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Baha'i Essays

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Badi Shams

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Generation Gap Can Be Overcome Through Respect



In most societies, it's common for older people not to trust the judgement of younger people. The reason usually given is that youth lack experience. And this is true — young people *don't* have the same amount of experience. But this reasoning never satisfies me because it ignores some of the insight and courage of younger generations.

Working with young people most of my professional life, I've observed an increase in criticism of millennials and the generation after them, Generation Z. I see this on social media and hear it in my conversations, and I feel this attitude has become more extreme.

In recent years as the confusion and problems of the world have increased, younger generations are getting more than their share of criticism. Many Baby Boomers wonder if there will be enough workers to take care of them when they have to depend on the services that should see them throughout their lives. At the same time, millennials and Generation Z wonder if there will be any future at all for them.

I think millennials are not following in the footsteps of older generations because the world's problems have led them to believe that they alone understand the gravity of the situation. After all, it directly affects them. They are the ones who have to solve it. In that way, I say, thank God they are not like my generation.

My aim is not to discredit the Baby Boomers, my generation, or the generations that came before. We worked hard and attained some significant achievements, but sadly it often feels like those were mainly material achievements, and some of them came at a great price. The mistake that was made was an overemphasis on achieving wealth at any cost, believing that wealth signified progress.

What previous generations missed — and what we are still missing — are the spiritual and moral goals to offset the damage created by an excess of material progress.

“For man two wings are necessary. One wing is physical power and material civilization; the other is spiritual power and divine civilization. With one wing only, flight is impossible. Two wings are essential. Therefore, no matter how much material civilization advances, it cannot attain to perfection except through the uplift of spiritual civilization”. – Abdu'l-Baha

This lust for material progress has brought us to such a critical state that younger generations feel there will be no future left for them to enjoy. Their cries and protests can now be heard all over the world.

I am very clear about my attitudes towards young people and have devoted my energies to encourage and support them in any way possible.

The world's present problems are overwhelming and beyond our generation's capacity because our solutions are outdated and ineffective. The world is in need of a fresh and fundamental change in its outlook and approach to tackling the ever-increasing crises of the world.

I believe the recent challenges of our time have awakened the youth and have brought forward many individuals that have exemplified passion, wisdom and devotion to such an extent that they inspire admiration in all. Our future depends on the tender shoulders of the millennials and

Generation Z. They can certainly use all the help and support they can get from my generation to undo the mistakes that we have made.

The Spiritual Cost of a Higher Standard of Living



Undoubtedly, the standard of living has improved since the industrial revolution, particularly for many in the West.

Not long ago, there was a time when phones, colour TVs, and cars were only for the rich, and the poor could only dream of having them. But now even poor people in developed nations own cell phones, colour TVs and computers.

Even children from poor or rich families, as early as the age of three or four, have cell phones and assorted sophisticated electronic toys. Of course, the adults also have their toys: airplanes, ride-on lawnmowers, boats and motorcycles.

The sad part about all these expensive toys: you do not have to have money to buy them because you can get a loan. With all our material possessions, we have come to believe we are better off than before and that we have improved the material quality of life. We think that acquiring more possessions will make us feel happier and more comfortable—but unbridled acquisition only starves the soul and makes us less and less happy. Our souls feel trapped in the clutter of material goods. The Baha’i teachings tell us:

“All around us today we see how man surrounds himself with every modern convenience and luxury, and denies nothing to the physical and material side of his nature. But, take heed, lest in thinking too earnestly of the things of the body you forget the things of the soul: for material advantages do not elevate the spirit of a man. Perfection in worldly things is a joy to the body of a man but in no wise does it glorify his soul.” – Abdu’l-Baha

If we use happiness as a criterion, many of us have begun to realize that in spite of our higher standard of living, we are less happy than people were before. Why?

Perhaps because the more we have, the harder we have to work to maintain that standard of living—and the more we work, the less time and energy we have to nurture our minds and our souls through meditation, reading books, playing music, painting, spending time with family and friends, and helping others. Those things can bring us true happiness.

Almost all agree that our current economic system provides more goods and money—but having more may not necessarily be the best. The philosophy of “more is better” has led to a mentality of acquiring as many material goods as possible. That mentality has created a sickness in society that measures achievements based on having more possessions and disregards the emotional and spiritual aspects of one’s life.

This lack of spirituality is the root cause of most of the problems in the world, and Baha’is are encouraged to introduce spirituality in any way possible into their economic activities. This can be as simple as saying a prayer for the poor or as grand as initiating a multi-billion dollar project to eliminate poverty or eradicate the disease. It could be by paying fair prices, avoiding wastage, being honest in insurance claims, or giving charitable funds.

Some mistake a higher standard of living for prosperity. To have more does not translate into being happier. According to the Legatum Prosperity Index, prosperity:

- Is a home to grow, to raise a family, a community where we belong, is people who care.
- Is compassion and generosity, is health, is education, is truth and integrity, in politics, in media, in business. Is peace and safety.

- Is in opportunity to work, to earn, to save, to get ahead, to innovate, to take risks, to succeed (or fail).
- Is freedom from hunger, disease, slavery, poverty, conflict, to speak our minds, to vote, to follow our beliefs. Is hope, space to breath and time to recharge and re create.
- Is becoming the best I can be and helping others to be the best they can be.

The question remains: do we want a higher standard of living at any cost, or do we want true prosperity for ourselves and all? The decision is ours, and the price to pay is ours, too.

Religious Prejudice: A Personal Journey from East to West



The world at the moment faces many difficulties, and the foundations of our civilization have been threatened. One of those challenges is religious prejudice. But during a recent trip to India, I witnessed something inspiring: people from different faiths coming together in unity. It reminded me that fostering the understanding that all religions are one and come from the same divine source is key to solving the challenges of this world.

I travelled to India to get away from the consumerism of Christmas. Once there, one of the churches in town invited me to celebrate Christmas with them. I really like the idea of commemorating religious occasions with followers of any religion since it creates unity.

My dedication to eliminating racial and religious prejudice comes, in part, from my own experience. I was born in Iran to a family that was all Muslims — except for my father, who was

a Baha'i. My family exposed me to all the Islamic ceremonies and events, and my father tried to connect me to the Baha'i teachings.

But when I chose to become a member of the Baha'i Faith, I became a target. At a tender age, I experienced a rude awakening — my family members, cousins, and even my grandma saw me as an inferior being. I heard many negative comments made about the followers of other religions but never about Moses or Jesus. Jesus' name is mentioned more than 51 times in Qur'an. That is because Jesus and Moses have been given the same station as Mohammad as one of the Prophets of God, sent by God to guide humanity.

Later in life, in the 1980s, I moved to Canada. I had all these ideas about meeting people with whom I could talk and even disagree. That was my second — and perhaps worse — a rude awakening. To my shock, I witnessed a lack of knowledge and prejudice towards Muslims in particular and other minorities in general. I faced some problems, and now people called me "Muslim" and told me to go back where I had come from.

I could not believe Westerners were so unaware of the truth about Islam. Most interpreted the actions of some Muslims as Islamic laws. In a peace walk and on other occasions, I tried to remind my fellow peace lovers about the role religious prejudice plays in creating wars and the importance of fighting them. After all, silence on prejudice is equal to supporting it and enabling it. To me, the problem of religious prejudice is addressed by a concept that is emphasized in the Baha'i teachings: the individual independent investigation of truth. I've seen firsthand how searching for truth for oneself — rather than following what others say — changes hearts and ends prejudice.

“...every individual member of humankind is exhorted and commanded to set aside superstitious beliefs, traditions and blind imitation of ancestral forms in religion and investigate reality for himself. Inasmuch as the fundamental reality is one, all religions and nations of the world will become one through investigation of reality.” – *Abdu'l Baha*

With that in mind, the Christmas observance in India turned out to be very special.

The church also invited local dignitaries and other representatives from federal and local governments alongside all the leaders and representatives of all the religions in town. They even requested that a religious leader who belonged to no religion be present.

Everyone talked about the message of love that Jesus preached and reminded us how that message is still relevant and needed.

One of the speakers who represented a mosque in town surprised me by addressing followers of his own religion by quoting from the Quran and said that you are not a true Muslim if you do not believe in Jesus and give Him the reverence befitting His station.

I was touched by this gesture of fighting prejudice from within — a Muslim speaker reminding other Muslims in what light they have to see Jesus.

We must hold on to basic truths such as the oneness of God, and the oneness of the source of all religions is one, and, most important of all, the oneness of humanity. As a way of offsetting the harm of religious prejudice, let's investigate the truth about other faiths. There is so much common ground in all religions — much more than any differences.

Delayed Gratification a Path to the Next World



Life has gradually taught me the benefits and the joy of delaying my gratification. Why put off enjoying the immediate rewards for my efforts? Allow me to explain.

Delayed gratification didn't come naturally to me. I had to learn it by trial and error. Suppose you're not familiar with the concept. In that case, delayed gratification refers to the ability to put off something mildly fun or pleasurable now and gain something even more fun, pleasurable, or rewarding later. For example, you could relax and watch TV the night before an exam. You could practice delayed gratification and study for the exam—waiting to relax only after the exam is over. Some say the discipline of delayed gratification creates real success in life:

The ability to discipline yourself to delay gratification in the short term to enjoy greater rewards in the long term, is the indispensable prerequisite for success. – Brian Tracy

Everyone wants to enjoy the rewards of their efforts, and there is nothing wrong with that. When we want instant gratification, the problem arises, rewarding ourselves right after half of the work is done and often before the job is finished. In extreme cases, one rewards oneself even before the work begins!

This kind of instant gratification indicates a lack of self-discipline and self-control, an absence of purpose in one's life and the inability to set goals and see them through. It also sets up a self-defeating pattern: if we reward ourselves before finishing a task, we train ourselves not to complete it.

Those who practice delayed gratification demonstrate a clear purpose in life and the need for accomplishing worthwhile goals. Delayed gratification means accepting the awareness of life's journey as a long one and planning it.

So, as I was thinking about how much I enjoy my quality time after doing everything on my to-do list for the day, I had an "a-ha!" moment: I realized that our lives, with all their complications, present us with a massive exercise in delayed gratification.

Our comfort and progress in the next world depend on sacrificing many human desires. To progress spiritually, we must value our own will less than the will of our Creator. That way, we can enjoy our journey, fully aware that we've delayed receiving the rewards of this physical world for the next one. This process, in my estimation, represents the greatest delayed gratification one can imagine.

The Baha'i teachings remind us about our purpose for preparing for the next world:

“Therefore in this world, he must prepare himself for life beyond. That which he needs in the world of the Kingdom must be obtained here. Just as he prepared himself in the world of the matrix by acquiring forces necessary in this sphere of existence, so likewise the

indispensable forces of the divine existence must be potentially attained in this world.” – Abdu'l-Baha

In this material world, we spend our lives doing things, hoping for the rewards they will generate. We sacrifice mental and physical energy to earn money so that we can acquire the things we need and want—but some of us spend it without much thought for the future. Only a small percentage of people save money to accumulate until they can exchange it for the things they desire the most.

In the same way, no reward or gratification is more magnificent than entering the next world with a clear conscience, knowing that we have exerted our spiritual energies to the service of humanity and spiritual growth.

The Connection Between Spiritual Principles and Financial Planning



I have often been asked by young people or their parents how they should plan to start their economic journey. It is a journey that has caused the ruin of many wise and spiritual individuals as they sink into the depths of the bottomless ocean of materialism.

There is nothing wrong with planning for a successful financial life and becoming wealthy, provided we realize that wealth can be a beautiful and God-given tool to support our families and serve humanity. The emphasis has to be that it is a tool and not the goal of our creation.

We can teach the next generation to plan for their future and not feel guilty about acquiring wealth, provided they include spirituality in their financial plans. A balanced financial plan consists of both material goals and spiritual aspirations. Such a plan has the potential of guiding young people to the full enjoyment of the fruit of their hard work through success financially and spiritually.

The pressure to plan for the future in our materialistic world is a great challenge even for mature adults, so it must be more challenging for the young. With so many crises going on today, it is

difficult for many young people to imagine themselves in the future and see their place in it. I think about them and worry for their future — a future that seemingly does not look as bright as it did for me. Added to the age-old sentiment of not being taken seriously by the older generation, they face environmental challenges, fewer job opportunities, and a lack of job security. This pandemic also is a reminder that they may face more challenges of that kind in the future.

In many countries, parents plan for their kids to become doctors, engineers, or follow the family business. Here in the West, the trend is to plan to earn lots of money. In this way, parents have decided their child's life's plan for them, and this support system is outdated. My heart goes out to young people who are trying to chart their path to the future, pressured by the old ways.

Parents may also fail to teach their children the concept of delayed gratification. Delayed gratification means accepting the awareness of life's journey as a long one and planning for it. As Canadian motivational speaker, Brian Tracy put it, "The ability to discipline yourself to delay gratification in the short term in order to enjoy greater rewards in the long term is the indispensable prerequisite for success."

But to protect their children, parents may avoid creating such conditions and seek to protect their children from any form of hardship. In addition, the education system, which should be preparing youth for the future, seems to be failing them. Many of my ex-students confessed that their years in school were wasted since they did not learn the basics of economic life and how to plan a practical economic path for their future.

Unfortunately, the education system has become a stepping stone for material success without considering other aspects of young people's lives — the moral and spiritual aspects. Their schooling may lead them to material success but at the cost of their spiritual and human duties to themselves and humanity as a whole. They become one-sided individuals who have put all their energies into material achievements, forgetting to nurture their souls. Why? Because when they chart their future, they do not consider their spiritual goals.

I am reminded of this quotation:

“For man two wings are necessary. One wing is physical power and material civilization; the other is spiritual power and divine

civilization. With one wing only, flight is impossible. Two wings are essential. Therefore, no matter how much material civilization advances, it cannot attain to perfection except through the uplift of spiritual civilization.” - Abdu’l-Baha

The most significant benefit of a balanced economic plan in life is that no matter who charts the financial goals, whether parents or the social trends, youth have the power to attach to it their spiritual and moral goals. If their financial goals fail, spiritual goals can give them peace of mind that they did not waste God’s precious gift of life chasing only economic aims. Spiritual goals also help them avoid the world’s material traps.

We can offer our young generation the best gift by reminding them that they should not forget their spiritual goals, duties, and obligations and ensure that a spiritual plan is integral to their future economic planning.

Learning to Love God, rather than Fearing Him



The phrase “fear of God” creates strong feelings in the hearts of most people. Yet it has been used in the writings of religions throughout history.

According to Wikipedia, fear of God “refers to fear or a specific sense of respect, awe, and submission to a deity.” People subscribing to prevalent monotheistic religions might fear divine judgment, hell, or God’s omnipotence.

Growing up, my knowledge of the fear of God was very elementary. Like most people, I had a fear of going to hell and suffering for eternity. I used to think that when I did something terrible, God the All-Seeing would see my actions and sooner or later would think of a punishment. And then I would pay for my sins. Gradually I came to understand it better.

I am sure people who do not believe in a higher power see the whole concept of the fear of God as a gimmick to control the ignorant. I do not blame them for thinking that since sometimes, I struggle to understand it.

After referring to the Baha'i writings, however, my vision has changed. First, I realized that God is not someone who is waiting for us to make a mistake and punish us.

“God is the Father of all. He educates, provides for and loves all; for they are His servants and His creation.” -Abdu'l-Baha

Recent personal experiences also made me think differently. I have a beautiful garden with many varieties of flowers and fruit trees. It has been my prize material possession and a source of fantastic pleasure. I share the fruits with everyone in the community. Flowers attract birds and insects, and among them are a few families of hummingbirds who enjoyed the flowers that I have planted for them. I have put out a feeder specifically for them. I was not surprised to see that they enjoyed the feeders so much that they decided not to migrate. Instead, these hummingbirds have stayed the winter with me for the past few years. I put out the feeders for the whole winter since there are no flowers or other food sources.

Last year was extremely cold, and for more than a month, the temperature went below zero. The feeder would freeze at night, which meant that I had to defrost the feeder every morning and put it out again. They knew the routine and were always waiting for me, chirping to tell me to hurry up.

One day, as I was putting out the feeder for them and watching their happiness, I realized that they would die if I did not feed them. Then I realized how much I loved them and how sad I would be without them. I had even cancelled a trip to take care of them. How I wished that they knew how much I loved them. They didn't realize that their life was in my hands — or that I made sure they were provided for — because of my love for them. Nobody asked me to do that.

At that moment, I felt how God must think about us. He loves us, and because of that love, he created us. He did not have to do it, but he created the whole universe, and all he wished was that we try to know him and show our love to him.

That opened my spiritual eye, and the fear of God disappeared. I thought about how all I have to do is follow his teachings that have been given to humanity by his manifestations. Without divine guidance, humanity cannot find the right path to spiritual progress.

In life, we have people that are our role models — someone we love, respect, and admire immensely. They could be our parents, our coach, our teacher, or our mentor. We do everything to please them, and disobeying them is the last thing in our minds. We do that because we know that they love us, and listening to them is for our benefit.

In my spiritual immaturity and limited brainpower, I see God’s love and the fear of God as the same. So, in my mind, when I read the Holy writings on this subject, I replace the word “fear” with “love,” and then it all makes sense to me.

**“We have admonished Our loved ones to fear God, a fear which is the fountain-head of all goodly deeds and virtues.” -
Baha’u’llah**

Again, in my mind, I replace the word “fear” with “love.” You can try replacing the word “fear” with “love,” too.

My fear of God is the fear of me not measuring up to his expectations, knowing that by not following his teachings, I have deprived myself of his limitless blessing — his love — and that creates great fear in my heart. I believe that fear of God is an essential policing tool to help keep my conscience in check. It serves to remind me of the consequences of not following the right path.

Why the Lessons of COVID-19 Give Me Hope for Global Unity



When I was a child, my parents taught me that the goal of my faith, the Baha’i Faith, was the oneness of humanity, and my primary duty was to serve humanity in achieving that goal. Even as a child, I understood it was important work and thought everyone would see it that way. To motivate me, I memorized quotes about unity from Baha’u’llah:

“Ye are all the leaves of one tree and the drops of one ocean.”

Soon society taught me that these ideas were just for dreamers who do not understand people’s lives and real problems in the world. As I grew older, though, I never questioned my goal. I became more and more aware of the obstacles. I knew that there were serious problems, but I believed that solutions could be found if humanity would really try.

Without getting into its politics, I've been focused on the will to find a cure. The way the world has dealt with COVID-19 by finding a vaccine in a short time has proved that when we want something badly, we will find a way to get it no matter how hard it is.

Despite serious problems finding a cure for COVID-19 and manufacturing a vaccine, it was amazing to observe the efficiency with which different governments communicated and shared information. How quickly all the barriers and obstacles were removed! How the world's governments cooperated and, more importantly, worked willingly with vaccine-making companies.

On the part of manufacturers, some decided not to follow profit-making practices for the vaccine.

As the vaccines were being developed, the most impressive deliberations, to me, were discussions about how the world's developing nations should not be left behind in terms of access to the vaccine and the need for its affordability. That demonstrated a consciousness and sympathy for the countries that do not have the technology or the financial resources. We have proven that humankind can deal with huge problems and overcome them when we tap into our humanity and solve the issues that threaten the world.

The time has come to understand that humanity's oneness is not a dream or empty slogan but instead an essential element for facing our problems. We need to continue to unite using an international approach rather than a narrow view of nationalism. This pandemic, like the issue of the environment, made boundaries between countries irrelevant. If we widen our horizons, it will not be at the cost of love for our country. It shows that we love our country and want it to prosper and thrive along with the rest of the world.

“Glory not in love for your country, but in love for all mankind.” - Baha'u'llah

The urgent task now is to bring the world's attention to the importance and urgency of uniting as one human family so that with our collective energies, we can deal with the challenges facing us. It is clear that many world problems would not have started if there had been unity and cooperation between people and the world's governments.

The time has come to accept this vital fact that the world's survival and prosperity depend on its people's unity. Science and technology have created the tools for the unification of the world,

and this pandemic proved how closely we are connected and how we are in it together. Technology has removed the physical barriers, and now we need to remove the obstacles in our hearts and minds and see ourselves as one race, one people, and one family.

The Spiritual Meaning of Wealth



One of the world's greatest driving forces is the desire for wealth. So many wars have been fought for money, and millions of lives have been lost in the pursuit of it. Every aspect of modern life is under its spell, and yet we really cannot define it. Wealth and money mean different things to different people, and they serve different purposes.

Investopedia defines wealth as: “the value of all the assets of worth owned by a person, community, company or country. Wealth is determined by taking the total market value of all physical and intangible assets owned, then subtracting all debts. Essentially, wealth is the accumulation of resources. Specific people, organizations and nations are said to be wealthy when they are able to accumulate many valuable resources or goods.”

In economic terms, wealth is explained in many ways — net worth for individuals and gross national product “GNP” for countries.

Before money was introduced, different societies had their exchange systems to create wealth and used wheat, rice, salt, cattle, and livestock. Silver and gold were used before currencies came to being, and since then, money has become the most common means of measuring wealth.

Considering all that, I've been thinking about defining wealth from a Baha'i point of view.

“The essence of wealth is love for Me; whoso loveth Me is the possessor of all things, and he that loveth Me not is indeed of the poor and needy. This is that which the Finger of Glory and Splendour hath revealed.” - *Baha'u'llah*

This is the spiritual definition of true wealth. I understand it to mean that we acquire spiritual wealth when we work to develop virtues such as trustworthiness, truthfulness, assertiveness, compassion, honesty, honour, prayerfulness, etc.

If we spend our lives developing virtues, we will have something to show for it when our time in this world of material existence comes to an end, as these developed qualities will assist us in our next stage of existence.

Developing these virtues will naturally affect our financial and material lives.

I see wealth as an amazing tool for service to humanity, and I have not shied away from using my God-given abilities to strive to create wealth with this in mind.

The materialistic and capitalistic world that we live in tries to convince us that there is no higher goal in life than buying and consuming. In these confusing times where “the cancer of consumerism” has taken hold of humanity, the Baha'i teachings tell us to look at wealth and life differently. Rather than living solely to maximize our pleasure, we can try our best to love the Creator and seek God's pleasure, and therefore love His creation — humanity. Instead of focusing only on personal satisfaction, we can turn away from ourselves and focus on a higher purpose. In this sense, we will be truly wealthy.

At that end of life, wealth loses its glitter and its charm, and the only thing that will satisfy our soul would be the fact that we understood the true meaning of wealth and used our material wealth for the good of others.

We Grow When We're Uncomfortable



I always thought that life has to be without difficulties and full of happiness because God wanted it that way. I also observed in my dealings with friends and family, and later on, in my involvement with the education system, that we have imparted this expectation to the next generation.

In schools, we would be alarmed if we saw the sign of unhappiness and would start making arrangements to remedy this condition and, in some cases, use the aids of professionals and medications, which of course, are essential in severe and chronic cases. In most cases, it was an interruption of the process of the individuals finding in a hard way their place in the universe trying to figure a course of action.

I was not sure that our interference and interrupting were the right thing to do. Knowing how the difficulties, such as facing religious prejudice, racial prejudice, health issues, poverty, and being a refugee for a long time, helped me be the person who I am today. Those experiences purified my soul and toughened my ability to deal with unexpected events and happenings.

I am so grateful for those difficult times and happy that nothing interrupted that process even though I hoped it would end.

So the question is if this has been so good for me and how it has made me more reliant on a higher power than relying on my parents, family, and friends, then should I not share it? I am so thankful to have experienced them, and I wish that I could impart that feeling to others and explain the benefits of hardships and tests in life. That would be my gift to the next generation.

The cause of most of the problems in our life is our mistakes, but if we were not allowed to make mistakes, why would God give us the free will knowing full well that we will not listen to His teachings and guidance, which He has sent through His Manifestations?

I believe that there is a pearl of wisdom and blessing in tests and difficulties, and there are many writings from all religions that support this.

Industrialization brought freedom from the physical world, and humanity started to master the elements with the help of inventions. With the invention of the steam engine, the process of conquering the forces of nature accelerated. It led to the construction and improvement of roads, railways, ships, airplanes, and other means of comfort.

The sciences opened up new opportunities to improve humanity's quality of physical life, which was extremely hard until then. These processes stepped up after the second war. Humanity was intoxicated with a great desire to have more of whatever made life more comfortable. Movies — Hollywood in particular — newspapers, television, radio and other mass media promoted this trend. The education system became a path to achieving money to live a life without discomfort since money could supposedly solve all problems.

Every generation wants the best for the next and tries to make it as easy for them as possible, believing that it is the best way to raise children or educate them, and they go to great lengths and put so much energy into making things easy for their kids. Parents use their influence and wealth to get them to where they want them to go, living a life of ease and comfort so that they can live happily ever after.

The Baha'i writings remind me of the crucial elements of educating the children, and one of the factors is to "accustom them to hardship."

“While the children are yet in their infancy feed them from the breast of heavenly grace, foster them in the cradle of all excellence, rear them in the embrace of bounty. Give them the advantage of

every useful kind of knowledge. Let them share in every new and rare and wondrous craft and art. Bring them up to work and strive, and accustom them to hardship. Teach them to dedicate their lives to matters of great import, and inspire them to undertake studies that will benefit mankind.” -Abdu’l-Baha

Going through challenges and overcoming them gives young people self-esteem and confidence, which is essential for their growth. These difficult times are tough and rough on the outside but have a precious gift inside them.

Overcoming challenges are a learning process in the classroom of life. The ignored point is that obstacles, setbacks, sadness, illness, losses, and many more things are essential for understanding ourselves and our role in this world.

I have not yet heard anyone complaining or questioning why everything is going so right for them. No one goes to a doctor or other professionals to get rid of the extreme feeling of happiness. We have been taught that life has to be a bed of roses, so it is natural to be happy. We have not been taught that difficult times are also crucial and vital for our growth.

We can change our mindset. All religions and great minds have taught us that life is a series of tests and difficulties. The creator designs them to test our physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of life to find out and realize how we have done at the end of our lives. The price of failing and the reward of overcoming them are too high.

Ditching the "Survival of the Fittest" Mentality



Most people think that human beings are fundamentally competitive, and they may be right if we look at human history. Industrialists and economists believed that Darwin's theories justified an economy of vicious competition and inequality. This has left us with a legacy that says that the corporate economy — wealth stays in the hands of a few — is best for humanity. This was always a distortion of Darwin's ideas. Darwin, in his book "The Descent of Man," states that the human species had succeeded because of qualities like sharing and compassion:

“Those communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring.”

He was not an economist, but wealth-sharing and cooperation have always looked more consistent with his conclusions.

Humanity began its existence from the Stone Age, where survival of the fittest was the rule of the time. It had to compete with the elements and hunt for food for its survival. Unfortunately, as

man's intellect developed and his economic circumstances improved, he did not have to be the fittest to survive, but he behaved in the same manner. It is an accepted philosophy that competition is praiseworthy at any cost and in all manners without considering the consequences. Economic theories are constructed on this philosophy. The Baha'i writings explain it this way:

In the world of nature we behold the living organisms in a ceaseless struggle for existence. Everywhere we are confronted by the evidences of the physical survival of the fittest. This is the very source of error and misapprehension in the opinions and the theories of man who fail to realize that the world of nature is inherently defective in cause and outcome and that the defects therein must be removed by education. -Abdu'l-Baha

Although collaboration is getting more recognition these days, it still has been entirely ignored in the economic field. The recent pandemic has highlighted both sides. We have seen the ugly side when different countries and states compete to buy the equipment to fight the virus, which led to skyrocketing prices that the developing countries can never afford. We can find countless examples of collaboration between individuals, communities, nations, and companies. People went out of their way to cooperate and share their resources. I read a social media statement that caught my attention: **“Collaboration is our world’s most essential value right now.”**

It explains the importance of collaboration instead of competing. It looks to me and many others that the survival of humanity depends on this essential human quality instilled in our soul's DNA by the Creator.

The time has come to do away with old habits of competition that have stayed with us from our primitive days. Even though the scenario has changed, we still compete for territory instead of hunting and fighting. Firms, businesses, and corporations compete in the same spirit of destruction. The big fish eats the small fish, and this is considered to be a success. But it is time for the fish to live and collaborate. We have to educate ourselves to get rid of this remnant of Stone Age behaviour which has no place in modern society.

There is nothing wrong with competing. If we want to compete, it should be in the spiritual realm; we should strive to be the most generous person, to be the most kind. That is the real competition. I wish for the day when “Survival of the Nicest” becomes popular and appreciated.

The World Needs Meaningful Conversations



We sometimes spend hours talking to people without it amounting to anything concrete. Those conversations have the potential to build community and friendships, and we need to have them feel we are part of society. Small talk helps us connect with people safely without offending or contradicting them. That is why in many countries people talk about the weather — which to visitors seems strange, irrelevant and a waste of time.

As people get used to making meaningless small talk as a means of connecting, they're also forced to tolerate and observe conversations that are hateful, divisive, and hurtful. These harmful conversations are mostly based on the supremacy of one political view, ideology, race, religion, and nationality over others. These subjects and many more have been used to put one set of people down by criticizing them so that they feel good about themselves. Observing these conversations is so painful that I'll take meaningless conversations about the weather at any time.

The art of meaningful conversation is being gradually forgotten and has become a rare commodity. Humanity seems to be losing its way of communicating with each other and is choosing confrontation instead. Hurtful words are often used to inflict the most harm to the opposite views. The Baha'i Writings remind us about the importance of being courteous and sensitive in choosing our words while addressing others.

“Every word is endowed with a spirit, therefore the speaker or expounder should carefully deliver his words at the appropriate time and place, for the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible. The Great Being saith: One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which both exert is manifest in the world.” - Baha’u’llah

Social media, with all its benefits, has given a new dimension to this problem. It provides an avenue for anyone to say whatever comes to their mind under the pretext of "Freedom of Speech." As a result, some people have replaced logic and common sense with erratic emotional outbursts that achieve nothing except creating pain and hate.

The other side effect of this phenomenon is when people reject any logical and scientific idea which does not coincide with their views by labelling it "fake." Though misinformation and propaganda have been part of media since the beginning of newspapers, only recently has now reached its highest peak. It has entered areas of life that were untouched before.

By calling other points of view “fake,” we escape the chance of learning something new or finding a new way of looking at the issues, and that will lead to a war of words. These warring parties fight a bitter battle of conversations as if they are on the battlefield having one goal: the destruction of the other's point of view at any cost.

What we need is:

“...with words as mild as milk [and] with utmost leniency and forbearance so that the sweetness of his words may induce everyone to attain that which befitteth man’s station.” -Bahá'u'lláh

The world is going to destroy itself if it continues to tread in this path of inability to have a meaningful conversation. We need to see each other not as enemies instead as fellow human beings and be forgiving in dealing with one another.

They say from the clashes of ideas comes the spark of truth. However, the problem lies in bringing the ego into the conversation, and then it becomes the clashes of egos rather than ideas, and that leads us to conflict and hatred.

Finding the Right Home for the Seniors in Our Lives



As I get older, I am more mindful of the end of my physical life. There are so many things that I am grateful for: I do not worry about work and money, and I live the retired life of my dreams. No matter how comfortable and content I am, I am also aware of the eventual fading of my bodily powers and my effectiveness and that I will be looked upon as someone who needs to be taken care of and in need of help.

For a long time, I have thought of elders in the senior homes, who, even though they are still capable, are just passing the time before their next journey comes.

I believe that the integration of elders has to be the goal of each community since the treasures of the elders' experience and wisdom will serve the young generation who need it so desperately.

That is why I want to build a home for the elders and try to make it a place where integration and collaboration between different age groups become commonplace rather than merely a dream.

Growing up in the Middle East and living in Iran, India, and China, I was exposed to different cultures and witnessed how the elders were viewed and treated. They were looked upon with respect and reverence. I remember that as children, we were taught how to behave in front of the elders because that was a sign of the proper upbringing of the children. I am surprised to see the approach that the West has taken towards our elders. Even in North America, with the exception of Native American culture, elders are often seen as a burden on social programs.

Our culture — especially social media — gives the impression that the whole world revolves around young people. Hollywood reinforces an unspoken reality that the world is the playground for the young. It is so hard to imagine a productive place for the elders in modern society. It often seems like every movie, television show, and commercial caters to the young. Frankly, it feels like the only thing left for older people to do these days is to take their medicine and wait for their turn to die.

This is such a contrast to my awareness as a Baha'i that our souls never age. The body's condition should not distract us from nurturing the soul, no matter how old we are. Our elders have been separated from society to efficiently take care of their physical needs that their spiritual and human needs have been overlooked.

Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith, wrote:

“Know thou that the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose themselves between his soul and his body, for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments.”

We should approach older people as spiritual beings and ignore their physical frailties. So much can be accomplished through our elders' resources and wisdom — if only society could begin to see them in the right light. Rather than allowing them to waste away in sanitized homes where dreams die faster than bodies, we should provide them with the means to achieve goals that they may have set for their golden years.

In 1982, at the first United Nations World Assembly on Ageing, the Baha'i International Community, an international non-governmental organization that represents the members of the Baha'i Faith at the UN, offered some suggestions that I recently came across.

“That there must be full integration of the aging in the human community, since the community should be an extended family in which everyone, of any age, is an essential part, and not only allowed, but encouraged, to make the fullest possible contribution to the wellbeing of the whole; and that in considering the needs of the aging in the process of development we must take into account the wholeness of the human being, the moral and spiritual dimension, besides his emotional, intellectual, and physical nature when discussing the special contributions of older persons to development and their sharing in the resulting benefits.”

In recent years the cancer of materialism has eroded some of the old traditions of respect and care for the elders but not entirely. My visit to India earlier this year was proof. Before I visited India, I had never considered building a home for the elders there because I thought that the rich Indian culture with its deep roots in tradition would reinforce the idea of taking care of elders. I was shocked to be informed by friends that this was not the case anymore. Also, adding to the elders' sad plight was that there was no monetary help from the government.

I can picture myself in a home with limited interaction with the outside world. No matter how physically comfortable I would be, my soul would be starving for other generations' companionship. I have spent a lifetime of learning, travelling to different places, and doing amazing things in my life. I've gained so much experience that I would love to share, and I have many stories to tell.

My dream, which is based on the goal of full integration, is a home where there will be classes for children, youth activities, art classes, and visitors coming from near and far to see the vegetable garden and flowers that the elders have helped grow. I see each elder spiritually adopted by a family who takes care of them and includes them as a member of their families. I see a home of creative activities where classes are taught by the young and the elders according to their interests. Yes, it is a dream, but it is a sweet dream that is worth our energy and resources. After all, without dreams, so many of humanity's achievements would not have happened.

We must consider integrating elders into day-to-day life not just for the sake of respect and love for them but because in no time if nothing changes, we each will be an elder experiencing loneliness and isolation. We have to change our mindset to see the elders as a source of untapped wisdom and knowledge. For the benefit of society, we can create an environment of comfort

with an emphasis on integration so that before their final flight, none of their dreams are unfulfilled.

Solidarity, Not Just Charity for Street Community

Joshua Goldberg



Badi Shams recently wrote a beautiful piece in the Times Colonist about the spiritual roots of economic disenfranchisement – “Spiritual solutions needed for economic problems”. (Published May 16th). I was inspired by his work to share what I’m learning from the street community about spiritual balance in pandemic times.

When the COVID health emergency was declared, survival services abruptly closed or reduced spaces. In Victoria, 500+ people have left with even less than usual -- no access to shelter, bathrooms, showers, laundry, handwashing stations, drinking water, or a way to stay in touch with loved ones.

None of the root issues are new; people who are homeless experience injustice daily. But COVID has intensely exacerbated the situation. I have been doing work on homelessness for 30 years and have never seen so much harm done in such a short period of time.

Unsheltered people in multiple cities are currently living under constant threat of displacement, without access to basic survival necessities. People are being pushed from park to park, having

tents and belongings destroyed, constantly vilified by housed people who don't want homeless people living anywhere near them. Distressingly this was normalized pre-COVID, but it has reached fever pitch in recent months.

I am ancestrally Jewish, and a convert to Buddhism. Both paths are ones I am grateful for and love deeply. Both have similar teachings.

In Buddhism we talk of three poisons that are the root of all evil. Our distorted misunderstanding of the nature of inter-being (ignorance) gives rise to two polarized reactive states. One is aversion -- fear, hatred, dehumanization, or otherwise pushing away something that we don't want to have to face. The other is avarice, a state of greedy clinging or grasping.

All three are very human experiences. And each of them, when combined with power, can cause profound harm.

Over the past two months I have seen incredible harm. That is not to say that the people causing this harm are evil people, but their actions are evil, violent, and devastating.

And I wonder, in the face of such evil, where are my Buddhist and Jewish people?

Individually there has been tremendous outpouring of generosity, kindness, and compassion. These are the beautiful qualities I love about Buddhist and Jewish teachings. We must always be heart-centred and firmly grounded in the aspiration for liberation of all beings -- including those causing harm.

But we must also access other aspects of our teachings that point to the need for fearless, bold willingness to say no to violence and abuse. It is not enough to cultivate beautiful qualities like generosity, kindness, and compassion. Out of balance, these qualities become cloying.

Even with good intention, a lot of harm can be done in the name of helping. Generosity can become a malformed paternalistic kind of charity that positions poor people as weak or broken, and wealthier people as saving them. This has particular painful impact in the context of colonialism which has made many Indigenous people homeless, largely due to ideas around saviorism which so profoundly shaped residential schools, "Indian hospitals", and the child welfare system. These distorted ideas continue to shape how housing and health services are approached today, where homeless people are assumed to be incompetent and in need of police, social workers, and others to control, contain, and assimilate them.

A Jewish teaching is *tzedek tzedek tirdof*: Justice, justice shall you pursue. In these times of grave injustice we must support: but from solidarity not charity. We must open our hearts in all directions, including actively blocking government harm, and lifting up street community power. I hope you will join us.

Joshua Goldberg is a volunteer with *Poverty Kills 2020*, a network of people who came together in mid-March to address the crisis of COVID-19 and the street community. We share a common solidarity/justice orientation that recognizes that while COVID-19 is new, the harms that are happening are not.

Simple Living a Solution in Times of Crisis



The events of the world in these recent times turn our attention again to what is essential for our existence and what things are mere distractions and not necessary.

When we face a situation where we have to decide what is necessary, we are surprised to see how simple our needs are. You can listen to the stories of people who have faced death or a deadly disease and realize how wealth and possessions lose their charms and don't matter at all.

Throughout human history, we have examples of great people like the Sufis and the followers of other religions who practiced simplicity and advocated living a simple life and avoiding the complications that excess materialism brings with it. Manifestations of God like Jesus, Mohammad, Buddha, Moses, and Baha'u'llah, the Prophet-Founder of the Baha'i Faith, exemplified simple living.

However, we also have the example of other people who were regular people like you and me — such as Gandhi, who famously said:

“Live simply so that others may simply live.”

They showed us how simple living is made by practicing it.

The industrialization has brought with it the ability to have things that past generations could not dream of. It has led to us accumulating things that seemed necessary, and yet, in reality, we could easily do without them. This has brought us to where we are now. When a pandemic suddenly makes us think about what is essential and what is not. It teaches us how we can do with so little. Living a simple life brings peace of mind and removes some of the distractions of our life’s journey. Many studies indicate that simplicity reduces stress in life and creates a sense of freedom from the burden of unnecessary possessions.

There is a movement called " voluntary simplicity " for those of us who prefer other ways than the religious approach of denouncing material possessions. There is a movement called “voluntary simplicity.” It encourages people to live a simple life by downsizing their lives. This movement has been described as “an anti-consumerist way of life that opposes the high consumption lifestyles prevalent in consumer societies today and voluntarily embraces ‘a simpler life’ of reduced consumption.”

Voluntary simplicity counters the effects of collecting possessions and believing that they are necessary for our survival. In reality, possessions often complicate our lives by making us feel dependent on them. This way of thinking has led us to forget our spiritual destiny. The Baha’i Writings tell us:

“Consider to what a remarkable extent the spirituality of people has been overcome by materialism so that spiritual susceptibility seems to have vanished, divine civilization become decadent, and guidance and knowledge of God no longer remain. All are submerged in the sea of materialism”. – Abdu’l-Baha

It should be noted that voluntary simplicity does not mean living in poverty, becoming an ascetic monk, or indiscriminately renouncing all the advantages of science and technology. It does not involve regressing to a primitive state or becoming a self-righteous puritan. And it is not some

escapist fad reserved for saints, hippies, or eccentric outsiders. Instead, advocates of voluntary simplicity suggest that we examine our relationships with money, material possessions, the planet, ourselves, and each other. Voluntary simplicity is about discovering the freedom and contentment that comes with knowing how much consumption is enough.

This is a theme that has something to say to everyone, especially those in consumer cultures who are bombarded every day with thousands of cultural and institutional messages insisting that more is always better. Voluntary simplicity is a philosophy of living that advocates a counter-cultural position based on notions of sufficiency and simplicity.

Voluntary simplicity can create a sense of peace of mind and free us to spend time on the goals that matter more in life. Some of the benefits of living this way are:

Conscious Consumption: Living a simpler life isn't just about spending less — it's also about spending consciously. That means taking a careful look at every purchase and asking yourself whether it's worth the money you're spending and the hours you're spending to make that money.

Fewer Belongings: One side effect of consuming consciously is that you end up with fewer belongings.

Smaller Homes: Housing is the biggest expense in most families' budgets, accounting for 26% of total spending. So it makes sense that families that want to downshift their spending often start by downsizing their homes. Choosing a small house can also simplify a family's life by giving them less space to maintain and clean, as well as less room to accumulate more stuff.

Lower Energy Use: Another benefit of smaller homes is that they use less energy to heat and cool. By choosing to live small and cutting back on the number of electrical gadgets, people can reduce their electricity use to the point where they can power their homes with solar panels or other forms of renewable energy.

Conscious Eating: For most downshifter, living simply also means eating simply: home-cooked meals made with whole, unprocessed foods.

Shorter Work Hours: Voluntary simplicity isn't just about spending less money. The main point for most downshifter is that, by spending less, they can afford to work less. If we

reconnect with what is vital in our lives and worthy of our attention — and what is not — we can simplify our lives. That, in turn, could lead to living a less complicated existence based on solid personal principles. Those principles are what can guide us through times of crisis without feeling any sense of panic and help us stay firmly focused on the things that matter to our individual and collective progress, both spiritually and materially.

Spiritual Solutions Needed for Economic Problems



Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the world around us and our way of life has totally changed. New attitudes, and a new way of thinking, have to be adopted. What is happening has highlighted the plight of the poor and the need for the governments and other agencies to step up and do all they can to help — because this epidemic is killing more of the underprivileged and people living in poverty.

However, there is some good news too; for example, celebrities, sports figures, and other wealthy people have got their wake-up call and are realizing that there is more to life than accumulating wealth. Financial institutions have relaxed their lending rates and brought credit cards interest to zero. There is a sense of unity, even with some warring parties across the world. They have ceased fighting because they have found a bigger enemy in the virus. Though these changes of attitudes have not come organically, nevertheless, they are welcome changes, and they make me happy in these stressful times.

Despite all these positive changes, the problems of the poor remain unchanged and instead have become worse. The problem lay in the failure to grasp that each of us, from the poorest person to the richest, are the stakeholders in all the affairs of humanity, and we all are in it together.

I have tried to address the nature of economic problems through spiritual solutions. According to the Baha'i Writings:

“The secrets of the whole economic question are Divine in nature, and are concerned with the world of the heart and spirit.” – Abdu'l-Baha

In recent decades, many religious and political leaders, philosophers, and economic experts have attempted to bring changes to a system built on the idea of promoting self-interest and individualism without any thought given to creating prosperity for the whole of humanity?

Now, this universal disease, Coronavirus, is tearing into all those barriers of nationalism, racism, and religious differences and making everyone think, "Oh my God, we all are in this together."

This realization weakens those barriers but does not destroy them.

The question in my mind is, do we need a disaster like this one that has paralyzed the whole world or a meteor from space to wake us up to the fact that this universe, this earth, has been created by one creator. We are all its occupants, so why don't we act as neighbours or family members?

“The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens” – Baha'u'llah

Why can't we create an economic system in such a way that all the citizens of the world would live fulfilling lives in prosperity?

In this health crisis and other disasters, whether natural or otherwise, it is poor and the underprivileged who are the ones who suffer the most due to not having the material means to protect themselves against diseases and disasters. You may ask why? I say because our economic system is set up that way. After all, the economic system is deprived of moral values. This is because we have separated morality and humanity from our economic system and economic activities. This caused the economic system to almost crash in 2008, leading to a financial crisis and yet this system continues to ignore the plight of the poor.

I believe that humanity has reached that level of maturity. It is my hope that it won't take crises and disasters to inspire us to find a better way of organizing our affairs — including economics.

Living in an Age of Miracles



We live in an age of miracles—and we don't even know it.

I've often wished I lived in the times of some of my heroes who participated in great historical events and to fight beside them in their battles. How I admired and idealized them. How I would have wanted to be with them and help them any way I could in their battles with ignorance and injustice, and by doing that, take part in an important event in human history.

Recently, though, I've become more focused on what is happening now. The news concentrates on the negative events, but I try to see the positive side of our present day. As I continue doing that, I realize the wonders of our modern-day world are totally overlooked because of the negative slant prevalent in much of the news.

I found it fascinating as I searched more and observed with an investigating eye. I am from the generation that did not grow up with the many amazing gadgets that are so commonplace today, such as TVs, phones and the internet, so I see them not with a jaded eye but with a sense of wonderment. I don't take them for granted, so you can imagine why I call the present time an age of miracles.

After thinking about it, I realized how my heroes would have loved to experience the present, not just because of new inventions and discoveries, but rather to see how much closer we are to the promised day when humanity becomes united and establishes a new world commonwealth.

It may sound too optimistic to write about these things at a time when it looks as if the world is falling apart when numerous wars and conflicts rage—but as a follower of the Baha'i Faith, I believe these events, both positive and negative, are all part of a bigger plan:

The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this greatest, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed. – Baha'u'llah

Look at it this way: to build your dream house, you have to dismantle the old, dilapidated one and start building a new, well-designed and beautiful structure. In the same way, the old order—with its failing theories, systems, and structures in the economic, political, education, health and other realms—can not satisfy the needs of the present generation of humanity. All of these upheavals are the signs of its malfunctioning and the sounds of its destruction. This doesn't signal the end of the world; instead, it signifies the coming of a beautiful new world. We are on the edge of these profound changes. Most people now agree that things are not working today and don't require convincing that we need a better system.

Now, we can endeavour towards a more unified, peaceful and loving future civilization, and we can devote our energy to laying its foundation.

Who from the past generations would not want to witness the advent of a new age? We are witnessing the old structure crumbling down, and every day a new tool is invented. We have the blueprint of the new structure in hand and are preparing our equipment as we eagerly wait to start construction. We now have the design for that future structure—but first, humanity as a

whole needs to join hands to participate in this venture because this new world belongs to every single person on Earth.

Gross National Happiness & Other Alternative Economic Approaches



We live in an age in which new ideas are born each day in every field of learning. I find quite interesting the many alternative ideas and theories suggesting new ways of solving our economic problems. As a member of the Baha’i Faith, I like to examine these theories from a religious point of view.

Of all the new concepts, I am especially attracted to Gross National Happiness and barefoot economics.

Gross National Happiness

As you probably know, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)—the total production of a given country—is the yardstick typically used to measure the economic progress or growth of a nation. A higher GDP means more production and more growth in a given country. However, the GDP’s effectiveness has been challenged by other concepts such as Gross National Happiness (GNH).

A system introduced by the king of Bhutan in 1972, GNH is calculated by an index that measures the collective happiness and well-being of a population. GNH is the goal of the government of Bhutan, as stated in its constitution, enacted on 18 July 2008. The Bhutan GNH Index was first published in 2012.

GNH values collective happiness as the goal of governance by emphasizing harmony with nature and traditional values as expressed in nine domains of happiness and four pillars of GNH. The four pillars are:

1. Sustainable and equitable socio-economic development
2. Environmental conservation
3. Preservation and promotion of culture
4. Good governance

The nine domains of GNH are psychological well-being, health, time use, education, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity, and living standards.

Barefoot Economics

Acclaimed Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef introduced the concept of “barefoot economics” in the 1980s. He explained, “The point is, you know, that economists study and analyze poverty in their nice offices, have all the statistics, make all the models, and are convinced that they know everything that you can know about poverty. But they don’t understand poverty.”

He believes we have to look at economics with a new approach and change it fundamentally—or else humanity is bound to have a disastrous future. He says a good economic system has to be desirable to everyone since it is supposed to be designed and implemented for everyone. He is disappointed that most governments and economists in the world failed to learn from the financial crisis of 2008.

Max-Neef suggests we build a new economic system based on five postulates and one fundamental value. The five postulates are:

1. The economy exists to serve the people, rather than the people existing to serve the economy
2. Development is about people and not about objects

3. Growth is not the same as development, and development does not necessarily require growth
4. No economy is possible in the absence of ecosystem services
5. The economy is a subsystem of a larger finite system, the biosphere, and so permanent growth is impossible

The fundamental value for sustaining a new economy should be that economic interest will never be allowed, under any circumstances, to be valued above reverence of life.

The central themes of GNH and barefoot economics—humanity’s happiness and respect for nature.

It’s exciting to me that so many people with great awareness are looking at the economic problems of the world and offering remedies for its ills. I believe some of these wonderful ideas offered by so many amazing people will be considered for and incorporated into future economic systems. For now, let us look for new ideas to solve our economic problems.

Three Spiritual Ways to Avoid Financial Regrets



As I get older, I spend more time reflecting on my life—on the right choices I've made and the regrets about the wrong decisions I could have avoided.

This reflection often takes me back to the innocence and ignorance of my youth and the things I could have done differently, knowing what I know now. How deeply I wish someone had guided me to the ideas that would have helped me have fewer regrets now.

So I'll try to reach out here with a reminder and a few tips that will hopefully help reduce the percentage of your regrets in those later years:

1. Know yourself—then Plan for your Economic Needs

To have a plan or a goal, one has to know for whom they are planning. When we plan for ourselves, we should first understand who we are—and ask ourselves: What is the purpose of our lives?

After answering that fundamental question, you'll need to find the answer to a second big question: What do I want? Examining who you are will help you answer what you want.

What we want applies not just to our spiritual needs and aspirations—it means deciding the financial needs we require to live a fulfilling life. Contrary to popular opinion, that you can never have too much money, many people accumulate wealth that is thousands of times more than their

needs. They spend all their energies to get more, while the spiritual elements of life pass them by due to their preoccupation with gathering and managing wealth. Can you imagine a sadder tragedy when we know we do not live on this Earth forever, and our days are numbered? The Baha'i teachings advise me to:

“Live then the days of thy life, that are less than a fleeting moment, with thy mind stainless, thy heart unsullied, thy thoughts pure, and thy nature sanctified, so that, free and content, thou mayest put away this mortal frame, and repair unto the mystic paradise and abide in the eternal kingdom for evermore.” – Baha’u’llah

2. Make Sound Financial Plan, Spiritually

With the pressure of the world's many problems weighing on us, we all need guidance—both financial and spiritual. People are looking everywhere to find the solutions to problems that have baffled them and have made the experts confused and helpless, too. When we recognize that financial planning is not just a material consideration but needs to take into account our moral and spiritual values, we can then plan for financial goals that not only support our physical existence but smooth the path of spiritual growth. Do our financial goals support our belief system? Do they reflect integrity and honesty? Do they take into consideration the welfare of others?

3. Plan not Only for yourself but for the Poor

We live in a world with extremes of wealth and poverty. We can all contribute to eliminating this problem by reaching out to others less fortunate and easing their load. This changes our outlook and gives the mind and soul a sense of peace. Reducing the sufferings of the poor may seem a small task, and yet every day, more and more people are becoming poor, destitute and homeless. Why? Because not enough people plan beyond their self-interests and do something about the plight of the poor.

In our next journey, none of us will need money. The material world dies the moment we die. The only reality left at that point is the inner spiritual qualities we have been able to gain through our hard work, meditation, service, and sacrifice.

That's the essence of real planning for the future—not only making sure we have sufficient material resources for retirement, but making sure you have the spiritual resources you'll need for your eternal existence. How sad to reach the end of our physical journey and realize that we have

not accumulated enough for the next world because we were distracted, overwhelmed and obsessed by the material world and forgot to put away something for our spiritual journey.

Small Town's Simple Approach to Peace



Nineteen years ago, one of the churches in our little town started organizing a Peace Walk on the first day of each year. They invited everyone to join. As a Baha'i, I welcomed the invitation since Baha'is all over the world actively work for the oneness of humanity and peace on Earth, so with great joy, I attended the first Peace Walk and have participated in each one since the beginning.

The Peace Walk's route takes us through the center of town, and the cars on the road mostly honk in support of peace. Each of my fellow peace walkers—all from different groups—hold their homemade signs quoting sayings from their religions or ideologies. My sign said:

**“The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens -
Baha'u'llah**

After the walk, we all go to a cozy hall of a senior housing facility. There is no set program since we all know why we're there. We come from different religions, and some of us have no faith at all, but we each know that peace is essential to all of us. That shared conviction creates a feeling of togetherness sensed by everyone. We spontaneously sing religious and non-religious songs, recite poetry and give short talks on peace. After that, everybody is invited to go for lunch at a Sikh temple nearby to enjoy the delicious homemade food prepared by the Sikh community.

I like many aspects of the Peace Walk but mainly appreciate its practical, simple approach to creating peace and oneness by sharing ideas, prayers, music, and food with people from different backgrounds. This unity in diversity appeals to me immensely. It feels like a small family, with each member representing a different country and religion, sitting down to eat and enjoy each other's company together.

After a few songs, we all listened to a talk about the need to take care of the refugees and then came the turn of one of the Baha'is, a refugee himself, who talked about the biggest hindrance to peace—prejudice. He paid particular attention to the harm religious prejudice can inflict on society. His talk gave a chance to the audience, who were mostly religious, to take stock of their own feelings about other religions.

One of the main hindrances preventing us from attaining peace today has involved only talking about peace and not taking real, substantive actions. We have many talks, books, conferences, treaties, and noble thoughts about this subject—but not enough actual effort to achieve true peace:

“Love ye all religions and all races with a love that is true and sincere and show that love through deeds and not through the tongue; for the latter hath no importance, as the majority of men are, in speech, well-wishers, while action is the best.” – Abdu'l-Baha

I hope that more people use the example of the multi-faith action of our little town and participate in projects and processes that ensure peace by acts and not only words. Peace these days seems like an unattainable dream, but it should not be that way. People on our Peace Walk have simplified it to small steps of coming out, being visible and being heard—then showing that we can peacefully unite despite any differences we may have. There is no reason why we all cannot do the same by reaching out to like-minded people or organizations and facilitating similar events. In this way, we can be the active catalysts of peace and not just passive bystanders on the sidelines.

Do We Need to Justify Our Spending?



Do we have to justify our spending to anyone? Most people would answer, “No—my money is mine, I earned it, and I can spend it any way I want!”

There are some people who consider themselves hedonists; hedonism is a school of thought which argues that pleasure and happiness are the primary or most important intrinsic goods and the proper aim of human life. Hedonists strive to maximize net pleasure, so for them spending any amount of money in the pursuit of pleasure would seem justifiable.

Entire philosophies have been built around this idea, including one that is called ethical hedonism—the idea that all people have the right to do everything in their power to achieve the greatest amount of pleasure possible. Ethical hedonism maintains that every person's pleasure should far surpass the amount of pain. Started by Aristippus of Cyrene, a student of Socrates, ethical hedonists hold the idea that pleasure constitutes the highest good.

While not denying the importance of pleasure in our lives, the Baha'i Faith and most religions look at life differently. Rather than living solely to maximize our own pleasure, we should be trying our best to love the Creator, seek God's pleasure, and therefore love His creation—humanity. Instead of focusing solely on personal pleasure, the religious writings say, we should turn away from ourselves and focus on a higher purpose in life. I personally know people who

are mindful of their spending in order to save so that they can give to charitable causes. My personal guidance is:

“You must assist the poor as much as possible, even by sacrifice of yourself. No deed of man is greater before God than helping the poor. Spiritual conditions are not dependent upon the possession of worldly treasures or the absence of them.” -Abdu’l-Baha

So let us try to look at our personal spending in that light.

In one way, my spending reflects my values. "You are what you buy," as one writer put it. If I spend primarily on myself and my pleasure, it may indicate a lack of empathy for or awareness of other people's needs. On the other hand, if much of my spending goes to help others, obviously, I have come to recognize the extreme poverty in the world. If I am fully aware of the great poverty in the world today, I soon recognize that I'll have to answer to my conscience for any unnecessary or selfish spending. That compassionate awareness and the actions that accompany it can shift my material choices to reflect spiritual decisions. An added benefit of this is combating materialism and consumerism, which weaken our sense of humanity.

No power in the world can force people to re-examine or justify their spending habits, except the power of our own realization and awareness of the level of poverty of our fellow human beings, many of whom are barely surviving.

If only I could see others as members of my human family, then I would not let my relatives live in abject poverty, hunger and want, while I spend my resources on luxuries and pleasures for myself.

I believe that humanity is gradually waking up to the fact that we have a very important responsibility and duty to look after the poor and needy, to make sure that they are cared for and live happily. This is a God-given duty. They have been entrusted to us, and by caring for them, we take a step towards a future society in which there are no poor.

What Can Be Done with the Widening Gap Between the Rich and the Poor?



This was the title of a news item:

“The 26 richest people on earth in 2018 had the same net worth as the poorest half of the world’s population, some 3.8 billion people.”

This reminded me of another report:

“A CEO from one of the world's top five global fashion brands has to work for just four days to earn what a garment worker in Bangladesh will earn in an entire lifetime.”

Some may argue that is not true because, in general, people have more than they had in the past, the standard of living has improved for most of the middle class so that they are richer. This is not always true because they may not know all the facts. As standards of living improved for most of them, so did the level of their debts. That increase in debt is due to more access to credits, loans and mortgages. People are spending more than they make. But I am thinking of the poor who do not have enough to live, so getting a loan or credit is out of the question for them.

There can be many arguments about the accuracy of the data and the methods of collecting it, but no one can deny that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer.

These headlines are often on TV, newspapers and other social media. This is not the first time such numbers highlight the sad economic situation of the world. As I stared at these statistics, my mind was focused on the plight of the poor, and I considered how a fraction of that wealth could change the lives of billions of poor people.

It was the only conclusion that I could draw from these tragic statistics, which made me extremely sad. Then the thought came to me that the rich see these articles and it has not affected the lifestyles of the majority of them, and that thought made me feel helpless. I felt that the widening gap between the rich and the poor would continue growing, and no one could stop it. I questioned our humanity that allows these disparities to continue.

Then I decided that I could only do my part as a Baha'i and citizen of the world to call attention to this story in an attempt to reach as many people as possible, in the hope that we can all take a small step to remedy this economic imbalance.

I am reminded of these words:

“Why, then, exhibit such greed in amassing the treasures of the earth, when your days are numbered and your chance is well-nigh lost? Will ye not, then, O heedless ones, shake off your slumber?”

“O ye rich ones on earth! The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease.” – Baha'u'llah

I hope that we wake up to the reality of this situation which is an indication of a sick economic system that favours the rich and ignores the plight of the poor while the majority of humanity stands helplessly on the sidelines.

Each of us can be an instrument of change, however small, by creating in our hearts empathy for the poor and then working in whatever ways we can to remedy this inequity.

I cannot close my eyes to these statistics and do nothing. I am sure millions feel the way I feel, and that gives me great hope for the future.

How Does the Philosophy of Karma Fit into Science and Religion?



As a Baha'i, I have always tried to believe in the harmony of science and religion and wanted to see the two sides of a given concept. The law of karma is one of them, and I wanted to see a scientific explanation for it. In my years of stay in India, I could see the effect of this belief on people and how it made them conscious of their actions. For those who have not heard about it is a concept familiar to Buddhists, Hindu, Jain and many other religious traditions—essentially that every action has a consequence, that good actions will inevitably have good consequences.

Most people believe in this law, which basically states that the intent and actions of any individual will influence his or her future. That's a wonderful thing because any concept that makes us think about the consequences of our actions will help us become better people—which in turn will make the world a better place.

In a scientific sense, the closest I came to compare the law of karma was Newton's third law of motion. Simply put, this law states that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Newton proposed it in order to describe the laws of physics in the material universe—but it also

expresses the truth of our spiritual reality. In fact, karma and Newton's third law both express the same thing, and when combined together, they express something even more profound—the essential harmony of science and religion.

The Baha'i writings explicitly endorse that harmony.

“Religion and Science are inter-twined with each other and cannot be separated. These are the two wings with which humanity must fly. One wing is not enough.” – Abdu'l-Baha

According to the basic Sanskrit definition, karma simply means “action.” In essence, everything

We do create a corresponding energy that comes back to us in some form or another-or, as the

The common phrase says, "what goes around comes around." Newton's third law states: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. We know that physical force, when applied, will cause a reaction, and that no force or energy vanishes into nothing.

These two laws may explain why all the religions and philosophers have universally agreed on the concept of the Golden Rule, which has been expressed in different wordings in many religions. What one puts in, whether physical or spiritual, that same energy will eventually come back. The Golden Rule makes us aware of our actions.

Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. – **Buddhism**

In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the prophets. – **Christianity**

This is the sum of duty; do naught onto others what you would not have them do unto you. – **Hinduism**

Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself. – **Islam**

What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it. – **Judaism**

So to me, whether I look at my actions through Newton's law, the law of karma, or the Golden Rule, the conclusion becomes very clear. Those immutable laws tell me that I should be very

considerate and mindful of my actions because they always have consequences. In a sense, I create my own happiness, misery, or my hell and heaven.

Mass Shootings: What Can We Possibly Do About Them?



A dear friend of mine, who knows that I write articles, said: “There was another shooting in the US. What about an article relating to this?”

My field is economics, so I initially felt hesitant—but I reminded myself about the many years I worked in the school system, where my first and foremost responsibility was protecting my precious students from the usual dramas and bullying.

I told my friend that I would try, so this is my attempt to share what is in my heart about these horrible mass shootings.

At the outset, I admit that I don’t have all the solutions. I’m uncomfortable even tackling the subject due to its explosive and political nature, the emotions it evokes and especially my personal experience with violence. Also, as a Baha’i, I will not insert myself into the party

politics that have become so tied up in this issue. But these horrific killings must stop, so let's see if we can come up with some starting points.

We have to remember these mass shooters—these killers of children—did not come from the moon or other planets. They were and are our kids, students, neighbours, cousins, and even friends. Many of them were almost invisible to us, but yet they existed, and most of us missed the signs of their struggles. We failed to see how ill-equipped they were to deal with the realities around them, and as a consequence, we did not help them.

As you can already see, I want to take a self-examining approach first and foremost, although there are other contributing factors. I believe we spend very little time exploring our own roles in this crisis, and consequently, we don't do enough to discover how we can empower ourselves to do our part in avoiding these tragedies.

There are things we can do as individuals. We can pay attention to those who are ignored, bullied, or ostracized; we can show them that we care, build alternative activities that allow them some respite from their negative environments, connect them to positive, welcoming people and courses and group activities. For example, we can connect them with youth activities that focus on spiritual exploration and on serving the community. There are countless things we could do if we cared enough and loved enough.

The Baha'i teachings ask us to love everyone because God knows that love is the real solution in His wisdom. Abdu'l-Baha, who exemplified love all his life through his actions, said:

“Love gives life to the lifeless. Love lights a flame in the heart that is cold. Love brings hope to the hopeless and gladdens the hearts of the sorrowful. In the world of existence, there is indeed no greater power than the power of love.” – Abdu'l-Baha

When I worked in the school system, I had some sleepless nights worrying about some of the kids who were so full of anger and frustration that I was afraid that they might do some harm to themselves or others. You might ask: Why were those students so hurt and angry? I would say because they were not getting enough love, care and attention. Most of them were deeply lonely, believing strongly that nobody understood them or cared about them. They craved love, but what they were getting was anger, punishment and disciplinary rules that aimed to set them right without addressing the root cause of their problems.

I am not trying to portray the mass shooters as innocent victims. I am fully aware that there are complex issues involved and deeply rooted personal as well as societal problems. Yet, in some ways, they are, perhaps like you and I, victims of a very common disease, a deficiency in love. In most cases, the essentially spiritual remedy of love can work much more effectively and preemptively than legal deterrents, although both are needed.

We could arm more people to protect the schools, install more metal detectors, do more body searches to confiscate weapons, but those approaches would never have more than a limited effect at best. I wish we would also spend time and resources on how, as a society, we can reach out to those angry and hurting individuals before they choose violence.

How can we as human beings lessen the emotional burden of people that may lead them down an awful path? The Baha'i teachings say we can take action to truly begin to address the problem:

“Love manifests its reality in deeds, not only in words—these alone are without effect.” – Abdu’l-Baha

If we cared for and loved all human beings and did so with deeds rather than words, I believe most of those shooters would choose a different path. I witnessed the drastic change that loves and caring made for many of my own students, who I honestly thought might do some harm. In all my years of dealing with troubled kids, I learned to look beyond their anger and bad behaviour and the barriers they put up to not get hurt because behind all that, usually, a scared person just wanted to be accepted and loved.

Issues such as a lack of proper gun control, easy availability of weapons, violent video games, and other suspects in this sad affair are legitimate concerns. But I suggest we also look at ourselves and resolve to befriend the sad and alienated before they become a danger to society.

By being aware of our potential power as a preventive agent in these mass shootings, combined with proper legal prevention measures and reasonable safety precautions, we can dream of a day when these tragedies will be nothing but a bizarre footnote in a sadder and darker period of human history.

Spirituality, Morality and Economics Rely on Each Other



How does humanity and morality—spirituality, really—fit into an economic system? To most people, spirituality and economics are completely separate subjects.

I'm an economist, so it surprised me when I learned that the first book written by the 18th Century Scottish economist Adam Smith, widely considered to be the father of modern economics, was *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. It was published seven years before his magnum opus *The Wealth of Nations*, which founded modern economic theory and virtually invented the idea of the free market. It never occurred to me that morality might be part of his philosophy.

Every economist studies *The Wealth of Nations*, and most will tell you that Adam Smith's work is all about the science of making wealth. His ideas have formed the guidelines for so many economists, and his words are still the accepted authority on the subject. His influence is still felt and his assumptions are still the foundation of economics.

But Adam Smith certainly recognized the inherent danger of wealth, even as he provided ideas for generating it:

“This disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and powerful, and to despise or, at least, neglect persons of poor and mean conditions, though necessary both to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society, is, at the same time, the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments.”

One of the most prevalent concepts in the economy, and one of Smith's most significant assumptions, was the concept of the “Invisible Hand,” which brooked no interference from the government in the economic marketplace—because Smith's invisible hand would solve the problems, balance supply and demand and also fix prices in an unregulated economy. Smith has thus been called the founder of “laissez-faire capitalism” and denigrated for his lack of a moral component in his economic theories.

But suppose you combine this “invisible hand” idea with Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments, where he says that human beings have a natural tendency to care about the well-being of others. In that case, you get a different picture of this conceptual framework:

Smith's quotations indicate that he strongly believed in morality. He discussed the welfare of the individual, saying it depends on the welfare of all: “No society can surely be flourishing and happy,” he wrote in *Moral Sentiments*, “of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable.”

The Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'ís, recently reminded us of the same important point:

“The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from

that of its neighbours' or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected.”

Smith himself said:

“To feel much for others and little for ourselves; to restrain our selfishness and exercise our benevolent affections, constitute the perfection of human nature.”

I am so grateful that I discovered the moral side of economics—and how I wish more economists would explore it too. We can talk about this in our universities and make it an essential part of economic studies to learn the relationship between morality and economics.

Morality and economics, to me, have to balance each other rather than competing for organizing and governing economics. They need each other to be complete.

The Role of Spirituality in Economics



Whether at the individual level or the national level, everyone is trying to solve their economic problems. The economic situation of the world at present is in a state of confusion, and we are looking down many avenues for a solution. As a member of the Baha'i Faith and an economist, I believe that the answers may be found in conceiving of economic systems as spiritual enterprises.

“The secrets of the whole economic question are Divine in nature, and are concerned with the world of the heart and spirit.” -Abdu'l-Bahá

Every individual has a role to play, using honesty, integrity and fairness as a yardstick, as does society as a whole. The international governing body for the Baha'i Faith wrote the following in 2010 regarding the necessary connection between morality and wealth:

“Many would readily acknowledge that the acquisition of wealth should be governed by the requirements of justice, which, as a principle, can be expressed to varying degrees, on different levels. An employer and employee, for example, are bound by the laws and

conventions that regulate their work, and each is expected to carry out his or her responsibilities with honesty and integrity. ...

The wide margin, often unjustifiable, between the production costs of certain goods and the price at which they are sold likewise requires attention, as does the question of the generation of wealth through measures that “enrich the generality of the people”. What such reflection and inquiry will no doubt make abundantly clear is that certain approaches to obtaining wealth—so many of which involve the exploitation of others, the monopolization and manipulation of markets, and the production of goods that promote violence and immorality—are unworthy and unacceptable.”

Adam Smith, the father of our economic system, declared that self-interest should be the driving force behind every economic activity in order to achieve material prosperity. This has led to a philosophy of individualism, creating detachment and lack of empathy and an economic disparity that most people recognize as unjust.

In 2008 the economic system of the world almost collapsed due to greed and a lack of morality in the system. The governments spent billions to avoid the collapse of the system, but nothing has been done to remedy the root cause of the problem, which was greed and self-interest.

The need for a new and better economic system is felt both by the layperson and the expert. Perhaps it is time to approach our participation in economic activities in a spiritual way and thereby take steps to improve the economic prosperity of the world.

In March of this year, the Baha’i international governing body wrote that "even if current approaches to economic life satisfied humanity's stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity...there is an inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth and resources."

Through the study of the spiritual principles of religions and great philosophers, we can increase our understanding of the importance of the changes that are needed in our lives to become better human beings and to implement them in our economic dealings.

Small changes in our attitude will change our daily economic activities, and that will eventually lead us to a new economic system where there is economic justice, and all people have the means to pursue their true potential.

Please God, Put it on My Account



Sometimes we're very hard on ourselves and can't forgive our mistakes in certain areas of life. As a result, many of us lack self-esteem and consequently lose sight of life's big picture.

When that happens to me, I often forget that life represents a collection of my good and bad actions—sort of a balance sheet that keeps track of my deeds, both good and bad. The negative side or the bad deeds are like an open account I have at a store or with a credit card company that keeps track of my purchases and payments. The expectation? Payments must be made by the end of the week or month at the most.

Our life's open account is no different—because we are spiritually brought to account by the end of our physical existence. So when we know this tab is open, and understand that we are going to make many mistakes until we die, then why do we suddenly pick one mistake and become obsessed with it to the extent that we cannot forgive ourselves? Why one, when many could be singled out and made to be the stumbling block on the way of our human journey?

Forgiving others for what they have done is much easier for me than forgiving myself.

The [Baha'i](#) teachings have a wealth of insight and knowledge on this subject to help us to forgive others—and ourselves. But my problem has always been being unable to forgive myself. For whatever reasons, my self-esteem has rarely been high enough to take me to the happier side of self-forgiveness. Even after finding out some great people also felt like me, did not help me with my struggles. But when I read the holy scripture of many different Faiths, they take away some of the pain.

**Even the great apostle Paul looked at his past with great regret:
“For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called
an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” – 1
Corinthians 15:9.**

Maybe we need to be reminded that our account with the Creator remains open and not let one mistake stop us from moving on with our lives. He has not given upon us, so why are we writing ourselves off? We will eventually balance our account.

As a result of doing so many wrong things in my life, I sometimes feel paralyzed, filled with deep regret. This negativity becomes so intense that I find ways not to deal with it, postponing that intense and difficult reckoning to some future time so that hopefully, by then, I am better equipped to face it and deal with it. So when those intense guilt attack moments occur, I repeat this to myself: “Please God, put it on my tab.”

That way, I buy myself some time to deal with it later—to pray, to silently ask God for forgiveness, to find the inner strength to resolve to be a better and more spiritual soul.

By using this method, I have survived many moments of utter despair. It also proved to me that God’s account with us is very flexible. He is kind because he sees our weaknesses and gives us opportunities to try again. Were it not for His flexibility; we would have had to give up trying.

The Baha’i teachings say that the spiritual Writings can wash our consciences clean if we let them:

**“Now hath the Truth appeared, and falsehood fled away; now hath
the day dawned and jubilation taken over, wherefore men’s souls**

are sanctified, their spirits purged, their hearts rejoiced, their minds purified, their secret thoughts made wholesome, their consciences washed clean, ...” – Abdu’l-Baha

I finally resolved this inner problem later in life, when I made a pilgrimage trip to the Holy Land. There I met a very wise man who noticed my troubles when I could not find myself worthy. This wise person asked me if I believed God is forgiving, and I said yes. He said do you think He has forgiven you for the bad things you have done? I said I am sure He has. Then he looked at me with a look of disappointment and said, “then who the heck do you think you are? Are you higher than God? Forgive yourself! He has!”

At that moment, my spiritual eye opened for the first time, and I could see my life clearly.

When we occupy our minds and souls obsessively with negative thoughts, we lose sight of the big picture and forget who runs the show. If God has forgiven all your shortcomings, please do yourself a favour and accept it with gratefulness. After all, our lives are God’s gift to us, and He wants us to live wisely, cheerfully and free from guilt and regrets.

Two Effective Ways to Fight Your Ego, that Dangerous Enemy Within



No matter how we succeed in any field, a great danger exists within us all—the human ego. That common inner enemy has destroyed the relationships, careers and lives of millions.

Our ego—the insistent, grasping, demanding lower self inside everyone—can make a lifetime of achievements disappear in an instant. It can manifest itself in the form of a gesture, a look, a word or an action, but the result is often the same.

When the ego dominates our behaviour, it usually results in a victory for negativity and the forces of passivity or evil. Like a volcano ready to erupt, our egos constantly require the supervision of our higher, more spiritual nature.

In our human history and the history of different religions, we can find many examples of how this hidden enemy victimized even good-hearted and spiritual men and women, destroying the great achievements earned in a lifetime. It has been the cause of the downfall of a great many leaders and learners in all walks of life. They could not see it coming or recognize its imminent danger until it was too late. Great religious figures, philosophers, poets and people of vision such

as Rumi have recognized this truth and warned us to be aware of this invisible and elusive enemy.

We need to be aware of our egos' demands and recognize its signs. This awareness is essential for those who want to progress in life both materially and spiritually. Though very difficult, there are ways that insistent self can be contained and subordinated with the help of two age-old methods used by different spiritual disciplines:

1. Self-knowledge

Because it lets us take an inventory of our minds and souls, with honesty and the intention of discovering more about who you truly are, self-knowledge represents a valuable tool for controlling the ego. It allows us to find out what abilities we have to face our insistent self; and also helps us find the areas where we will likely be tested, where possibilities of failure exist. This ongoing process of self-examination requires the courage to face ourselves as who we are and not who we might wish to be. It requires honest self-examination, which the Baha'i teachings advise us to implement on a daily basis:

“Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds.” – Baha'u'llah

An added benefit of self-knowledge is the spiritual growth and depth of understanding of that ongoing process. It requires a lifelong conversation that we need to have with ourselves.

2. Meditation

Research has proven that meditation can strengthen the powers of your higher nature to deal with the challenges of life—and no challenge is bigger than the insistent self residing within.

We have to deal with our insistent self or ego; otherwise, it can undo any success or progress. Once we recognize it as a serious threat to our good efforts—that our lives and our efforts in this world and our progress in the next world depend on the decisions we make—we will recognize the necessity to be vigilant.

If we do not make the right decisions and give our higher nature the upper hand, we can easily fall victim to our lower nature. So we need to tune ourselves spiritually to make the right choices and receive the rewards and benefits of those choices. When we read the spiritual writings and meditate on their meaning, our souls are uplifted, affecting our decision-making. Our souls are tuned by reading, praying and meditating, and bringing ourselves to account each day. This important matter has great consequences in our lives, and we need to take the opportunity to adequately deal with it so that our lifelong achievements are not left to our egos.

Making Sense of Confusing Times



The events in the world these days baffle both the learned and the ignorant, confuse the young and the old, and perplex people of all ideologies and religions.

People ask what I think about the world's seemingly unresolvable problems. I tell them that Baha'is believe humanity's future is bright and that humanity cannot resolve these upheavals using ideologies of bygone days or even today's digital database solutions.

I tell them the root cause of problems is the lack of morality and lack of spirituality.

Humanity has lost its moral compass, and even human history cannot help us find our way out because the rate of change has accelerated so fast that we have no historical reference point for it. But we do know how many times humanity has reached the point of no return and has found a way out of seemingly impossible situations. World War II is an excellent example of when everything seemed very dark and hopeless, yet the forces of good managed to prevail.

Regardless of history, though, it's hard to deny the gravity of our present world situation: the plight of millions of refugees who are running from terror and economic misery; the extreme nationalism leading to the election of governments throughout the world that enforce strict border controls, leaving migrant populations to endure in demeaning conditions; climate change

that threatens the existence of the world to the point that the young generation wonders if it has a future; the religious fundamentalism and fanaticism spreading in every corner of the world, the glut of misinformation and propaganda that has replaced decency, respectful discourse and facts.

I see the present situation in the world as one in which humanity has turned its back to spirituality and morality and has chosen materialism to achieve its goal.

"That nothing short of the fire of a severe ordeal, unparalleled in its intensity, can fuse and weld the discordant entities that constitute the elements of present-day civilization, into the integral components of the world commonwealth of the future, is a truth which future events will increasingly demonstrate." – Shoghi Effendi

Humanity today stands at a crossroads, and every individual has the privilege to be part of the plan to lead it towards unity and harmony.

So I tell my friends that though they have an accurate picture of the problems in the world, they are wrong to give up and accept defeat while the struggle between the forces of construction and destruction plays out all around us. These upheavals send us signals so we can play our part in preparing for a new spiritually-based system of global governance.

As for the present time trends, it seems that in most cases, kindness and cooperation towards our fellow man have taken a back seat to nationalism and self-interest. I believe that these trends are the “last hurrahs” of the decaying old order, whose followers are making a desperate attempt to hold on to political control. Yes, the changes in the world are rapid and confusing, and most of the people in charge of making policies and laws cling to short-sighted goals instead of working for the betterment of the conditions of the world in all areas of life.

But all of this upheaval provides us with the opportunity to re-examine our values, to take hold of the vision of a united and peaceful world, and become a powerful part of its construction of a better future.

Fasting a Time of Spiritual House Cleaning



Those who know me are aware of my love for fasting. I have participated in the Baha’i Fast, 19 days of abstaining from food and drink between sunrise and sunset, every year since the age of 15.

Please don’t misunderstand me. Even with all these years of experience, my body has never liked it and has made it clear to me that it does not share my enthusiasm.

Baha’i fasting is both a physical and spiritual exercise, which is why I am so attracted to it.

I love fasting because I know as a human being during my daily life, I unknowingly subject my soul to many impurities, and with this awareness, fasting has become my annual “House Cleaning.”

In the same way that people clean their houses in the West before Christmas or in Iran before the New Year (Naw-Ruz), I do the cleaning with my soul.

My friends who are from different religions cannot understand why I put myself through this hardship. They think the Fast is not a good idea, but their concern allows me to inform them that fasting has been a part of most religions. When food is always available in modern life, people have forgotten about fasting to the extent that now they find it a strange practice. However, history gives us evidence of the existence of fasting in most cultures and religions.

Fasting has been part of coming-of-age preparations for adulthood. Boys from native cultures in North America would fast in the wilderness, seeking a vision of a guardian spirit. Hindus have some form of fasting, which is an avoidance of a particular food. Generally, the ladies fast for the sake of their husbands. The Sadhus of India and Sufis fast and meditate for enlightenment. Modern Jews fast for 24 hours as a penance.

Fasting is also very much part of the life of priests — holy men of various societies would fast in preparation for particular rituals. In most mystical and monastic traditions, fasting is practiced as a means of purification. Roman Catholics traditionally abstain from meat on days associated with the passion of Christ. Added to that list are the Manifestations of God, who fasted and meditated to commune with God.

Islam is one religion that strictly tries to observe the law of fasting. In addition to obligatory prayer, fasting is the essential ritual obligation of the Muslim; it is one of the five pillars of Islam. Fasting in Islam consists of deliberately abstaining from all food, drink, and sexual relations from the time of the first light before dawn until the last light after sunset. The Qur'an explicitly states that fasting is an obligation and has been central to earlier religions.

It is important to remember that the essence of fasting is the spiritual part of fasting. If depriving oneself of food was a sign of spirituality, then all the food insecure people in the world would be holy men and saints.

“For this material fast is an outer token of the spiritual fast; it is a symbol of self-restraint, the withholding of oneself from all appetites of the self, taking on the characteristics of the spirit, being carried away by the breathings of heaven and catching fire from the love of God.” —Abdu'l-Baha

I believe that all the spiritual laws of God are for the benefit of humanity, and the direct gain is for the individual who obeys them and follows them.

Each year I pretend that I do not know anything about fasting and read the Holy Writings with an eager soul to uncover their mysteries and, combined with meditation, to try to get rid of the filth that has attached itself to my soul. In a way, it is a time of self-examination, and as I get older, I find more benefits in fasting.

Science has now found that intermittent fasting is very beneficial for our bodies. It maintains that by not eating for a length of time, the body gets to direct its energies towards repairs. This does not surprise me at all because I am discovering the wisdom and physical benefits of it. I am waiting for the day when humankind gets the chance to experience the sublime feeling of detachment from the body's need for food and focuses on cleansing the spiritual aspect of their lives so that we can start the process of the unification of humanity.

It may look strange to connect fasting with unity, but if we think deeply, we realize that most conflicts and problems are caused by the lack of a spiritual approach to the issues. That makes fasting and praying the most effective tools. Souls are linked together with a string of divinity.

I hope this year I can again introduce my mind and soul to fasting and experience the sense of purification by following this instruction for my spiritual betterment.

Why We Can't Forget the Pandemic's Hard-Earned Lessons



Some countries are gradually lifting COVID-19 restrictions, and soon, we hope, life will get back to normal – but what will that new “normal” look like?

As painful and challenging as the pandemic is, it has brought many issues to the forefront for humanity to ponder and resolve. We obviously haven't adequately dealt with those issues in the past. But as people speak about going back to “business as usual” when we can fully stop fearing COVID-19, I worry that the lessons the pandemic brought will be soon forgotten.

Human Fragility — and Our Spiritual Resilience

The COVID crisis has shown us that we are not invincible. No matter how many inventions and discoveries we make or how many gadgets we create to make life more convenient, we cannot protect ourselves from future pandemics that will kill millions of people if we do not come together and overcome our differences. A tiny virus, we now know, could jeopardize the survival of humanity. That stark fact has created a rude awakening for many.

However, the pandemic also proved the ingenuity and resilience of the human spirit gifted to us by God, as we rushed to heal the sick, create and distribute vaccines, and support each other through a global economic crisis.

This resilience has helped humanity progress since the very beginning of our species, when we faced fierce animals, survived famines, and endured wars. The human spirit can solve problems no matter how difficult and complex they are.

The Beauty and Tenderness of Humanity

We took many things for granted until the pandemic reminded us how vital they are for our emotional and physiological well-being.

For me, the biggest loss was the smiles. I love smiling, and I joked about how my smiles were wasted since nobody saw them under my mask. It was such a tragedy to not touch or hug our loved ones, and I hope that we never forget how essential that is for our happiness.

As we realized that there are other things in life, money became less important. We became less concerned with physical appearances. It was interesting for me to see so many singers that I admired sing in virtual concerts without all the tools to enhance the quality of their voices. I could listen to their natural voices and appreciate them more than the professionally produced versions. Hopefully, this time has helped us accept ourselves and others as we are.

The Importance of Nature

This lesson was an interesting one for two reasons: one, it affirmed the benefits of nature's healing powers for humans' psyche and happiness; two, it reminded us of the power of nature to heal itself. During the pandemic, nature made a remarkable recovery, proving that we can solve our environmental crisis if we take steps to reduce our carbon footprint.

I hope that seeing these changes has made us more sensitive to nature's needs and motivated us to try to protect our environment before it is too late.

“We're In This Together”

Ordinary people and politicians repeated this phrase time and again. Some used it as a slogan without fully understanding its implications.

The pandemic exposed to a greater degree the disparities in opportunity, healthcare, and financial security between communities of different races and genders in the workforce. People of colour suffered a greater infection rate and the greatest economic devastation, on top of a new wave of racially motivated violence in the United States, while women were forced to abandon the workforce at a greater rate than men. While we should have all been in this together, many found themselves at a disadvantage. Supporters of change convey that the time of talking has passed, and we need to take action to correct past errors.

We also learned that we could not depend on national boundaries to solve the problem of the pandemic. Although we put in place restrictions to movement, they exist because we all know that as long as the whole world isn't vaccinated, the problem will not be solved.

We have lost so much during this pandemic. Millions of lives were cut short. Billions of dollars have been spent, and more will be spent for economic recovery. There are emotional scars to heal. It would be even more tragic if all the suffering goes for nought, and the lessons are forgotten.

The Importance of Prayer and Meditation

During the toughest moments of the pandemic, many of us found solace in prayer and reconnected with our meditation routines. Many adopted meditation into their daily lives or strongly felt the need for prayers for their spiritual health — even those who had not considered prayer as an option for their spiritual health before.

For me, meditation and prayer became an essential part of my daily routine. These words reassured me and helped me see the light at the end of the tunnel as I strived to function with a positive attitude:

“The darkness of this gloomy night shall pass away. Again the Sun of Reality will dawn from the horizon of the hearts. Have patience, wait but do not sit idle; work while you are waiting; smile when you are wearied with monotony; be firm while everything around you is being shaken; be joyous while the ugly face of despair grins at you; speak aloud while the malevolent forces of the nether world try to crush your mind; be valiant and courageous while men all around you are cringing with fear and cowardice ... Continue your journey to the end. The bright day is coming.” - Abdu'l-Baha

The suddenness of the pandemic and the speed with which it spread made us realize how uncertain life is and how, in no time, our world can drastically change. It has given us a hint of the problems that could develop if countries do not work together to solve problems, leaving behind political and financial greed, and showed us how we might prepare for such events in the future.

I hope that, even if we fully return to “normal” soon, we can carry these lessons with us so that tragedy may be averted and we can create a more peaceful, unified world.

Can We Have a Flag for Our Planet?



Lately, I've been wishing that we had a flag for our planet, along with our national flags. Wouldn't it be great to have one universal banner that offers the Earth our commitment, allegiance, respect, and love?

Actually, the topic of flags has been occupying my mind and soul for a long time, but I have to start with a disclaimer to avoid misunderstanding or accusations of being unpatriotic: I am not against any flag or country and have nothing against loving one's motherland or fatherland. I think that kind of patriotism shows the existence of passion, gratefulness, and loyalty.

But I do have a problem when those feelings of patriotism come at the cost of forgetting our love for our bigger home, our love for the whole Earth.

This feeling is very personal. While watching the Olympics or other sports, I sometimes feel like I have divided loyalties since I have lived in Iran, India, China, Latin America, and Canada. Wherever I lived, I felt that it was my country, and it was home to me.

How I wish we had a flag for the whole Earth – to show our love for it, salute it and even shed tears for its sad situation. By doing that, in reality, we show love for our individual countries, too.

How I wish we would not kill in the name of a small portion of the planet or wouldn't hate people who live on the other side of a borderline drawn, not by God, but by man.

How I wish some of those tears shed when the national anthems are played would be shed for a flag that represented our entire planet. It saddens me to see so much love being misplaced. I fear that these strong national sentiments block our love for the wider world and humanity itself. They may stop us from expanding our minds and souls to see how we need each other, no matter which side of a border we live on.

How I wish humanity had not divided our God-given planet into different pieces, which have changed throughout human history due to conflict, violence, and bloodshed.

My feelings, like all Baha'is who consider humanity as one family and the whole Earth as one country, try to expand our horizons beyond our national and religious allegiances.

“A fundamental teaching of Baha’u’llah is the oneness of the world of humanity. Addressing mankind, He says, “Ye are all leaves of one tree and the fruits of one branch.” By this it is meant that the world of humanity is like a tree, the nations or peoples are the different limbs or branches of that tree, and the individual human creatures are as the fruits and blossoms thereof.” - Abdu’l-Baha

There is no shame in loving our home country, but not at the cost of making that a reason to dislike or hate or make war against others from other parts of the planet.

Sadly, those ready to kill and die for their homeland ignore the needs of our real home, the Earth. Due to our narrow view of nationalism, our home is in danger of being destroyed.

Humanity has come a long way. I hope that soon we will reach our collective maturity and accept that we are all citizens of Mother Earth. She is our true country. Then we can direct our energies and resources to the world's unification and healing the damages our ignorance and conflict have caused.

Making Economics Serve Humanity



Photo by Towfiqu barbhuiya on Unsplash

The recent pandemic has highlighted the glaring disparities in the economic system between the rich and the poor. On the one hand, we have the plight of poor people living under the poverty line and trying to survive the onslaught of miseries caused by financial hardship. In contrast, a small percentage of people continue to add billions to their already colossal wealth.

It upsets me because it looks like humanity has lost its consciousness and has become numb to the sufferings of the poor and underprivileged. I see the ever-widening gap between the poor and the rich getting wider and wider, yet there seems to be no solution in sight. That makes me more determined than ever to keep this issue alive and continue to address it.

We need Humanomics: a human system with human values, and less of economics to solve the inequalities in our economic system because a lack of humanity has been with the system since its inception and has had devastating effects on millions of lives.

The Baha'i Writings remind me to be aware of my role in taking care of the poor since my moral and spiritual duty is to protect and care for them:

“O Son of Man! Bestow My wealth upon My poor, that in heaven thou mayest draw from stores of unfading splendour and treasures of imperishable glory. But by My life! To offer up thy soul is a more glorious thing couldst thou but see with Mine eye.” -Baha’u’llah

In addition to helping on an individual level, we need to work towards changing the economic system to make it more sensitive to people’s needs and inject morality and spirituality into it to serve humanity rather than humanity being sacrificed to make the system work.

This can only be done by practicing truthfulness, trustworthiness, and other moral values in our actions, especially in our economic activities. These activities are not just economical but spiritual.

The economic problems of the world will not be solved if we do not change the system. The present financial system is a by-product of the old order and was built on wrong assumptions. It is assumed that people only think of their interests and do not concern themselves with the plight of others. This assumption has been the engine for driving the system, and it has become a fertile ground for greed to spread in every aspect of human life, and we can see the result is the present economic injustices in the world.

The sad part about this is that every single day that this continues, thousands of people in the world will be dragged into a life full of economic challenges without any hope of remedy.

The essential element missing in the present economic system is justice, which should be its foundation. Economic justice these days is the scarcest commodity in the world.

I feel that every individual is responsible for trying to do his or her utmost to lessen the burden of poverty from the shoulders of our fellow humans so that every person in the world has the economic means to live a comfortable and fulfilled life — which is a fundamental human right for everyone.

Though the possibility of the economic system becoming more humane looks like a far-fetched dream, if we desire it and strive to attain it by playing our small part, we can transform this rigid system, which is currently devoid of spirit into a fantastic tool for the prosperity of humanity.

Is 'Fighting' still the only way of dealing with a problem?



Photo: Georges de la Tour - The Musicians' Brawl: Wikimedia Commons

There comes a time when, as human beings, we are powerless to solve some of our problems. The question remains, how do we want to deal with them? Having seen my loved ones going through cancer, the words “fighting cancer” have really struck a chord.

When we talk about ending the world’s injustices — poverty, racism, and sexism, we tend to use the same language. We often say we are “fighting” these things. And we absolutely should do everything we can to end these social and spiritual ills and ensure humanity’s unity, peace, and prosperity.

The question in my mind is, is “fighting” the only way to face the problems given to us?

I understand that anger can be the first reaction in grasping the reality of what has happened, and it is natural to react with rage for a short time. But scientific research shows that allowing this emotion to dominate for long periods has a negative effect on the body.

Common sense and the law of karma (for those who believe in it) encourages us to live with a positive view since whatever energy we put into the universe will eventually come back to us. You are what you think. Fighting needs anger, and when we are sick, we need peace more than anger because there is so much that needs our attention.

I wonder if there are other ways of approaching these situations rather than dealing with them with so much anger, especially since anger and high anxiety are the last things that the body and soul need.

When one of my most cherished friends got cancer, she was given little chance of surviving. She deliberately used the word “dealing” rather than “fighting” when talking about her condition.

Humanity has had to face many difficulties throughout the ages, such as fighting big animals in the Stone Age or enemies during the great wars in our history. We needed a fighting mentality that gave us motivation or the force to overcome adverse situations.

We live in a different world now, and our awareness has improved dramatically, and we know what our body and soul need to gain the strength to overcome or deal with difficult situations in life.

We know that peace of mind through meditation and prayers is an essential tool to solve life-threatening problems. They give us guidance and strength to empower ourselves to follow a healthy diet of food and exercise and research other medical treatments that will help us to overcome the disease. There are a wealth of Writings that guide us to approach tests and deal with them.

I know so many cancer survivors (including my dear friend) and survivors of accidents and other tragedies. When asked what helped them, mostly they mentioned prayer and their family and friends good wishes that gave them the strength to deal with these challenges.

This logic helps me see the situation with a better frame of mind and soul to face the challenges that will always be part of our lives. Sometimes our language reflects our mentality. When we want to fight, we are angry. When we want to do the best we can, it may reflect a certain sense of serenity and acceptance.

We can also consider the “Will of God” and whether we should learn about it. I believe that it is a critical approach that some have found useful to help them to do the things within their powers and be detached from the outcome. Following this practice has created great contentment in me since I am satisfied that I have played my part and acknowledged that my efforts are not the only deciding factor. It can enable us to continue our efforts to serve humanity by relying on a higher power for assistance.

“Wert thou to consider this world, and realize how fleeting are the things that pertain unto it, thou wouldst choose to tread no path except the path of service to the Cause of thy Lord. None would have the power to deter thee from celebrating His praise, though all men should arise to oppose thee.” -Baha’u’llah

I hope we can become more aware of our limited powers and use them wisely with a more mature and peaceful approach. The world is full of wars and can do without my declaration of

war on a disease or ideology. We need a new race of men and women who will do everything to bring about justice and unity and spend those energies to educate themselves and others.

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"The Russians Love Their Children Too"



For those of us who are old enough to remember, this was the title of Sting's song, "**The Russians Love their Children Too**" at the height of the Cold War, when the level of hatred for Russians had reached its highest. The song gently reminded us about the fundamental fact that no matter what country or political ideology we belong to, we are human first, and we have the same human emotions, such as love for our children.

The message in the song is still fresh and clear. It points us to the universal fact that parents everywhere love their children, worry about their future, and fear losing them.

Once again, the world has so much hatred and negative feelings. In particular, negative feelings toward Russia because of the war and the destruction in Ukraine.

The mass media's coverage of this devastating war is comprehensive and detailed. Every death and bombarding is shown. Every tear shed, every story of Ukrainian suffering is reported.

Sadly, what is missing is seeing the faces of the dead Russian soldier's mother and father, who do not even know where their son's body lies. These soldiers were forced to leave home away from their parents to fight a war they most likely did not want. They were killed and left behind

the heartbreak for their grieving parents. The media has no access to these parents so that they can share their pain and agony, and that is a tragedy because “The Russians love their children too.”

Any human death is a tragedy. It does not matter if they are Ukrainian, Russian, American or German. The savagery of war has to stop.

“For thousands of years men and nations have gone forth to the battlefield to settle their differences. The cause of this has been ignorance and degeneracy. Praise be to God! In this radiant century minds have developed, perceptions have become keener, eyes are illumined and ears attentive. Therefore, it will be impossible for war to continue. Consider human ignorance and inconsistency. A man who kills another man is punished by execution, but a military genius who kills one hundred thousand of his fellow creatures is immortalized as a hero. One man steals a small sum of money and is imprisoned as a thief. Another pillages a whole country and is honored as a patriot and conqueror. A single falsehood brings reproach and censure, but the wiles of politicians and diplomats excite the admiration and praise of a nation!” -Abdu’l-Bahá

How long does humanity need to realize that there is no winning for those who died and left behind their families to grieve? It is so sad that the young who have their whole lives ahead of them must pay the ultimate price of life in every war. How much longer will we glorify killings in our psyche and culture through songs and movies? We can if we want to put all these energies into educating humanity on ways to settle disputes through reasoning and peaceful methods.

We can not even imagine the amount of money and resources that could be saved by the nations not stockpiling weapons. All these savings could be used for constructive purposes such as eradicating diseases and eliminating poverty.

As we mourn every death in Ukraine, mourn the destruction of the country and other parts of the globe, let us also grieve with the mothers and fathers of the dead Russian soldiers who died by following orders. Those parents loved their children too.

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The Beauty and Benefits When East and West Meet: A Personal Experience



I have spent precisely half of my life in the global East, and the other half living in the West. East and West functioned as schools of learning for me, educating me in unique ways.

I feel like a lucky plant rooted in the soil of the East and watered and nurtured by the West, and the recipient of the best of both worlds.

History is full of records of the past contributions of the East in culture, art, music, architecture, sciences and literature. The physical evidence of some of the East's rich cultures can still be seen today. The East is the birthplace of Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and many more religions.

On the other hand, the West has been the birthplace of many scientific discoveries and innovations that have advanced humanity and led to a better and more prosperous standard of living. Western science has discovered the smallest parts of atoms, mapped the DNA of the human body, and sent spaceships to distant planets looking for signs of life.

If I could describe the relation between East and West simplistically, I would use the metaphor of the heart and brain in the human body. With its deep roots in spirituality, the East functions like the heart, pumping the lifeblood of guidance and values; and the West, with its advancements in science and finance, functions as the brain.

“In these days the East is in need of material progress and the West is in want of a spiritual idea. It would be well for the West to turn to the East for illumination, and to give in exchange its scientific knowledge. There must be this interchange of gifts. The East and the West must unite to give to each other what is lacking. This union will bring about a true civilization, where the spiritual is expressed and carried out in the material.” - Abdu'l-Baha

I do not think I fully understood the implications until our Baha'i community decided to adopt the community of Jaipur in India as its twin sister community and join forces and share experiences.

Soon, we found out that we are lucky in the West to have the financial means, but we lack human resources in our small community. In contrast, our friends in Jaipur have ample human resources, but they struggle with the finances to carry out activities.

Each member of our community feels a sense of pride and accomplishment due to this beautiful involvement and experience, helping with activities such as children's classes, junior youth activities, and devotional gatherings there. Friends in Jaipur are very grateful for our financial support.

Although humanity is connected by physical means, people's hearts are very distant from each other. Many walls, such as skin colour, nationality, religion, political views, and language, are hindering the East and the West from getting closer.

Whether from East or West, we all recognize that our world is getting smaller thanks to improvements in communication and transportation. This highlights the need for unified efforts by all countries to share resources for the betterment of the world.

I am not sure that our community's small attempt to reach out to a community in the East will reduce the weight of the world's problems. Still, it surely has given us a sense of pride that at least we are working to cooperate with our brothers and sisters on the other side of the planet.

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Humanomics Is the Solution to Economic Problems



The recent pandemic has highlighted the glaring disparities in the economic system between the rich and the poor. On the one hand, we have the plight of poor people living under the poverty line and trying to survive the onslaught of miseries caused by financial hardship. In contrast, a small percentage of people continue to add billions to their already colossal wealth.

It upsets me because it looks like humanity has lost its consciousness and has become numb to the poor and underprivileged sufferings. I see the ever-widening gap between the poor and the rich getting wider and wider, yet there seems to be no solution in sight. That makes me more determined than ever to keep this issue alive and continue to address it.

I like to use the word "humanomics" to describe the solution to the inequalities in our economic system because a lack of humanity has been with the system since its inception and has had devastating effects on millions of lives.

The Baha'i Writings remind us to be aware of our role in taking care of the poor since our moral and spiritual duty is to protect and care for them.

"O SON OF MAN! Bestow My wealth upon My poor, that in heaven thou mayest draw from stores of unfading splendour and treasures of imperishable glory. But by My life! To offer up thy soul is a more glorious thing couldst thou but see with Mine eye." -Baha'u'llah

In addition to helping on an individual level, we need to work towards changing the economic system to make it more sensitive to people's needs and inject morality and spirituality into it to serve humanity rather than humanity being sacrificed to make the system work. We need Humanomics: a human system with human values and less of economics.

This can only be done by practicing truthfulness, trustworthiness, and other moral values in our actions, especially in our economic activities. These activities are not just economical but spiritual.

The economic problems of the world will not be solved if we do not change the system. The present financial system is a by-product of the old order and was built on wrong assumptions. It is assumed that people only think of their interests and do not concern themselves with others' plight. This assumption has been the engine for driving the system, and it has become a fertile ground for greed to spread in every aspect of human life, and we can see the result is the present economic injustices in the world.

The sad part about this is that every single day that this continues, thousands of people in the world will be dragged into a life full of economic challenges without any hope of remedy.

The essential element missing in the present economic system is justice, which has to be its foundation. Economic justice these days is the scarcest commodity in the world

I feel that every individual is responsible for trying to do his or her utmost to lessen the burden of poverty from the shoulders of our fellow humans so that every person in the world has the economic means to live a comfortable and fulfilled life — which is a fundamental human right for everyone.

Though the possibility of the economic system becoming more humane looks like a farfetched dream, if we desire it and strive to attain it by playing our small part, we can transform this rigid system — which is currently devoid of spirit — into a fantastic tool for the prosperity of humanity.

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Alleviating Poverty Through Virtues



For many years, I've tried to emphasize the need for humanity and morality in our economic systems – because I believe that lack of morality is the root cause of misery in the lives of billions of people.

Those people struggle daily to survive in the face of immoral economic injustice.

So in this brief essay, I will try to define economics as it is now practiced in most places, point out its problems, and suggest a remedy.

The complex subject of economics is hard to define, so here's an easy way to understand it by going to the original root of the term: economics is derived from the Greek word "Oikonomia," which refers to managing a household or family. This means, obviously, that an economic system is supposed to help us manage our households – not only in the individual sense but in the collective one, as well.

Every economic system, then, should exist to help sustain the welfare of all the human family members so at a minimum, they can live comfortable lives and share their resources and earnings. That way, no family member lives in poverty or privation, and humanity as a whole can live a stable and productive existence. Historically, when great disparities in wealth exist, it destabilizes entire societies, provoking war and revolution – so a good economic system doesn't only ensure prosperity, it also keeps the peace.

Sadly, as most of us know, this lack of reciprocal kindness means our current economic systems do not work well – in the human family, one in ten people lives on less than \$2 a day. Globally, one-third of urban dwellers live in slums. What is the problem? Where did the system go wrong?

Perhaps the problem was exacerbated when Adam Smith, who observed economic activities in the marketplace as they relate to people's behavior, made some assumptions and came up with a system. He assumed that everyone wants to maximize their satisfaction or profits, with self-interest as the major motivation. He also said the market could correct itself, so no governmental intervention is necessary.

This made sense to many, but Mr. Smith's system left little room for morality or human virtues.

In today's economic reality, money has become like a religion; therefore, we follow the practice of everyone in it for themselves, making as much money as they want by any means. Nobody asks if someone is a good person or evinces praiseworthy actions. Many consider someone who is poor a failure because they believe we have been created to make money and get rich.

It is easy to criticize the system itself, but that does not solve the problem.

Instead, we can all have a hand in reforming the system when we start injecting virtues gradually and slowly into it so that it revives itself to become a system that is sensitive to the needs of humanity, sensitive to the poor people of the world, and responsive to the spiritual aspiration of human beings.

Every day we can practice virtues like truthfulness, kindness, generosity, and honesty in our economic activities. These spiritual virtues, common in all religions, create an environment of generosity, caring, and cooperation – all necessary for the poor to prosper. We can do the same by injecting human values into the political, educational, and other systems because all systems suffer from the same afflictions.

We must take action – because our inaction is partly responsible for the suffering of the poor. If we don't change the system, millions of people will continue to live in misery every day, deprived of God's purpose for them because they are too busy finding a few dollars to survive.

We need “Humanomics” – economics with human elements – because we are humans, and we all aspire to have those qualities and values. You may ask: how can we do this? What is my role? It is impossible to change a system, so why should I even try? All systems are subject to change, so, in countless small ways and some large ones, too, we all can make a difference.

We can create a yardstick that measures our material and spiritual achievements. A yardstick, which considers spirituality as well as material things, changes our perspective. At present, sadly, our measurements are incredibly lopsided.

That personalized economic yardstick involves an important measurement: simple living. Throughout history, a great many people were symbols of simplicity and lived a simple life, avoided materialism, and shared whatever they had with others. Simplicity also makes financial sense, which can relieve us of so many headaches.

The pandemic highlighted the poor's plight, widening the gap even more between the rich and the poor, and now the war in Europe has dragged millions more into poverty and starvation. The need for action is dire and urgent. The Baha'i teachings urge every human being not to close **their eyes** to the sufferings of members of our human family:

“Fear the sighs of the poor and of the upright in heart who, at every break of day, bewail their plight ... They, verily, are thy treasures on earth. It behoveth thee, therefore, to safeguard thy treasures from the assaults of them who wish to rob thee. Inquire into their affairs, and ascertain, every year, nay every month, their condition, and be not of them that are careless of their duty.” -Baha'u'llah

By introducing spiritual virtues into our economic life, we begin to revolutionize the economic system from within and change it to a humane system that meets the material needs and spiritual aspirations that God meant for everybody.

Badi Shams is a Baha'i and a mystic at heart. His field of interest is economics; he has published “Economics of the Future” and “Economics of the Future Begins Today” and has recently written the books “Random Thoughts of a Mystic Economist” and “Towards a New Spiritual Economic System.” You can find Badi's website at badishams.net called “Baha'i Inspired Economics” He is retired from the education system.”

Butter Chicken and Oneness of Religions



I am very blessed to still be in touch with my ex-students. They are from all walks of life, and most of them now have children of their own. One of them is Derek, who has the purest heart and regularly visited me in my office during his school years, and we kept in touch after my retirement.

He has been to my house helping me with my garden work, and I have cooked food for him. He told me that he wanted to cook for me and bring it to my home.

I asked what he was planning to cook, and he said, “butter chicken.” On my part, I told him that I would cook rice and make the salad.

On the appointed date, Derek called to say that his father had come to visit him from another town and asked if he could come too. I said that he was very welcome.

On that day, I had promised an Iranian Muslim lady that she could come to my house to pick some fruits and I invited her to eat with us also. She is new to town, and her work has brought her here.

After eating the food, we started to talk about the sad situation of the world and all the crises. Both the Muslim lady and Derek’s father are strong in their beliefs.

The Iranian lady was furious at the situation in Iran and how the mullahs had lied to people and misled the public. She believed that they had done things that had damaged Islam.

Derek's father, a Catholic, was not happy about the role of the clergy in his church. He felt the same as the Iranian lady and said that he was disappointed with what had happened in the name of Christianity.

I mentioned that the Baha'is believe that all religions are fundamentally one and differ only in their social laws. I used the metaphor that religions are like pure healing water streaming down the mountain, and leaders use it as a political means, polluting the water.

At the end of our two-hour discussion and sharing our feelings and ideas, we agreed that the only solution to solving the world's problems is for all nations to become united in their efforts and find a religion that combines all the religions in one.

After they left, I realized what an amazing thing had happened. A Muslim, a Baha'i and a Christian of different ages agreed on the need for a universal and all-inclusive religion.

It was a miracle that three different people who did not know each other and with solid religious beliefs expressed views respectfully and lovingly. There was harmony and friendliness in the air.

What made all of us with different age groups and views experience this? As if a mysterious force took over the discussion and led us to that conclusion. Maybe it is because of helplessness felt worldwide due to overwhelming crises that highlighted the need for a solution. With all its unsolved issues and barely recovering from the pandemic, humanity has been forced to reflect and do some soul-searching to counter the dangers ahead. The spirit of unity and oneness is at work with full force. The unity of humankind is not an ideal or empty slogan anymore. It is the only way out left for the survival of wayward humanity.

Now I am left with the memory of that beautiful night when we relished our oneness and the delicious food – butter chicken for the body and the soul.

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My Brother's Keeper: 9 Economic Tips for Uniting Humanity



“Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain asked God after slaying his brother Abel. That famous question from Genesis forms one of the primary moral lessons of Judaism and Christianity – and of all religion.

In the Torah, Abraham and Moses asked us to be our brother’s keeper. In the New Testament, Christ asked everyone to be their brother’s brother.

Can you imagine a world where most people follow that spiritual advice?

Along those lines, one of the solutions to contemporary issues explained in the Baha'i writings deals with solving our economic problems using spiritual solutions. We need that approach to inequality, because economic injustices have reached a critical level in today’s world. Millions of our brothers and sisters suffer, dragged into a life of poverty every day.

Since my field of interest is economics, I concentrate on the sufferings caused by the mismanagement of the world’s economic resources, which has left billions of people in misery, not having enough to eat – and others who have billions and find ridiculous ways of hoarding it or wasting it.

The rest of us, who are neither rich nor poor, can feel powerless about this unjust disparity. We may think we cannot do anything to bring about a change, and must wait for the arrival of a new system. I do not accept this excuse, and believe we can gradually change the economic system by

injecting morality and humanity into it, all while participating in our own economic activities. The global, democratically-elected administrative body of the world's Baha'is, recently wrote:

Every choice a Baha'i makes — as employee or employer, producer or consumer, borrower or lender, benefactor or beneficiary — leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfil those aims. - The Universal House of Justice

My book “Economics of the Future Begins Today” has a chapter called "Practical Economic Suggestions for Everyday Use." Here are 9 of them:

1. **Changing our mindset.** The first action we all take is internal – by changing our mindset and recognizing that the moral economics is fundamentally different and is based on spiritual and moral principles. “The secrets of the whole economic question are Divine in nature, and are concerned with the world of the heart and spirit.” - Abdu'l-Baha
2. **Pay a fair price.** If you feel that the price of something is too low, pay more than the asking price. One of the most beautiful things related to economic activities is the commitment of fair-minded people to disregard existing prices and pay more, because they believe their estimate of the price to be just.
3. **Share profits with employees.** The workers need to have a share of the profits. Besides profit-sharing, there are many ways to help. Get medical coverage for employees. Support the emotional and physical well-being of employees. Taking care of workers is a privilege and an opportunity to serve people. Looking for such opportunities is a beautiful act.
4. **Pay fair wages,** not based on what society dictates. We do not need to follow the minimum wage guidelines. Society's wage guidelines should not prevent us from paying more if we think that is fair.
5. **Require reasonable interest rates.** If you lend money, ask for a reasonable interest rate, not the maximum one. The interest rate has to be fair and reasonable. Banks should not be the only ones setting interest rates.
6. **Participate in social and economic projects.** We can help change the world for the better by getting involved in these kinds of projects – they can represent a valuable way of learning and contributing.
7. **Create a consciousness of the human family.** Your welfare, well-being and happiness ultimately depend on the welfare, prosperity and happiness of every poor, needy, and

underprivileged person in the world. The real meaning of the oneness of humankind will come into being when we see others as members of our family.

8. **Give generously to those working for minimum wage or earning very little.** We can find ways to pay more to all those working for a minimum wage, be it in the form of a generous tip or giving more than the asking price to street sellers who earn a pittance from their sales. How can we otherwise reduce the gap between the rich and the poor if we do not make selfless contributions?
9. **Be considerate to those who rent from you.** Be sensitive to the situation of everyone. If they are in trouble, be flexible with their rent payments. Let them miss a payment or part of a payment. Besides the spiritual satisfaction you feel, you also gain a tenant who cares for you and your property and will use it as if it's theirs. It makes economic sense since you will probably lessen the cost of repairs.

Each of these tips can help us apply spiritual counsels to prefer his brother above himself. First, though, we all must evolve to the point where we see the oneness of the human family, and see all people as our brothers and sisters.

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