

# From the Editor's Desk

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## THE NATURE OF HUMAN NATURE

We are pleased to present in this issue two particularly in-depth articles, one on human nature and a second on the affective disorder of depression, both of which are artistically suggested by Keith Mellard's cover art sculpture *I Think I Am*, a clever play on the Cartesian proposition "*Cogito ergo sum*" ("I think, therefore I am").

The first article, by highly regarded Bahá'í scholar and philosopher Ian Kluge, is an overview of the Bahá'í teachings' engagement with one of the most critical and challenging issues we confront in this life—the foundational reality of human existence. Having worked on this study for over a year, Kluge has devised in "The Bahá'í Philosophy of Human Nature" a rather comprehensive analysis of the fundamental Bahá'í concept of human nature, its source, and its operation as a metaphysical essence. In particular, he focuses on how the human soul produces physical effects through its associative relationship with the physical apparatus that is the human brain and body.

The second article in this issue also involves a great deal of research and labor by psychologist Patricia McIlvride

(formerly McGraw), author of *It's Not Your Fault: How Healing Relationships Change Your Brain and Can Help You Overcome a Painful Past*. Analyzing the virtual pandemic nature of affective illnesses—particularly depression and anxiety disorders—McIlvride discusses in "Stigma, Depression, and the Soul" how these emotional and mental problems inhibit our ability to feel that we can be a useful part of the community, often largely because of the stigma attached to such debilitating afflictions, whether overtly or subtly, by family, friends, and other members of the community. This widespread attitude of discomfiture, avoidance, or even condescension by others is often accompanied by a judgmental stance that implies the sufferer is spiritually deficient or simply unwilling to exert sufficient willpower to overcome the challenges of life.

The obvious relationship between the two articles, then, is that the first piece gives the reader the opportunity to analyze how the essential reality of the individual—the human soul and its powers of rational thought, willpower, memory, and reflection—translates these capacities into physical action through the intermediary of the brain, and the second article shows how this process can be impeded by various mental disorders.<sup>1</sup> More to

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding this point, the reader would benefit from viewing the article "The Beauty of the Human Psyche: The Patterns of Virtues" by Rhett Diessner in our previous issue (vol. 26, no. 4). The *Journal* has also already published some

the point, McIlvride's piece explains the need for friends, caregivers, and the entire community to become better able to discern when someone is suffering from affective disorders so that intelligent assistance and comfort can be offered to support the healing process.

Without the information that both articles provide, our limited understanding of the nature of mental illness and of the appropriate methods for interacting with those affected by it all too often distance individuals thus afflicted, causing them to remove themselves from community activities for fear of being stigmatized as being unspiritual, weak, or simply "different." Furthermore, both discussions are critical to the community at large because each of us is striving to comprehend exactly how to navigate this physical stage of our existence in order best to prepare ourselves for the life that lies beyond this realm.

For while we may have some fundamental grasp of the concept of the soul and how the conscious mind communicates with the world through the intermediary of brain-body association, we find that there is a virtually endless supply of information in the

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very insightful articles on the subject of mental health. See, for example, Michael L. Penn's "Human Nature and Mental Health: A Bahá'í-inspired Perspective" (vol. 25, nos. 1-2) and Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian's "Depression: Biological, Psychosocial, and Spiritual Dimensions and Treatment" (vol. 25, no. 4).

Bahá'í texts providing specific insights into the particulars of this relationship and, more precisely, how studying the relationship itself can help prepare us for the transition to the life to come. Therefore, if some impediment—whether a physical or mental illness—deters the normal process whereby we chart the course of our lives through daily reflection, determination, and action, then we would obviously benefit greatly from learning how to remove or otherwise deal with this hindrance.

Furthermore, both articles deal with areas of study that are on the cutting edge of religious philosophy and science. Where does consciousness reside? Is there such a thing as free will? Do millions of neurons construct some illusion whereby we feel we are in control when, in fact, all our actions may be the result of arbitrary neural activity? Is memory resident in the brain? If so, then even if our soul continues after the demise of the body, does that mean we lose our recollection of our earthly existence?

Similarly complex and challenging are the study and treatment of emotional and mental disorders. To what extent are these maladies the result of genetics, environment, nutrition, and relationships gone awry? The fields focused on the study of the brain-body relationship, such as psychology and psychiatry, are in their infancy as regards diagnosing, classifying, and treating depression, anxiety disorders, and other impediments to the pursuit of those goals prescribed in the Bahá'í teachings for our advancement.

Moreover, the widespread nature of these disorders is demonstrated by the fact that few among us do not have a friend or family member beset by these afflictions and have not observed the toll they take on both the sufferer and the caregivers.

These two articles by Kluge and McIlvride thus function as collaborative attempts to help us understand several extremely important axioms about the physical or embryonic stage of our existence. Both articles indicate that the intimacy of the associative connection between the soul and the body/brain is not trivial, nor does our knowledge of this relationship, however sophisticated, guard us against the suffering that is an inherent part of our mental and physical well-being. In the midst of depression, we can pray for the cessation of the darkness that seems to have enveloped our inmost life, and yet the assurance that this malady will have no long-term effect on our essential self does not alone ease our pain or bring about instantaneous relief.

Implicit in both articles is an attempt to understand human nature not only at the level of the individual, but also, importantly, at the level of community, because as human beings, we are inherently and inextricably social beings. In this sense, our individual and collective objectives are in concert because the entirety of our existence, whether in this realm or the next, is governed by what 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes as the law of love, the organizing force of the universe. In the

physical realm, this law is symbolized by the mutual attraction of all matter. In the metaphysical realm and in our spiritual relationships, it can be discerned in the affection we have and are exhorted to develop for one another so that, in time, there will emerge a global community that will function like one soul in many bodies and foster a nurturing environment sufficiently infused into the global commonwealth that none need feel alone, unloved, or helpless.

Finally, we include two poems, both dealing with the examination of spiritual beliefs and the effort to understand and apply those beliefs in two distinct contexts. "Shahada," by Caitlin Johnson Castelaz, depicts the thoughts of a student in a classroom learning about Islam. "The Fragrance of a Poem" is a very powerful glimpse by Mahvash Sabet of the daily life she experiences as a prisoner in Gohardasht Prison in Iran. We have also included a photograph of a second sculpture by Keith Mallard, *Warrior*, which seems extremely apropos of the article by McIlvride that follows it.