

## Marriage And The Nuclear Family: A Bahá'í Perspective

Khalil A. Khavari\*

### I. The Status of the Nuclear Family

The nuclear family, consisting of parents and their children, is now being threatened by divorce, collective child care, and communal living. The enterprise of marriage and family is in a critical condition, attacked by powerful internal and external forces that range from pathological individual expectations of marriage to legislation that attacks its very foundation.

Over half a century ago, in response to a question about marriage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated, "This is divine creation and there is not the slightest possibility that change or alteration affect this divine creation...."<sup>1</sup> The Bahá'í writings assure us that these assaults against the family are temporary and will fail in the end: logical fads and erroneous social theories will be annulled or corrected to conform with the decree of the Almighty Ordainer.

Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book commands:

Marry, O people, that from you may appear he who will remember Me amongst My servants; this is one of My commandments unto you; obey it as an assistance to yourselves.<sup>2</sup>

My understanding of the above admonition is that humans are urged to marry to fulfill an important aspect of life. Bahá'u'lláh gives us two main explanations for obeying his commandment for marriage and family formation. The first has to do with procreation and needs no elaboration. The second is with respect to the blessing that marriage confers, "...obey it as an assistance to yourselves."

A century later, research has provided detailed documentation for the veracity of the latter assertion. It is a well-established fact that the incidence and prevalence of most illnesses, (psychological as well as physiological), suicide, and every other imaginable index of misery and misfortune, are significantly greater for single persons than for married people. For instance, the 1975 National Conference on Preventive Medicine endorsed the following statement:

People who are isolated from family support, single people, the divorced and the widowed, have rates of morbidity and mortality which are higher than those who are married....Children who grow up in families from which either parent is missing are reported to have less good health than those who grow up in an intact nuclear family.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, a 1979 report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* states, "Historical data indicate that married persons live longer on the average than unmarried persons and that they generally make less use of health care services."<sup>4</sup> Thus, each person stands to reap the rewarded benefits—including the directive to marry.

### Purpose of Marriage

Even the smallest component of creation operates according to the Divine Will and is conceived by a Supreme and Purposeful Designer to achieve a pre-specified objective. Thus, it is evident that the institution of marriage also has clear and vital goals.

The cardinal goal of matrimony is to procreate, educate and train children. Much of the responsibility in this regard is vested in the mother, as clearly stated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

O maid servants of the Merciful It is incumbent upon you to train the children from their earliest babyhood It is incumbent upon you to beautify their morals It is incumbent upon you to attend to them under all aspects and circumstances, inasmuch as God—glorified and exalted is He!—hath ordained mothers to be the primary trainers of children and infants.<sup>5</sup>

There are at least two other important objectives in marriage; achieving unity and creating a vital source of nurturance. When two people are drawn together by the force of attraction and are unified, the result is a new entity—an entity which may possess some of the attributes of its component parts, yet displays qualities which are unique to the combination.

In the same way, the unity between a man and a woman can be envisioned as producing a new dimension—the building block of a unified humanity. Two people, attracted and held together by the creative and cohesive force of love, produce children. They are connected in a multifaceted love bond, with their parents, and their children. Then, this circle of unity and love can expand indefinitely to include all members of the human race—in fact, the whole of creation. Bahá'ís are required to obtain parental consent for marriage, at least in part, to promote unity.

Marriage also provides a unique opportunity for the sublime act of nurturing. Two adults who had been self-contained and independent assume a new and more mature role. They begin a process of sharing and interdependence in a most intimate manner. The husband and wife learn very rapidly about each other's needs, hopes, aspirations, fears, likes and dislikes.

The union presents each partner with the challenges and rewards inherent in any true organic unity: giving up some personal and individual privileges, making certain sacrifices, learning to care deeply, and standing ready to share in all the consequences of the partnership. It is in the arena of marriage that one learns to subdue narcissism, to act in the interest of another, to enlist one's energies for the good of the common weal. These are the vital transformations, the changes that must proceed without too much friction, to lay the foundation of the union for the subsequent phase—the arrival of children, the fruition of the enterprise.

Thus, the divinely-ordained union, marriage, is a vital mechanism for the maturation, humanization, and realization of the person's highest potential. Once he learns to give, to share, and to love in the context of marriage, then, these and other spiritual practices can also be directed toward the entire family.

### **Sound Basis for Family Formation**

We know from chemistry that some chemical attractions are partial while certain others are total. Chemical reactions based on partial attractions form highly transitory and unstable bonds. The slightest disturbance may trigger separation and dissociation of the compound. On the other hand, chemical substances produced by total attraction create stable and lasting bonds that withstand immense forces aimed at their dissociation.

Consider water. It represents an example of total attraction between hydrogen and oxygen. The union survives tremendous assaults. When heated, it expands and becomes vapour; yet, it is still water—the components are bonded together. When cooled excessively, it crystallizes into ice—still, water in another form. To separate these components requires more than heating and cooling; their union transcends the hardships of their command bond. Extraordinary force, such as intense electric current is required to break this bond. From this fundamental attraction, rivers flow, and oceans are formed.

Analogously, marriages which are based on partial attractions form shaky and unstable unions. They are highly susceptible to ever present disruptive forces. It stands to reason to assume that bonds rooted in greater attraction are more likely to succeed in achieving the glorious destiny inherent in the union of a man and a woman. A strong marriage must be based on mutual attraction in three general domains: spiritual, intellectual, and physical. The presence of all three is vital for the success of the enterprise. When any of the three components is absent or even weak, the marriage begins with less than total attraction, and the chances for its success are accordingly less.

As is the case in any action, one must have a clear understanding of what marriage is all about. The main purposes of marriage must be kept in mind. Furthermore, there is a set of healthy attitudes about marriage (listed in the following section). Accepting these assertions provides the individual with a realistic, yet beautiful, view of the subject and largely prevents disappointment and disillusionment which are often the results of ignorance and unrealistic expectations.

Many marriages are based on premises other than those delineated in the Bahá'í writings. The attraction between the two individuals may be a purely physical one. This is particularly true when we consider the fact that biological developments and hormonal activation are powerful forces which energize the search for a partner.

When the union is based, either purely or largely, on a physical attraction, the bond is highly susceptible to dissociation. Soon after marriage, the habituation of sexual desire begins, illusions shatter, wrinkles under the eyes assume prominence, the hairline recedes. Concomitantly, other potential partners begin to “look good,” as compared to one's spouse. The illusory chase after physical appeal may deal severe blows to the current bond. Panic may even set in so that one proceeds with all due haste to abandon the current partner and to seek the “ideal” before it is too

late. Unfortunately, the consequences are nearly always the same. The search is illusory, the effort futile, and the achievement a disappointment.

In some instances, both physical and intellectual attractions may be present in significant quantities. It is obvious that marriage based on the strength of these two attractions has a much better chance of surviving and even providing a limited degree of mutual satisfaction for the partners. Yet, healthy marriage requires total attraction between two people in all three critical realms—the spiritual, intellectual, and physical.

It is important that looking at one's future partner should trigger a pleasant sensation in the beholder. He should feel a certain joy about her physical attributes. He must also be attracted to her intellect, her sense of humour, her goals and interests, her views on a host of other things such as the arts and leisure. He should also be firmly captivated by her spiritual and moral qualities. The indispensability of moral character to a happy union is clearly stated in the Bahá'í writings. Both the man and the woman must scrutinize each other's moral character. They should look for the presence of truthfulness, trustworthiness, and a host of spiritual attributes rooted in an unshakable faith—the belief in the loving Creator and his teachings for this day.

It should be kept in mind that the presence of all three attractions is vital—none can be done without. Consider the high rate of failure for Bahá'í marriages in the West. The individual Bahá'ís are surrounded by a non-Bahá'í society—at times overwhelmed by it. They may feel alienation from its values and practices. Thus, a sudden encounter with another Bahá'í who exudes spiritual qualities can be most reassuring and attractive. This appeal can be so powerful, at the time, to lead the partners into matrimony. Eventually, the marriage is likely to falter, due to the lack in the other two dimensions.

It is impossible to justify selfishness under any circumstance, let alone recommend it. But, the importance of partner selection to a successful marriage cannot be overemphasized. I am almost tempted to say that this is one instance where selfishness can perhaps be justified. That is, each person must do his utmost to choose the best partner he possibly can. Marriage is our greatest investment. We should make a very thorough and careful study of this investment. It stands to bear spiritual fruits and pay infinite dividends, or it can be disastrous.

### **Proper Attitudes About Marriage**

In addition to the vital importance of attractions for a happy and successful marriage, one also needs to have healthy attitudes and realistic expectations. False premises abound, as attested by the disgruntled partner's statements, "I didn't know what I was getting into," "I thought it would be completely different from what it turned out to be," and so on.

Some people, more generally women, marry mainly to leave the confinement of the parental home. They may end up trading one cage for another. The new address can be just as restrictive, but perhaps in different ways.

Others may have unrealistic fantasies. Unfortunately, the world as it exists is often frustrating and stressful. Therefore, there is considerable variation and gradation of psychopathologies which may afflict people. One of them is fantasizing—in an attempt to construct, in the privacy of one's mind, the ideal world and life. A terrible feature of fantasy is that it invariably turns out to be a straw palace, and the strong winds of reality rapidly blow it away. Consequently, more disappointment and frustration are produced.

Other prevalent, yet faulty, premises are that if the partners are perfectly matched, they are "meant for each other," there will be no need at all for compromise and adjustment, it will be fun and play, and some little genie will descend to do all the housework—and so on! To the extent that one enters the union deluded by these or other fantasies, the chances for happiness and survival of the partnership diminish. A successful and lasting union requires compromise, accommodation and effort.

Thus, it is most constructive to have a proper attitude as well as realistic expectations about marriage. Both our attitudes and expectations should be moulded by the pearls of wisdom found in the Bahá'í writings. Some basic points to ponder:

1. Above all else, marrying should be viewed as an act of obedience to a commandment of an All-loving Creator who directs us to do so. The Creator has chosen humankind as an expression of his love. He has also bestowed this gift of procreation upon people, to proceed by the life giving force of love, to have a share in making the journey of life possible for another soul.
2. The union of a man and a woman is more than a physical event. A truly Bahá'í marriage entails an eternal union of two spiritual beings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts:

...when the people of Bahá desire to enter the sacred union of marriage, eternal connection and ideal relationship, spiritual and physical association of thoughts and conceptions of life must exist between them,

so that in all the grades of existence and all the worlds of God this union may continue for ever and ever for this real union is a splendor of the light of the love of God.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, humans are spiritual beings in essence and reality. The physical existence of this world is a vital, yet transient, facet of man's ever-advancing journey toward the Beloved. The union of two truly united people need not terminate at the end of our tenure on earth, "till death do us part" is not part of a Bahá'í concept. Death can only separate the physical components of the partners—the bodies, the temporary vehicles of the souls. The spiritual components are immortal and need not separate. They can grow together in all the worlds of God forever.

3. The parents must fully prepare themselves to do their very best for the products of their love, the children. Children are the primary objective of marriage, and we should never lose sight of this. This in no way implies that Bahá'ís should produce children indiscriminately. In human procreation we should never confuse quality with quantity. The parents should fully realize the limits of their resources and capabilities, and then meticulously plan the entire glorious event from prior to conception, through pregnancy, the birth, and the up bringing. 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly draws our attention to the vital importance of properly nurturing and educating children:

Every child is potentially the light of the world—and at the same time its darkness; wherefore must the question of education be accounted as of primary importance. From his infancy, the child must be nursed at the breast of God's love, and nurtured in the embrace of His knowledge, that he may radiate light, grow in spirituality, be filled with wisdom and learning, and take on the characteristics of the angelic host.<sup>7</sup>

Having and raising a child is analogous to creating and delivering a packaged "good" to humanity and the Creator. It is vital that every effort is made to insure that the "product" is a blessed addition to the human enterprise—an ornament, a jewel in the crown of creation.

It is absolutely imperative that, through neglect and miseducation, we do not create misfits of various sorts—packaged time bombs inevitably bound to self-destruct and harm others. The supreme aim of marriage is to create and nurture children with spiritual qualities.

4. To participate in the formation of that vital building block of unity. By the union of a man and a woman, a new dimension is created which enables an ever-expanding circle of unity—a circle which should encompass the totality of the human family, barring none.
5. To be prepared to work diligently and tirelessly for constructing a "fortress for well-being." Making sacrifices, compromises, and accommodations needed to realize this lofty objective. To make it an arena for the expression of an unending love to ward others, to cleanse oneself of narcissistic temptations, to become a fountain of living water to all, to reach out for the inclusion of others into the nurturing shelter created by the labours of selfless love.
6. To realize that marriage is not a business transaction. It should not be stifled by feelings of possessiveness. When you marry someone, you do not purchase another being in a life of slavery. The Bahá'í marriage vow clarifies this point beautifully: "We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God."<sup>8</sup> This means that the relationship of a man and a woman is based on a transcending love and obedience they feel for the same Source.

Thus, their love for one another should be devoid of possessiveness, they both belong, in reality, to a Greater Being who announces:

Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty.<sup>9</sup>

This realization of belonging to God in no way detracts from the love and affinity that the couple can feel for each other. On the contrary, it purifies this love, enhances it immensely, and strips it of the destructive elements of possessiveness and narcissism.

### **Courtship and Dating**

The practice of courtship and dating varies widely from culture to culture and even within a given culture. Hence, it is difficult to make general statements without a risk of error. Nonetheless, some observations are in order.

The Bahá'í system of courtship and dating has not yet fully been established. This does not mean that we lack the guidelines and the necessary directives. It simply means that Bahá'ís, in this respect, tend to follow closely the norms of their respective cultures.

In Western societies the practice of dating is widespread. It involves the meeting of a male and a female, usually in private. Justifications for dating Western style are provided by its supporters. They claim that the practice gives the potential marriage partners an opportunity to: become familiar with one another; see if there is compatibility and attraction; ascertain common likes, dislikes, life goals; get into marriage with thorough prior evaluation of one another, and so on.

In my judgment, dating Western style neither fulfills its professed lofty aims nor is it a practice compatible with Bahá'í standards. By and large, Western style dating, with all its privileges and irresponsibilities, is a pathological vestige of the old world order. The two parties often meet each other when they are at their “best”—all rested, ready and eager to have a good time. This system of one-to-one dating is not conducive to the type of comprehensive evaluation of the potential partner. It has a tendency to allow maximal expression of physical urges and impulses, while suppressing spirituality and intellectual concerns. One can hardly expect to study the true character and personality of his potential partner in the highly constricted and artificial setting of a Saturday night date. It is in the arena of day-to-day life that vital attributes can be scrutinized. It is here that the man can ask himself “do I want to have her as the mother of my children?”, and the woman can inquire “is he fit to be the father of my children?”

Thus, in my opinion, courtship should take place largely in social settings and real life situations, e.g., Bahá'í functions such as committee meetings, the Nineteen-Day Feast, summer schools, conferences, and so on. The practice of one-to-one dating in private places should be discouraged. This does not mean that the couple may never be alone together. Certainly they can and should spend some time “alone” but not completely alone. That is, they may go to the theatre, a restaurant, or be together in the parent's living room (while other family members are in the home). This system of courtship allows ample opportunity for the partners to evaluate each other's spiritual and intellectual qualities.

What about physical compatibility? Should not that be investigated before marriage? No, not at all—not in the Bahá'í system. Here, chastity before marriage and fidelity after marriage are cardinal and inviolable rules. Besides, if two people find each other physically appealing and have spiritual and intellectual attractions then all the vital ingredients are present. Chances are good that the biological part of marriage will work out. It has worked out for millennia after all.

## **II. Communication and the Family**

To create and maintain a happy family, active efforts are required and many ingredients must be present in proper proportions to produce the proper “chemical reaction.” Effective, healthy, and proper communication is the catalyst for the chemical reaction that constructs a dynamic fortress, repairs its worn out parts, defends it against internal and external assaults, and propels it toward its lofty summit.

### **Defining Communication**

As vital as communication is to the welfare of human beings (and for nearly all living organisms), most people have a very poor understanding of what it is—they are ineffective communicators and are seldom motivated enough to do something about it. When you ask someone what communication is, he may say any number of things such as: getting ideas across, informing other people, giving a message to someone. The general tendency is to consider mainly one side of the three-part paradigm involved in communication; the “I” part, the “my” component, the “personal” and often “egotistical” aspects. The other two parts are often neglected.

In every communication process, regardless of form, there are three distinct components: the generator, the signal, and the receiver. If any one of the three vital parts is absent or not tuned properly, communication does not take place.

The generator, as the term implies, is the source which produces the second component, the signal or the message. Somewhere in the system, there is a need for a third component, the receiver: a tuned in receiver to allow reception of the generated message.

The world is constantly bombarded by an array of signals generated by countless sources. But, the emissions can only be picked up by receptive receivers. To the rest of the universe, they are indistinguishable from noise, a non-message.

## **Forms of Communication**

Since human beings are highly verbal, their immediate notions about communications are verbal in nature. But, communication is not limited to vocal speech. Humans also make extensive use of behavioural communication, such as posture, gestures, and nonverbal vocalizations. Although these are primary forms of communication in animals, they are secondary in humans. Behavioural communication may combine with verbalization harmoniously—a message conveyed by one modality is reinforced by the other. Consider the assertion “I love you,” uttered by a human being concurrent with an affectionate hug. There are other occasions where words are either inadequate or superfluous; for example, when a flower sent to the beloved will deliver the message with greater eloquence.

There are also times when behaviourally originating messages may be in direct contradiction to the verbal signal. Consider the man who says to his wife “I would do anything for you—I would give my life for you.” The exasperated wife may retort, “Save it, just empty the garbage, please, I have asked you three times since yesterday” The husband responds, “Yes, dear, I will, right after I finish watching the game.” It is a sure bet that a fourth reminder will definitely be needed. In short, behavioural communication is often capable of relaying certain messages more effectively and clearly than language, our most obvious method.

## **Man-Wife Communication**

Even when all channels of communication are open and both husband and wife are truly united, certain challenges of life may still make adjustment very difficult. Obviously, when the two have not developed effective and healthy ways of communication, the partnership is in definite trouble.

As discussed earlier, for communication to be effective the three components must be present: a source, a clear and comprehensible message, and a tuned-in receiver. Each human being, like nearly all living organisms, has the capability of being a source, producing signals, or receiving them. Yet, unlike nearly all organisms, some humans severely neglect their roles as receivers. They become almost purely a source—whenever they are “in communication” they only act as generators. They emit a barrage of verbal and behavioural signals. They do not pause for a moment to flip the switch and become receivers. All they do is to “jam” the other’s signal with noise they produce on all wavelengths.

In any relationship, marital or otherwise, it is absolutely vital that the parties involved serve alternately as generator and as receiver. Being a generator is easy. It is based and rooted in the prepotent system of impulse gratification, egotism, narcissism, and immaturity. Consider a group of five-year-olds. They do not have conversation; they all speak at once, oblivious and uninterested in whatever the others have to say. It takes considerable maturity and unselfishness to be a listener. Even some adults fail to advance in this vital respect beyond the five-year-old’s level. Their switch is completely stuck on one position—generate.

There is a story about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, our Exemplar. It is reported that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, with infinite patience, always listened attentively to anyone who wished to speak to him. Frequently, he would be seen in the streets of ‘Akká listening to the mentally ill who would pour out the contents of their tormented minds to the ever-benevolent ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Bahá’u’lláh used to tell the Friends to emulate ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, pointing out the patience and sincerity with which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá listened, even to the mentally ill “as if he is taking lessons from them!” [From a story by Hand of the Cause of God, Mr. Zikrulláh Khadem.]

In short, a good listening habit is eighty percent of effective communication. Being a generator and producing a clear message deserves no more than twenty percent of the credit.

## **Group Communication**

The ideal world notwithstanding, in any relationship, one partner may mostly serve as generator while the other may function largely as receiver. There is no way that we can impose a strict 50-50 allocation. We cannot use a meter as a monitor accordingly to enforce the just ideal. Besides, in most instances, such rigid enforcement is not only unnecessary but could also prove undesirable. That is needed is a general sensitivity and realization that others should be heard.

In the family, the man and wife reach some sort of accommodation in due time. Somehow, miraculously, and in spite of all our shortcomings, some unions survive and even thrive. These fortunate unions, either implicitly or explicitly, resolve and defuse many potential sources of friction and destruction. They stay on course and go from strength to strength.

The arrival of children can seriously disrupt the achieved accommodation, if the partners are either not fully prepared or not in agreement for the treatment of the child. The interjection of the child into the previously adequate communication system does not have to be a disruptive stimulus. In fact, parents should make the necessary adjustment to grant the new member his full and rightful place in the network. Confused by divergent opinions of

experts on child rearing, parents often choose a course of action which may best suit their own preferences, temperaments and preconceptions.

With respect to communication, the old adage, children should be seen but not heard, is clearly pathological if taken literally and rigidly enforced. As discussed earlier, language is one of the greatest gifts of humanity. It is a vehicle for expression; it is a tool and more. The child should definitely be heard, i.e., allowed to be a generator as soon as he is physiologically able. Concurrently, early in life he should be taught to be a receiver as well.

In short, a balance must be achieved where the child is allowed and even helped to utilize, develop, and hone his expressive faculty while concurrently acquiring the equally important qualities of control and restraint needed for developing into a good receiver. Sometimes, the first-born is pampered and indulged to the limits of parental resources. When the second child arrives, there is not very much left for him. Consequently, the latter child may fail to be fully incorporated and rightfully accorded the privileges so lavishly spent on the first-born.

In any group, family or otherwise, there must be clear and equitable means of communication for all members. No one should be short-changed, stifled, or even indulged. We do well to remember the admonition of Bahá'u'lláh, in this case and in every case “The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice...”<sup>10</sup> We should further realize that listening is not necessarily an act of suffering and sacrifice. By being receivers, in any communication setting, we can learn, expand our repertoire of information, correct erroneous and maladaptive strategies, and evolve into true human beings.

### **III: A Prescription for Family Well-Being**

Clearly, a union firmly based on correct premises, brought about by the presence of all three attractions, and with open, loving and fair communication is well on its way to attain its goal—to become a “fortress for well-being.” Yet, to enhance further the chances of success for this sacred enterprise other steps must be taken. Some of the major ingredients are briefly discussed below. The prescription is neither all-inclusive, nor does it guarantee success. Nonetheless, it contains certain specifics that should aid the concerned parties in making those adjustive responses conducive to a successful marriage and a happy family.

#### **Assurance and Approval**

Human beings, regardless of gender and age, have an insatiable need for assurance and approval. This is in part due to their desire to excel, to do well perhaps coupled with the realization, often not conscious, that one is not capable of always doing well on all fronts. Furthermore, ours is the age of uncertainty. There are so many unknowns in the equation of modern life. Uncertainty generates anxiety, and anxiety is an aversive state that people would like to avoid and escape. Unfortunately, the individual is frequently helpless in eliminating uncertainties—he is a member of a highly complex and capricious human enterprise.

Thus, we need feedback. We want to hear, see, and feel that what we are doing is superb, excellent, acceptable, or, at the very least, adequate and non-objectionable. Since what we do represents what we are, approval of the acts means approval of the person.

In marriage, two people are brought together in a very close setting. Each of the partners is constantly exposed to the observing eye of the other, like being in the limelight at all times. In this situation it becomes very difficult to protect, insulate, or isolate oneself from the ever-scrutinizing eyes of the partner.

It is essential that the partners become inexhaustible sources of approval, assurance and acceptance. That is what marriage is all about; a private mutual admiration society. It should never deteriorate into a torture chamber where each tormentor attempts to gain the upper hand and to subdue the other. That family in which there is an abundance of assurance and approval has a most vital ingredient for the nurturance of its members. They will thrive, develop, and evolve into true human beings. They, and humanity at large, stand to reap the reward.

#### **Reward and Encouragement**

Encouragement, praise, and being positive are manifestations of the force of love—the creative, the sustaining, and the nurturing force. It is love that creates, that builds, that holds together, that sustains, that makes the universe possible.

In contrast, discouragement, criticism, and negativism are the agents of hate—the destructive, the divisive, the disintegrative force.

Much of the world moves by this force. One is often assumed guilty unless proven otherwise. One is chastised for one's failures and shortcomings—constantly harassed, always fearful.

Bahá'ís, as individuals, marriage partners, and members of the human family, should completely purge themselves of these negative forces. We should be dispensers of reward. To look and find praiseworthy acts and

encourage them—praise and reward them. Then, the recipient will be nurtured. He will go from strength to strength, from good to better.

What about bad habits and evil acts? How does one deal with them? How does one teach children spiritual behaviour and eliminate their undesirable tendencies? When spiritual qualities are firmly implanted in people, there will be no place for negative qualities. However, since we still live in an imperfect world certain bad habits may be formed. Clearly, they should be dealt with since a major purpose of our lives on this earth is to acquire positive attributes and to free ourselves from bad qualities. This purpose can be achieved through proper manipulation of the reward mechanism. Depending on the nature and seriousness of a negative quality or act, we can resort to withholding of reward. For example, consider a four-year-old who is busily expanding his vocabulary. He comes to mommy and articulates a newly-acquired profane word learned from his playmates. He awaits anxiously for mommy's verbal praise and the usual hug. Withholding the usual verbal praise and hug accompanied by a simple, but firm, explanation that the word is naughty and not acceptable should serve as effective discouragement. But, there are times when we need to do more to uproot a persistent negative behaviour. In these instances we should judiciously adjust the punishment to fit the "crime." Again, this can be done by withholding privileges.

However, the important point to remember is that there is a heavenly force in reward, encouragement, and praise which propels the individual from strength to strength. We should make generous, yet judicious, use of this force in marriage and in every aspect of our interaction with all people. We, as human beings, have finite capacities. If our capacities are filled with good qualities, then there will be no room for bad ones.

### **Intimacy and Need-Fulfillment**

A true marriage is blessed by many positive attributes which serve as cement for the union. It is also basically free of negative features, which by their very nature act to destroy the bond.

Intimacy and need-fulfillment are two important operations which play a major role in the relationship. The couple should feel so close to each other, spiritually, intellectually, and physically, that they represent living examples of intimacy, become fully united, and confide in each other, share their thoughts, and never feel compelled to keep secrets from one another. Their relationship should be not only of a man and a wife, but also of two true friends.

At the same time, this intimacy must be based so far as possible on the sharing of beautiful thoughts and pleasant experiences. It should not be abused, i.e., imposing one's real-imaginary, trivial-important problems on one's partner.

Certainly, there are times when one is fully justified to share unpleasant news or concern with one's most intimate friend. By all means, one should feel free to do so. However, the relationship should not degenerate into a "common dump" in which one partner, as soon as he thinks of something unpleasant, "dumps" the contents on the other. So far as possible, the individual partner should find healthy ways of solving his own problems, and only those problems which are either not amenable to individual solution or which directly concern the spouse are brought up for mutual consideration.

The exercise of restraint, on the one hand, and giving succour on the other, are the twin forces which propel a union along a happy and far-reaching path. Each member of the family has a set of needs which may change over time. Consider the needs of the baby. They are relatively few, well-defined, and simple. Yet, they are vital to his development and maturation. These needs basically persist throughout life. The important consideration is that the baby, as he grows and develops new competencies, gradually plays a greater and greater part in satisfying his own needs.

Children, as well as adults, have a number of physiological, intellectual, and spiritual needs. One or more family members may be best suited in assisting each person to satisfy a particular need. It is a communal enterprise and it should function as such. At first, operations of succour and nurturance must proceed in a bi-directional fashion—from husband to wife and from wife to husband. If either side receives more than it gives, a state of unhealthy disequilibrium may result. One side may become bloated while the other side depleted an imbalance which is capable of breaking the bond connecting the two components.

Where there is a free and bidirectional flow of love and nurturance, the system is at equilibrium, and healthy. Then, and only then, is it prepared to receive a new addition—a baby. Such a healthy arrangement can accommodate several children, modify modifying the flow of nurturance and love from a bidirectional to that of multidirectional. But, the basic unit must be healthy, strong, and balanced before the introduction of the third party. It is a risky illusion to proceed with procreation on the assumption that the new arrival somehow will serve as a bond between the couple—that the baby will achieve for the couple what they themselves had failed to achieve. Indeed, this may happen extremely rarely. More likely, the arrival of the baby will add more stress to an already strained system, and the family will disintegrate.



Thus, the foundation of the marriage must be strong, based on loving “give and take” processes between the husband and the wife. It is only in this loving, balanced, and nurturing context that a new human soul deserves to be introduced.

### **Children and the Family**

It is essential that the parents adopt a mutually-agreed plan for the conception, education and training of their children. The plan should be simple, implementable, and based on the Bahá’í teachings. Procreating, training, and educating a child is a sacred and serious business to Bahá’ís. This activity has the highest claim on the resources of both parents. Thus, it should be carried out with full realization of what it entails, considerable preparation, and great love and patience. Hence, it follows that children should never be the results of accidents or by-products of sexual activity.

Long before conception, the parents must engage in prayerful consultation, assess their resources and examine as many pertinent facts as possible. Only after fully satisfying themselves that they are prepared to receive the child and are capable of doing what is required should they proceed with the act of conception. Once the newborn arrives, he should receive the love, care and nurturance that he needs for his full physical, intellectual, and spiritual development. He should be assisted in becoming a full-fledged member of the family—with clear privileges as well as responsibilities. Although he should not be indulged excessively, pampered, spoiled, or allowed to “take over,” he should be fully instilled with a clear sense of self-worth and self-identity.

Each stage of the child’s life presents unique demands and challenges to the parents. The parents must always maintain a healthy view of the person they have helped to bring into this world. There should always be love for the child, since it is love which is the creative, the sustaining, the nurturing force. This love should not be dominated by possessiveness, which makes it narcissistic and unhealthy. In reality, the child is not a possession of his parents; he is more like a trust that they are to care for, protect, and nurture to fruition. Equally important, the child should never be neglected, degraded, or abused.

The parents must make every effort to launch the new arrival on a straight path toward a glorious destiny. Measured amounts of love-discipline, freedom-control, receiving-giving, intimacy-privacy, privilege-responsibility, idealism-pragmatism, and other vital ingredients must operate to direct the child’s optimal development. In short, the parents must work diligently to insure the child’s development in accordance with his spiritual, as opposed to material, nature:

In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men....The attributes of his Divine nature are shone forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature. Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man’s spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature.<sup>11</sup>

### **Prayers**

When a union is based on spiritual, physical, and intellectual attractions, it is only natural to strengthen these common bonds and expand them to include the children. Prayers are food of the spirit—without prayers the soul literally starves. Just’ as the man and wife eat food together, it is highly desirable that they pray together. They should take certain blocks of time, preferably daily, and set them aside for mutual prayers. There is a very special force present when prayers are said by members of a group in any gathering. This force releases an energy which serves to unify the participants; and, unity is the crucial bedrock upon which the fortress of marriages.

Praying should also be viewed as indispensable for procreation. The couple would do well to pray to the loving Providence and ask that He bestow upon them and the as-yet-unconceived, his infinite blessings.

At conception, a soul is created by the Will of God. In the same way that the unborn requires material nutrients, he is also in need of spiritual food—prayers. Thus, the parents, when praying together effectively have the participation of the precious unborn in the life-giving activities of prayers and meditation. Furthermore, the parents should specifically pray for the unborn. They should continue this practice of praying together after birth and throughout life. Additionally, they should teach the infant simple creative Words, and eventually regular prayers, as soon as the infant is capable of articulation.

The newly-born is not powerful physically and is totally at the mercy of others to take care of his needs. Both his physical and mental prowess will develop in time. Yet his spiritual nature is already at an advanced level: “...in the embryonic stage and in early infancy the reasoning power is totally absent, whereas the soul is ever endowed with full strength.”<sup>12</sup>

Love of prayer, hence, should be instilled in children very early in life. Children, as soon as physiologically capable, show a great desire to articulate, both through speaking and reading. Parents and others must nurture, direct, and train this powerful tendency. What a marvelous way to satisfy this desire—teaching and allowing them to pray. Listening to children pray can be a spiritual experience of unbounded ecstasy for the listener. In summary, praying together blesses the family and serves to unify its members in a lasting bond.

### **Work**

Repeatedly throughout these pages, I have employed Bahá'u'lláh's phrase "fortress for well-being" in referring to marriage and the family. This "fortress" does not come automatically with the marriage license, it cannot be inherited or bought. It must be built by the diligent, sustained, sacrificial labour of the pair and the children—stone-by-stone, brick-by-brick. Even when the fortress is built, work must continue to improve it, repair the worn-out parts, and further beautify it. The work required is both challenging and varied; some of it is exciting, some tolerable, and some outright drudgery.

We must express our infinite gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh for assuring us that "every soul who occupies himself in an art or trade—this will be accounted an act of worship before God."<sup>13</sup> We are further informed that work performed in the spirit of service to others also has the rank of worship. Imagine, housework being counted as worship. By his pronouncements on the lofty station of work and being of service to others, Bahá'u'lláh has once and for all put an end to the deplorable practice of exploitation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Exemplar, has assumed only one title for himself—servitude. Servitude is work rendered in service to others.

Thus, a Bahá'í family should be characterized as an enterprise where members actively vie for work; they seek out opportunities to do the most difficult and menial chores in order to relieve others from the task. A Bahá'í family should never allow any member to carry a disproportionate share of the work. No one, young or old should be deprived of contributing significantly to the building and maintenance of the fortress.

Children are no exception. Very early in life, they should be imprinted with this lofty Bahá'í ideal of work being worship, and actively enlisted to work. They should come to take work seriously, a vital preparation for the years ahead.

Frequently, it is easier for a parent to do the work himself than to ask and to help the little one to do it. But, raising children, training, and educating them is never easy. It is both a science and an art for a devoted human soul to nurture another being, to take the time to teach a child the skills and joys of doing useful work at the earliest age possible. The effort will pay handsome dividends in building a good character and in having a truly helpful member of the family for many years.

In a Bahá'í home, no one should be allowed to be lazy, to be spoiled; to receive but not contribute. No one should be deprived of the bounty of work and giving. Some of the most severely maladjusted people come from materially affluent homes in which they were pampered as children. Because of their misguided upbringing, they may fail to adapt to the outside world. Being a member of the family is like membership in any other organization. There are privileges for the membership as well as dues and responsibilities. In any group, a valued member is a contributing—member not the one who is there for a free ride.

### **Consultation**

One of the greatest gifts that Bahá'u'lláh has brought to mankind is the concept of consultation which, when properly practiced, results in discovering solutions to problems without creating confrontation and disunity. Obviously, unity and harmony are vital to the family. Yet, there are issues that arise which the family must face. The way the family resolves these issues directly determines its unity, love, and togetherness.

To maintain an ambiance of love and unity, arbitrary decisions should be avoided or minimized, particularly those which directly affect the welfare of others. Authoritarianism is a stifling force. True, it is efficient and gets the work done. But the product seldom warrants the cost. No one should appoint himself the absolute authority; however, no family should be without a clear final authority. The distinction is that in the former case, decisions are made by one person for everyone, often without consultation. In the latter case, the parents make the final decision after thorough consultation.

Children should be granted full citizenship in the family, with its privileges and responsibilities. They should be informed about matters which affect them and gradually be incorporated as full fledged members of the family council. Furthermore, the parents must exercise considerable wisdom in preparing agenda items for family consultations, even as the children grow up and develop new capabilities. There is absolutely no need to traumatize a five-year-old by insisting that he learn about every family misfortune. In certain instances children either do not understand what is really going on or may take things much more seriously than is warranted.

Children should participate particularly in those decisions which directly affect them. Their participation should neither be a token involvement nor an all-consuming participation. It should be a genuine activity aimed at allowing everyone's views to be considered and reaching the soundest decision. Decisions reached by all members prevent family disunity, have greater chance for implementation, and are consistent with the ideals of love, respect, and consideration for all.

### **Consistency and Fairness**

Certain contingencies, conditions, and practices are absolutely indispensable for a happy and successful family—consistency and fairness are two. Consistency is like a powerful sun which disperses the fog of confusion and illumines the path to salvation. Both adults and children benefit greatly from consistent treatment. Consistency gives order and certainty to one's life—it draws the boundaries, establishes expectations, and delineates sanctions.

Inconsistent treatment is most destructive to the child's character development and can generate considerable anxiety in anyone. Never being sure, never being certain of what is in store can be highly traumatic. Inconsistency can take innumerable forms and vary widely in magnitude. Consider a child who is reminded repeatedly that as Bahá'ís we obey certain laws. For instance, we must refrain from slander and backbiting. Yet, the adults themselves occasionally violate these laws. For example, a child is told that "truthfulness is the foundation of all virtues," yet is encouraged to be "circumspect" in telling the truth as he sees it.

There are instances where inconsistency may be displayed by the same person over time, or by the same person sending contradictory messages at the same time. The former case is illustrated by the mother's following assertion, "Wait until Daddy comes. But, don't say a thing. You never know what mood he is in. We'll just have to see and then take our chances." The above statement reveals apprehension. The woman is not sure. She is uncertain of how her husband will react; he is not consistent, he is not predictable.

In the second case, a person may react verbally in one way and convey a diametrically opposite message by another communication duality. Consider the earlier example where a child articulates his newly-acquired word. A parent may react by verbal disapproval, but laughs at the same time.

Clearly, human beings are not perfect—neither are they programmed automatons who are always predictable. Furthermore, some degree of inconsistency may be both an inescapable fact of life, but consistency is an important quality for the development and formation of the children's character, and for adults in their transactions with one another.

Consistency means general concordance and agreement; an overall harmony in approach and behaviour. It allows some degree of freedom within a prescribed limit. It should not be considered synonymous with inflexibility and rigidity.

Fairness, on the other hand, is the most precious jewel in the crown of humanity. It is justice that reigns as a supreme instrument for the realization of human ideals. It is the duty of every person to adorn himself with this indispensable virtue. Justice should occupy its lofty place in the family; there should be fairness of the partners toward each other, unconditional fairness to all the children with no favouritism, and no injustices. No one should be made the family scapegoat. Family scapegoats are not born—they are created through injustice, neglect, and disfavour. No one should be designated the family martyr. Everyone should be treated within the same set of rules.

### **Reverence**

Reverence is a vital catalyst for the fruition of the human enterprise. Where there is no reverence, there is very little that is worthwhile. Reverence should include the person, others, the creation, and the Creator. Reverence is defined here as that magical compound which is composed of the twin ingredients of love and respect.

The attribute of reverence should be implanted in the child at the earliest possible moment by treating him reverently. This does not mean spoiling the child. These are two totally different things. Then the child perceives love and respect, he tends to incorporate them. It is absolutely essential that the child learn to revere himself.

Revering oneself is more than self-love and it should certainly not be confused with narcissism. The reverence that one feels about oneself should be based on the realization that one is a very special creation. How awesome and electrifying this realization can be; to be the creation of love, the love of an indescribably glorious Creator.

When self-reverence is firmly established, the results can be marvelous indeed. A person with unshakable self-reverence never engages in self-depreciation—never abuses his body (the physical vehicle of the soul in this realm) chemically (by taking a alcohol and unprescribed drugs) or physically (e.g., sexual promiscuity).

Additionally, such a person will readily revere all other human beings, the creation, and the Creator. Without self-reverence, there is a major deficit that can and does lead to many pathologies and degradations.

Thus, it is in the family that this vital quality must be instilled early in the children and lovingly nurtured. Clearly, care must be taken to instill reverence, not narcissism and egotism—destructive qualities so common in a spiritually confused humanity. The partners can also reinforce each other's self-reverence: training and education should not be confined to the children. The partners must also be loving teachers and trainers for each other.

### **Self Actualization**

We should be acutely aware of our own potentials and strive to translate them into reality. Each person must work to become distinguished. Above all, we should aim for spiritual distinction.

It is true that individual capacities are different. However, capacity is analogous to capital—some use it fully and wisely; others squander away a fortune. What we do with what we have is the criterion of achievement:

The whole duty of man in this Day is to attain that share of the flood of grace which God poureth forth for him. Let none, therefore, consider the largeness or smallness of the receptacle. The portion of some might lie in the palm of a man's hand, the portion of others might fill a cup, and of others even a gallon-measure.<sup>14</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh tells us that: "All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization."<sup>15</sup> Who is to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization? only those highly gifted individuals? Those chosen few? Absolutely not Bahá'u'lláh clearly specifies that it is "all men" who are created for this lofty purpose. It means everyone is destined to contribute his share to the glorification and advancement of the human civilization. It means the physically handicapped, the mentally "not so bright," one and all, without exception, should fully develop, participate, and contribute.

Thus, no family member should be denied, either by consensus or coercion, the opportunity to strive for self-actualization. The greater the number of blossoms which are allowed to bloom, the greater is the beauty and fragrance of humanity's flower garden.

Even superficial historical analysis shows that women, as a class, have not participated as much as men in building the human civilization. Bahá'u'lláh has unequivocally established the equality of men and women. This means that the traditionally oppressed half of the human race is set free by the command of the Creator. It further means no woman should be confined to a strictly biological role—as vital as this role is.

It is absolutely essential that all children, regardless of sex, be treated fairly, that all receive the best training and education conducive to the fruition of each individual's talents. Even when a man and a woman marry, this should not mark the "end" for the woman, as is often the case. Her contributions to procreation, training, and education of children should be valued and deeply appreciated. In addition, she should be entitled to pursue other activities to achieve full self-actualization. Sometimes, this may be satisfied by serving the indispensable role of mother and a homemaker. At other times, further education or work outside the home may be required.

In short, reverence for others and respect for their wishes dictate that every family member, not only be allowed, but sincerely aided, to self-actualize—to become a full citizen of the family and humanity.

### **A Frame of Reference**

A frame of reference (hereafter called FOR) is that collection of values, beliefs, and information that an individual utilizes as a guide for decision-making and behaviour. It begins to form very early in life by diverse forces such as religion, culture, education, training, experience, and so on.

It is the FOR that largely determines the person's views about himself, others, the creation, and the Creator. That he does and how he feels are also, to a great extent, a function of his FOR. Thus, the formation and evolution of a healthy FOR is of paramount importance to the person as well as to others.

As is the case in much of human development, the first few years of life lay the foundation for the individual's FOR. Additions, revision, and refinements continue throughout his life. However, it is on this basis that the early attaining and education of the child assumes tremendous importance.

The newly-born is highly susceptible to assaults of unhealthy influences, in the way he is treated, spoken to, the things and events in his environment, the way the adult models behave. Soon, extra-familial forces assume greater and greater importance in the formation and moulding of his FOR—television, other children, other adults. He may experience considerable conflicts and confusion by encountering different sets of rules at different times by the same or different people. He may indeed find himself in many situations where, as far as he can ascertain, there are no rules at all. Furthermore, before long, he experiences hypocrisy in others, who say one thing, but do the opposite. Deception, blatant lies, violence, and hatred may enter the arena.

Thus, the child may end up with a hodgepodge of disharmonious and even conflicting pieces of inferior material thrown together in a haphazard manner—the foundation of his frame of reference. Unfortunately things may not get much better in the subsequent years. The negative influences continue their relentless assaults and the individual drifts into the destructive quagmire of a nihilistic society, into an existence which is completely at variance with his intended glorious destiny.

In no way can I overemphasize the critical importance of a healthy FOR the protection, well-being, and the advancement of the individual as well as collective human enterprise. Hence, it is imperative that the parents do their utmost to strengthen their children spiritually, particularly during their early years. It is like an inoculation against a fatal disease that can destroy their very soul. Children should be shielded from adverse influences of all sorts, such as undesirable television programs, other children, adults, and so forth. Clearly, I am not proposing that we build an aseptic tent around the newly-born and keep him in there forever. Sooner or later he will have to leave the tent and face the world. He must be prepared, armed, and strong.

What I am proposing is a concerted effort to aid the child, particularly during the early critical years, in building a healthy frame of reference. A healthy FOR must be firmly grounded in spiritual values and teachings, based on an education that will prepare the child to deal with the realities and demands of the world. The child should know that the current world is far from perfect, and that the human enterprise is indeed critically ill, largely because people ignore spiritual “medicines” and the necessary “inoculations.” But, he should also clearly know where he stands—hold unswervingly to the precepts and guidelines which are his only guaranties for safety, success, and salvation.

### **To Live The Life**

Finally, it all comes to this: to live the life—a life of sanctity, love, service, compassion, generosity, forgiveness, patience, detachment, trustworthiness, courtesy, truthfulness, and many more spiritual qualities. A life free of hate, prejudice, narcissism, egotism, impulsiveness, aggression, war, backbiting, treachery, deceit, and other destructive parameters. A life totally charted by the Divine Road Map which leads the individual, the family, and humanity along the straight and far reaching path toward the Beloved.

The Bahá'í Faith must evolve, find expression, be nurtured and reinforced in the family. Then, it can overflow, and it must, to the outside world—to encompass the larger family of man. A spiritual, cohesive, loving, serving, and nurturing nuclear family is the foundation upon which the glorious human enterprise is built.

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