.

After discussing the main goals of the spiritual life, we now turn to the definition of the spiritual life.

H.B.Danesh in his enlightening book “The Psychology of Spirituality” says that “It is difficult to give a single definition of the spiritual way of life because there is such a wide range of views on the issue.”(p.31)

He notes:

Spirituality is not the opposite or negation of materialism. Far from it. Spirituality is an active process that is inherently purposeful. Its objectives are growth, development, and transcendence. Through our spirituality we seek to achieve the highest and noblest in ourselves and to create a united and ever-advancing civilization....We human beings are at the crossroads of material and spiritual realities.....We can live totally materialistic, animalistic lives or we can choose to transcend our animal nature and enter the realms of spirituality....As humans we are endowed with the capacities to know, to love and to will....We can use our knowledge to wage war or peace.”(p.31,32)

Thus, we learn that the spiritual path is not “the opposite or the negation of materialism” It is purposeful and its noble aims include “growth, development and transcendence” Through our spiritual journey and quest, we attain “the highest and noblest in ourselves” We also “create a united and ever-advancing civilization” by using our free will to choose World Peace and not war and tragedy. A spiritual life in general, and the Bahai Faith in particular can bring on a Utopia on earth when all our energies, actions and resources are focused and directed towards the betterment of the world.

Danesh continues:

If we choose peace and dedicate ourselves to its cause, we have chosen a spiritual lifestyle. The same holds true for other choices such as truthfulness, trust, justice, compassion, cooperation, beauty, humility, service and all other spiritual qualities (p32)

Hence, we see that in the cultivation of the virtues of trust, peace and justice, our lives take on a transcendent purpose, meaning and nobility. When we dedicate our lives to something greater than ourselves (eg:Goodwill and Peace to all Mankind), we forget ourselves and live for others. In this way, we become selfless and noble.

The wise author further elaborates:

If we make the objective of life to use our minds to learn about these spiritual qualities, to focus the power of our love and attraction to them, and to employ our will to commit acts according to them, we will have embarked on a spiritual lifestyle (p32)

Spirituality is thus the practical application of the virtues in our daily lives. We are to use our minds, hearts and will to choose to commit to virtues or the spiritual attributes and qualities of God..

Danesh succinctly concludes on this beneficent thought:

A spiritual life is a life of growth and detachment, purpose and reflection, discipline and creativity, immediacy and farsightedness, prayer and social action, determination and resignation --- seemingly irreconcilable opposites. Ultimately, a spiritual life transcends the limits of time, place and person. It follows that a spiritual life calls for a major review of our thinking about our life experiences and perspectives. It examines not only our inner personal processes but also our interpersonal relationships and our relationships with God – a process that helps us to search for and establish a transcendent meaning for our existence (p32)

This writer concurs with the above quote. By thinking and living the spiritual life, we live the ultimate and authentic life -- we search for and establish a transcendent meaning for our existence. We lead the truly abundant life of soul and spirit.

The purpose of our lives, declares this indomitable stalwart, is:

To use these capacities (ie: capacities for knowledge,love and will”(p28,ibid) to acquire knowledge and wisdom, to become loving and just, and to use our will in the service of good rather than evil (p28)

WHO IS OUR ROLE MODEL AS WE TREAD THE SPIRITUAL BAHAI PATH?

The Bahai Faith and the spiritual life is not the easiest of lifestyles, but it is a worthwhile endeavor to live the religious life because such a life fulfills the soul and spirit of mankind. It gives joy and hope to the poor and ill, it gives vision and direction to the disillusioned and cynical, it gives impetus to do good and serve God and man. It advocates Excellence in all things. It can do great and lasting Good for all.

Where do we get the yearning to lead the spiritual life in a materialistic and often corrupt world? Where do we draw our strength to abide by God's Laws and walk the mystic life with practical feet?

The Beloved Master Abdul- Baha, the son of Prophet Founder Bahauallah of the Bahai Faith and the perfect Exemplar of mankind, is the One Bahais turn to when in doubt or uncertainty. He shared the physical sufferings of his Father . Both were incarcerated in the worst prisons and dungeons because of their noble Faith and spiritual convictions. Both stood firm in the difficult times and said that in the darkest prisons, they were at peace and joyful because God was never far from them. In living in the Presence of God always, they were never in want and were spiritually rich and happy despite their hardship in the harsh prisons.

In the book “Writings of Bahauallah –A Compilation”, it is stated:

At the Foundation of this guidance lies the unique role which Bahauallah's Writings—indeed the text of the Kitab-I-Aqdas itself—confer on His eldest son Abdul-Baha. This unique figure is at once the Exemplar of the pattern of life taught by His father, the divinely inspired authoritative Interpreter of His Teachings and the center and pivot of the Covenant which the Author of the Bahai Revelation made with all who recognize Him. The twenty nine years of Abdul-Baha's ministry endowed the Bahai world with a luminous body of commentary that opens multiple vistas of understanding on His Father's purpose (p186,187)

Before he died, Bahauallah in his Will and Testament said categorically that Abdul-Baha, the Master, was to be the sole authoritative interpreter of His Holy Writings, Epistles and Tablets.

We may well ask: Why not emulate the Manifestations of God themselves? Why not the Prophets Jesus, Isaiah or Bahauallah Himself? Why choose the Son of the Prophet, Abdul-Baha as our role model?

The reason is evident to the enlightened and thoughtful. The Manifestations were too high and holy to be emulated by man. They act as mirrors to the Sun. In this analogy, the Sun is God, the Creator. God is ineffable and too holy for man to understand and decipher—so the Rays (the attributes of God) of the Sun fall upon the Divine Manifestations (the Mirror) so that man can see God through His Manifestations and follow these Divine prophets in thought, word and deed.

Abdul-Baha became the only authoritative interpreter of the Bahai Writings and Holy Books. We are to take up the "cross" and follow the great Abdul-Baha in our daily lives, thoughts and deeds. The joy and peace that comes from the spiritual life is beyond human understanding. The fact that Abdul-Baha suffered the most abject material poverty and suffering yet lived the victorious Bahai life of joy, hope and love is insurmountable. By His deeds and words, this dignified Holy Personage sets an example for all, to live the virtuous and learned high life of Simplicity, Spirituality and Excellence in all things.

The Master even rewarded a woman who pelted him with stones by visiting her when she was ill. Such was the mercy and selflessness of this noble Exemplar. He was generous and humane, and thought nothing of giving away all His Father's sheep to their shepherds. In the "Vignettes from the Life of Abdul-Baha", we see His Pure Heart, Kindly Heart and Radiant Heart in the stories told in the book.

On His Purity, it is told:

The Master wrote to one lady as follows: "Endeavour thou, as far as thou canst, in order that thou mayest be like unto a chaste and clear mirror, cleansed and purified from every dust, so that the outpouring of the rays of the Sun of Truth may descend and thou mayest illumine those who are around thee.(p37 of the "Vignettes from the Life of Abdul-Baha")

HOW SHOULD WE LIVE THE SPIRITUAL AND ESSENTIAL LIFE?

In the following section, this writer will focus on her experiences in applying the Writings to her situation as truth seeker and city dweller

It is noteworthy to recognize that the essence or crux of living the spiritual life is the practice of the Golden Rule – we are to prefer others to self. When we are gracious and magnanimous, we are like brightly lit candles in the darkness of the world!.

SERVICE, REFLECTION, MEDITATION AND PRAYER

The Bahai Life is very much a life dedicated to Service, Reflection, Meditation and Prayer. This writer would not be telling the truth if she said that the spiritual path is easy to tread. City life is often frenetic and stressful – everyone has a tight schedule to run and there is not much respite in the concrete jungle that is city life.

In sophisticated city life the notion of Service is given short shrift. Indeed, Service sectors are perceived as lowly and “dirty” jobs, held by the lowly educated and weak. How different is the idea of Service in the spiritual and religious life! The Bahai Writings state:

Let them perform their services with complete sanctity and detachment ...let them...seek distinction in truthfulness, straightforwardness and the pursuit of virtue and excellence....To attain to true glory and honor, man should exercise justice and equity, forbear to act in an oppressive manner, render service to his government and work for the good of his fellow-citizens. (“Trustworthiness: A Cardinal Bahai Virtues (New Delhi: Bahai Publishing Trust, 1987, p13)

Although this writer has not attained such lofty excellences and virtues of “distinction in truthfulness, straightforwardness...justice and equity...render service to [my] government and work for the good of [my] fellow-citizens” (see quote above), she is very heartened and elated that the Bahai Faith places Service to all as a virtue to cultivate and treasure. It is like a breath of fresh air to view service and altruism in such an uplifting and inspiring way!

In the Ruhi Institute’s book, “Igniting the Heart” (Second edition, by the Macau Bahai Institute, p45), it is wisely and succinctly stated :
True service springs from the spirit of altruism and love for others. It requires an attitude of selflessness and devotion. The effectiveness of our service depends on our inner qualities and the purity of our intentions. When service is motivated by love and is free from self-interest, it bears excellent fruits and exerts lasting influence in the world of humanity.

It is to be noted that he who strives for excellence in his profession and carries out his duties in a spirit of service to others, is, in the sight of God, engaging in worship. Abdul-Baha in “Paris Talks” has said, “The man who makes a piece of notepaper to the best of his ability, conscientiously, concentrating all his forces on perfecting it, is giving praise to God.” (p176 –77)

Through striving to apply the writings to my role as city-dweller and truth seeker, this writer has come to the happy state of inner peace and contentment espoused in the “Seven Valleys” where the valley of contentment marks the stage this writer now

experiences. This author is more reflective and tries to make time for meditation and prayer in her life. The Bahai life encourages all of us to reflect after taking action so that we can recognize our strengths and weaknesses and find out what leads us to nobility and loftiness or to meanness and abasement. Spiritual aspirations and growth happen when we reflect on our past actions and improve on our present and future actions. As we comprehend through meditation, prayer and reflection, we strive to purify our motives and inner conditions and improve the quality of our actions, thoughts and words. Meditation, Reflection and Prayer are intrinsically vital parts of the Bahai spiritual life. This author finds herself motivated to practise these activities in her daily life. But Truth be told, she is not always successful in these activities. Often while praying or meditating upon God's Word, she finds her mind wandering to mundane things like when dinner will be ready or what is going on in the television. Cosmopolitan Singapore holds much to distract us from doing our sacred duties and spiritual practices. The Singaporean pastimes of eating, shopping and movies do not augur well for the spiritual pursuits of the practicing Bahai. There is nothing wrong with eating, shopping and movies per se but I feel strongly that we should also spend time on prayer, meditation and reflection as we are here dealing with fundamental issues of eternal verities and spiritual truths when we do so.

In "The Path Toward Spirituality", we see that "Service is central to our spiritual growth" (p65)

In the same book, we find the spiritual significance of service expounded upon on page 70, thus:

Again, is there any deed in the world that would be nobler than service to the common good? Is there any greater blessing conceivable for a man, than that he should become the cause of the education, the development, the prosperity and honor of his fellow-creatures?.....'The best of men are those who serve the people; the worst of men are those who harm the people.'" (Abdul-Baha, "The Secret of Divine Civilisation, p. 103)

How do we apply the Holy Thoughts and Writings to life in the urban landscape? With difficulty. With integrity. And with excellence, hopefully. And with an utter dependence and trust in God and His Divine Outpourings. In most cities, and Singapore is not exempt, high society or the glitterati esteems the beautiful and rich, but disdains the poor and needy. This is in direct contradistinction to the Bahai Writings where we are to:

..... manifest complete love and affection toward all mankind (The Hidden Words of Bahauallah and Selected Holy Writings, Bahai Publishing Trust of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of Malaysia, p134)

Also in the same book:

Do not exalt yourselves above others, but consider all as your equals, recognizing them as the servants of one God. (p134)

In applying the above writings to my situation as a city dweller, I have to exercise wisdom and careful thought.

IDEALS VIRTUES AND SIGNIFICANCE

When we whole-heartedly apply Bahauallah's laws, principles and truths to our daily lives, we will gain true friends and also true enemies. Some will start to persecute the active Bahai practitioners, as did the clergy and Imams in days gone by. However, the Bahais of yore went heroically to their deaths and executions because they stood by their Faith. They had high and noble ideals, virtues and lived the truly meaningful life and death. Their heroic self- sacrifice in the face of intense persecution is praiseworthy – theirs were indeed lives of true significance and virtue.

WISDOM, TACT AND DISCERNMENT

The Faith's Writings are for everyone – while it enjoins us to the highest and purest of motives, it also encourages wisdom and discernment...we are not to foolishly and recklessly give everything we have to the poor and needy because we would then be burdens to the larger community and our loved ones. We need to educate the poor and disadvantaged so they can fend for themselves and are not reliant on others for their livelihood.

At the personal level, I consciously practise the virtues eg Courtesy, Love, Justice and Unity---I am often far from the mark and fall short of the Glory of God but I am always trying to improve and the practice of virtues is , for me, a most worthy pursuit.

DETACHMENT

The Bahai Holy Writings advocate that we be detached from worldly possessions. It even encourages the rich to voluntarily share their wealth with the deserving poor and disabled. In "The Divine Art of Living—Selections from the Writings of Bahauallah and Abdul-Baha" it is stated:

The essence of detachment is for man to turn his face towards the courts of the Lord, to enter His presence, behold his Countenance, and stand as witness before Him. (p64)

IDEALISM AND SPIRITUALITY

In the Bahai Faith and indeed in all spiritual traditions, idealism and spirituality are Godly virtues. The question that commends itself at this juncture is: how do we practise and live out the noble ideals and spirituality exhorted by the world's religions in our secular pragmatic urban landscape where materialism and power struggles are so ubiquitous and commonplace?

I argue that the spiritual and ideal truths, laws and obligations when lived out and practiced in this world evoke a change for the kinder, gentler and more gracious society where all have a part to play in God's Plan. The Earth is but one country and mankind is one big family.

VIRTUES AND LEARNING

The Bahai spiritual life is centred on the cultivation of virtues and learning. The Writings encourage all to practise the Golden Rule of preferring others to self. Can this utopian ideal and vision hold true in the rat race and politicking world? If we depend and trust in God, the Golden Rule is an injunction we pledge allegiance to. Of course, we are fallible beings and the ego is always waiting to arise in our hearts to rear its ugly head. This writer often fails to be spiritual and loving, succumbing to anger and envy.

But the difference is this: she refuses to quit treading the spiritual path. She prays to God for his blessings and succour – and persistently tries to replace negative thoughts and emotions with the virtues Bahauallah (the Founder of the Bahai Faith) emphasized. Is it possible to conquer hatred with love and goodwill? Is it possible to die for your enemy? I believe that with God and His guidance, nothing is impossible! The virtues of Justice, Love, Wisdom and Unity if and when practiced with commitment and determination would truly bring about the World Peace that Bahais believe is inevitable. This is in accordance to the Bahai Holy Writings. It is no mere trifling belief, the Bahais are not willing to rest on their laurels – they are actively involved in building schools and hospitals in poverty stricken countries. They are not to proselytize but their pure and goodly deeds make their vision of World Unity and World Peace a distinct possibility.

This author's inner turmoil borne of her inability to find meaning in life disappeared after she embraced the Bahai Faith. For the first time, she experienced a serenity that was beyond human ken. Her heart, soul and spirit rejoiced because she has found the Universal God. She seeks to live in the Holy Presence of the God who is the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.

SERENITY PRAYER—APPLYING SERENITY, COURAGE AND WISDOM TO CITYSCAPE /URBAN CITY

The spiritual life is lived according to many homilies but the one prayer that has made a great change in my life—psychologically, spiritually and intellectually—is the Serenity Prayer. In the past, I was easily excited and quick to anger. These traits are still within me—but I am now in more control of my negative emotions and thoughts. The Holy Spirit within me is at the helm and I need not fear.

The world is full of calamities but , according to the Bahais, also full of the good, the true and the lovely. Things like injustice and wars in the world extant bothered me much in the past. However, the change is that I now pray and practise this prayer:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change

Courage to change the things I can

And the wisdom to know the difference

(Reinhold Niebuhr, American religious philosopher)

I try to actively apply the Serenity Prayer to my daily life. Situations that I have no control over, I remain serene. But if it is within my powers to help, wisdom and courage are applied.

WALK THE SPIRITUAL LIFE WITH PRACTICAL FEET

This means the practice of Virtues and the Bahai Sacred Duties and Practices in daily life. The Bahais are to lead the spiritual life in the world. Not for them, the path of the Ascetic. They are to have right livelihood or be self supporting with an honest occupation. They are enjoined to pray, recite the Verses of God and Meditation, study the Faith, teach the Faith, observe the Divine Laws and Principles, contribute to Huququallah and the Bahai Funds and last but certainly not least, do service for humanity. Spiritual Distinction is their Aim in life. It is also enjoined that the Bahais be thankful in adversity and generous in prosperity. If we apply these principles and duties in our daily lives, we are indeed walking the path of Spirituality with practical feet.

A SPIRITUALLY DISTINGUISHED LIFE

In the wise and insightful book “Vignettes from the Life of Abdul-Baha” collected and edited by Annamarie Honnold, (pp141 of Vignettes) the following well-loved speech of Abdul-Baha struck me forcefully:

For you I desire spiritual distinction; that is, you must become eminent and distinguished in morals. In the love of God you must become distinguished from all else. You must become distinguished for loving humanity; for unity and accord; for love and justice. In brief, you must become distinguished in all the virtues of the human world; for faithfulness and sincerity; for justice and fidelity; for firmness and steadfastness; for philanthropic deeds and service to the human world for love toward every human being; for unity and accord with all people; for removing prejudices and promoting international peace. Finally, you must become distinguished for heavenly illumination and acquiring the bestowal of God. I desire this distinction for you (Abdul Baha The Promulgation of Universal Peace, vol. 1, pp184-5)

The author is trying to follow the Master’s wish to lead a spiritually distinguished life---it is exhilarating to have such worthy and meaningful goals in her life. She has learnt to embrace tests and difficulties and view them from the spiritual viewpoint. It is the tests and trials that mould and shape the heart, mind, soul, character of humanity. It is from tests and trials that the dross is burnt away and the gold (ie: Virtues and wisdom within us) is made manifest.

An example of the excellence of Abdul Baha’s advice put to good use in the urban landscape is that this writer has come to look upon all Humanity as one family, be they loved ones or strangers. In the past, the writer confesses to self-centredness and narcissism. She was so absorbed in her personal goals and pursuits that she had not the time of the day for loved ones and friends. She is endeavoring to practise the Golden Rule – to prefer others to self and to die to the self and live for others. As expected, she often falls short of these ideals and principles, but she gamely tries again and again to do so, refusing to accept defeat.

The above paragraphs are *some* of the pertinent ways to live the spiritual life—they are by no means exhaustive and comprehensive.

After examining the topic of “How to live the Spiritual Life”, we turn to the issue “Why is living a spiritual life important?”

WHY THE SPIRITUAL LIFE IS VITAL AND IMPORTANT

If exercising the mind means Reading Writing and Arithmetic and playing Soccer and Tennis are exercises for the body, how do we exercise the soul and spirit , the heart and character of Man?

The spiritual life well-lived very often leads to a completely new and different mindset in the individual. In my case, my worldview changed when I encountered the Bahais and their priceless Writings

Before I had the bounty of becoming a Bahai, I was a discontented and egoistic person...no different from most of my city friends. I wanted worldly success as much as the next man on the street. I filled my time seeking for meaning and purpose but not finding any in my pursuits. Then the Bahais challenged me to do independent investigation on the Faith and I was captivated by this magnanimous and inspiring Faith. My external circumstances did not change...but there was a great upheaval in my inner core being. My mindset changed and with it my cantankerous disposition. While in the past, I grumbled and complained that there was no meaning in life, I now had discovered the true meaning in life which is to know, worship and adore God Almighty. Inner peace filled my heart and I found rest and solace in my soul. I had found my *raison d'être*—man was created by the loving God to know and worship him. The Bahais believe that man was created with the potential to be noble, spiritual and giving. Education would bring out the best in all of Humanity. I was inspired by the Bahai spiritual ideals and ideas, their pure and noble virtues, their devotion to God and learning, their fine balance of spiritual and material pursuits, their aspiration to better the world, and their pure motives. Their conviction that man is in essence a spiritual being, with the potential to be giving and noble moved me to accept this glorious Faith. I was no longer the urban and urbane cynic but a “born again” Bahai!

WHAT CAN SPIRITUAL LIFE CONTRIBUTE TO SINGAPORE CITY LIFE WHERE ACADEMIC AND ECONOMIC SUCCESS ARE THE BE ALL AND END ALL

I believe that the Bahai Writings can change the heartless and indifferent cityscape. City life is all about competition (sometimes ruthless and unprincipled) and the survival of the fittest. The strong take it all whilst the weaker fall by the wayside. In the Bahai Writings, we are exhorted to care, give and share. Further, no one ought to be an idle beggar if he is fit to work. The truly needy and poor (who, due to genuine illnesses or disabilities, cannot work) are to be cared for by the more fortunate amongst us. It is an honor and privilege to serve the poor. Thus, justice and compassion are well served if we sincerely apply the Bahai Writings to life in general and city life in particular. The idealist in me takes heart and is filled with radiant joy at the enlightened Bahai stance of sharing and caring for all. I will endeavour to apply these exhortations into the city life that I lead. It will not be easy and smoothsailing as the world does not esteem the marginalized and disabled but the Divine Laws and Teachings of the Bahai Faith stand me in good stead. They are a constant source of encouragement and inspiration in my attempts to walk the spiritual path with practical feet. The Bahai Lifestyle is indeed living the high life of the Spirit. When practiced sincerely the Bahai Writings and way of life can bring joy, love and light to a sin-scarred and dispirited world. Spiritual virtues and loving warmth can bring life and a spiritual awakening to the cold and hardened city life. Hence, we see that spiritual contributions in a hub-city like Singapore are very vital --- they bring intangible successes and speak to the hearts, minds souls and spirits of man. Such contributions infuse all areas of endeavor (eg economic and academic success) and bring them to fruition through the practise and study of the Eternal and Unchanging Spiritual Laws of God.

SPIRITUAL LIFE IN SINGAPORE – WHY IS SPIRITUALITY VITAL FOR URBAN SINGAPORE?

In the Singapore urban scene, economic and academic success used to be the be all and end all of our lives. It is only recently that the arts and sports have received positive support from our government and populace. It is only recently that we have been exhorted to think out of the box and be creative, and innovative. The leaders of Singapore are the technocrats and the business successes – only recently do we find people of quality and caliber like Eunice Olsen to stand as NMP and add diversity to the political scene. Her outstanding work in community and voluntary organizations and in the Arts scene (she is a pianist) are her qualifications. She typifies the alternative lifestyle which more and more in Singapore are coming to embrace---there are now vibrant creative professions being accepted by governing and governed. In the past, there was only recognition of economic and academic success.

Spiritual and religious vocations are also given space in tolerant multi-religious cosmopolitan Singapore. This open minded and creative approach to the selection of Singapore's leaders and opinion shapers bodes well for Singapore's spiritual development too. We may be a secular nation but we respect all the myriad religions and beliefs held by our different racial peoples. There are no bloody religious wars in Singapore -- there is religious freedom that allows all to be the best they can be in their respective religions and spiritual pursuits. The Bahai Faith exhorts us to press forward in our task of encouraging all to attain spiritual distinction. We are to vie and "compete" amongst ourselves to be the most loving and just. Our quest in this noble dispensation is to bring about a New World Order where Justice and all the Virtues prevail. A worthy and altruistic vision indeed!

Spirituality is vital for Singapore because it looks at the fundamental verities and eternal timeless values that all of us need in order to have meaning and direction in life.

INNER TRANSFORMATION

My perception of what constitutes a happy life and a successful career has taken a 360 degree turn for the better. Where I was judgmental and impatient in the past, I found myself actually chastising myself when I lost my temper and was impatient with others. I started to value relationships as we are all creations of God. I started to value the virtues espoused by my Faith and tried to be more loving and patient with stranger and loved ones alike. As I cultivate the virtues and increase scientific and artistic learning and culture, I realize that the Bahai Faith does not hesitate to go against the grain of worldly society. While Singapore, the urban cosmopolitan state, values economic, academic and other tangible successes/excellences above all else, I realize (from my understanding of the Bahai Scriptures) that Spiritual Distinction should preside over all other types of successes. It is a well-known fact in Bahai circles that without the virtues, the other types of successes(eg:deep learning and knowledge and material wealth) can become dangerous. The rich, powerful and brilliant who lack the foundation of virtues cultivated over the years can do great harm to the world ---the computer hacker who is brilliant but sadly lacking in conscience can wreck and ruin many lives. However, the not so bright but kind and just person can contribute to the betterment of mankind and do everyone

proud. Such a one will sow seeds of goodwill and love wherever he goes. In the city, living the spiritual life runs counter to the notion that only the rich and famous count in society. My spiritual eyes were opened by my Faith --- everyone is precious in the Eyes of God –God does not distinguish between rich or poor, he loves the sinner and the saints—he loves all, impartially and unconditionally. This view has repercussions in society and the world. If God loves the least of our brethren, be they rich or poor, intelligent or not, Bahais are exhorted to do the same. This is a tall order but we believe that a Just and United World and World Peace are inevitable and a noble, worthy cause to aspire to.

Why pursue the straight and narrow difficult spiritual path? For this writer it leads to purpose, awe and gratitude in life. I am fulfilled and tranquil in my soul and spirit. I see the world as family, strangers and loved ones alike. I no longer belong to the school of thought which says it is a rat race and a dog eat dog world out there. I see the virtues and strengths and spiritual potential in all. As the Catholics see Jesus in all humanity, I endeavor to see Abdul Baha in the faces of my fellowman. I seek God and His righteousness in all I do, say and think. I aspire to practise and live “The Divine Art of Living”.

In the priceless book “Paris Talks: Addresses Given by Abdul Baha in 1911” it is stated that “There can be no true happiness and progress without spirituality” (p.106). How true this observation is!

It is then observed:

“Ferocity and savagery are natural to animals, but men should show forth the qualities of love and affection. God sent all his prophets into the world with one aim, to sow in the hearts of men love and goodwill, and for this great purpose, they were willing to suffer and to die” (106)

The worldly people mock at the noble and lofty sentiments in the above quotation. Is it not the height of folly to die for the sake of love and goodwill? Why would the prophets of the Ages want to do such a sacrificial and selfless deed? Indeed the scoffers would assert, the only worthwhile occupation for humanity is to look out for self and disregard the welfare of all others. Self is paramount ---altruism and submitting to God’s Will are irrational ways of life and therefore nothing to aspire to. Unconditional Love is a mirage and a sign of weakness. Only the wily and the cunning can succeed –man is by nature sinful, covetous and abject. Bahais are sadly mistaken to think that all humanity have innate nobility, generosity and spirituality. Wars and bloodshed are necessary and inevitable as man is basically sinful and selfish

Abdul Baha, the Bahai Founder’s devoted son, differs from these worldly folk. For Him, it is of the utmost folly to “kill each other like the savage wolves, and forget the laws of love and tolerance” (p. 106)

He observes:

“Now this luminous age has come , bringing with it wonderful civilization and material progress. Men’s intellects have widened, their perceptions grown, but alas, inspite of all this, fresh blood is being spilt day by day....And what is to be gained in exchange for all this anguish and heartache? Only a corner of the earth! (p107)

The above quote shows why we have to choose the spiritual life over a material existence. We clearly see who the truly foolish are:

”How many have been killed during this sad time? How many homes are ruined, wives desolate and children orphans! And what is to be gained....only a corner of the earth! (107)

Why choose the spiritual life over the material one? Abdul Baha exhorts:

“...material progress alone does not tend to uplift man. On the contrary, the more he becomes immersed in material progress, the more does his spirituality become obscured (p 107 ibid)

Further the wise Exemplar reiterates:

“only if material progress goes hand in hand with spirituality can any real progress come about, and the Most Great Peace reign in the world” (p107) and:

“The Laws of God may be likened unto the soul and material progress unto the body. If the body was not animated by the soul, it would cease to exist. It is my earnest prayer that spirituality may ever grow and increase in the world , so that customs may become enlightened and peace and concord may be established (p108)

and further:

Is it wise to turn away from such a loving Father, Who showers his blessings upon us, and to choose rather to be slaves of matter?(109)

Thus, we see the absurdity of killing and pillage over land or “a corner of the earth” (as stated in the earlier paragraphs) For ‘real progress to occur, material progress goes hand in hand with spirituality” and the “Most Great Peace [will] reign in the world”.

Abdul-Baha succinctly encapsulates the gist of his speech thus:

“True happiness depends on spiritual good and having the heart ever open to receive the Divine Bounty” (p108)

It is so true that the spiritual life brings true inner peace and joy. We are made in the Image of the Almighty God and it is to fulfil our high destiny and potential that we choose to live the spiritual life. Therefore there is good reason to be noble, true and spiritual. Man is in reality a spiritual being.

The soul and spirit belong to the ultimate realm of everything good, eternal and true. By following the eternal and unchanging spiritual laws, life takes on powerful meaning and purpose. For example, one of the spiritual laws is to die for our foe. If this was adhered to, there would be Peace and Paradise on earth. World peace would result. Such is the power of living the authentic spiritual life!

The spiritual life encourages us to selfless altruism and to submit to God’s Will. It is difficult to extinguish self will, but the resultant joy and love we experience when we are selfless and altruistic are priceless and eternal. Indeed, the spiritual life is the highest and noblest life that we can aspire to.

CONCLUSION

In the Kitab-I-Aqdas found in the Introduction of the book “Writings of Bahauallah” (a Compilation by the Bahai Publishing Trust, New Delhi, India, p193), The Universal House of Justice stated:

Our world has entered the dark heart of an age of fundamental change beyond anything in all its tumultuous history. Its people of whatever race, nation or religion, are being challenged to subordinate all lesser loyalties and limiting identities to their oneness as citizens of a single planetary homeland. In Bahauallah’s words: “The Well Being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established’

Indeed, it is the time to aspire to lofty goals like Unity and Peace in the World and in the Universe. As is stipulated in the above quote, the vital peace and security of our precious planetary world, is dependent on the practice and application of the Eternal and Immortal values and principles, Universal and Spiritual truths and obligations of Bahauallah, our great and noble Prophet Founder.

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