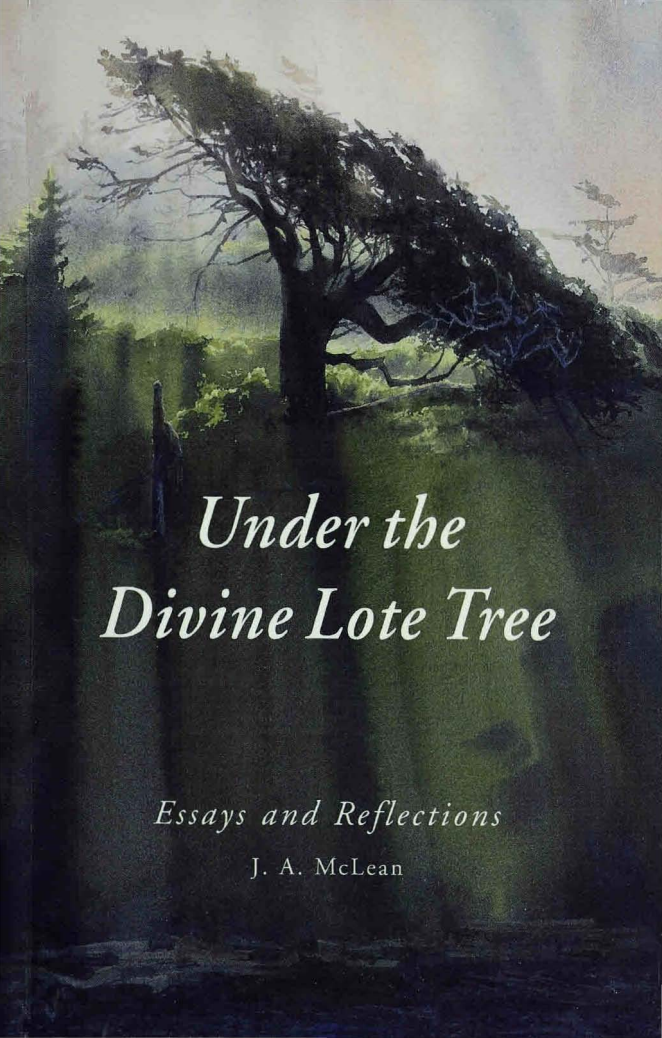

Under the Divine Lote Tree

Essays and Reflections

J. A. McLean

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This book is dedicated to
my mother
Joyce Mary Halsted McLean
with deepest gratitude

'By My Life!
The names of handmaidens who are devoted to God
are written and set down by the Pen of the Most High
in the Crimson Book.'
BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

'The world passeth away
and that which is everlasting is
the love of God.'

BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

Contents

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Introduction

Under the Divine Lote Tree reflects a diversity of thoughts, moods and voices. These have been arranged thematically in what is intended to form a greater ensemble. Two common threads, however, bind these eighty-five pieces together: the search for truth and spirituality. I count these two as one in our continual quest for the knowledge of God, self-understanding and spiritual transformation. As the subtitle indicates, this book is not intended to be a thorough-going metaphysic. But it does share, at least, a similar aim to that of speculative philosophy as 'a flight after the unattainable'.[1] Spirituality I define broadly here as the experience of God and the soul in relation to other souls on our common journey that 'Abdu'l-Bahá has called a 'pilgrimage',[2] whose goal is the celestial city, the heavenly kingdom and the sanctuary of the soul.

About a third of the following pieces are more academic in tone but all have been written with the thoughtful reader in mind. Most of these essays are 'personal' and correspond to what might be called reflection, or to creative or insight writing. Even these designations are not meant to be taken too definitively for there are also testimonial, evocative, even lyrical elements in the pages that follow. The essays are fairly brief but I have tried to provide insight or inspiration, and in some cases to clarify or question the commonplace. Most essays are a few pages in length. Some thoughts are contained in only a paragraph or two. Others are brief *pensées*, consisting of a few sentences, although there are no maxims.

While Bahá'u'lláh highly praised learning, the following saying from one of his chief mystical works might be taken as encouragement

of more free-ranging, creative forms of writing: '...for quotation from the words of others proveth acquired learning, not the divine bestowal.' Creativity is one of the many forms of 'divine bestowal'[3] which is, of course, a *charis* – a grace, a heavenly gift.

The question is sometimes raised as to what extent personal experience is reflected in the writer's craft, but for writers of spiritual literature or philosophical theology, this question is far less ambiguous. While some of these essays are expository and didactic, my own experiences thus far gained on the journey of life have formed the existential background and inspiration for a good number of them. A few derive directly from what I can only call mystical experience,[4] for in order to be genuine, spiritual writing must correlate knowledge and experience. In this endeavour, one is always conscious of Bahá'u'lláh's admonition that words should not exceed deeds. In any case, if they do, life has a relentless way of catching up, with a reminder to be authentic or at least to always strive to be authentic. I take this to mean being as true as possible to the expression of spiritual principles in what is commonly, but well and truly called 'real life'. Anything else would be a delusion.

II

For those who may be unfamiliar with the meaning of the title, I include in this introduction a brief word of explanation. The original context is Islamic. The complete Arabic expression from which the translation 'divine lote tree' derives is *Sidratu'l-Muntahá*, rendered as 'the lote-tree beyond which there is no passing' in George Sale's 1734 translation of the Qur'án and adopted by Shoghi Effendi.[5] Quranic references to the tree are found in 53:14,16; 34:16[15]; and 56:28 [27]. Rodwell in his translation of the Qur'án (1861) stayed close to the Arabic original when in the surah of *The Star* (53:14) he translated this phrase as the 'Sidrah-tree which marks the boundary'. No such tree exists by that name. The species is, however, extant as the lote tree (var. lotus) or *zizyphyus* plant, although the specific variety to be identified with the Sidrah tree of the Qur'án is disputed. The lote tree has an extensive sacred symbology and is sometimes contextualized as the 'divine lote tree'.

Shoghi Effendi transliterated the expression as *Sidratu'l-Muntahá* in his translations of the Bahá'í sacred writings. In a few translations of this expression, Shoghi Effendi simply retained the Arabic original as a substantive. One of Bahá'u'lláh's prayers, for example, he translated 'to make whosoever arises to serve Thy Cause as a sea moving by Thy desire; ablaze with the fire of Thy Sadrat, shining from the horizon of the heaven of Thy will'.[6] Here the word *Sadrat* is used as a proper noun. The translation of the 1991 edition of *Bahá'í Prayers*, however, replaces Shoghi Effendi's translation with the looser, more generic expression 'Thy Sacred Tree'. Elsewhere, Shoghi Effendi translated the same expression as 'the Divine Lote-Tree'[7] which I have adopted for the title of this book.

While the more recent translation 'Thy Sacred Tree' might be more widely understood, with associations harking back to the burning bush out of which God spoke to Moses on Sinai, Shoghi Effendi's modified Arabic version *Sadrat*, regardless of its botanical or linguistic correctness, both invokes curiosity and invites learning. In other words, upon further research, the seeker discovers that the word is rooted in a Quranic context and that the expression is not only significant for Muslims but is also prophetic for Bahá'ís, for the *Sidratu'l-Muntahá* is a clear reference to Bahá'u'lláh, as both He himself and Shoghi Effendi have declared.[8]

The identity and nature of the Lote (Sidrah/Sadrat) Tree has resulted in a rich tradition of commentary within Islam. The tree stood at the apogee or high point in Muhammad's mystical vision of paradise encountered during the *mi'ráj* (night journey). Beyond it lay the domains of *Alláh*, realms impenetrable even to the Prophet of Hijáz. The symbology of the Divine Lote Tree is diverse:[9] the source and station of all prophets and divine revelation; the individual and universal soul; the ultimate seedbed of faith and the faith of the individual believer; the outer limit of all human and divine knowledge and at the same time its source; the tree of life on whose leaves are written the destinies of all souls – all these may be included in the meaning. Maurice Gaudefroy-Demombynes writes of the cosmological significance of the lote tree when he states that commentators interpreted its meaning as 'un arbre de lotus *nabaq* [fruit] capable d'embaumer l'univers'. ('a *nabaq* lote tree

capable of perfuming the universe').[10] Here it is a symbol of spirituality.

One can also consider the Divine Lote Tree (Bahá'u'lláh) as being the archetypical or preeminent 'Cosmic Tree' whose symbolism has been studied by historian of religion/comparative religionist Mircea Eliade.[11] Eliade writes: 'One can even admit the possibility that all the variants of the Cosmic Tree come in the last analysis from one single center of diffusion.'[12] Taken theologically, Eliade's statement has special significance for a Bahá'í. For it rarely occurs to one that when Bahá'u'lláh addresses humanity with the words 'Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch',[13] He points at the same time to Himself as the regenerative symbol, the Tree of Life that sustains a single humanity. Eliade's designations of the cosmic tree as *imago mundi* and *axis mundi*[14] may both be theologically interpreted to apply to Bahá'u'lláh. For Bahá'ís view Bahá'u'lláh as the divine pattern or *ur*-archetype on which the spiritual meaning of world order is patterned and the pole or axis which sustains the world and makes possible communication (revelation) between heaven and earth.

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THE BOOK OF KNOWLEDGE

The Dream of Knowledge

In order to acquire knowledge, I must dream. True knowledge cannot emerge merely from intellectual effort and a slavish observance of the dialectical process. The dialectical process consists of what I *will* to discover when once I have focused my attention on a specific question or issue. Dreaming, however, allows the mind to rest from intentionality and opens the way to the more free-ranging world of symbol and spirit, thus allowing them to present to consciousness what they will, following their own wisdom. The various stages of research and analysis confine the thinker to the limits of waking-consciousness and thought. In order to gain more comprehensive knowledge, we must avail ourselves of the free-flowing powers of the oceanic world of subconsciousness in which we are immersed in dreams.

The powers of the dream of knowledge release themselves, not only in deep sleep, but also in the waking states and half-states of reverie when ego-consciousness is partially suspended. Indeed, there in that reality where a perfect correspondence is suddenly struck between the subconscious and conscious worlds, remarkable truths are discovered. Dreaming releases elements of myth, poetry and story, the symbols and hypostatic meanings that conscious thought cannot so easily access. Through such processes reality is presented to us in its various guises. After all, it is reality (Ar.=*al haqq*) that the believer, thinker and scholar are after, not just one of its more constricted forms.

The conscious interpretation of reality requires, of course, the collaboration of analytic reasoning. It is in this collaboration of

conscious thought and subconscious processes, of symbol and spirit on the one hand, and logic and analysis on the other, that more comprehensive knowledge will emerge. Especially, it is the knowledge of self that the dream of knowledge reveals. Once I awake from the dream of knowledge, even though I enter the daylight world, the dream still lingers on like a vapour trail, carrying its discoveries into the conscious mind. Thus comprehensive knowledge or the discovery of truth may be viewed as a continual transiting and exchange between the subconscious and the conscious worlds.

We should be careful of too closely guarding our thoughts or of thinking that we own them as a type of intellectual property. Our thoughts merely surround us as an atmosphere forming the larger world of our elemental life, just as the swimmer is immersed in the water of a lake or an ocean. To use another analogy, the thinker is like the boatman on a river. The river (the world of thought) carries the boatman along. He may well steer his craft but he does not entirely control the current. In this sense, the thinker is just the manager of the mental processes that come to consciousness. Although it may seem that the thinker 'owns' his thoughts in some sense, he is actually highly dependent on a vast reservoir of pre-existent thought in the same way that the sculptor or the fine artist is dependent on the materials out of which *objets d'art* are fashioned. If I am able to think, then what I do think is not really created by me. I have merely discovered it.

The dream of knowledge arises with the grace of effortless attainment. At a higher level, the thinker begins to discourse freely by himself. When this happens, the thinker is no more in control of his thoughts. He becomes their inspired instrument and merely gives them voice, in the same way that the singer sings the song or that the poet writes verse.

The angel friends who direct our actions also direct our thoughts from the unseen world. This guidance is often revealed in dreams and in those awe-filled moments that have a significant impact on our lives or our current preoccupations. But in order to find this guidance, we have to let ourselves dream. We have to allow the mind quiet times of rest, to momentarily desist from ceaseless 'mental fight',[1] even though this mental fight is also an integral part of the process. As in

other areas of our spiritual life, the virtue of surrender will prove efficacious in unlocking the great door of knowledge.

Angels attend us unawares, and though few of us may see them, sometimes we can hear their wings rustling. So is it true, as the child asks, that when it rains the angels are crying? In the mythopoeic answer to this question the dream of knowledge lies hidden.

Beyond

One of the most captivating words in English is *beyond*. Beyond belongs simultaneously to the realms of time, place and space. It points to an ideal. *Beyond* has an unique evocative quality. It says: 'Be on'... Be on your way'... 'Travel'. The word transports beyond self, past Baudelaire's rapt adoration of the clouds, '*...J'aime les nuages... les nuages qui passent...la-bàs... la-bàs... les merveilleux nuages!*'[2] and out into the vastness of the cosmos. *Beyond* evokes a vision of things far away and unattainable, things purely platonic whose lofty Olympian beauty can only be admired from a distance, not grasped. The word *beyond* recalls Victor Hugo's haunting phrase – '*Je ne suis qu'une force qui va*' – a sentence that tells of a mystery of movement leading where, we do not know.

Beyond indicates that wherever we may be right now or expect others to be, they may already be past that point. That in itself bodes well or ill. For individuals may be beyond others in goodness and virtue, or beyond in things reprehensible. The word *beyond* indicates that the usual barriers have been broken down, those normative and comfortable confines in which most individuals circulate. So there is a freedom in being beyond, and a daring, but a great risk too.

Icarus was beyond when he flew too close to the sun, catching his wings on fire and falling into the Aegean Sea.[3] The beyond that Icarus invaded was a violation of the golden mean, a maxim that was for the Greeks, who valued proportion in all things, almost a religion. For if we dare to *reach* beyond, we may surprise ourselves to find that we have indeed *gone* beyond and have arrived at that point which we once sought to grasp. In reaching this point, we may find that either we have made new empowering spiritual advances or have reached a hard place from which it proves difficult to return. For the beyond can be

realised, and if it is, then it is no longer the beyond. It becomes the here and now, in this space around me, a space that is no longer away ahead of me, nor hopelessly out of my reach, as it once was. This once beyond has become the present realisation.

Beyond points to transcendence, to every holy thing that is in the heavens above and sustains our world without our even knowing it. Transcendence is a state beyond. It is also called heaven. There is a time beyond. It is called eternity. There is a place beyond. It is called the placeless. There is space beyond. It is called infinity. Lastly, there is attaining the beyond ourselves, where all things cease – the point of detachment, the station of self-sacrifice and spiritual transformation where we begin to live in and for God.

* * *

The following four essays deal with time from contrasting perspectives. Time *presents a metaphysical understanding of time and views time, once its mystery is grasped, as a friend.* Midpoint in Time *deals with the existential concerns of facing the past, present and future on the life journey.* Defeating Tyrannical Time, *a shorter piece, considers time to be a heartless god who makes imperious demands on our lives but who may be defeated by being alert to the potentialities of the present moment always about to be born.* The Soul: Both In and Out of Time *reflects on the contrasting experiences of the soul in the light of eternity.*

Time

Time is a mysterious creature. Sometimes it goes so fast we can scarcely imagine that it has gone. At other times it drags on painfully slowly, and no matter what we do we cannot speed it up. Sometimes there is no time, as when they say: 'We are out of time.' Then at another moment we are told that there is 'all the time in the world'. But how much time is 'all the time in the world'? Surely, it cannot be measured. And yet we do measure time. We measure it in seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years and so on. Unlike the atom, however, time cannot be split. Neither can it be manipulated in any way. But it can be used, foolishly or wisely.

They say time is wasted, but it is not so, for time outlasts everything in the universe. It is our lives we waste. As long as the universe lasts, there will be time. They talk about the beginning and

the end, but there is no beginning and no end, really. Beginnings and endings are just turning points, significant events, heart beats or moments of high drama in the lives of individuals or in history. Something has always preceded these beginnings, and something will always follow these endings.

There is no beginning, no end of time. There is only the beginning and the end of the lives of sentient beings, those who are conscious and who can either use or measure time. When there is an end to time, the universe as we know it will no longer exist. In one very real sense, there is only the now.

The child is either oblivious of time or feels it as a burden and a mystery. 'When will I grow up?' the child asks. 'When will we be there?' asks the impatient, travel-weary young one. For the youth, time is an opportunity to affirm the powers of self, to become what one is becoming, to find an identity. Only the aware individual is really conscious of passing time.

We may well fear time, and fear it with reason. For like the tide, as the maxim says, it waits for no man, will not indulge the hesitation of any woman. It is more precious than gold but cannot be bought or sold. Though its effects are ever-determinative, it is intangible. It runs more freely than water through our fingers. The only way to truly understand time in this world is to measure and use. This is all that can be done with time. Measure and use.

This old and venerable, kindly father will smile on you if you respect his ways. If time becomes your benefactor and your patron, he will laud your persistent efforts with kindly praise. But I tell you there is a real secret and a solemn mystery to time. Very few discover it while they are here. This is the secret: to know that you are now in eternity and that time is your friend.

Midpoint in Time

Each pilgrim is on a journey midway between the past and the future. That midpoint is, of course, the present. The future lies before us like an open road, bright and full of promise. But at the same time, we are at certain moments in our lives only too fully aware that the past lingers on, determining in part today's moods and feelings. If the past

has been a happy one, there may be little to trouble the mind in the present. If, however, the past contains regrets – and few of us do not have some – we know that the only profitable thing we can do with this past, both for our own good and for the sake of others, is to learn its valuable lessons and turn the page to the next chapter of our lives in order to write a more congenial script. I am learning that submission to one's fate and thankfulness for all that life brings to my door are great liquid assets in fulfilling my 'unfolding destiny'[4] without which acceptance would be a formidable difficulty.

While the past may inspire confidence to face the future, especially for those who can count blessings among their legacy, it is future expectations that offer that most life-giving of attributes – hope. Now hope is a powerful alchemy of both desire and expectation, and to make good its promise, hope is best accompanied by the confident expectation of fulfilment; otherwise it proves not to be sanguine. Luke-warm hope always undermines its true spirit which fully anticipates realisation.

While the past may store confidence to face the future, it does not offer hope. The past reflects back memories, full of satisfaction or tinged with regret. For most of us, memories of the past are bitter-sweet and that oxymoron, it seems, is a singular feature of the human condition. The unending search for tomorrow beckons the wayfarer, for although tomorrow contains no memories, it holds nonetheless the potential for brighter ones. This potential is itself a boon, for great expectations feed the soul. Tomorrow contains the glowing promise of a better life.

Yet it is hard to live for tomorrow, bright though we believe it to be, harder than to live for yesterday. For tomorrow, unlike the past, is and will remain undefined. And if tomorrow, contrary to the dictum, does finally come, it is not exactly as we expected. But anticipated in the spirit of faith, strength can be derived from the promise of another day. We increase both faith and strength in the firm belief that tomorrow will bring other journeys, fresh adventures, friendly faces and fast friends.

And what of today? The saints, the mystics and the sagacious, both of the past and the present, have discovered the answer to that question. It was and is to live in the now. The 'spiritually learned'[5] know

that the future is best made ready by fully experiencing the present, by completely living this instant, by attending fully to the task at hand, to the goal to be won, by being fully conscious that this moment – *now* – is the only bit of time that we shall ever own. These select few who have learned the secret of the now – not to forever mourn the past nor dissipate present opportunities by living in too great an anticipation of the future – have discovered the way to contentment. They know that by overcoming today's test, by attending to today's problem as best they can, by assuaging today's pain and solving today's riddle, they will be empowered to break the vicious circle; they 'will be freed from the darkness of continually repeating the past'[6] and become capable of creating for themselves a new life at every moment.

Defeating Tyrannical Time

Time can be a harsh taskmaster, even a slave-driver. But the tyrant of time can be governed. The despot of time can be conquered. The way to humble time, the trick in discomfiting Kronos, is to goad him into combat, to engage him in sport, to challenge him to defeat you in the arena of the busy life. This contest, this sport, this bloodless war must be waged at sunrise. The gauntlet must be taken up in the early hours of day. The tyrant of time is overmastered by the strategy of the slow and steady pace. The race is won by running long into the hours of evening. Time is routed by the marathon that continues late into the night, even unto the first streaks of light at early dawn.

Time is fleeing away this very moment like the grains of sand dropping through the hour glass. Let me make now the best of time – which is to make the best of the present moment. Let me stop this oppressive tyrant though it be just for a breath, in the here and now, in the *Dasein*,[7] in the just-being-there, in being fully present to the possibilities of the *now* and ever-alert to the potentialities of the radiant moment that is about to be born. The true believer knows that time is only a tyrannical false god that reigns but briefly, then dies. He is to be served while he yet lives and is able to make his imperious demands. But the true believer serves him in the knowledge that one day the tyrant of time shall fall victim to himself and be no more.

The Soul: Both In and Out of Time

He who binds to himself a Joy,
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the Joy as it flies,
Lives in Eternity's sun-rise.
WILLIAM BLAKE[8]

It is both a consolation and a hope to realise that the soul lives both in and out of time. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the soul is a created phenomenon and has thus been created in time, yet lives eternally from the moment of its creation.[9] It lives both in the now and the forever. The soul shares with the body its mortality but outlives the body when it puts on the garment of immortality. What does this mean for human experience?

While it inhabits the body, all the experiences of the soul are present in the psyche and available to the human mind. Most individuals forget about unpleasant experiences or events in time – or at least their impact fades – as does indeed the effect of pleasant ones. The human tendency is to live in the dynamic of the now, whatever that dynamic may be. For it is the now that usually occupies the immediate attention of the soul.

Yet the soul wants to carry its most meaningful, joyous or richly transformational experiences into eternity. It will be a cause of joy to the soul if it is still possible to repeat such experiences in the present, or at least to remember them. But it will be a cause of sorrow to the soul if these experiences are no longer available to us and if we regret their passing.

Precisely at such times, when we are simultaneously rewarded and vexed by 'the remembrance of things past',[10] it is a consolation to remember that the soul lives in eternity – that what once was, still is. And we can best remember through detachment. The sorrow of the 'remembrance of things past' can be transcended through detachment. The practice of detachment will help bring the soul back into eternity and back into joy. By simply remembering the moment without clinging to it, without desiring its repetition, we shall live it once again, and by the same process, experience eternity.

This is admittedly difficult to do for it is in the nature of the soul to long for the repetition of 'peak experiences'.[11] But if we are able to escape or to abandon the all-too-human desire to repeat the self-same experience in the here and now – which is an impossibility because the circumstances are by now different – by a surprising paradox we shall know the joy of the experience afresh. It is only the regret of not being able to relive the self-same experience that causes pain. The point is that for the part of the soul that lives in eternity, the joy of such experiences is always available to us, that is, if we are satisfied to simply remember them with gratitude, without longing, without regret, without the desire to possess them again. If such experiences or events were (are) truly pure and truly lovely, were (are) selfless and sincere, I believe that they will live eternally and we will find them again, for 'Surely He will not suffer the reward of His favoured ones to be lost'.[12] As for the memory of unhappy experiences, the best remedy here is to create new experiences which will become a remembered source of joy.

Mystery and the True Name

'What is it?' is a commonsense and fundamental question raised by certain philosophers who seek to discern the identity of any thing. Names are an attempt to answer that question. In Pascal's understanding, there are such things as essential names. Essential names are 'divested of all other meaning'.[13] These names cannot be reduced to any other signifier. They are essential signs and cannot really be understood in terms of synonyms or substitutes. Any other signifiers used to describe them are only approximations. When we have reached the point where something cannot be described in other words, we have reached its identity as a true name.

A true name, then, is something that cannot be given any other name than its own, any other name than the one it already has. Thus, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said in a famous passage: 'My name is 'Abdu'l-Bahá [Servant of Bahá]. My qualification is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My reality is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My praise is 'Abdu'l-Bahá.'[14] 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the true name. The 'Servant of Bahá' is his reality. When Moses, the great legislator, met Yahweh on Sinai, He inquired of God what God's name might be. According to the Eloist tradition, God told Moses to tell

the people of Israel that 'I am who I am (*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*)[15] sent me'. The 'I am' (the Eternal One) is in this example one of God's true names which cannot be explained by any other reference.

The familiar example of colours comes to mind to further elucidate the true name. If you did not know colours and were to ask: 'What colour is this apple?' one would respond, 'red' or 'green' and you would understand immediately. If you wanted to inquire further, you might ask: 'But what is red?' At this point you would be obliged to resort to analogies that share the common property that we call red: the red of the rose, the red of blood, the glow of sunrise or sunset, the red of the beloved's cheek, etc. An esoteric passage in the writings of the Báb depicts a quintessential red, '...the Maid of Heaven, begotten by the Spirit of Bahá, abiding within the Mansion hewn out of a mass of ruby, tender and vibrant...'[16] Yet, however abstruse the explanation might be, the answer is simply that 'red is red'. It is nothing other than itself. True names result at the point of an essential understanding or bare reality, that point beyond which there is no defining.

Now what is the point of the foregoing? The bare essential of the true name underscores the fact that both language and human thought are incapable of transcending their own limitations. Bahá'u'lláh has, of course, alluded to this very theme several times in his writings. In one passage he says:

> How great the multitude of truths which the garment of words can never contain! How vast the number of such verities as no expression can adequately describe, whose significance can never be unfolded, and to which not even the remotest allusions can be made! How manifold are the truths which must remain unuttered until the appointed time is come![17]

It is to be emphasized, however, that the true name, though it be familiar or commonplace, does not reveal the essential mystery of any being. Thus, even though we name things, in so doing we do not capture their essence, disempower them or even necessarily make them familiar or bring them into closer relationship with us. They remain surrounded in mystery. Language and human thought in no way pierce the veils of mystery that encompass the slightest things in creation. The water droplet, the blade of grass, the speck of sand,

the crystal, the smooth stone all retain their essential mystery. Think, then, of the mysteries contained in the human being, that most subtle and complex of all creatures, alluded to in the saying attributed to the Imám 'Alí: 'Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form when within thee the universe is folded?'[18] How much more so is this idea true of God Himself, that mystery of all mysteries! Whatever we name the Divinity, even when He names Himself *Bahá*, His most essential true name, such naming does in no way capture His essential reality. Thus, the true name remains and will always remain shrouded in mystery. That mystery is the hidden name within the name, the unknown attribute of God.

The Beginning and End of Names

Where did naming begin? In the Judaeo-Christian tradition at least, the Book of Genesis tells us that naming began with Adam. Adam, that first link in the prophetic chain that bears his name (the Adamic Cycle),[19] named with God's permission the birds of the air and the beasts of the field.[20] This naming of the creatures by Adam also signifies that Adam possessed the science of knowing their true identity. It also indicates that Adam was God's deputy or representative, for clearly God might have named the creatures Himself, dictating the names to Adam. The Book of Genesis states, however, that God 'brought them [the creatures] unto Adam to see what he would call them'.[21] Here is one evidence of Adam's prophetic power.

Where do names end? Names will end when we know the true identity of things. Once we are able to perceive the essence of a thing, once we come to visualise its pure identity, we shall no longer need to identify it by name. Names will disappear when we no longer need to ask the questions: 'Who are you?' 'What is it?' For then we will know the thing itself and understand its essence and no longer 'see through a glass, darkly'. St. Paul had a clear intimation of this essential knowledge when he wrote: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.'[22] I imagine that in that vast world beyond, in the spiritual birth that breaks forth after death, we shall not have names, nor need them, even though we shall recognise and be recognised.

Questionable Logic: Nothingness and the End of Philosophy

Philosophy is a complex mass of reflections that at higher levels aims at simplicity, a simplicity clearly discernible in the writings of the great thinkers. Few philosophers reach this stage, but in several of the great ones such as Plato, Kant or Spinoza, this drive toward simplicity and synthesis becomes more apparent. Spinoza at least, unlike some of the philosophers of idealism such as Hegel, was never impressed with the sophistry of words, with the spinning of verbal webs, with the intoxication of the phonic *tour de force*. There is a beautiful clarity running through a great deal of Spinoza's thought. I do not mean by this that everything Spinoza wrote is simple; only that his work is admirable for its clarity as well as its profundity, particularly his writing on virtue in the *Ethics*.[23]

Now and again something remarkable happens to the philosopher's work at these higher levels. Sometimes in the later stages of analysis, an abrupt shift in thought occurs. The bifurcation radically changes the earlier thought, or at least departs from it in a significant way. We see this shifting pattern in the earlier and later Wittgenstein. The earlier Wittgenstein was associated with the linguistic positivism of the Vienna circle, so heavily influenced by the growing ascendancy of twentieth century science but, unlike Adolf Carnap who was an acerbic critic of the 'nonsense' of all metaphysical language, the later Wittgenstein clearly recognized the meaningfulness of all language,[24] and indeed, posited forms and families of language as more discrete and characteristic languages within language itself. Most embarrassing of all to the analytical philosophers, the once earlier positivistic, ultra-rational Wittgenstein later alluded to mysticism and such things incomprehensible. Like the silent theologians of the *via negativa* and the mystics, Wittgenstein could write such things as 'There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.'[25] This statement caused the poet Julian Bell to recognize in Wittgenstein an anti-philosophical philosopher and declare him to be what he was:

> He smuggles knowledge from a secret source
> A mystic in the end, confessed and plain
> The ancient enemy returned again.[26]

We also see this pattern in the earlier and later Heidegger. Agnostics could claim that the earlier Heidegger belonged to them. The later Heidegger, still preoccupied with *Sein* and *Dasein*,[27] although still veiled as ever, whispered his concern for all Being, but spoken now in a more careful way, in open, sensitive and sober tones that might be described as a mystical monism. Whether he excogitated this mystical monism with or without theism, Heidegger has left us guessing, but he was one who certainly recognized the spiritual power(s) inherent in an increasingly personal Being or beings of the universe.

In the case of St. Thomas Aquinas, nigh unto death, he suddenly stopped writing altogether, saying that everything he had written previously 'now seems like straw'.[28] What happened to Aquinas we do not precisely know, but a year before he died on 7 March 1274 he had a 'mysterious experience'[29] while saying Mass. A vision or a mystical occurrence that profoundly shook his soul is one interpretation. But whatever happened to him, it made the world of thought, for all its precision and nobility, all its concern for truth, seem meaningless. Another, more sceptical, interpretation has it that Aquinas suffered a mental breakdown.[30] Death, however, sometimes intervenes and the philosopher is removed from the scene so that the later thinking cannot be developed in a more systematic, thoroughgoing way.

The presence of the thought-shift bears out 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that the philosopher, through the self-same mode of logic, will overturn a previous conclusion and advance a new one. 'Abdu'l-Bahá teaches that Plato first proved by logic the geocentric theory of the earth and the sun and then by the same logic proved the heliocentric theory.[31] My reading is that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's observation is meant to caution against relying too heavily on the epistemological tool of reason or logic as an absolute guide. The same caution is sounded with respect to the other epistemological tools.[32] A judicious balance among them offers a surer picture of reality.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's caution needs to be heeded. Even with Kant's impressive critique of the powers of reason,[33] from the time of the Enlightenment (and for centuries afterward) reason or logic took on an absolute character in western philosophy. But anything other than God that poses as an absolute must be imperfect and its defects recognised and exposed. The same may be said of any other epistemological

tool that attempts to pass for the Absolute. In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teaching, however, it is only God who bestows absolute certainty, working through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as It illuminates the faculties of understanding:

> But the bounty of the Holy Spirit gives the true method of comprehension which is infallible and indubitable.This is through the help of the Holy Spirit which comes to man, and this is the condition in which certainty can alone be attained.[34]

These affirmations lead us clearly in the direction of the prophetic figure as the sole sure source of knowledge and wisdom, for it is only He who claims to be so possessed of the Holy Spirit and to speak with such certitude.

Western philosophers have generally not paid close enough attention to the weaknesses inherent in their own epistemology. Logic is notorious for becoming caught in a trap of its own making, for being prone to antinomies[35] and for being subject to circular reasoning from which it can escape only by exiting. Intuition is far more synoptic. Moreover, logic deduces only those correct conclusions or 'therefores' that are already implicit in and follow unavoidably from its own premises. In this sense it is all too predetermined and predictable.

Euclid's geometry is valid only if we are measuring space by the axioms that lie at the basis of his system. Once we leave Euclid's mathematical world, the geometrician begins to measure according to a diffferent, non-Euclidian, standard. Bernhard Riemann's (1826–1866) elliptical geometry, for example, went beyond Euclid's work to include the concept of unbounded, curved space.[36] The non-Euclidian cannot say, of course, that Euclid was wrong; only that Euclid has calculated according to another measure, a standard that the non-Euclidean does not employ. Now, someone may argue that if there be contradiction, faulty logic must perforce be at work. Perhaps. But it must also be said that Bertrand Russell's affirmation that there is a single, universal and undeniable propositional logic was destroyed by Gödel's proof in 1931. Gödel affirmed that every mathematical system of logic which will repeat its operations

infinitely must necessarily contain propositions which cannot be proven by the same system – a kind of mathematical faith.

These considerations raise at the same time another question. That question is 'so what?' The 'so what?' question implies that even when logic is faultless, is consistent with itself, and when arbitrary and unavoidable conclusions inevitably follow from first premises, this mode of reasoning still runs the risk of passing for an end in itself, rather than a means.

Logic above all should be a means to an end: namely, the elucidation of *a* truth, and not purport to be *the* proof of the Truth. The fact that P=Q is proven, once the conclusion is drawn and the 'therefore' stated, may in fact be meaningful only to the logician and to a few others who are interested in such demonstrations. The 'so what?' question has to be raised in the face of what has been called the 'violence of logic'. The hyperbole expressed in the word 'violence' indicates that when logic is used outside of its valid norms and attempts to become the exclusive vehicle for understanding reality, it tends to crush forms of reasoning that the logician has falsely concluded are less sure than itself.

Logic by itself is woefully deficient in *meaning* and where there be no meaning, to slightly vary a phrase from the Book of Proverbs, 'the people perish'.[37] How meaningful is it to the life and death of the individual to say that P=Q without contradiction? It is only meaningful to those who conceive of human reasoning in such a narrow and restrictive fashion, and who allow for no other mode of reasoning. When one lies close to death, is one then moved to salvation by the inescapable conclusion that P=Q? If one is not in any case interested in salvation, then either my point is proven, or there is no logic present at all.

Is it rather not more meaningful and reasonable to wonder what will loom up when we close our eyes for the last time, or to wonder what our fate will be when once we are delivered from the agony of death? Is it not more meaningful to hope and to pray, indeed to know, that a higher and more glorious form of being will, in some other dimension, be ushered in, when in what surely must be the greatest of all surprises, we shall have discovered that we have not died at all but have been born again?

I am not arguing here simply *in extremis*, from the most apocalyptic example in an individual's life, the moment of death itself, when we come to dwell for all eternity in the land of the last things. All of life, every waking turn, calls us to discover moments of significance. They come as moments of revelation, or as moments of intimate disclosure in which the universe speaks to us, in Martin Buber's word, as a 'Thou'.[38] They come as quiet, simple and loving moments full of transport, exaltation or ecstasy of soul, or quiet but assuring increments in 'the peace of God which passeth all understanding'.[39] Herein, I think, lies the true meaning of meaning.

Another significant and curious thing happens to the mind of the philosopher, once again at these higher levels. The tendency towards simplicity to which I have referred above becomes even further marked as the mind of the philosopher reaches the end-point of systematisation and makes breakthroughs into higher forms of consciousness. These higher forms of consciousness are usually a clear recognition of the limits of the power of the human mind to fathom the Grand Plan that is called Reality. Prospero's broken staff in Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* (Act V, sc.1), a symbolic gesture that the poet and writer Horace Holley has interpreted as applying to Shakespeare's own 'self-recognized limitations as a writer'[40] is an indication that there were other powers and other realms that were not at his command.

The work of the enlightened philosopher at these higher levels ventures further away from writing as chatter and further and further into silence, and then increasingly into nothingness. By this I mean that at some significant point in the philosopher's life, he realises that somehow his philosophy must be expressed in concrete action, in morality, in real living. Kant knew this truth. He called it the exercise of *'die praktische Vernunft'* or practical reason; that is, reason put into practice in the service of morality. Kant realised that any system of ethics must lead to peace with one's neighbours, human dignity, and a life of duty and virtue in which reason assents in the exercise of free will to fulfil a higher moral purpose.[41]

It is precisely here that philosophy tends toward nothingness to find fulfilment. By nothingness, however, I do not intend the void of meaninglessness, the dubious negation that had inveigled the imagination of Jean-Paul Sartre, a negation that leaves the individual

with that most questionable and obscure possibility of freedom, that of being able to 'annihilate nothingness' (*néantiser le néant*).[42] For what kind of freedom is it to be able to negate nothingness? Does the negation of nothingness somehow usher us into the world of being? How can two negatives somehow create a positive? Only being can annihilate nothingness.

The nothingness to which I refer is rather the silent eloquence of the deed; the deed that does not draw attention to itself, the nothingness that is selflessness. It is the cessation of discourse and the articulate testimony of the deed that sounds both the end and fulfilment of philosophy. This nothingness is the nothingness that results when the philosopher realises that all he has written signifies nothing unless he lives, or seriously attempts to live, a life of devotion, reverence for all of life, and spiritual virtue. Such nothingness is the nothingness and the insignificance of what I have written, the insignificance that pales before the unavoidable imperatives of the-what-I-must-be, the what-I-must-do and the-what-I-must-live. For all great philosophy must at some point end in silence; at that point where words end and deeds begin.

Although as the scriptures testify, it is the prophet who prepares the way for the prophet who is to come, in another back-handed sense the philosopher also makes the ground ready. For what the prophet teaches cannot be taught by the philosopher, although he may lead us to the door. As Holley has said of Shakespeare, the notes that the writer sounds – and I take his point to apply equally well to the philosopher – consist only of the notes that he or she can hear and compose, however moving and beautiful the melody may be. 'Thus it seems to most students that Shakespeare is and must be supreme in literature for all time. Shakespeare, it seems, sounded all the *available* notes on the keyboard of life.'[43] Shakespeare sounded all the *available* notes, says Holley. This implies that other notes there were, silent notes that Shakespeare could neither hear nor play.

But the symphonies composed by the prophets are written in other keys and in scales with which we are not immediately familiar or can scarcely hear in the beginning. Their compositions originate in that sacred silence that is the end of philosophy and the beginning of wisdom and truth. Those who are willing to listen will soon discover

the delights of the prophetic song and will desire to make music after their fashion. All that the prophets have said and done bears fruit in the silent witness of the life lived for God, at that point where philosophy ends and is fulfilled, in the fragrance of spirituality.

Christ in Gethsemane: The Existential Moment and the Irony of Knowledge

As a philosophy, existentialism is closer to real life than any other, for its roots do not lie in philosophical speculation at all, but rather in a profound reflection and experience of the depths of those living, determinative, divine realities that we call life and death and in the affirmation or denial of self and others. We find especially telling examples of the existential moment during those rare days when 'God walks among men', in the lives of the prophets, apostles, martyrs and saints. These examples can be found in the events of the Hebrew Bible and the Gospel and indeed in any spiritual history which tells us of the Divine Epiphany revealed in its encounter with the human world.

One of the deepest roots of existentialism lies in its contrary, in the possibility and threat of non-existence, the risk that life may be snuffed out. 'Abdu'l-Bahá when speaking of death, says for example: 'Death is the absence of life. Therefore, on the one hand, we have existence; on the other, nonexistence, negation or absence of existence.'[44] The deeper questioning resulting from the contemplation of our own annihilation (the fear of death), leads us to the philosophical disposition that is called the existential. This fear of annihilation, whether from the uncertainties in our personal lives, the still persistent nuclear threat or the certainty of death, has risen up like a tidal wave of despair to engulf entire nations, producing the psychological angst that has been so pervasive in the second half of the twentieth century and which has defined the mood of much existential literature. Yet when taken in a more positive spiritual perspective, existentialism does not convey that pessimism with which it has been associated. Viewed with the eyes of faith, the existential moment leads to realism and beyond realism into hope and spiritual transformation.

In the Christian tradition, the Gospel accounts of the betrayal, passion and crucifixion of Jesus as well as Peter's momentary denial

of Christ furnish meaningful examples of the existential moment. Here we find the Anointed of God earnestly praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, supplicating his Father for strength during his last few hours on earth, looking into his soul so that he may offer up in a sacrificial spirit his blessed life. The prayer is so heartfelt, so deep, that his luminous brow is beaded with drops of sweat like pearls of blood. St. Luke's account reads: 'And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.'[45]

In those agonizing moments, Christ spoke a few words that have caused no small amount of wonderment: 'Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.'[46] Some have concluded that Jesus spoke thus in a moment when nerve failed; when the human nature of the man Yeshua, not the deified Christ, was praying for mercy, for the chance to escape the supreme sacrifice destined for him that day. Such interpretations have been justified by recourse to the human nature of Jesus; that *Yeshua* was experiencing the fear and anguish that all men experience, begging God to release him from the fate that awaited.

Yet these poignant words might be understood in another way – as the prayer of the Son trying to read the divine mind of the Father, the prayer of the sacrificial lamb struggling to discover what the holy will and the irrevocable decree of the Father might be. For who, even the Son, may read the final will of the Father until that will is fully disclosed? From several other Gospel passages we know that Jesus prophesied his own death,[47] a death that came as a certainty decreed. Yet while the tragic but triumphant story was still unfolding, who could know, even the Son himself, what the Almighty might finally enjoin?

For in all sacred history, in all readings of the divine will, as both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have clearly indicated, there is a word that points to a divine uncertainty, to a condition of doubt that indicates that things may turn out to be either this or that. That word is 'impending'.[48] Now impending means that the ensuing result is not a decided issue. It may also point to an event that is likely. The event may be probable, even imminent, but neither imminence and probability necessarily mean that the result has already been decided. The divine decree just might surprise us in a sudden twist or

turn and declare the outcome otherwise. One of the greatest freedoms that God possesses is the possibility of changing the Divine Mind; this changing of the Mind of God encloses the deepest wisdom. Then might it not also have proven to be the supreme mercy and wisdom of God to have let that cup pass from Jesus? Could Christ, locked into the dark heart of the passion in Gethsemane, despite the prophecies of his own death, have so easily and clearly read the Divine Will as it was unfolding? No, there is another interpretation to this pathetic scene than a slip in steadfastness.

The disciples, however, could not watch with him. Their eyelids closed. One has to wonder why they did not sense that this might be his last night on earth, his last hours with them. Perhaps in their naiveté, they never imagined that one so glorious, one so much in touch with powers not of this world could be taken from them. And as sleep invaded their eyes, a profound note of human frailty is sounded.

There in that nocturnal garden in Jerusalem, we encounter the existential moment: the aloneness, the utter solitude of the self bearing up under its burden, the naked self heavily labouring, watching, waiting, struggling, trying to read and to acquiesce to the will of God, waiting for some sign, struggling to be born again into a stronger, clearer state of courage and acquiescence.

* * *

I come now to a clarification of the meaning of the phrase 'the irony of knowledge'. Its reference points are Judas Iscariot and Saint Peter. In that moment of consternation when Christ had announced to the disciples who had gathered to celebrate the Paschal Meal for the last time that one of them would betray him, Judas along with the others said to Jesus: 'Master, is it I?' Christ replied to Judas: 'Thou hast said.'[49]

Here is a cogent example of the irony of knowledge. We are accustomed to believing that knowledge is power and that to be forewarned is to be forearmed. We are taught that with knowledge and foresight souls can be educated, behaviour can change. Judas, however, could not be dissuaded by the foreknowledge of Christ from enacting the treacherous deed which according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá was motivated by a conflagration of hate and envy which had consumed his heart:

Judas Iscariot was the greatest of the disciples, and he summoned the people to Christ. Then it seemed to him that Jesus was showing increasing regard to the Apostle Peter, and when Jesus said, 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church,' these words addressed to Peter, and this singling out of Peter for special honour, had a marked effect on the Apostle, and kindled envy within the heart of Judas. For this reason he who had once drawn nigh did turn aside, and he who had believed in the Faith denied it, and his love changed to hate, until he became a cause of the crucifixion of that glorious Lord, that manifest Splendour. Such is the outcome of envy, the chief reason why men turn aside from the Straight Path.[50]

The meaning of Judas's existential moment is that foreknowledge is a useless thing in the face of the malevolent will. And in the face, too, of the inexorable will of destiny by which such woes must come into the world.[51]

The irony of knowledge is again revealed in Peter's denial of Christ. Peter swore and protested aloud at that same table that he would rather die than deny his Lord: 'But he spake the more vehemently, If I should die with thee, I will not deny thee in any wise.'[52] But he did nonetheless. In this Peter, like Judas, had foreknowledge that did not prevent him. For when a maidservant identified him as being with the Galilean, he swore that he knew him not[53] and he did so swear to save his life. Peter for all his oaths was caught in the trap of his own denial. 'Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech bewrayeth [betrays] thee,'[54] they said to him. But he only swore the harder.

We also in our aloneness, when our friends and companions are powerless to lift the burden from our shoulders, or we from theirs, when we can do nothing but go through the fires of purgation ourselves or watch our friends being consumed by the flames, live out then our own existential moment.

The Gospel stories of Judas and Peter are an object lesson in the powerlessness of knowledge when the human will fails. As the great Aquinas has written, even though the intellect moves the will, will also moves intellect and thus our actions.[55] Judas's mind condemned his action; otherwise he would not have later sought death by his own hand. But he was overcome by the passions of self and thus suffered from a grievous defect of the will. For it is will that determines to a

great extent human conduct. It is the will that resolves whether or not we will believe, whether we will affirm or deny, whether we will do or not do, either to seek to do good or to seek to do harm – that and the mercy of God. Without will, knowledge is lame.

But the story does not end here. Unlike Judas, who was so filled with self-loathing that he went out and hanged himself, Peter's story ends happily. After walking alive through the fires of remorse, Peter was transformed and became the 'rock' (Gk.=*petros*) that Christ had foretold. No doubt Peter was saved by the prayers of his Master: 'And the Lord said: Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy bretheren.'[56] Simon bar Jonah ultimately came to manifest the steadfastness his Master had foreseen in him and for which He had prayed. Peter became firm in the end, after coming through his own Gethsemane of sorrow – the denial of the One he loved most in the world.

It would be difficult to fully imagine the fires of sorrow and regret that seared Peter's heart once the full realisation struck him that fear and cowardice had compelled him to deny his Master, that One who had bestowed upon him the very essence of love and kindness. But in time the fever of remorse was stilled, the shameful deed was assuaged, and the man became again a tower of strength, in steadfastness constant, and more importantly, for all time. The fisherman who became caught in his own net stumbled and fell, but then rose up to cast again into salvific waters and in the name of Christ gathered up thousands of souls.[57]

The existential moment, then, is the moment of that inner solitude and vulnerability when we must needs come face to face with self, with our own identity. Truthfulness takes many forms. Coming face to face with the reality of self is one of the most difficult truths to face and accept. Although we may evade and deny for a time, if we ultimately deny this moment of truth, we shall deny the condition of our own soul and the possibilities for spiritual growth. The existential moment is that moment of truth when the soul is plunged into a wasteland of meaninglessness, when all the knowledge in the world seems as useless as a weed. Meaning and transformation are

forged in the fiery ordeals of the moment.

The existential moment cannot be fully foreseen. Its apocalyptic descent precludes preparation. It cannot be analysed away. Yet, most importantly, this moment can be the prelude to spiritual transformation and so has proven to be many times throughout sacred history. The existential moment is the lesson of life itself, the lesson that only life and nothing else can give, the lesson that no book of philosophy nor any human writing can convey.

Science, Consciousness and the Personal Category

In the late twentieth century and as we prepare to enter the third millennium, scientists have been attempting, through a variety of approaches, to fuse quantum mechanics and general relativity into a single 'unified' post-quantum theory. In so doing they have come to realise that science is not just a collection of detached, objective statements about the universe, but that the universe is a reflection of what is in the mind itself. The workings of consciousness are becoming an object of scientific reflection. Physicist Bob Toben has called consciousness 'the totality beyond space-time' and 'the missing hidden variable in the structuring of matter'.[58] Other physicists such as John Wheeler,[59] David Bohm[60] and Fritjof Capra,[61] albeit in varying degrees, have invoked mystery, holism, philosophy, and eastern mysticism, and, most important, the role of the mind itself, in bringing science and religion closer together. Consequently, it is rather more likely that the 'Grand Unified Theory' will work on a larger scale, uniting the timeless truths of philosophy, mysticism and religion with a scientific world-view.

Sir Arthur Eddington, who was knighted in 1930 for his contribution to astrophysics, wrote these telling words about the centrality of the mind itself in relation to science:

> Recognizing that the physical world is entirely abstract and without actuality apart from its linkage to consciousness, we restore consciousness to the fundamental position instead of representing it as an inessential complication occasionally found in the midst of inorganic nature at a late stage of evolutionary history...all features of consciousness alike lead into the external world of physics.[62]

In another celebrated Eddington phrase, he said crisply: 'The stuff of the world is mind stuff.'[63]

Now, that which is nearest the self is and must be personal. Mind or consciousness is not only nearest the self. In one sense, it *is* the self. The synthesizing scientists mentioned above (and there are a number of others) are telling us that the further we advance into science, the further we travel both within and without; the deeper we travel into outer space, the more we penetrate inner space. Unavoidably, with mind, both the personal and the spiritual begin to unfold. These scientists have already begun to realise the implications of a more personal view of the universe, one that does not destroy the foundations of science but rather augments and complements its more traditional views. Science in and of itself cannot furnish a total 'world-view', for it is only the part, not the whole. The total world-view must necessarily derive from both science and religion.

Philosophy has a central role to play in the new synthesis of religion and science. However, its limitations must be recognised. Within its ordinary constraints, philosophy does not venture beyond the objective and the detached. Although analysis, objectivity and rational constraint constitute philosophy's strengths, they are also at the same time its weakness and limitation. Earnest seekers beg for experience. They want not only to analyse and describe, but also to taste. They wish, not only to describe flight, but to fly. They are seekers after God. We are bound, at some point on this journey, to leave the excogitations of philosophy behind to strive to enter the mystical realm, to go beyond theory and engage in *praxis* [= theory + practice].

Mysticism is characterised paradoxically both by silence and by dialogue. In silence, one speaks with oneself and in dialogue we enter into conversation with others. When we enter the realm of the mystical, we realise that the universe is speaking to us as the reflection of a living God who without being a person is nonetheless a personal Being in the most intimate sense. The universe during such experiences becomes transformed, as viewed through Buber's categories, from an impersonal and remote 'it' into a living 'Thou'.[64] The leaves on the trees and the blades of grass, every living thing declares mystery and rapture in a transpersonal language that is intensely bright with colour and meaning. In that moment, all our senses come

alive from out of the numbness of our half-knowing. In this vision of things, the world is, in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's phrase, 'beautiful in colour and redolent of fragrance in the kingdom of God'.[65] Thus mysticism, like science itself, heightens consciousness in an acute way.

Erwin Schrödinger (1887-1961) not only discovered a form of wave mechanics (Schrödinger's wave equation) and won the Nobel Prize for physics in 1933, but also wrote lucid mystical prose replete with poetic feeling. The following is a passage that Schrödinger wrote about the relationship of our oneness with 'Mother Nature' experienced in the eternal now. This gifted physicist was at the same time able to envision and experience nature in a hypostatic mode.

> Thus you can throw yourself flat on the ground, stretched out upon Mother Earth, with the certain conviction that you are one with her and she with you. You are as firmly established, as invulnerable, as she – indeed, a thousand times firmer and more invulnerable. As surely as she will engulf you tomorrow, so surely will she bring you forth anew to new striving and suffering. And not merely 'some day': now, today, every day she is bringing you forth, not once, but thousands upon thousands of times, just as every day she engulfs you a thousand times over. For eternally and always there is only now, one and the same now; the present is the only thing that has no end.[66]

She sounds like a living being, a personal being, does she not? Just symbol and metaphor? Perhaps. But at the heart of Schrödinger's statement is a profound personal relationship of communion with something that is both within and beyond oneself.

At the heart of the personal realm beckons the experience of prayer and meditation and our discovery of that living and loving Spirit who cares for each of His creatures and all their movements, trials, thoughts and aspirations, just as if this one poor solitary creature had been the sole object of all of His loving and creating. God is the essence and epitome of all that is personal. His creation consequently, when perceived according to its divine intention, cannot be anything other than personal. This personhood includes as much the mind of the scientist as that of the mystic – which are increasingly coming to be recognized as one and the same mind.

The Cosmic Space Traveller and the Oneness of the Spiritual Universe

Today's cosmic space travellers must summon up the same courage as the great explorers of the Renaissance who set their very lives in the balance, and relying on the new theories of Copernican science, set out in their little Caravels to explore far-away continents across vast oceans. Unlike some Renaissance adventurers, however, today's cosmic space traveller will always return safe from his spiritual wanderings. Indeed he will be more alive than ever, for his travels will have added to his perceptions and knowledge. Just as the Renaissance explorers discovered one 'round' geophysical world, the cosmic space traveller of today will also discover the spherical unity of the 'great chain of being'.

The critical thinker may be sceptical of this purported oneness. Yet certain commonalities in the world's religions have been identified by the Perennialist Aldous Huxley as his 'four fundamental doctrines',[67] by Joachim Wach in his chapter on 'Universals in Religion',[68] and in Friedrich Heiler's 'seven principal areas of unity?'[69] to name but a few. Further, the unity of the great religions is either implicit or explicit in the writings of several of the outstanding comparative religionists and scholars of religion today such as Huston Smith,[70] Wilfred Cantwell Smith[71] and Frithjof Schuon.[72] That such a common core might not lend itself to a rigid codification or universal assent still does not invalidate the reality of the oneness of spiritual truth. The sceptic who doubts such affirmations suffers from spiritual myopia. He lacks that susceptibility that philosopher-poet George Santayana aptly expressed in describing Henri Bergson's idealism of the universal mind as a 'cosmic sensibility'.[73]

The oneness of the spiritual universe is a given. Its giver is God. It is as much 'one' as the world that we see every day with physical eyes but are unable to conceive in totality. As we need the perspective of altitude in space to observe the geophysical oneness of this planet, so too we require a higher and broader vision of spiritual truth to perceive the metaphysical oneness of the great religions. The oneness of truth is as much a pure gift as the 'being' of the physical world we now inhabit. But unlike the physical

universe that we take for granted upon the undeniable evidence of its existence, we are still loath to accept the oneness of the spiritual universe. Even though we have known for centuries that the earth was 'round' (spherical), it was not until our beautiful blue planet, partially veiled in stratospheric clouds, was photographed in the cold darkness of infinite space, that we became fully conscious that 'the earth is one country'.[74] The time is soon coming when the consciousness of the oneness of the spiritual universe will be as widely accepted as the geophysical oneness of our planet.

For whatever journey we plot for ourselves and in whichever direction we travel, some things are inevitable. All spiritual explorers share the same human condition. We are all born, live, love and laugh, suffer and die. If we so choose, mariners may meet in the 'midmost heart' of the ocean.[75] And in our cosmic *rendezvous*, we shall discover that the ocean of existence which has given life to all, and upon which we all sail for a time our little craft, is common property, claimed, shared and cherished by every sailor.

The new synthesis of metaphysics, spirituality and science that is being forged by the brightest minds today beckons us to explore a unified cosmos to which Huxley's bold and imaginative title 'brave new world' (borrowed from Shakespeare) might truly apply. The new synthetic science will have as profound an effect on the unity of humanity as the Copernican Revolution did on the obsolete geocentric theories of the first Italian Renaissance. Every spiritual explorer who goes journeying today will find that he or she has contributed to the making of a new map, whose vastness is as yet unrealised – the chart of the human soul and the commonality of the world's great religions – two of the brightest reflections of the Divine Mind. This map will reflect a new creation, outlining the shapes and patterns of the spiritual potentialities inherent in the new world order. Bathed in light, it will far eclipse in detail and depth the geophysical maps of old.

THE FRAGRANCE OF SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality: A Short Definition

Spirituality, for centuries confined to the house of worship, the convent or hermitage, the monastic hall or the divinity school, has by now entered the home, the office, the secular institution of learning and society at large. Two fundamentals of spirituality are devotion and service to God and humanity. How can we better serve God and the human family? In answering this question, we shall come closer to an understanding of spirituality. We serve God through love, prayer, self-sacrifice, charitable deeds, through striving to know and to love God and His friends, by teaching others, by pioneering into new realms of service.

Some serve God by study, writing, teaching and research. By examining our own confused thoughts, we may make them less obscure and thereby illumine with a little light our own lives and the lives of our friends. We may serve God, too, through contemplation, and as Milton said, by patience in difficulties, by standing and waiting – 'They also serve who only stand and wait'[1] – watching the divine plan unfold in our long hours, anticipating His presence and working through the greater and lesser tests of life.

No understanding of spirituality can be merely academic, for this would be a travesty of its true spirit which demands continual practice. The spiritual life makes eloquent testimony of itself. It needs no other proof.

Analogies on Crystals and a Spirituality of Imperfection[2]

Few things in nature seem more perfect than a crystal. Geologists tell us that the perfection of the crystal results from its very large

numbers of atoms or molecules that are concentrated in near-perfect mathematical alignment. Rarely is even one atom in a thousand out of line with another. But many crystals could not have grown into luminous multi-coloured gems without imperfections. The colour of gemstones, for example, is due mainly to imperfections. Imperfections enable the atoms within crystals to move about and chemical reactions to take place. Crystals and gemstones owe their special characteristics of beauty and perfection to flaws.

These rudimentary notions of crystallography suggest rich analogies with spiritual development. The crystal is near-perfect because the design of its atomic structure is 'in line'. By analogy, the righteous soul is in line or conforms to the law of God: 'In all these journeys the traveller must stray not the breadth of a hair from the "Law", for this is indeed the secret of the "Path" and the fruit of the Tree of "Truth".'[3] From this alignment the believer derives strength of character and spiritual beauty, and acquires perfections.

Another commonplace but nonetheless useful comparison between crystallography and spirituality is the idea that every soul is a precious gem, each having its own particular hue or colour. Some gems are more common than others but they are still nonetheless all beautiful. Some souls, like the blue or pink diamond, are rare and it is their rarity that makes them precious. When such souls shine with the light of virtue or reflect the lustrous depths of Lady Wisdom, we are struck by their rich value. Rarer still than diamonds or pearls is the ruby. A ruby is by analogy any unique and precious soul, a deep, rich gem of inestimable value. Such a soul shines with the deep ruby red lustre of celestial love.

The science of crystallography teaches us by analogy that just as imperfections in the crystal cause its growth and produce its lasting beauty, human imperfections are an indispensable function of spiritual development. We do well to remind ourselves consequently that the imperfections that we often see in our own moral and psychological make-up are but God's way of helping the soul to attain that unattainable goal of spiritual perfection. For it is to the extent that the careful and conscientious individual strives to overcome character flaws that he or she draws closer to God. Imperfections can act as catalysts or reactors that precipitate alchemical changes in the life of

the soul. But the soul in struggling against the imperfections of self not only acts and exercises free will and determination, but is also acted upon by the forces of divine confirmations. Through patience and effort and the ebb and flow of activity and passivity, such a soul gains colour, beauty and perfection, and just as important, individuality. Imperfections are, in Daniel C. Jordan's cogent little phrase, but the means for 'becoming your true self'.[4] The true jewellers and gem polishers of humanity are the prophets of God.

Divine Fragrance: Thoughts on an Anecdote

The Bahá'í writings speak in several passages of 'divine fragrance'. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (The Most Holy Book) Bahá'u'lláh says, for example, 'Happy is the lover that hath inhaled the divine fragrance of his Best-Beloved from these words, laden with the perfume of a grace which no tongue can describe.'[5] In the same book He writes that those who recite the verses of God 'in the most melodious of tones...will inhale the divine fragrance of My worlds...'[6] This phraseology, it seems to me, is not just poetry.

I propose here that divine fragrance is not only a poetic symbol but also a sensible substance. In the same way that perfume can be detected by the olfactory sense, the spiritual fragrance of an individual or a piece of writing, a musical composition, painting, sculpture, or other great work of art can be detected from the aesthetic atmosphere surrounding that individual or creative work. Although the scientist or the sceptic may doubt that anyone possesses an ability to tangibly detect spiritual fragrance from an aesthetic world just beyond the fringe, it is nonetheless as real as the scent of a woman passing, but alas, just as fleeting. It may be rare, but is nonetheless real, this ability to detect the fragrance of a work of art that is, in Keats's expression, both beautiful and true.[7]

The question of a divine or spiritual fragrance poses the conundrum of a literal or figurative interpretation of Bahá'í scripture, interpretation that has to be seen in light of human experience. Faced with a literal and/or symbolic interpretation of those writings that mention divine fragrance, a reader may well ask if one can really inhale spiritual fragrance. The possibility should not be so quickly dismissed. Science

may tell us that scents cannot issue from nonexistent organic sources. Yet more than one soul will testify that the smell of roses permeated the air when there were none in the vicinity or that the scent of lilacs was strong where no garden was to be found.

In addition to my own experiences, there are testimonials. I relate one of these here.[8] While travelling in England in July 1993, I met Mrs. Dorothy Brown at a fireside meeting to which I was invited to speak at the home of Roger and Muriel Wilkinson of Kendal, Cumbria. It was in fact Dorothy's decisive experience of the divine fragrance that had caused her to declare herself a Bahá'í fifty years before. Dorothy recounted to me that when she had first heard of the Bahá'í Faith, in her then sceptical frame of mind she had audaciously challenged her teacher Audrey Thompson by saying something to this effect: 'If this God of yours knows that the very hairs of your head are numbered, why doesn't He come and tap me on the shoulder?'

At that very moment, Dorothy said, the room was suddenly filled with the unmistakable, overpowering scent of roses. Dorothy was not alone in smelling the fragrance. Audrey smelled it too, and, Dorothy said, she turned as white as a sheet. As for Dorothy, she required no further proof. She was transformed by this experience and became a believer. Dorothy trembled as she told the story, recalling her audacity at the time in challenging God in such a bold way. The scientist or the sceptic who would like to explain the experience in terms of the imagination stimulating chemical reactions in the brain would have to explain not only what stimulus caused the reaction, but also how *two* people could share the same experience simultaneously. Doubtless they did not share the same brain.

I found further confirmation about divine fragrance a few days later in Caernarfon, North Wales, when I was visiting my friend Robert Parry. While there, I came across this text as I was reading the Bahá'í writings one morning:

> He will come to your aid with invisible hosts, and support you with armies of inspiration from the Concourse above; He will send unto you *sweet perfumes* from the highest Paradise, and waft over you the pure breathings that blow from the *rose gardens* of the Company on high.[9]

It is entirely possible that this text refers to a state that is other than a purely symbolic, a state where the spiritual and the physical meet in perfect correspondence.

I have not concluded, however, that the individual who experiences such occurrences possesses any rare or mystical gifts. Such experiences, though they may count as personal confirmations, are incidental and not basic to faith. They can be meaningful for no one but the individual who experiences them. In terms of a proof of faith, the anecdote that I have related above must be classified as weak; it falls into the same category as miracles. These are proofs for those who see (or in this case smell), but not proofs for those who have not seen (or smelled)[10] – privileged proofs, one might call them, valid for the individual only. I look upon such experiences, nonetheless, as tangible expressions of the existence of spiritual substances, the 'proof' that the Holy Spirit at times allows itself to be verified by other than rational means. In this case, the means are through the senses, which are paradoxically in other situations quite unreliable and at times very misleading.

That one may conceive of the fragrance of spirituality in this way, as a real perfume emanating from the bower of heaven, does not indicate the wholesale adoption of a thorough-going scriptural literalism. There are, however, many things which defy explanation and which exist nonetheless. Spiritual fragrance is a sign, albeit rare, of the divine presence, a vital manifestation from that 'prayer-hearing, prayer-answering God'[11] who is able to touch seekers directly with a message from His presence as a loving token and grace, as a confirmation from a world beyond. Spiritual fragrance means that Spirit *is* sensible [12] – and must be – while we are still in the world, as sensible as the fragrance of the spring rains and the moistening earth that release the fragrance of the flower and the myriad other forms that come to life from within the earth.

Happiness for its Own Sake

We can venture only so far into an understanding of happiness, for happiness is above all to be lived rather than analysed. Although much has been written and said about the nature of happiness, this pearl of great price remains an inexhaustible theme. I contrast this

view of happiness with the one that says happiness is a by-product of something else, of virtuous living, for example. Although this no doubt may be true, it will not prove true in every case. For one may well be virtuous but not happy, although it does not follow that one can be happy and vicious.

The world has its own kind of happiness, what I call the spirit of living for the world alone.[13] This is that sense of well-being which ignores the spiritual realm, and gets along quite happily according to the comfortable ways of natural law, sociability and human sentiment. It is the way of happiness that takes what the world has to offer and does so with a happy heart. Most people seek happiness this way and doubtless many find this kind of happiness in the world for a while. The happiness the world has to offer is, however, by nature not durable, and so proves to be. It will escape us in the end. But by fixing our attention on end things we shall not be deceived.

Living for the world alone cannot procure divine happiness. Divine happiness resides in another order of being. It is based, not upon natural sentiment, that is, neither the subtle or volatile emotions, but upon what 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls 'spiritual susceptibilities'.[14] This means being susceptible or open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, the lofty thoughts that filter down from the ether of divine knowledge, and enjoying the satisfaction that comes in the conscious realisation of being created in the divine image and of fulfilling a divine purpose. This is true happiness. While the man or woman born of the Spirit may share with anyone all the legitimate pleasures and joys that life offers, the man or woman lacking a spiritual mind cannot share in the delights of faith and certitude and the satisfaction of deciphering the geometry of the mind of God.

I oppose the notion of self-existent happiness to the concept of happiness as functionality, to its being dependent upon observing ethical practices, rules or norms. I am not advocating, of course, the flaunting of the moral law. I am rather seeking that flight of mystic joy, of unrestrained celebration, a relaxation of the self-directed will, a laying down of the burden of self, a forgetting of sin. Happiness is a gift to be cherished and celebrated merely because it is a divine birthright, in the nature of things. If I think otherwise, then I must also think that I must perform a, b and c in order to be happy. In other

words, that I must deserve my happiness. Such thoughts can in fact be counter-productive to the creation of the very happiness I seek. For at what point are we competent to judge that we have done enough to deserve to be happy? The happiness I seek comes as an 'ode to joy'. It is simply for the thing itself, because of the thing itself.

Such happiness is like the smile. You may be smiling because you are happy. But some people smile because they love to smile. They smile for no other special reason. If you ask someone 'Why are you smiling?' they may say 'Because I am getting married today', or simply 'Because I like to smile'. It is in the nature of the human being to enjoy and to share in happiness. Happiness is a free gift, *a gratuitous act*. And this ever-present consciousness that happiness is a free gift in the nature of things, as the greatest bestowal of God, causes the perpetuation, increase and re-creation of happiness.

We should not be deceived by the appearance that others enjoy a greater happiness than ourselves. For happiness, like water, finds its own level. To envy those who seem happier is illusion. Happiness coexists simultaneously at several levels and in this sense happiness is relative. At any time, we may find ourselves ascending to a higher level or descending to a lower one. So we rejoice at our own level. Happiness is the possession of all those who love God.

Birds are happy when they fulfil their own natures; when they can make nests and find the seed necessary to ensure their survival. But for human happiness, we must look beyond material necessity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said the cow lived 'blissfully',[15] not merely because the cow was created by God, and so is blessed, but because the cow 'knows' a kind of sensual happiness. 'Untroubled'[16] it enjoys the fulfilment of its bodily functions; chewing the sweet grass, giving milk and grazing undisturbed. This must be a kind of happiness. However, the happiness of the material mind and the worldly-wise is not the happiness of the spiritual soul. Those who have experienced spiritual happiness know what it is.

There is another consideration. Many things will eclipse this happiness of mine, if only for a time: ill health, misfortune, relationships gone bad, the death of loved ones, and not least of all, my own ignorance or folly. But spiritual happiness has the power to shine through the clouds of mental and emotional disarray, bringing healing in its wings.

'Abdu'l-Bahá qualifies as truly noble those who are happy in the midst of trials:

> In circumstances of ease and comfort, health and well-being, gratification and felicity, anyone can live contentedly; but to remain happy and contented in the face of difficulty, hardship and the onslaught of disease and sickness – this is an indication of nobility.[17]

For when life is good, and one can 'feed on the fat of the land' (Gen. 45:18),[18] it is easy to be happy. It is at this relatively low level of unchallenged happiness that most people function. But when we realise that happiness exists for its own sake, as a gift from God who desires happiness for us, we can rejoice in spite of adverse conditions. It is those who are happy in the end who shall be truly happy.

Sun and Shadow

When we choose to stand in the light of the sun, our shadow side is unavoidably going to be revealed. When we see our shadow, we contemplate that great dark void, the vast potential of formless non-entities that have not yet become well-defined spiritual attributes. Our shadow is a reminder that our dark side is an ever-present condition of the light, a symbol both of what we are and what we might still be. Above all, we are reminded that in this world, sun and shadow dwell ever together.

Divine Daring, and Fear and Trembling in the Pilgrim's Heart

We must be not only willing but also daring enough to venture to enter the mysterious and majestic presence of the sacred. For the blessed few, that daring may have been realised as a real encounter in historical time with a holy figure. Sometimes it is expressed as an arduous search for truth, or by sacrificing oneself for a worthy cause or loved one. Sometimes it means to venture bravely into the mountains and valleys of the mystical or to plunge into the heart of prayer or to pioneer into new realms. But wherever such daring leads,

spiritual life cannot be truly experienced without audacity, without the spirit of adventure.

Without this daring, one cannot experience divine confirmations. Without this daring, the depths of love could not be brought to the surface of human relationships from the most profound recesses of the heart. Without this daring, the pilgrim soul could not receive the tangible spiritual proofs and evidences coming from the bounty of God. Without this daring, heroic souls could not become the robber barons who 'seize and possess the hearts of men'[19] for their sovereign lord.

We know from historical accounts that some Bahá'í pilgrims, when they first saw an individual whom they misperceived to be 'Abdu'l-Bahá, felt their spirits crushed. Plunged into momentary despair, such souls might have lost faith had the Master not soon appeared to fulfil all their expectations and fill their hearts with His love. But what is interesting in these cases of momentary disappointment is that the great expectation, the fear and trembling that first arose in the pilgrim's heart, both precipitated the test of the believer's faith and at the same time allowed for its satisfactory resolution.

Now there is to be sure a certain risk in going into the presence of the Chosen Ones of God, a risk that we will be found out, that our life and character with all its warts will be exposed. Some feared this and did not go.[20] But the heavenly love let loose in the believer's heart for these Holy Beings was so oceanic that it overcame any fear of inadequacy. In place of fear, the pilgrim felt comfortably at home. The strange irony is that the pilgrim was found out anyway but in a way not anticipated – with a gentle lifting of the veil and with the greatest courtesy, sometimes with merely a kind word, a look or a glance. This truer insight into the inadequacies of self was also part of the bounty of the pilgrimage, one facet of the benediction.

Now if one thinks of these Sacred Figures as divine assayers, as celestial jewellers who are able to gaze into the divine gem of the soul and tell its worth at a glance, one should also consider the mercy of their sin-covering eye. It is good to think about this sin-covering eye, that these Great Ones did not see the flaws – or if they did, overlooked them with that divine magnanimity that the critical mind prone to look for the fault cannot understand. They looked,

not at the cracks and dark spots that beclouded the lustre, but instead marvelled at the gem that was shining with the love of God.

The Silence of the Sacred

The sacred has a myriad methods of touching the human soul, in drawing the spirit to itself. Sometimes the sacred will gently invade the citadel of the soul as the touch of a soft breeze or the caress of a whisper. In such moments, we experience a welcome, temporary suspension of our busy senses. All creation seems to hold its breath while the sacred whispers its secret mysteries to our enchanted ears. Now the cosmic voice has faded to the faintest echo. We listen for the songs of the spirit and enter the unmistakable realm of sacred time. We dare not utter a sound, for the spoken word might break the fragile silence. *Hush....*

What shall we call the sacred? How shall we name the holy? We know not how to name the unnamable. If we write down the Beloved's name, we shall profane the memory. We ponder in our hearts the sweet, silent lessons of love. The silence of the sacred is eternal. It is always there. Patiently, it awaits our rapt attention, longing to fill our souls with peace, to enchant us with mysteries, to transport us to the Elysian Fields, to the blessed isles of the West.

The Void of Forgetting

In Mahayana Buddhism, the notion of *Shunayata* (Sk.= emptiness, void) is fundamental. I consider here the Buddhist notion of the void simply as the departure point for a personal reflection on the void as forgetting, a void that comes in the form of grace. This emptying of the mind is a cleansing, a suspension of the ego-drives of minutes, hours, days or months ago, drives that no longer compel the ego to seek their fulfilment in violation of the voices of reason and wisdom. The ambitious project that was once under way, that waybill of the ego's plans and schemes, has been voided.

A power exists in prayer, in a dream or even in a dreamless sleep that can void the selfish desire, or the strongest of impulses, that craving for ego fulfilment. Once we descend into the void, the slate

of the mind is wiped clean. Distorted or unhappy memories are erased from the psyche and the tentative script of the writer's vain imaginings, the half-formed letters of all those hazy or impossible dreams that once seemed legitimate and true.

The restless mind and the wayward heart pursue their own self-interest. And self-interest, I should note, is not always selfish interest. But sometimes the seemingly legitimate needs, plans and schemes of the moment are voided in the interests of the development of a greater self and a more magnanimous plan. The void of forgetting is a sign that a greater power is at work, evidence that a greater will has countermanded a lesser one. It remains to be seen whether or not the void will find acceptance in the seeker's mind or rather prove to be mere suspension.

For now, the desires of the heart will have to wait. Let the seeker who desires to know the Will of God watch and wait, be patient, reflect, consider the movements of her own soul, experiment, seek and discover. Let the seeker pray earnestly and supplicate at every moment that she be alert enough to discern the Will of God and content enough to dwell happily in the now-of-what-God-has-ordained. The seeker will thus come to know whether or not the waybill of the self-directed project is to be stamped with approval or be declared void. She will see whether or not it conforms to the will of self or the Will of God, or both.

Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl's Humility and One's Gifts and Accomplishments[21]

The great Bahá'í scholar-saint and 'learned apologist'[22] Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl (pron. Fazel) is said to have wept on occasion when his friends and admirers paid him a compliment. More than simply embarrassed by such effusions of praise, he wept perhaps because he knew to whom he really owed his gifts. Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl knew that the measure of his achievement was in no way proportional to its source, the grace of Bahá'u'lláh. As a true Bahá'í scholar, he wrote only out of a desire to love Bahá'u'lláh more perfectly and for a love of truth.

I well imagine that Abu'l-Faḍl, in a spirit of loving-kindness, was often grateful for the kind words spoken in his favour by his friends.

But he knew that what friends and admirers eulogized in him was nothing other than what Bahá'u'lláh had chosen to reveal. Mírzá's tearful reaction to praise suggests that he felt it was not fitting to applaud the vehicle, that praise of the instrument in some sense devalued the Celestial Composer. His pain was that his admirers were not always conscious of this.

Praising the vehicle or the instrument is somewhat like praising a beautiful woman or a handsome man for beauty or good looks. Though they may enjoy the compliment, what merit do they possess in being beautiful? They did not earn it but rather came by the gift through inheritance or good fortune.

Some may disagree with my drawing analogies between a man or a woman's beauty and the accomplishments of the learned because the scholar works hard for success and thus deserves it. Beauty is not gained through striving but knowledge, according to the principle of just deserts, is gained by dint of effort, not granted. What I am considering here, however, is that the very capacity for discipline or insight, for learning and achievement, has itself a source. It did not create itself. The ultimate source does not lie within the individual. It lies with Bahá'u'lláh. The learned merely share in the bounty that He has bestowed. Of course, unless one exercises the gift or strives to fulfil the potential, one cannot share in that bounty. What *would be* regrettable is that one would not develop the gift nor cultivate the fallow ground.

Nor should false humility play a part in the recognition of one's successes, for Shoghi Effendi has qualified this as 'hypocritical' and 'unworthy of a true Bahá'í':

> There is nothing more harmful to the individual – and also to society – than false humility which is hypocritical, and hence unworthy of a true Bahá'í. The true believer is one who is conscious of his strength as well as his weakness...[23]

It is rather simply a question of recognizing the True Source of all gifts. The potter honours the vessel. The vessel does not honour itself. The vessel may well be admired but it is the potter who receives the praise. This is one of the meanings of *non dignus sum* (Lat.=I am not worthy), a phrase so often on the lips of the great ones of old.

Heart's Desire

Somewhere at the end of this multi-coloured rainbow, at journey's end, lies the fulfilment of all the desires of the heart. The greatest of these is that He might love us, bestow upon us the breath of life, make us His own and grant us that greatest and most unimaginable of all pure graces – to live with Him forever.

FIRE AND LIGHT

Love is Cognitive

The logician imagines that the cognitive statement is the impregnable fortress of human thought because it clearly distinguishes true from false. When the false is eliminated, truth remains, pure, incontrovertible, unambiguous rational thought. According to this logic, pure rationality affords the highest possible degree of certitude. Such confidence endows the cognitive statement with epistemological authority, that much sought-after prize cherished by the scientifically minded. But love, I argue, falls as much as logic within the realm of the cognitive, for love too is rational. The cognitive distinguishes the true from the false. Love also proves to be true or false. Consequently love is cognitive. True love is at the same time real, rational and endowed with authority. False love is unreal, irrational and unbelievable. Pascal, who proved himself both as mystic and mathematician, comes to mind. His famous dictum says: '*Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas*' (The heart has its reasons which reason does not know). His next line, not so well known, is equally beautiful: 'We feel it in a thousand things.' Then he says: 'Is it by reason that you love yourself?'[1] Love's reasons far surpass those of logic.

Love Divine

The mystical experience described in paragraph three of the essay below began in a mundane moment that quickly became transformed into an extraordinary event. It occurred one Saturday evening after supper as I was preparing to go out. I was actually standing at the ironing board pressing my clothes – a thoroughly mundane activity. Although I did not note the exact time and date, the experience

took place at about 7 o'clock in the evening in either March or April – in central Canada a transition time between winter and spring.

It was already quite dark outside but a strangely contrasting luminosity played against the horizon. It was unusually mild that evening and a warmish wind was blowing. I opened wide the balcony doors to look outside and let the fresh air into the apartment. The unusual combination of luminosity and the movement of the warm wind in the branches of the trees outside created a strange, eerie atmosphere. I had returned to the ironing board and picked up the iron again, when suddenly I became conscious of an unmistakable mental and spiritual transformation. This experience was not dramatic, as some other mystical experiences of mine have been, but it was nonetheless just as real.

The prevailing state was a pervasive peace and a sublime, heavenly love that I had never before known and the quiet, assured, undisturbed consciousness of a higher, living presence. Although my everyday state of consciousness was momentarily significantly altered, I remained nonetheless very much myself and I was fully aware of the change that had come over me. I had been ushered into a higher, purer intimation of divine life. This mystic visitation came, as it sometimes does, in a time of great duress and so brought a wonderful consolation. The troubled thoughts I had been experiencing only minutes before had completely disappeared. The real self had emerged within the real world. I was experiencing a foretaste of heaven, that divine love which is all peace and which sustains the life of both heaven and earth.

'Abdu'l-Bahá says that there are only four types of love: (1) the love of God for man (2) the love of man for God (3) the love of God for the Self of God (4) the love of man for man (humanity for one another).[2] The love I write of here is the first type: 'the love that flows from God to man'.[3] He says that 'this love is the origin of all the love in the world of creation'.[4]

Human love when practised selflessly by lovers is a beautiful and noble thing. All too often, however, as the great love stories of literature attest and as daily experience reveals, human love can be pain-filled and contradictory, full of longing, struggle and regret. In its more dramatic and darker manifestations, death and tragedy result.

Heavenly love, divine love, in marked contrast, issues from a realm that is all peace. This type of love cannot, however, be reduced to peace alone, for such love is more than peace. It is peace and eternal life. Heavenly love, as its name indicates, is born in heaven and

envelops the world in all its graces. This is a love that is solemn and sacred but without severity. It is an extraordinarily great love, moving within the inmost heart of the world but still suffusing all things above and below. This is a love both lucid and still, a love that enriches to the point where we feel enabled to easily dispense with all else. It is human love, personal love, but purified and detached, expanded, heightened, strengthened. It seeps into the depths of the All and circulates throughout the veins and arteries of the body of the cosmos, moving with a great regularity, like the life-giving flow of blood that sustains the whole body and on which it depends. It bestows 'the peace of God which passeth all understanding'.[5]

Heavenly love moves in that coincidence of opposites in which all things are passing away and simultaneously being born anew at every moment. It is a love that exists in the paradox of eternity that contains past, present and future alike, both death and eternal life.

When, by some mysterious grace of God, such a love enters our heart, we have no troubled thought. There is no cry of anguish, no utterance of pain, sorrow or regret. The soul is wrapped in equanimity. It lives in eternity. For a moment it dwells in heaven on earth. This form of heavenly love brings balance and peace of mind to the soul and liberates all its faculties. Through the aegis of love divine, everyday waking consciousness is transcended and the soul is lifted up to some higher station but remains at the same time grounded in itself. It exists both in the heights and in the depths. This love enriches as nothing else can.

When love divine invades your heart, you will recognize yourself as another self, purified, stabilised and brought to some great fulfilment. Through love divine the soul attains maturity. You will become as the ocean itself, hugging the breast of the vast shores of earth.

True Love

True love does not complain of the pain endured in its path. It is a flourishing branch when once watered never dies, a yearning to break forth into the higher, purer realms of freedom and grace. True love is all at once an affirmation, an acceptance, an invitation and an embrace, a saying yes to God and yes again. This love causes us to

emerge from the hell fire of doubt, denial and despair into the affirmation of belief and trust and dispenses that power divine which God has bestowed upon humanity for the dispelling of grief. It grants the gift of solace to the world.

True love is the most sublime instrument for uniting all hearts. It points the way to peace and concord and makes a way for the willing heart to find love's reasons in the face of an arbitrary and irrational spirit. True love will never knowingly seek to disappoint or hurt another and will give freely of itself without asking recompense. It makes light of time, place and age, builds bridges across the void of days and the diversity of human experience.

Such love knows neither race, colour nor hue but lifts up its voice to sing the sweet song of the universal. True love is everywhere and always the same. It is here and now. Its re-creation lies in the genesis of its own experience, a perpetual, self-replenishing stream of healing waters, a balm to each sick and sorry soul, an inspiration to every aspiring heart. True love decks out the festal board of fellowship and invites the honoured guest, the special friend to come and sup at the banquet table of God's love.

True love is a communion of the hearts, a meeting of the minds, and a taking of delight in the company of God's loved ones. It is an ever-awakening and perpetual discovery of the beauties of soul of all those who walk the spiritual path. It discovers at each new and wondrous turn a springtime of joy. True love brings stimulation to the mind and refinement of the sensibilities. Through the force of this all-conquering love, humanity will be irresistibly drawn to that common bond of unity which shall doubtless conquer the ugly spectacle of malice, discord, hate and war.

True love turns to face the fearful shadows that stalk us at every turn and dispels them with nothing but a word from Him. It opens the eyes of the blind and becomes eyes to those who cannot see. It lightens the burden of those who are in misery and sets them free. True love is the only hope we may hold in store for the present and future happiness of the human race. Within the graceful, soaring wings of this white dove of peace lie concealed every inestimable grace that God has chosen to bestow upon His people. It is, in sum, our final salvation and our only hope. It is our first and last prayer.

Perfect Faith Means the Then is Now

Trust in God, which Bahá'u'lláh says is 'the source of all good',[6] is a learned experience. An intellectual understanding of trust will not serve in moments of crisis. It is, moreover, precisely in moments of crisis that we learn to trust God, not with our heads but with our hearts, and with every fibre of our being. Nothing less will bring us safely through adversity. Like so many other realities in spiritual life, there is something mysterious in this process of trust. We may try, we may falter for as long as it takes, but if we persist through our pain we shall discover in one sublime moment that wonderful release that comes with truly placing 'all our affairs'[7] in His hands.

As we learn to trust God, we learn also to grow in faith, for faith is essentially trust (Gr. *pistis*). Christ admonished us to be as perfect as our heavenly Father when He said: 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.'[8] I understand this admonition to mean that we are called to have perfect faith.That formidable word 'perfect' found in Christ's admonition suggests something redoubtable, a perfection impossible to attain but one that we cannot help striving for because perfection in the individual suggests not only moral integrity but also beauty of character.

What does it mean to have perfect faith? There are many meanings to the phrase. One primary meaning, however, has already been indicated by both Christ and Bahá'u'lláh. It is the sure knowledge that what one has asked of God has already been received. The person of perfect faith already lives in that future condition when the petition has been granted. Stated simply, perfect faith means the then is now.

Christ said in St. Matthew's Gospel: 'And all things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.'[9] In *The Seven Valleys* Bahá'u'lláh alludes to that spiritual condition of being able to see the end in the beginning. He writes of the mystic wayfarers in the Valley of Knowledge: 'Yet those who journey in the garden land of knowledge, because they see the end in the beginning, see peace in war and friendliness in anger.'[10] For these pilgrims, the then is now.

Seeing the end in the beginning or believing the prayer of petition has already been granted depends upon a certain visionary experience of seeing the future in the present. Bahá'u'lláh certainly knew of the

difficulty of attaining this condition when He wrote of it, of how trying it is for frail human beings to see a victorious end when they feel as if they are only at the beginning of their journey or still in the thick of their troubles. Yet for all His great compassion, this is nonetheless the spiritual condition that He calls us to attain.

Bahá'u'lláh says something quite astonishing in the *Prayers and Meditations* that bears on this theme: 'I bear witness that Thou hadst turned toward Thy servants *ere* [before] they had turned toward Thee, and hadst remembered them *ere* they had remembered Thee.'[11] I take this text to refer to both God and Bahá'u'lláh, for according to the belief in divine unity, divine omniscience is a special attribute of the Divine Manifestation. Bahá'u'lláh, as the Manifestation of God, not only knows the question before it is asked – He grants the request before it is made. Put differently in Aristotelian terms, He knows not only the potentiality but also the actuality, which in this case must be an actuality not yet realised or thus far not experienced in time. 'Abdu'l-Bahá saw this actuality in the potentiality when, after He laid the dedication stone of the Mother Temple of the West in Wilmette, Illinois, on 1 May 1912 is reported to have said: 'The temple is already built.'[12]

To render this idea somewhat clearer, we may try to imagine a full-grown oak tree while holding an acorn in our hand. We can imagine the acorn full-grown because we have seen other oak trees and are familiar with them. Although we can visualise the full-grown tree, we cannot actually see *this particular* oak full-grown when it is still a seed. But this is precisely what Bahá'u'lláh can do. He can see the very, individual oak in the acorn and see it as it will be. When He asks us to see the end in the beginning, He is asking us also to dare to have such faith.

This prophetic power is not the same thing as mere *clairvoyance* or seeing into the future. For Bahá'u'lláh not only grasps the person or the thing as he/she/it will be, but also sees into his/her/its very nature and understands the essence. This is a power that is reserved only for the Manifestations of God and differs categorically from those powers possessed by psychics and spiritual souls.

When He says that He hears our prayer *even before* we have turned to Him, we begin to realise something of the unfathomable greatness of Bahá'u'lláh. Who has ever said before that He heard the rising dirge of our prayer while there was still the silence of despair?

Who has yet proclaimed that He saw the mighty oak of our faith when it was still an acorn, that is, even before the seed was planted! Who has said before that He saw the brilliant, luminous jewel of our soul when it was still the splintered fragment of a cloudy crystal?

It may happen that these two types of perfect faith – the sure knowledge that the prayer has already been answered and seeing the end in the beginning – are combined in one and the same experience. For seeing is a form of knowing, just as knowing is a form of seeing.

Wonderful Trust

The way of salvation is the way of trust. If we want to overcome our fears, we must begin to trust Him, to cast away our life with all its willing, controlling, manipulating and predicting. We must be wary of the sly insinuations of the subtle ego and truly put our life in His hands.

When we become His standard bearer, He shall reveal us to the world. When we bear aloft the ark of His covenant, He shall bear us on His shoulders through the battle. When we throw ourselves into His ocean, we shall walk on water and find safe haven in the arc of salvation that weathers the fiercest gale. When we cease to be self-directed, we shall discover what it means to be God-directed.

Our mental afflictions and petty annoyances will disappear little by little. By paying no heed, we shall not be excessively disturbed by them. By just continuing in His way and abandoning our life to Him, we shall *begin* to know true freedom and true joy. And once we enter that placeless realm of trust, we shall fly through the open skies of the Spirit and our hearts shall rejoice, for we shall know that we have found the way to true freedom.

Learning To Trust Love

As time passes, I am learning to trust the many faces of love I have known throughout my life, even the ones that rent my being in two, the ones I thought so pure and could not bear to live without. I see now that these many faces of love had something supremely important to teach me and they go on living inside me, teaching me even now their own special lessons. For in time, I begin to see more

clearly the reasons for lessons once so painful and obscure. Time and patience help to put all things, even love, into perspective. At least, I should say into a certain perspective, for there is no mystery greater than love and nothing more confounding and difficult into which to see clearly. I have also learned to trust the wisdom of my own tears, for I have found in them, and perhaps especially in them, the secrets of life's great blessings.

A child's love, though pure, cannot stand the rigours of love. As adults, we retain and must retain something of the child's love. We sometimes think that if we can love as children do, we will be happy. But it is not quite that simple. Love requires something greater than the innocence of the child. Love requires discipline. Love requires what the great Carl Jung called 'soul-work'.

With the passing years, I am learning to trust the lamp of Lady Wisdom, lovely Sophia who burns her golden globe inside me. When her still, small voice speaks with assured, quiet clarity and when the multiple voices of guidance are heard as one, we know she speaks truly. But even this guidance must be tested by experience, one of the many faces of wisdom, for sometimes our intuitions prove wrong.

As we contemplate our little plans and schemes and those cherished dreams that have gone astray, we see ever so clearly that God does what He wills. And faced with His inexorable will, we are quite powerless. We empower ourselves only in submitting to that will. Even when we pray with all our hearts, with the very fibres of our being, we must not think that we shall set the course of love and determine love's destiny. For Love itself sometimes answers our prayers in ways contrary to our first heartfelt expectations. Try as we may, we cannot set the course of the of-where, the of-how, the of-why our prayer may fly throughout the universe to knock at the threshold of God's door. We cannot fix the of-whom it shall mark, the souls it may join together or tear apart on their appointed courses so that they may be 'sustained by the power of Truth',[13] so that the One Great Will may fulfil Its purpose in our little lives. Even sincerity cannot hope to rule the Will of God.

We pray for what we will. Yet blinded as we sometimes are by self and passion, we cannot know before clarity descends, cannot understand the broader sweep, the larger plan, cannot discern the arc of destiny, the rod of deliverance, cannot yet completely fathom while

we are in transition, the greater destiny, the bounties that await, the purer love that is about to be born.

Perfect Love

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.

1 JOHN 4:18

Perfect love accepts all, does not manipulate, is content, asks nothing, gives freely, does not mourn, is not consumed with longing, has no regrets.[14] It is the available warm heart that offers itself gladly, that joyfully embraces other hearts, both now and forever. Perfect love is the pure gift of being, gladsome and free, without condition, a pure gift that simply *is*.

Loving All of Him

Existentially, the love of God makes unconditional demands. Faith and love are total experiences. The great commandment of Moses, uttered by Jesus to a Pharisee that 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength',[15] makes this call to totality clear. The love of God is with the whole being. The total demands of faith have made of religion a very powerful, moving force for the development of civilization. Sadly, as the historical record also attests, this total response has made religion a terrible force for destruction in the hands of the fearful, the ambitious and the fanatic.

Loving God means loving all the attributes of His unknowable essence, however imperfectly we perceive that essence. God is primarily love, knowledge and will. The Bahá'í sacred writings declare that God first created and ordered the universe through the Primal or First Will.[16] He said: Be, and it is.[17] Will is primary in the knowledge and experience of God.

What does this mean for spirituality? It means in practical terms that we cannot say we love God if we detest what is happening in our personal lives. We cannot say we love God if we deny our destiny.

Loving God means loving all of Him and that must mean loving what He has willed for us now. What we are experiencing now is our destiny. Only through fully accepting our destiny can we come to know and to love God and to know and to love ourselves. Ultimately, knowing and loving God and knowing and loving self mean the same thing: 'He hath known God who hath known himself.'[18] It follows, then, that he has loved God who has loved himself.

One of the meanings of divine unity, whether that unity is relationship to another or relationship to God, is that the lover sees God's will in our will and in our will His own. Every true lover of God realises that the most acute and painful experiences of life, and perhaps especially these, reflect the wisdom of the divine will. When we can begin to look upon life tests as instruments for divine healing, or opportunities for confronting self and for spiritual growth, we will learn to welcome such adversities and to benefit from them. If we are able to embrace pain with a willing heart, for the nobler purpose of our own spiritual development – and by our own spiritual progress further that of the community and the world – we shall be able to find love's hidden, gentle consolation. The Divine Archer lets fly love's arrow truly. With great skill and mastery does His shaft of love speed to the heart of things. And His dart is a better remedy for our ills than all the medicines of earthly physicians.

IN SEARCH OF NOTHING

Positive Detachment

Detachment might be defined as an individual's being unaffected by the negative influences of the world. This definition, however, is incomplete. The more complete formulation would also express the converse – being attached to the positive influences of God. Without qualification, detachment might make a negative definition only. One might be detached but aloof, unfeeling, uncaring or uninvolved. In common parlance, detachment has an antisocial nuance, implying withdrawal from the world. By contrast, the attribute of detachment in Bahá'í spirituality always implies the positive affirmation of attachment to the will of God. Detachment cannot support notions of negativity or even neutrality. Neutrality is temporary disengagement. One may temporarily disengage from the world but how does one temporarily disengage from God or from the will of God?

But from what are we freed, if detached, and how are we to become so? Detachment expresses itself in one of its meanings as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's definition of self-mastery. It is self-forgetfulness.[1] We become detached by *forgetting* – forgetting the 'thorn in the flesh',[2] the demons in the head, the afflictions of the spirit and even, and just as important, our subtly concocted thoughts. When we cease to be possessed by thoughts of self, even by our own joys, sorrows, preoccupations or intellectual schemes, we shall become possessed by the things of God.

Now another question arises in relation to detachment and the pervasiveness of pain. How does the wilful or afflicted spirit forget its own hurts or desires, its pleasure or pain? Simply by attaching itself to the will of God. Attaching here means letting go and

trusting. I say 'simply' but nothing proves more difficult. However, with constant practice through the tests of life the seeker does learn to let go. We feel joy in turning over the insistent self with all its ego drives to the One who holds in His hands the destinies of all things and who is able to heal all our ills.

The more we trust, the more we become free. The more we let go, the less attached we become. Detachment becomes real in those wonderful moments when we give up our will to God and really acquiesce to His decree. The *ultima thulé* (Gk.=furthest island) in this journey is that safe isle in the ocean of God's love where we live in and for Him. Such detachment is epitomized in that last of Bahá'u'lláh's universe of the valleys, 'the valley of true poverty and absolute nothingness' when He says: 'This station is the dying from self and the living in God, the being poor in self and rich in the Desired One.'[3]

In this valley, you find yourself sinking deeper within the self as if you were immersed in water. But suddenly you discover yourself standing on ground zero. At that point you have reached land's end. You have arrived. You are grounded, contented and at peace. In this state, you remain conscious of both your body and your thoughts but the body becomes a lighter, more transparent medium. Your thoughts are no longer wrung out of the mind with so much intensity and effort. They float by, as Thomas Merton says, like 'big blue and purple fish' that swim past in the darkness of consciousness...this sea which opens within me as soon as I close my eyes.'[4] I imagine Merton's big blue or purple thought-fish swimming up to the surface to catch a rare glimpse of the light, perhaps to make a break for an insect on the surface of the water, then to glide back down into darker waters where the sea grasses sleep. Merton's thought-fish swimming along in the sea of the mind parallels Bahá'u'lláh's metaphor of His revelation as the 'most great Ocean' containing all the aquatic life forms: 'This most great, this fathomless and surging Ocean is near, astonishingly near unto you. Behold it is closer to you than your life-vein!'[5]

At deeper levels of detachment, you momentarily lose self-consciousness. You become totally abstracted. Then, when you return to yourself, you realize that in a rare moment you have been touched

by the bliss of the Glory of God. But you cannot sustain such states long. They are like Blake's analogy of joy as a winged creature:

> He who binds to himself a Joy
> Does the winged life destroy;
> But he who kisses the Joy as it flies
> Lives in Eternity's sun-rise.[6]

Only Seek What God Has Laid Out For You

One Sunday morning in an anxious moment I found myself invoking God in these words: 'O God! Where shall I go now? What would you have me do?' I stood looking out of the kitchen window into the back yard, that stretch of lawn I had so badly neglected over the years. The rectangular plot was far from being the ideal model of suburban greenery. It had become unsightly with the passage of time, overrun with patches of wild clover, plantain, dandelion weed, and nondescript vegetation growing up between what was left of the grasses, choking them out of existence on the dry, lumpy, clay-filled soil.

No sooner had I voiced my thought when about a dozen sparrows flew in from the back yard next door where they had just been feeding on a narrow strip of grass that ran alongside the neighbour's garden. They flew up into the Russian Olive tree in the adjacent yard, rested there for a moment, and then in one quick motion swooped back down onto my weedy stretch of lawn.

They seemed happy, those little sparrows, just flocking together and feeding on the seeds of that poor excuse of a lawn that I had judged by my own neglect to be so useless. But I felt nonetheless a surge of contentment that these little creatures could find sustenance there. Only moments before, my yard had seemed nothing but an eyesore. Now, as I watched the birds feed, I saw that weedy plot transformed into a land of plenty. A moment later the sparrows flew back to the fence, up into the Russian Olive again and down once more for a final feed. Once sustained, they flew away.

What a life of simplicity, I thought. And in that simplicity came the answer to the anxious question posed only minutes before. These

sparrows were merely following what God had laid out for them, seeking their sustenance on the wing, flying together, being happy. The answer to my question came in that epiphanic moment,[7] in the beautiful simplicity of their example. 'Go nowhere. Do nothing,' came the reply. 'Be content simply to follow what God has laid out for you, flocking together with those whom you love and who are of like mind. Move from seed to seed in the garden of God's grace, feeding on what precious moments of spiritual meaning and contentment the breaking day offers.' Above all, these happy avian creatures brought the message that I need not seek after anything at all. What I sought after, God had already generously provided.

What Can I Refuse to the Universe?

One cold winter afternoon I returned home, struggling with a severe test. In my combative mood, I heard a militant voice rising up inside me saying: 'I will refuse this test. *Jihad*[8] is justified.' As I walked along the snow-packed street, I began to gaze up and away to the southern horizon where a pale January sky hung over the edge of the Ottawa Valley. From the hill where I stood in Gatineau, I surveyed the city of Ottawa, a few miles distant, palled over with snow. The Ottawa River lay inert below, a frozen, naked ribbon of white. The light of the late afternoon had begun to fade from the winter sky. The first city lights along the crown of the capital were just beginning to glimmer.

I resumed my walk but in the next instant slowed my pace again and paused. Standing motionless, I looked intently at the winter panorama stretched out before me. As I stood surveying the frozen scene, I sensed some deeper force at work. I began to hear a slow, barely audible heartbeat, a great, low rumbling sound from deep within the world. My impression was one of some awesome and majestic, unseen force, the world soul containing, sustaining and moving the All. In that dawning of a higher, deeper consciousness, I became silently aware of a great mastermind that with the greatest of ease drives all things.

Brought to the conscious realization of such an organization of power, I began to acquiesce to my situation. My thoughts shifted. The tension eased. I said to myself: 'What shall I now refuse to accept faced with all this might? What shall I now not accept in the face

of this vast and vibrating mechanism,[9] this "divinely-appointed system,"[10] this universe of life? What shall I now refuse to It? For does It not sustain all, and all who dwell within It, through Its own profound laws, Its own skilful unseen ways, Its own hidden wisdom? What am I and my troubles in the face of this mighty motion? Why should I refuse to accept the road that I am bound to travel? For the Maker of that road and the road itself enclose a wisdom that I am ignorant of. Only let me find a greater trust.' Such thoughts as these came to me that day as if welling up from a deeper, purer stream that assuaged the struggles that sometimes pit us here against one another and set self against self.

I felt my ego shrinking on the face of the cold earth. My former combative self became greatly pacified against the backdrop of the grand organization that I contemplated. 'Where was my place,' I asked myself, within such a 'wondrous system'?[11] My place, I realized, was to become minute, to adjust myself to the workings of the rhythm of this great *Tao*.[12]

More than this. I found satisfaction in the thought that I might not only shrink, but one day disappear without a trace and become a thing forgotten, like a drop in an ocean. No nihilistic urge was this. It seemed rather the appropriate reflection for one small creature living for such a brief time on the face of this gigantic sphere spinning and orbiting in space. Thus I discovered on that cold January afternoon consolation in the grandeur of our world and solace in the thought that my petty problems would be managed well and would eventually disappear in the cosmos.

Gravity and Flight

Everyone has two contending tendencies of soul. One is to fly. The other is to remain grounded. The desire for flight is a longing for spiritual freedom, a yearning after brilliance, to know fire and light, to soar in the rarest of climes. It is to be Icarus.[13] When we experience gravity, we seek the cool darkness of the night season. We experience desire. We want to be held down, to mix with the earth and the elements, to remember that we are made of blood and bone, to take delight in the flesh.

Gravity is not materialism or gross sensuality. It is connectedness to earth mother. It is recalling our origins in the womb, of being nurtured at our mother's breast, remembering that we have come from the matrix of life. It is a desire to return to the source and as medieval pilgrims once did in the great cathedrals of Europe, seek sanctuary and protection. Gravity is knowing that only through the body and the senses can the spirit express itself. Gravity says that the body takes on qualities of soul, that the soul becomes flesh, that it seeks the heart's other half, the *animus/anima.*

But gravity can become a prison. We can easily become enmeshed in gravity. If the bird of the soul flies too low, it becomes trapped in the fowler's net. Then it flutters helplessly until it is either consumed or released by the fowler. Gravity can become addiction in its many forms, 'the multiple identities that were born of passion and desire',[14] in the frenetic, inverted search for peace.

We must learn to walk a tightrope between two worlds, to dance between heaven and earth, to walk on air and return gently to *terra firma.* We must learn to raise aspiring, upraised hands to the sky while moving carefully over ground. We must glance heavenward even as we dip our feet into the fast-flowing stream of the source of life. For if we linger too long on earth, our wings will become sullied and we may find ourselves forced to dwell in the dust, unable to take flight again.

We know when gravity becomes life-threatening, for we hear an ominous note of caution being sounded. If the joy that we have sought is followed by sorrow, than we know that we are being overpowered by gravity. If we find ourselves caught in a tournament of fears, when sorrow jousts repeatedly with joy and passion altercates with pain, we are being held fast by gravity. Then we must fly upward again where the air is pure and sweet and where the sky is clean and blue. As we learn to defy gravity and fly, even as we welcome the return to earth, we shall no longer be forced to dwell in the dust, but shall spread our wings and fly again with ease.

Acceptance and Self-Affirmation

Acceptance is everything in spiritual life. First, we have to accept the fact that we have been born. If we do not accept that we are in the

world, life becomes hateful. The sad spectacle of suicide occurs when the soul is unable to accept life in this world. Once we accept being-in-the-world, we have to accept our share of life's tests and difficulties, its 'changes and chances',[15] its hard knocks and 'body blows'.[16]

Many of us also have to accept failed relationships. The ego reluctantly admits responsibility for its actions, but acceptance is salutary. Many good lessons are to be found in failure that serve us positively in the next stage of life. Perhaps the hardest thing is to accept death, either our own or another's. To lose someone we have lived with for a long time and loved dearly is not easy. Nor is it easy to lose a child, that most cherished fragment of your heart and soul, that still fresh flower of youthful possibilities. But time brings acceptance and acceptance brings peace. The death of self likewise proves very hard, for self does not die without a fight.

'Growing old gracefully', even though it witness the gradual decline of powers and abilities, is an attitude we can cultivate and even rejoice in, for all stages of life contain their own particular joys and sorrows, rewards and punishments. One day we shall see that death, that grand imposter, is not the end at all, but a new and radiant beginning, when we shall be thankful for all we have experienced and endured.

Some might view acceptance as a rather passive virtue. It is not valued in a consumer society that puts a premium on control – regrettably there is no premium on *self*-control – on setting one's own agenda and gratifying desire. But passivity is not to be equated with weakness. Clay is a passive recipient in the hands of the sculptor but as the sculptor moulds the material, a new form is created. Passivity indicates a willingness to be acted upon by the force or forces greater than self, the forces of tension and test, of love and will.

But what if the heart breaks? The broken heart learns in time to become the willing heart, the heart that is open, the heart through which the warm blood of life still flows. The broken heart is the heart that God does not despise: 'The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou will not despise.'[17] Willingly receiving something that is imposed, some weight or burden that one cannot so easily throw off, is precisely what makes acceptance such a mighty virtue in spiritual life.

The sister virtue of acceptance is self-affirmation. Without self-affirmation, acceptance makes us victims. When we combine acceptance with self-affirmation, we become active agents for creative possibilities. Rather than submitting passively to 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune',[18] we become active participants in the creation of our own destiny. We seize the threads of life and begin to weave our own pattern. We run swiftly with the ball we have been handed in the game of life. We play as judiciously as we can the hand we have been dealt. Whatever is in the cards or in the stars, we shall count as gain in the end.

The Blessing of the Impossible Dream

The song from *Carousel,* the 1960s' musical, says that we should 'Dream the Impossible Dream'. Yet I am thinking that it is sometimes better, sometimes wiser, not to dream the impossible dream. I would like to fly off the ground but I cannot. I should like to travel with my body at the speed of light but it can't be done. I may desire friendship with a certain person but such a friendship does not happen or is not advisable. I may desire to overcome an adverse condition with prayer. But prayer alone does not suffice. I shall have to take actual steps, physical steps, or perform certain deeds in order for my prayer to be realised. I may desire with all my heart that a certain door open but it remains shut and with good reason.

The voice that says 'nothing is impossible' as it pursues its own lusty plan may be speaking with the exalted voice of *hubris*. Now Christ did say that 'with God all things are possible'.[19] But I hear an unspoken note of wisdom in Christ's saying, a voice implied in these authoritative words. That voice says that all things possible are not desirable. It is good for us to determine which of these 'all things' of which Christ speaks are the things of God.

Now the imagination can easily conceive of things impossible and through this ability imagination proves to be an incredible power. I may well imagine, for example, that I find a block of ice in the middle of the Sahara Desert, but reason tells me that even if I can find such a thing, it will not be there for long. Even though I can create the image in the mind's eye, I know that such a conception

exists only in the imagination. Here dreaming the impossible dream produces neither practical result nor benefit.

Faith does indeed have the power to defeat nature and so render the impossible dream possible. But sometimes it is better to let nature defeat us. In jurisprudence, the legal meaning of 'impossible' is 'impracticable in the nature of the case'. We may well 'hitch our wagon' of imagination to the 'star' of faith, but we should decide whether or not the dream is really desirable before making it a reality. This mismatch of the dream to reality explains the meaning of the common saying about prayer one sometimes hears these days: 'Be careful what you pray for. You may get it.' Or as the jurist might say, the impossible dream is 'not practicable'. The question is: do we really desire to have what we do not really want? We may well conceive something imaginatively but once the thing becomes ours, we sometimes no longer know what to do with it. We just cannot execute our plan because we really know better. At such times, the voice of Lady Wisdom is whispering in our ears: 'not practicable'. We ignore that voice at our peril.

Those things that can be conceived when faith and imagination conspire are literally incredible; that is, they are beyond belief. 'Beyond belief' means here that belief has become reality. Energy has been poured forth to bring the impossible dream into reality. Reality is beyond belief because it is already in the here and now. We do not have to believe in existence. We *are* in existence.

To dream the impossible dream, something more than dreaming is required. Will power is required. Love is required. Labour is required. Discipline is required. Commitment is required. When faith and imagination join forces, things happen, great works are accomplished *in deed*, not just in thought or word. Some plans deserve to be born. With them our labour is justified since they are a benefit to others and to ourselves. But other plans miscarry. And miscarry they should, where nature has deemed, through her own wisdom, that they are not fit to live in the world.

THE SUPREME TALISMAN

The Human Person

Man is the supreme Talisman.[1]
BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

The human person is the model, the life form on earth beyond which 'there is no passing'.[2] Without the human being there would be no literature, no art, no philosophy, no science, no history; in short, no civilization at all. While this last statement may be a truism, it bears reflection nonetheless. Without the human being, there would be nothing but a void and meaningless world; in fact, no world at all since we would not be in it. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: 'For the enlightenment of the world dependeth upon the existence of man. If man did not exist in this world, it would have been like a tree without fruit.'[3] The world found meaning in human terms only when Adam, as recorded in the opening passages of the Book of Genesis, endowed creation with logos by naming the creatures.[4] This naming of the creatures by Adam is an extraordinarily significant act in the history of human thought. In one sense it announces the beginning of philosophy, for the ability to name things means that one has discerned their identity. It is the human being who ascribes meaning to creation at the bidding of God.

In this connection, philosophers have failed to direct their attention to an essential relationship in the world of existence. Although they have analysed in detail the meanings created by the meaningful one (man), they have not scrutinized the source of meaning, man himself. There are, consequently, philosophies of all sorts of things, but no anthrophilosophy; there are philosophies of life, but structured philosophies of the human being are only just beginning to emerge.

Is it not better to attempt to understand the one who ascribes meaning, as well as the meanings themselves? Understanding the source of meaning (the human being) is certainly as desirable as understanding meaning's derivatives (philosophy).

Regarding the revelation of the names and attributes of God in the world of creation in relation to man, Bahá'u'lláh has written:

> How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop! To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. All these names and attributes are applicable to him. Even as He hath said: 'Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery.'[5]

Like 'Abdu'l-Bahá who is the Greater Mystery,[6] man is the lesser mystery of God. Bending the mind to discover the multiple meanings of the whole human person in an integrated anthrophilosophy bids fair as a promising project, as a great intellectual enterprise. As we delve deeper into this new spiritual anthropology, we shall enter into a second Renaissance, one that will far outshine the movement of the arts and sciences that radiated outward from northern Italy in the fourteenth century. We are now on the verge, not merely of that second Renaissance, but of the entirely new and unprecedented birth of a unified global community. One of the distinguishing features of the world about to be born will be the full recognition of spiritual personhood.

The Living Question

Where did you come from, little one? Who are you? Where do you belong? Where are you going? Who are you, venerable one? What is your story? What is your reason? What tales lie wrapped up inside you? What countries have you travelled through? Let me hear your rhyme. What times you must have lived in, what climes you must have seen! Ah, to me you are a living question, a wonderful mystery. You are old, but you are still young. Your face is wrinkled, your

body frail, but your soul has the freshness of youth. Why must you leave the world so soon? I will miss you.

A Vision of the Children of Tomorrow

I see in my dream the children of tomorrow seated between the freshly planted rows in the garden of knowledge. They peacefully absorb with all the reverent concentration of which they are capable. These pure souls are wedded to knowledge from an early age. Through the solicitous care of their elders, they learn to revere spiritual education. They are ever eager to assimilate every truth planted in the green garden of mysteries and to drink, in earliest childhood, from the fountain of divine truth.

Dancing Angels? A Spoof on Pseudotheology[7]

The theologians and their students leaned a little more closely together to engage the debate. The question was put by the chair.

'What we have here, my friends,' the cleric intoned, 'is not a case in the artifice of oratory, nor an example of deceptive ambiguity, but a question not at all, you see, devoid of substance. I pose today's question as follows: do we dance around the angels or they around us?

'This is not, do not be deceived, a mere trifling matter or a now outmoded quodlibet[8] of schoolmen that once resounded throughout our hallowed lecture halls. This is a question vital to all those devoted to the Cause of Truth.'

Heads nodded in agreement, as the theologian plodded on, underscoring the weightiness of the subject.

'Beware of thinking that it does not matter. Of course it matters! We make mention here of angels. We converse in this place about God. What subject could be more important, what issue more weighty? Lack of interest in such a question would be tantamount to neglect of the worthy pursuit of metaphysical truth.' A murmur of assent ran through the hall.

With these opening remarks, the discussion was engaged. A learned theologian, supported by his students, took up the case for the affirmative.

'We argue', he began, 'in favour of the second proposition. We declare that the angels dance around us. The angels dance around us because the fact that they are able to dance means that they have freedom of movement. Having freedom of movement clearly infers that they have greater power. If you are able to dance around someone, as in the expression 'she danced rings around him', you are unquestionably possessed of superior power and ability. Furthermore, the fact that the angels dance around us, that is, in a circle, is very suggestive. Esoterically, it indicates that they have become initiates into that ancient symbol of unity. Only inductees into the sacred temple of the divine mysteries enjoy the hidden mysteries claimed by those initiates. These angelic beings alone may claim the right to dance in a ring.'

The theologian waded ahead. 'Consider further these arguments. Those who are able to dance around us would ostensibly be free to move, while we would be obliged to sit still in the middle of the circle. This sitting still indicates that we are motionless; in a sense, that we do not have the right to move since we are surrounded by them. This clearly indicates the superior power and privilege of the angels. Unavoidably, the conclusion must be drawn that the angels dance around us.'

A respectful hush fell over the assembly as it sat quietly reflecting on the presentation just made. At the appointed signal from the chair, a second theologian arose and gravely began to make his case, this time for the negative. Without hesitation and with great enthusiasm, he launched into his demonstration.

'My learned friend has presented an impressive argument, but with all the respect due to the wise in holy orders, he errs. I argue, consequently, in favour of the first proposition: that we dance around the angels. It is abundantly clear, following the courtly analogy, that we must dance around the angels because only kings and nobles have the right to sit undisturbed while their attendants move about them. It is clear that we, occupying a rank lower than the angels, must move about them at their pleasure, and busy ourselves doing their bidding and fulfilling their every want and need. Such exalted spiritual powers must be waited upon. They do not wait upon others. Therefore, we can safely conclude that we dance around the angels, that is, we do their obeisance, not the reverse.'

The assemblage listened in rapt attention. 'Further, to dance around others indicates that only those at the centre of the circle are entertained by the dancing. The dancers are engaged in dancing, not enjoyment. It is clear in this case that it would necessarily have to be the angels who would enjoy such dancing. We would not be entertained by their dancing, for the dignity of their rank and station would prevent this. To be entertained by them would not befit their exalted position. Therefore, it is clear that only those of a lower rank would dance to entertain those of a higher rank. Therefore, it must be that we dance around the angels.'

A deep silence fell, followed by a flurry of voices while the newly exercised theologians excogitated meaningfully in order to settle the vexed question and to ponder the merits of thesis and antithesis. Just then a 'still small voice'[9] – that of a unnoticed choirboy who had been watching from the precincts outside the learned circle – dared to speak up. With mild but disarming penetration the innocent child raised the question: 'But, reverend sirs, we cannot see the angels. How would we know that they dance around us or not?'

The theological society fell into an embarrassed silence, the tangled web of words broken by youthful innocence and wisdom.

Ego and the Scholar

Ego, that subtle seducer, is an ever-present danger to the scholar. Even though one be motivated by a love of truth, the dangers of ego-entrapment loom up all the same, casting long shadows over the scholar's work. The calculated risk of scholarship is that one become self-centred rather than truth-centred. Here we encounter the conundrum of the relationship between the scholar and his/her work.

The pretended 'objective' status of scholarship is a delusion. The claim that scholarship is an independent body of knowledge, unrelated and unconnected to the scholar, existing, in some sense outside the self as pure argument, elucidation or concrete findings, is untenable. For the scholar shares at least this in common with the poet. Both are engaged in the act of *poieó* (I make). Both make something. In this sense, scholarship is a creative expression or labour, an extension, as it were, of the self. Scholarship is thus a highly subjective act.

While truth may be the supreme objective, the scholar is unavoidably engaged with self as the medium through which truth emerges. This subjective engagement means that no scholar can present his or her understanding of truth in a totally objective, Olympian fashion. The nature of the scholar's task is always to fall back on one's own thoughts, research, resources and defences – in short, one's own view of this or that particular corner of the universe of thought. To the extent that the scholar is attached to his own views, he or she is ego-bound.

While the free exercise of the reflective self is the mainspring of scholarship, this privilege carries at the same time certain responsibilities. Like a missile flying through space that must correct its trajectory to remain on course, the reflective self is likewise in constant need of correction. Spirituality is the best remedy for the work of the scholar and indeed must exist in a symbiotic relationship with the pursuit of knowledge. It is all too easy to fall into the tangled web of one's own conceits. Standing back from the work and removing the self as much as possible aid in this process of retaining clarity of vision.

To the proud and ostentatious, as Bahá'u'lláh has often warned, knowledge becomes a veil that makes one blind not only to divine truth but, just as important, to one's own conceit. That one can be 'massively learned'[10] but spiritually blind or morally defective is one of the strange maladies that afflict certain academics.

Bahá'u'lláh has drawn a clear demarcation line between divine and satanic knowledge. In a trenchant passage, He categorizes the arrogant among those versed in the satanic:

> Know verily that Knowledge is of two kinds: Divine and Satanic. The one welleth out from the fountain of divine inspiration; the other is but a reflection of vain and obscure thoughts. The source of the former is God Himself; the motive-force of the latter the whisperings of selfish desire. The one is guided by the principle: 'Fear ye God; God will teach you;' the other is but a confirmation of the truth: 'Knowledge is the most grievous veil between man and his Creator.' The former bringeth forth the fruit of patience, of longing desire, of true understanding, and love; whilst the latter can yield naught but arrogance, vainglory and conceit.[11]

No hyperbole, this passage indicates that for some strange souls, the acquisition of learning proves to be an insidious disease. But however one defines satanic knowledge, if knowledge is gold, then we should be wary of 'the men who moil for gold'[12] in a fever. For learning that leads to 'arrogance, vainglory and conceit' will make one blind to the colour of gold itself.

The tempests of ego really mount up in a fury when a scholar is driven to control, manipulate or dominate others by dint of reputation or learning. Here is the perverse side of scholarship. Such fierce storms have laid waste many a fair land.

'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that '...self-love is kneaded into the very clay of man...'[13] One expression of this self-love is the desire to be always at the centre of things. Egocentrism is dangerous, not only because it impedes the spiritual progress of the scholar, but also because it increases the fawning of the obsequious or produces its own naive victims who are over-awed by learning.

The truly learned would despise conceit if such loathing did not further arm the ignorant. It is a powerful voice that says: 'I know. You do not;' but it is a voice that rings patently hollow. Whether shouted aloud, quietly affirmed or merely implied, this voice either disappoints, angers, or alienates. Bahá'u'lláh commanded that certain of His writings be thrown into the Tigris. This gesture demands profound reflection on the part of every scholar who values detachment.

The Mystic

While the scholar is exposed to the dangers of egocentrism, certain drawbacks are also inherent in the life of the mystic or the contemplative, as they themselves have often testified. Excessive solitude and a certain aloofness from engaging in and with the world impede the process of contributing to 'an ever-advancing civilization'.[14] The mystic life, however, is not a project of erecting a framework for the objectification of intellectual truth, but rather a journey, an experience of the active and growing realization of the Self of God within the immortal soul, the bride of the Beloved. The mystic takes up the infinitely difficult task of the 'practice of the

presence of God' from moment to moment, of finding traces of God's face in all of creation and hearing some faint echo of the Divine voice in the human heart and amid the complexities of human experience when one's guide must be as much oneself as the written word.

The dangers of spiritual pride, passivity and self-absorption are ever-present to both scholar and mystic alike. But the mystic knows that ultimately it is the awakening of the mind and the spiritualization of the soul that alone will win salvation. The mystic knows that formal learning and its accomplishments, unless they be entirely dedicated to the service of God, have a relatively minor role to play in the salvation of the soul.

The mystic sets out alone to trek across the endless desert of the divine mind. To sail upon the boundless ocean of existence mystics rely, not upon the knowledge of others, but on nothing other than the all-sufficing grace of God, 'and with unquestioning reliance on His promises as the best provision for their journey'.[15] And while seeking communion with the Spirit of God, mystics must endeavour at the same time to become a source of social good and contribute to the advancement of society, without becoming either a slave or a victim to its demands.

The mystic transcends all earthly loves in order to find love divine. And if he does find earthly love, he knows that it can survive only if sustained by that larger, more spacious reality of divine love. He flees from the dialectic of subtle disputation in order to hold holy discourse. He tires of endless words, conferences and debates, no matter how brilliant. He would rather be back in his study with his books and his God, thinking things over, and, Zen-like, 'sitting quietly, doing nothing.'[16]

He regrets if at any time he has become drunk with the power of his own words or has insisted too strongly on his own opinion. All this defining, qualifying, being precise, has a hollow ring and fades as fast as the echo of a lone voice in a canyon. He would like to leave behind the learned assembly that struggles with itself, to abandon the loquaciousness, the gifts displayed. He would rather simply think things over and thank God for ever-present favours and beseech Him lest he slip unknowingly into the firepit of his own ego.

Let Mystic Souls Appear

I know that God has created mystic souls in the world and I am longing for them to appear, so that they may touch me and teach me what they know. I am longing to meet them and to share with them the secrets and mysteries of the divine life. I am longing just to share their company and be in their presence so that they may heal me and change me forever.

The Cult of the Petty Personality

O friends! Let not the deceptive glamour of this fleeting world – to whose impermanence all things attest – cut you off from God's enduring bestowals, nor deprive you from partaking of the spiritual sustenance that He hath sent down from the heaven of His bounty.[17]

BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

The cult of the petty personality, which has by now permeated all industrialized societies and is rapidly colonizing the developing world, is both shallow and false because it ignores the meaning of true artistry and degenerates into narcissism.Those who idolize the actor or the pop artist, who idealize the current leader or mindlessly follow or cater to the influential personalities of the day, fail to realize that the qualities they have imagined have a greater source outside and beyond the individual, who merely reflects them. These devotees of 'pop culture' are not at all conscious that any such gifts are not the *proprium* of the artist, leader or celebrity. Their gifts are by nature endowments, a point I have touched on elsewhere.[18] By definition, an endowment is something one has received. If anything, one should be grateful to the source of the endowment, rather than idolizing its recipient. The cult of the petty personality will persist as long as its followers fail to observe these words of Bahá'u'lláh: 'God grant that all men may turn unto the treasuries latent within their own beings.'[19] The only remedy for the mindless adulation of the rich, the powerful and the famous is to become fully conscious of the divine bestowal of one's self-worth.

The Laughing Saint

The French have a saying pertinent to my theme – *Un saint triste est un triste saint* (A saint who is sad is a sad saint indeed). The flavour of the *double entendre* is lost in the translation but the message is nonetheless conveyed. Some of the funniest people I know are saints. Real saints have learned to laugh at themselves and this ability is, I think, one of the deepest roots in the psychology of humour. These saints are happy because they have learned to laugh at the very things that in other circumstances gave them embarrassment or pain. It takes a secure and liberated person to laugh at oneself. The insecure person is always offended by the joke that pokes fun at self or others, for he wrongly imagines that deprecatory laughter is humiliation.

What the self-righteous do not realize, however, is that laughing at oneself or others is really just another way of loving the imperfect creature in us all. For it is precisely the imperfections of the self that make it profoundly winsome and loveable. At a deeper level, we love those whom we love, not in spite of, but because of their faults. The 'perfect person' without foibles, who lacks any aura of humanity, is not really very appealing. The laughing saint knows, as William Sears wrote all those years ago, that 'God loves laughter'.[20] The laughing saint recognizes in these three words just another door to self-transcendence and liberation.

John H. Wilcott: Cowboy Pioneer

John H. Wilcott was a cowboy pioneer who settled in Kendall, Montana. An old photograph[21] shows him mounted on a fine horse with his ten-gallon hat cocked to one side. His lasso is hanging down from his western saddle horn and the handle of a redoubtable six-shooter sits in full view high up on his hip. He is wearing a handsome bandanna and his chaps are decorated with engraved silver buttons. Fearsome spurs jut back from his cowboy boots and his sleeves are rolled up to the elbows. If you look at his picture closely, you'll see a robust man with a zest for life, a man proud of his new accomplishments, who had found himself at last on the plains of Montana.

John H. Wilcott was no tenderfoot. When he went for the mail, he carried a gun because of wild steers and snakes. 'This country is wild with rattlesnakes and wolves,' he says in a letter dated 1910. 'Oil costs fifty cents a gallon, potatoes four cents a pound. Before the cold weather came I used to lie in bed in the morning and shoot sage hens or prairie chicken.'[22] Since the country was infested with rattlesnakes, he and his mama dared not sleep with an arm outside their beds. The hens and chickens would destroy their garden and four or five times a day he would venture out and drive them away along with the rabbits.

Mr. Wilcott had settled in Montana to proclaim the Bahá'í Cause. He brought the Bahá'í teachings to frontiersmen who would swear at him when he gave them a pamphlet, and curse the name of God. So he gave them instead an old newspaper from Santa Anna sent to him by a missionary offering Christ crucified, or a book called *Indian Wars and Brave Deeds*.

From her tent on the plains, Mama Wilcott tended to sick cowboys, sheep herders, the newly-settled and wanderers. I wonder how many of those rough and ready men had an inkling who this 'diploma doctor' really was, the one who ministered to their physical ailments and nursed along that rarer spiritual need she detected in a few. Along with the few medicines in her possession, she poured out on them the balm of the love of God.

Before he became a cowboy pioneer, John H. Wilcott was a one-time city dweller in Kenosha, Wisconsin. In 1910 he left Kenosha, once called Pike Creek village and later Southport, a city that had a fine situation above Lake Michigan and an excellent harbour, a prosperous manufacturing centre, a historical and art museum and the Petrifying Springs Park. All this he left to become a cowboy pioneer.

John H. Wilcott was no great artist who desperately seeks and finally finds fame, the kind of fame the ambitious will die for. He did not need any descent into hell to transform his spiritual consciousness, no deranging of the senses so that he could emerge purified. John H. Wilcott needed no Dionysian excesses to find out who he really was. He knew what the greatest deed in the world was and he did it.

Now who is going to remember John H. Wilcott? A few of us may end up being remembered as a footnote in a scholarly article, or as a

book on a fond reader's shelf. Some may be interviewed on the radio or even on TV. A very few of us will end up being remembered by history, or they may write an article for an encyclopedia or better still *be* in an encyclopedia. Most of us, however, will die obscure, just one of the millions who pass this way throughout the dusty ages on planet earth.

But this cowboy pioneer who roamed the bleak plains of Montana rode in the Lord's vineyard. John H. Wilcott knew who he was. He knew that 'in the land of the free and the home of the brave' the way to glory was to become a cowboy pioneer.

THE BODY BEAUTIFUL

Love and the Body Beautiful

Today the 'body beautiful' has become an overt sex object, flaunted on the commercial market, just one more product of desire. This enslavement of corporeal beauty to carnal desire has in effect reduced and deprived beauty of its more subtle powers to awaken, to refine, to captivate and to please. Beauty as reflected in the more quiescent organic and inorganic life forms that we find in nature and the creatures, or in the elegance of architecture and the variegated patterns found in works of art, has today become sacrificed to more sensual appetites.

By contrast, for the ancient Greeks, in whose sculpted and linear proportions we find the roots of western aesthetics, and for Plato especially, the love of beauty was intimately interwoven with the love of God. In Plato's account of the 'ladder of love' in his superb dramatic dialogue *The Symposium*, Plato elaborated his philosophy of love in the ascent of the soul upward to the world of Forms as being caught up in a vision of beauty at the end point of knowledge. Plato's idea of beauty being wedded to knowledge concords with an idea of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the same theme. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: 'If, then, the pursuit of knowledge lead to the beauty of Him Who is the Object of all Knowledge, how excellent that goal...'[1] In Diotima's speech to Socrates at the dinner-party (*symposium*), Diotima argues that the soul ascends by the initiate's ability to be rightly led from the lower forms of physical beauty upward to moral beauty and then on to the beauty of knowledge whose true object is 'absolute beauty and knows at last what absolute beauty is'.[2] For both Plato and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that absolute Beauty is an ecstatic vision of the Beauty of God.

For Plato, at the highest levels in the world of Forms, all the sublime attributes tend to coalesce. Thus, not only love, knowledge and beauty, but also the virtues and truth itself are all expressions of one manifold:

> Do you not see that in that region alone where he [the contemplative] sees beauty with the faculty capable of seeing it, will he be able to bring forth not mere reflected images of goodness but true goodness, because he will be in contact not with a reflection but with the truth?[3]

For Plato true love causes us to perceive 'absolute beauty in its essence, pure and unalloyed...divine beauty where it exists apart and alone'.[4] Plato's aesthetic vision consisted, then, not only of a transcendent fusion of love and beauty but also of that essence which contains virtue, purity and truth.

How fitting it is to remember in this context that one of the many titles of Bahá'u'lláh is the 'Blessed Beauty' (*Jamál-i-Mubárak*) and that those who love and contemplate Him may experience Plato's radiant fusion of love, knowledge and beauty as a high point in the soul's ascent. This is one of the meanings of the beatific vision spoken of by the mystics.

Consumer Psychology and Glorifying the Body

It seems to me that today's frenetic society has missed a fundamental point of logic with its on-line, no-wait, quick-bred consumer psychology. In all affluent societies, manufactured goods have become the idols that masquerade and substitute for spiritual values. They are the body that is worshipped without the spirit. North Americans especially have developed the cult of the body beautiful in an obsessive, sensate, corporeal materialism that would have astonished the ancient Greeks. Sensate appetites are being fully exploited in the media by commercial interests, in a denatured and desperate drive to possess the soul. Sophisticated consumer items have become the little rewards to which one treats oneself, the badges proudly worn that mark success, the soothing comforts one freely bestows upon oneself or others to relieve the nerve-shattering stresses of our frenzied way of life.

A recent luxury automobile television commercial tells the story of substitute values. It opens with the strains of celestial music, the intoning of a heavenly choir. The coveted white status symbol glides into the picture screen, slinking sleekly around a corner into full view. The heavenly music crescendoes. The celestial voices are raised to an exalted pitch. The apocalyptic moment has come at last – the victorious entrance of the promised one. Hosanna in the highest! The accompanying voice message is terse, proud and challenging. 'Celebrate the guts and the glory.' The inversion is complete. A cause for celebration, the acquisition of courage, the celestial attribute of glory, are now made readily available to those with the requisite cash flow or viable credit margin.

But even such crass commercial messages provide us with metaphysical food for thought. If the avid promoters of consumer products want to glorify the objects they hold up for public envy, why not glorify instead the spirit that made such things? We do not have to inject God and religion into the discussion at all. Is not the human genius that made the car greater than the car itself? The compact disc, the multimedia computer, the cellular telephone, the 'surround sound' high-definition television and all the other techtronic[5] miracles being hatched out in the research labs of the industrialized nations – not to forget the item that framed this reflection, the luxury automobile – are marvellous inventions every one. But if one wants to idolize them in such a fashion and sing their praises, why not be prouder of the spirit that created such things than of the things themselves?

It would make much more sense for those who have jettisoned God and religion in this consumer-oriented society, to found a purely secular religion based on the adulation of the human mind. At least it would lead to the worship of the intellectual as well as the material. Atheistic though such a hollow religion would be, it would still be better than the worship of the fabricated objects so keenly coveted by the consuming public. This is only slow logic. But the late twentieth century dedicated consumer is not only possessed. For all his sophistication and know-how, he has become deaf and dumb. In his blind adoration of technically performing material goods, he cannot even lift up his sights to recognize that the human spirit is greater than the thing it has made.

Goodness is Now Obsolete

Today goodness holds little interest for the popular imagination and is regarded as virtually obsolete. It has consequently become void of the power of moral persuasion it once enjoyed. Nothing can be got from goodness. So the people think. For them, it is a useless, devitalized thing. In postmodern literature, for example, the genuinely good person is largely ignored by writers as being a lack-lustre individual. This is one of the failings of modern characterization generally, that the hero or 'good person' has suffered an eclipse. The virtuous character, if not actually suspect, is perceived as uniformly flat and has consequently received little attention from today's writers, except to be cast in the role of victim or as a modicum of mediocrity.

Goodness, however, implies not just something benign, but also a quality of strength. Today's fiction writer may well find a challenge in creating reader interest through depicting the strong, virtuous individual, but we all stand to be enriched and inspired by the reintegration of a certain moral authority into contemporary literature. It is not a forgone conclusion, even in today's postmodern mind set, that goodness or strength of character will not sustain reader interest and serve the best interests of contemporary writing. For is it not true that goodness and strength are what we end up loving most?

The Metaphysics of History and Fine Art

Over the millennia civilizations have come and gone, but still their traces remain. In the spare and graceful lines of temple columns, in script, in artifacts of all sorts, the remnants of ancient peoples still bear witness to their past. Behind the desire of the historian to know and to record history integrally, to capture the whole sweep of evolving, organized human life on the planet, lies the quest for eternity. All history radiates onward as one flowing stream of spiritual energy, as fluctuations of a wave. Just as science attains the personal the more it advances,[6] so does history attain the infinite the more widely it surveys. From the atomic moments of particular civilizations, the historian broadens his vision to survey patterns, to observe the 'rise and fall', a metaphorical phrase itself dependent on

the metaphysical notions of causality, space and time. The desire to discover, in the German historian Leopold von Ranke's well-known phrase, *'wie es eigentlich gewesen'* (how things really were or what *really* happened), points to interpretation. Providential history especially has an inescapable metaphysical component.

In the abstract sense, as there is only one religion, the religion of humanity, there is only one history, the history of the human race on the planet earth. Although only rocks and rubble, broken and silent temple columns and long-deserted arenas and amphitheatres may survive from past ages, these remains are very much *our* history. For it is our history's roots that lie in those rocks and rubble, in those mute pillars of the temple, in the silent amphitheatre or the decaying sports palace. The historian reestablishes the continuity, forges the direct links between the ancestors and ourselves.

As a quest for the infinite and the eternal, history cannot be understood without an effort of the imagination. It is with imagination as well as with documents and artifacts that history is reconstructed. Imagination works the creative synthesis that assists in the reconstruction of past events. In this sense, the writing of history is a creative act. The historian must imaginatively reconstruct the ancient scenarios that he or she surveys. Since the historian is distant in time from the scene or events, this reconstruction must be a kind of re-creation. The historian must make the sought-after events come alive again in a process that cannot be achieved without the collaboration of both intellect and imagination. But the synthetic powers of imagination in this case can never be exact. They are only loosely representative of the events they seek to recreate.

Many consider history, like art, to be immobile. One speaks, for example, of 'the dead weight of the past' as if past events were buried and inert. But the paradox of history is that the past is both dead and alive. History is dead in the sense that the selfsame event can never be relived exactly as it was. But it remains alive and moving in the major events that shape the present age and in the everyday gestures of individuals, as well as in the life of nations. History is alive in the present tense of current events and in individual lives; the happenings of the past, for good or ill, perpetuate themselves into the present and have to a great extent determined what we are doing now. Especially

in the history of technology does the past project itself into the present. Our sophisticated, clever gadgets and labour-saving devices have developed from their more rudimentary historical antecedents, dating back to early Palaeolithic times. Within these modern technologies, we find more primitive forms encapsulated and transformed into more complex ones.

To say that the past lives on in the present moment is true, not just in current events and contemporary history, but in all of time. For the moment that has just died is continually being reborn in the moment that is now. Just as the past has a decisive impact on the present, so will the present impact decisively upon the future. In this sense, there is only one eternal continuum. In mythology, the Titan god Kronos bestowed upon humanity that most important single element which makes all life possible and upon which history depends and becomes eternal – time. As long as there is time, there will be history. History must be concerned with this eternity or 'all time'.

What the artist shares with the historian is the concern to capture the moment or the scene and to preserve its living quality. The creation of great art results in a paradox, for works of art are only deceptively static. In great art one senses that the static form, the medium through which the artist creates, actually moves or is alive. In reality the fine artist actually achieves the sense of a moving or living image preserved in a motionless form. Thus, as the artist works, there is a mighty striving to freeze eternity in a moment and to create motion in immobility.

This motion in immobility is, of course, one of the characteristics of both the Divine Manifestation and the human soul. Bahá'u'lláh proclaims about His own coming:

> He Who is both the Beginning and the End, He Who is both Stillness and Motion, is now manifest before your eyes. Behold how, in this Day, the Beginning is reflected in the End, how out of Stillness Motion hath been engendered.[7]

In what is rightly called a 'coincidence of opposites', He writes of this paradoxical nature of the human soul which reflects its qualities in art:

It is still, and yet it soareth; it moveth, and yet it is still. It is, in itself, a testimony that beareth witness to the existence of a world that is contingent, as well as to the reality of a world that hath neither beginning nor end.[8]

In the same way that love and death, and the loss and regaining of identity or true self, have been the motivating force for much great literature and philosophy, so the quest for eternity and the thirst for the infinite are the source of all true art and history. Even at the level of worldly fame, the most cherished desire of those who withdraw from public life is to be remembered favourably 'when history is written'. Thus, the quest for eternity lives on, even at the most mundane levels.

The historian must consequently seek the total picture, the meaning of the whole so as to make sense of humanity's ordered life, at this date now much disordered. If historians mechanically reconstruct only minuscule atomic moments, specific episodes or even periods or ages, they do not really succeed in capturing history. If they do not succeed in capturing the *meaning* in the pattern of events they interpret and the *telos*[9] of history, they have not really succeeded, for history is the manifestation of the human spirit in the concrete act and can never be devoid of a higher significance. He who does not learn the lessons of history, learns history not at all. Without the sense of the metaphysical, history remains deprived of a deeper meaning and it cannot afford to be so deprived. Without the sense of the metaphysical, art can never become fully conscious of its eternal value.

Ecstasy, Art and the Brevity of Life

The whistling train that passes in the dark of night has been for many years my private symbol for the brevity of life. Until now, I have never analysed the reason, having been content to imbibe and enjoy this haunting sound in a quiet, reflective moment. But I suppose it is because the whistle of the passing train, like the human voice, sounds briefly, then dies. It returns to life, but ultimately fades away. The nocturnal whistle of the passing train contains the mystery of return. It is a haunting sound that swells and fades,

returns in refrain, then disappears. It whistles from we know not where, over there in the distance, this enigma of a train just passing through. Life too comes from we know not where, then passes by.

For many, the brevity of life has generated much fear in the soul, deep dark pools of anguish and *angst*. Many who love life cannot bear to contemplate the fact that one day they will die, will no longer be able to continue to enjoy what they take pleasure in doing now. To many souls the prospect of death is terrifying, unless the thought of extinction and the cessation of consciousness bring them consolation. In order to escape from such grim realities, men and women drive themselves to attain dizzying heights of passion and pain, succumbing to a frantic search for strong sensations, desperately hoping to numb themselves against the aching meaninglessness and sharp pain of life.

But by seeking liberation in a misdirected quest for pleasure, we will never be able to discover true joy. True joy cannot be had by desperate attachment. Souls in flight desire *Eros* but they do not know that true *Eros* is the ecstasy of the love of God. In the flight from self, they never discover that it is in the 'possession' of their souls that they will escape death and all the dark fears surrounding it. In possessing the soul they will step into eternity and attain a larger life of bliss and transfiguration. And to rephrase a teaching of Jesus, to possess one's soul, one must lose it.[10]

However, this ever-larger-looming spectre of life's brevity has been not only the cause of the great escape and the desperate search for the pleasure principle, but also the source of much great art and literature. In such creative work lies hidden the quest for immortality. Artists desire most through their work, not only to move their own souls and the souls of others, but also to perpetuate their existence, to live on and through the work that they have created. In all great art is heard the sometimes faint, sometimes booming voice of a prayer for immortality, a prayer that cries: 'Let me not die a thing forgotten, a thing obscure. Let me live.' Such a prayer contains within it the seed of its own realization. The imaginative individual faces, then, the contemplation of fast-fading life in productive instead of destructive ways. Life's brevity impels the artist to self-transcendence, which is but creativity and immortality in another form.

Beauty

One of the functions of beauty is simply to be beautiful for beauty's sake. Of course, beauty does increase our sense of pleasure, well-being and delight, or creates a plenitude and contentment of both senses and soul. But as the expression so aptly puts it: 'Beauty is its own excuse for being.' Beauty has no right, either earned or conferred, to exist. It simply does exist in the nature of things and requires nothing else to justify its existence. Functionality may apply to beauty, but if so applied, is secondary. Beauty's main function is to be beautiful and thus augment that sense of deep tranquillity, joy and admiration that the onlooker experiences. We should be cautious when praising beauty or when recognizing the merits it possesses. If beauty is rewarded, it is not because it has earned recompense, but rather simply because it has been itself. Beauty owes the world nothing and the world owes beauty nothing other than its admiration, if admiration can ever be owed. Those who mindlessly adore beauty, however, are mistaken if they do not adore beauty's source rather than its reflection. True beauty is not vain and does not wish for wanton idolaters.

NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY

Divine Losses and New Beginnings

If we have lost a love, then surely another is waiting to be found. If we look deeply into the ash pile of our broken dreams, we will find a glowing ember waiting to rekindle the flame of love's ancient story. When perennial flowers wither and die, their seed contains the germ of a new beginning. So it is with the aspiring soul. An ever more abundant life stirs within her being.

However lovely and fragrant, it is the same flower that returns every spring. Not so with the soul. After the agony of loss and the winter of discontent comes spiritual rebirth. Following the long sleep of death, the soul experiences a new awakening. Unlike the perennial flower which maintains the same form year after year, a purer, more stable and refined self appears in the divine springtime. With the passing days, the spiritual soul becomes more '...beautiful in colour and redolent of fragrance in the kingdom of God'.[1]

If we feel as though we are dying, let us willingly accept death while remembering that we are sure to be resurrected. The layers of the old self, no longer fit for the present task, are being torn away by the pain. As the mask of the former self comes unglued, a stronger, more beautiful face of spirituality is taking form. We are not losing but gaining. A new self is emerging. We are being born again.

The Sense of the Platonic and Paradise Lost

It is both strange and true that those things we have lost, or at least imagined we have lost, or paradoxically not yet attained, seem to be the most beautiful, most real things in the world. Of course, in the

Platonic sense this must be so. Plato's Ideas in the world of Forms enjoyed an ideal beatified existence in a world beyond. Whether that world was to be found in some transcendent spiritual realm or existed only within the mind of the contemplative philosopher matters little. The far-off, unattainable nature of the Ideas, as much as their being the only ultimately real things in existence, accounted for their appeal.

I have often wondered at this paradise lost and paradise not yet attained, reflecting on the meaning of Proust's phrase that 'the real paradise is the paradise we have lost'.[2] We might well add to the French writer's aphoristic expression, 'or the one that we have not yet gained'. The paradisiacal point which we so strongly believe in, love or long for, whether it lies in the misty past or still looms up before our eyes, bright with the fair promise of future things, is nothing other than a vision of happiness welling up from the deepest desires of the soul.

On the one hand, this paradise of happiness seems to be held firmly in the grasp of the fair maiden of the future. The lover who has not yet met with destiny, the ailing body who longs for healing, the poor or destitute one who desires wealth, the troubled soul who longs for inner peace, the ambitious person who desires success – this earnestly sought-after happiness is connected with a moment that is not in the now, but in the future. And if and when that future becomes the now, in that moment when the secret desires of the heart are attained, then the happiness we once imagined becomes another happiness. It becomes a happiness transmuted, now tinged with the wan light of reality and sometimes with disappointment.

There is, consequently, a note of caution to be sounded here. If this happiness is not really attainable, and each seeker must decide for himself when it is no longer attainable, then the seeker, if he truly loves himself and has mercy on his own soul, will tear up the unreal script of his own desires. For this unrealized happiness will become as bitter as gall and will serve only to frustrate and to disillusion his present and future hopes.

And what of the paradise past? Wherein lies the lure of '...the days that are no more'?[3] This paradise is the paradise of the secret garden, of that lost Eden through which we once freely roamed. It is the paradise of that place whose access we once enjoyed unencumbered but whose entrance is now barred by angels with a flaming sword.[4]

This is the paradise of the forbidden return. 'No!' the angels say. 'You may not enter here again. Go on with your journey, whatever it may be. Be faithful to the truth you have come to discover and we will show you another Eden, so lovely that you will long for this one no more.'

But in our sorrow and our longing, when we are '...wild with all regret',[5] if we continue to cling to this lost paradise ever the more desperately in the hope of regain, we shall be cast down. Cast down until that moment when, by virtue of a greater wisdom and the grace of God, we are ushered again into that larger, clearer vision of reality that alone can set us free. Then we shall realize that in the Plan of God, and for all those who love Him and who seek that special destiny He has set down for each aspiring soul, nothing is ever really lost and every heartfelt prayer is answered.

'Nothing Gold Can Stay', or the Beginning of Knowledge and the End of Innocence

Experience soon teaches that much of life's sorrow stems from loss. Yet formal education provides poor preparation for the inevitable losses that all must face over the course of a lifetime. Such losses bring in their wake the psychological distress and trauma that occur most poignantly with the death of loved ones or the end of relationships, or in times of transition.

The child or youth, if he is happy, tends to live in the false security of present circumstances. He never suspects that all that is familiar to him – the playground, the park, the school, the vacant lot or open field, the familiar street, the family and friends – cannot be a permanent setting in his life. He cannot envisage that soon he will be banished from this green garden. Especially, the child or youth never contemplates that those who share the inmost recesses of his heart, or tutor his soul, will one day move on, or he will leave them. If he does suspect this truth, he does not want to believe it.

The American poet Robert Frost (1874–1963), writing in the tradition of wisdom literature, sought to convey the truth that life's golden moments must be followed by inevitable losses. None of that pure gold can stay:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf 's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank down to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.[6]

These verses demand the cultivation within ourselves of a certain informed realism without which we cannot successfully navigate through the stormy seas of life's tests. When Bahá'u'lláh warns us to contemplate what might befall us in the future,[7] far from promoting a fear-ridden pessimism He must, I think, be warning us to be sharp-sighted and to be wary of a certain naiveté vis-à-vis the world. For there are no guarantees against the instability of human affairs.

But there is something else connected with these necessary losses. The Hebrew Bible teaches that 'in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.'[8] It is a hard fact of life to realize that we mature more through trial and suffering than we do through the '...ease of a passing day'.[9] Sorrow has much to do with the acquisition of knowledge and particularly the knowledge of self, for the acquisition of self-knowledge must signify an end to naive innocence. The innocence and credulity of the child's mind and the gusty enthusiasm of youth, for all their sweetness and sincerity, must sooner or later evolve into that vision of the world that seeks something greater than the repetition of its own happiness. Adults must learn the same lesson.

Now there is, to be sure, a certain winsomeness and purity in this outlook of innocence, in this anticipation of the eternal return of the ever-lovely. But there is nonetheless a flaw in it, an irksome fly in the precious ointment of the golden moment. It is precisely the defect of unknowing, the impairment of not being acutely aware of 'all things passing away', of not being cognizant that 'nothing gold can stay'. The French Canadians have retained in their sometimes picturesque speech an inkling of this connection between innocence and the failure of knowledge, for even today when they say *'Il est*

bien innocent', they do not mean that he is innocent, but rather that he is naive.

The child's innocence, says 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is pure but untried[10] and is consequently not based on the conclusions of the sure mind. What is ideally supposed to happen is that the child or youth's experience of transitory events becomes the cause of the acquisition of real self-knowledge that will help ground him in the mature experience of the adult.

There is, however, a paradox to be lived in this experience of the loss of innocence and the acquisition of the knowledge of self. In the process of becoming worldly-wise and of having to sew 'aprons' of 'fig leaves' over our naked bodies,[11] the individual should in later years continue to maintain the innocence of childhood and the enthusiasm of youth. Something of this innocence must be preserved in the faith-state of adulthood, for Christ has said that unless we become as little children, we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven: 'Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein.'[12] There should never be an end to this purity of heart, this vulnerability, this spontaneous wonderment and willingness to believe which are the blessings of childhood.

In time, we learn to see with the eyes of faith that even in loss (and sometimes especially in loss) there can be great blessings. The sense of loss and mourning, whatever its origin and despite its bitter poignancy, causes the bounds of the soul to be stretched to the limits, to rise to greater heights of reliance upon God or to plummet further into the depths of human experience. Such fiery ordeals mature the soul with understanding, make it mellow and touch it with pathos, a pathos that more greatly sensitizes the soul to the sadness and suffering of others. For sorrow is of little value if it does not in some way make us wiser or better people, more ready to assist our friends who themselves have been touched by the sad things of life.

The lesson that 'nothing gold can stay' also has a larger and immense creative value, for its compensation is to be found in the quest for a philosophy of wisdom, and in the time-tested universal truths contained in literature and religion. For gold that does not stay spurs us on to find a currency that is of everlasting value, one that is always good on every market and in every time and clime.

Another question arises. How to teach the child or youth detachment to prepare for the inevitable changes that must accompany the journey of life? How do we teach the child or youth to enjoy and to love the things that now fill his world, yet not cling to them? That is a great question, one to which I have no ready answer. Only the life experiences themselves that come with the passage of time will ready the child or youth for future developments and that slowly-ripening sense of detachment that usually comes with age. Somehow, the child must be made aware that some of these things that he or she loves and cherishes will not always be here. And the best way to make aware is with a gentle wisdom.

But there is, I think, another means to convey the sense of the joy of sacrifice, of laying down the things we love, and the elemental self we love, with singing. This joy of sacrifice to compensate for loss can never be learned without complete trust in God and without the assurance of His never-failing love and compassion.

In Praise of Failure

Guilt-ridden, gloating western society seems to be preoccupied more by its failures than its successes. Failures abound these days. We hear, for example, that a corporate merger attempt has failed, some ambitious engineering project has failed, a much touted scientific experiment has failed. The world of scandal that so rivets the public's attention is intimately connected with moral failure.

Sentimentalists like to indulge their failures. Romantics sorrow over paradise lost, over the what-could-have-been-that-never-was. Some sad and sorry part of ourselves disappears or dies with the failure. It loves to be sweetly mourned. Much self-love, I think, must linger in many a failure.

The religious, particularly, with their conscious or unconscious inheritance of original sin and consequent paradise lost, seem to be always mourning losses. 'Ah, what a shame,' they say when they hear another couple has divorced, when friends knew all too well the union was pathological. Or 'Fred lost his job just yesterday and the prospects are dismal. It's just too bad,' they say. Yet the sympathy is understandable. The tender zone of the heart, the compassionate

friend, wants to commiserate with the victim. The tough part, however, the Spartan soldier wants to say, 'Stand up and take it like a man' (now a politically incorrect statement). Let us rephrase: 'Stand up and take it like a human.' German speakers put it better. 'Stand up and take it like a *Mensch*. Be a *Mensch* (human being)'. Yet failure raises the question, and has to: why is unsuccess so endemic to human existence? Such a ubiquitous pattern in human experience must be here by design, be it ever so unconscious.

Failure may be an indication that one is ignoring or violating the workings of spiritual law. The notion of spiritual law has existed in Hinduism and Buddhism for millennia as *Karma* (action, deed)[13] and is well-expressed in its biblical textual parallel in the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians: 'for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap'(6:7),[14] no doubt ancient rabbinical teaching. Spiritual law is simply the metaphysical demonstration of the scientific principle of cause and effect. Like it or not, it is as predictable as the rise of the northern star. According to spiritual law, those who fail, fail predictably. Sadder but wiser, they may wish that they had not left the ranks of the humble, the naive and the innocent who did not dare to try the tempting experiment. If they accept their chastisement and are still functional enough to tell the tale, they will have another opportunity. Failure, then, can become an eventual cause for celebration, for it causes us to become more aware of our own motives, to work more consciously with and for the creation of our own destiny, rather than passively submitting to what we might view as the outrages of fate and fortune.

Failure, if accepted as an opportunity to relearn the lesson, can prove to be a fruitful discipline. I have not consulted the historical record to determine the count, but for every successful experiment of the prodigious American inventor Thomas Alva Edison (1847–1931), there were many failures. Edison's workshop and laboratory at Menlo Park and later at Orange, New Jersey exemplified the principle that for the patient and the assiduous worker, failure is often the prelude to success. Edison came to understand, however, that some of his experiments, no matter how many times repeated, were destined to be failures. They were blind alleys. No matter how many times you run up a blind alley, you will always hit the wall. In this case, Edison

learned to move away or to take another tack. He was successful precisely because he learned to move away at the right time and to see the possibility of another victory in defeat. It is self-defeating to stand at the wall for too long.

Through twists, turns and accidents – and accidents, we do well to remember, are also part of the scientific method – some of Edison's 'failures' turned out to be his greatest successes. For Edison and his team, as for spiritual scientists, the road to success requires the implementation of Thomas Kuhn's 'paradigm shift',[15] a shift in consciousness, a looking at the bigger picture, at what is trying to emerge in the now. When faced with failure, Edison and his team were able to seek other solutions and step back to apprehend the way that nature seemed to be leading them. What is true for the inventor is likewise true for the spiritual artisan. When we are able to put aside our own wilful designs and preconceptions, we too are led to make great discoveries. Sometimes it is just a case of relentless trial and error.[16]

When failure strikes, we do well to regroup and look at the bigger picture, to wrestle with the experiment. Where is it taking us? Let *it* lead the way. Our failures, although often self-determined, contain their own hidden wisdom and justice. Once we begin to take a more detached view and really listen to the needs of our own soul, and to the needs of others, we too shall find what we seek.

Finally, one has to remember this. Not everything that initially looks like failure proves to be so in the long run. What the world loves to write off so quickly in judgemental fashion often proves in the 'fullness of time' to be surprisingly resilient, and to come back with poetic justice as a resounding success.

IN EXTREMIS

True Joy

Teach us, O God, to know that there is something greater than our sufferings, something greater than the loves we have known. It is Thou Thyself. Thou art true joy.

Golden Joy

All our suffering is in some sense sacred. Suffering is the natural tendency by which we rid ourselves of imperfections. Whether that suffering be God-sent or self-caused, if we are able to accept the visitation of the holy and redemptive discipline that suffering brings in its wake, we shall discover its salutary effects in understanding, growing, healing, transcending, becoming free, finding balance, seeing once more with clarity, renewing and doing afresh. We are happy when we discover that in this fast-fleeting world of illusion, the mask of sorrow conceals the shining face of joy. By some dimly understood law of opposites or by the mysterious mercy and grace of God, we discover that beyond 'the thorns and briars of sadness and despondency'[1] awaits the gold of joy.

In the Ebb and Flow of Joy and Sorrow

We are all of us seekers after joy. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said in a pointed phrase, 'Joy gives us wings!'[2] We ascend on the wings of joy. When stirred by joy, we feel as if we touch the face of God. The ecstatics among us want joy to be everlasting. Yet more often than we care to be, we are visited by sorrow. We come all too slowly to

the realization that the 'steady state' does not reside in the ebb and flow of the tides of human feeling.

We mistakenly cling to joy, just as we mistakenly resent sadness as a wearisome, oppressive intruder. We do well to remember, especially in our darker moments, that in one sense both joy and sorrow are imposters – 'imposters' because the polarities of human existence reveal themselves to be only the shifting features on an ever-varying countenance, dancers in a minuet of changing partners. Both joy and sorrow are to be embraced and accepted with equanimity in the multi-textured fabric that defines our life. When gripped hard in the clutches of sorrow, it is a consolation to remember that sorrow's face is as liable to fade as quickly as that of joy. We are mistaken if we believe that sadness will last forever, just as we mistakenly cling to joy as if she would so brightly define all our waking moments.

When we find ourselves laughing through our tears, we realize then just how fluid joy and sorrow are, and how very closely the one is linked to the other. If we are cast down deeply enough into the heart of sorrow, we will soon find ourselves uplifted on soaring spirits. Indeed, the depths of sorrow produce their corresponding heights of joy. Perhaps this is why 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote these wonderful words which may first read as a puzzlement: '...affliction is but the essence of bounty, and sorrow and toil are mercy unalloyed, and anguish is peace of mind...'[3] True words for those who accept with equanimity the contrasting movements of the human soul.

For the Brokenhearted True Believers

One of the believer's greatest tests is the test of 'Dear God, this is not what I had prayed for,' the test during which the soul cries out 'Father, no, this cannot be!' The believer has prayed that God in His mercy would answer the heartfelt supplication, would not visit this test upon him. The deepest desire of the heart is not granted, the fondest of prayers not heard. If he has feared much, like Job, his worst fears have come upon him: 'For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me.'[4]

But we must wait a moment. The end is not yet. Hope still rings out in the cathedral bells of the words 'in a little while'. Consolation is breathed into the phrase 'in God's good time'. Next time the fulfilment of our prayer will be found in the words 'as you would have me do'.

Whatever we have lost, we have Bahá'u'lláh. This is our supreme consolation. He is our salvation and eternal life. What then have we lost? What choice is there to be made? Our solace can be found in remembering Robert Browning's words:

> Grow old along with me!
> The best is yet to be,
> The last of life, for which the first was made:
> Our times are in His hand
> Who saith, 'A whole I planned,
> Youth shows but half; trust God; see all, nor be afraid!'[5]

The Existential Moment

In spiritual life, two contrasting moments hold great potential for significant transformation – the existential moment and the epiphanic moment. Although these moments, as I define them, are found at the antipodes of pain and pleasure, of humiliation and exaltation, they converge at a point of renewal and resurrection. The first comes clothed in the garments of agony, fear and dread. The second ascends on wings of joy in a breathless moment of divine delight. Both are harbingers of spiritual birth. One is the birth of trial by fire; the other, the birth of a glorious awakening from a long, dreamless sleep.

The existential moment is apocalyptic. It comes as a surprise, unexpected and unpredictable. We are crushed at its onset. It is a sudden meeting with the shadow self, the elemental self, the worldly self, the unruly self that lives for the moment and has momentarily rejected divine law in the interests of its own imperious demands. The existential moment is a meeting with the *alter ego* that can no longer be delayed. The true believer is forced painfully to peel away the outworn mask of the old self and persistent habits. The image of the hidden higher self is seeking definition and desires to come clear.

The existential moment is defined by another meaning in the search for truth: of the confrontation with self, of standing face to face with the lower self that attempts to assert its supremacy within the human soul. Unless we are vigilant, this lower self can easily become 'a monster of selfishness'.[6] In the existential moment, we face ourselves as the 'quintessence of passion', as 'rebellious ones', as 'children of fancy', as a 'weed that springeth out of the dust'.[7] The existential moment is a moment of high realism, stark and real, that momentarily outweighs any other consideration. Through our struggle with that angel of darkness do we release the dayspring of pure light that would shine from within our soul.

The Epiphanic Moment

The reverse side of the existential moment is the epiphanic moment. Also sudden in its manifestation, by contrast the epiphanic moment is a moment of exaltation, of illumination or triumph when we are in Wordsworth's phrase 'surprised by joy'.[8] This epiphanic moment is 'a numinous disclosure of glory, an experience of awe or reverence, triumph or celebration, a hierophany that looms up large with promise and exaltation. It is Bahá'u'lláh in the Garden of Riḍván,[9] and all the lesser reflections of that spiritual event. It is the believer winning the desires of the heart. It may be a divine healing, a mystical encounter, or the certitude that our lesser will has become one with the greater Will of God.'[10]

Wherefore Anger and Pain?

Any complaining I do in the present is the residue of life's past frustration and pain, the imagined unfulfilled hopes and dreams. Any anger I now manifest derives from my failure to accept graciously and to reconcile myself to the hurts that are inevitably bound up with my unfolding destiny. Any whining, any note of self-pity, is due to an inability to understand at the deepest levels, to have greater faith and trust, to detach myself from the things that I fancy I love most deeply and would not bear to live without.

The Plummet into Sorrow

The natural human tendency in the face of psychological pain is recoil. But the brave fight against sorrow sometimes only intensifies the suffering. As we resist, the trouble persists. If we struggle too hard to climb the 'arc of ascent' while we are on the 'arc of descent',[11] the spiritual energies consumed in the battle may prove to be futile and lead to the reverse effect of a surcharge of grief. In this case, it may be better to go along with the plummet into sorrow and honestly embrace the test that has visited us.

This consent to a free-fall into distress is not to be confused with futile self-punishment. It is a willingness to drain the cup we have been asked to drink. It is really a search to rediscover an equipoise by a relaxation of the will, by a giving in and a giving over. By letting ourselves sink deeper into the dark waters of what may seem like endless night, we shall come to plant our feet again on solid ground and rediscover equilibrium.

For certain souls, the walk into the long night of sorrow proves too much; overwhelmed, they do not return. For such as these, sorrow has pronounced its sentence with a weighty finality. But once willing to give in and to let ourselves be pulled deeper into what seems at the time like a swirling vortex, we find release from the wasted energies of spiritual combat and the overpowering, depressive forces that momentarily had taken hold.

In this life, we are all captains of our little ship. The plummet into sorrow is like navigating the waters of a raging river. If we are skilful enough to adjust to the current without being overpowered and if our craft is strong enough to stay afloat while we are being jetted along, we shall soon find ourselves in calmer waters. By the willing consent to plummet into sorrow and to work with its energies, we shall soon find ourselves released.

ON REAL GROUND

The Call of Truth

Many have heard the call. Either it is beautiful, insistent and clear, bright with the promise of a new day, or it fills us with fear and trembling, making us anxious with the hope in which love and dread dwell together as partners. But only time and ardent prayer will make it clear whether or not the call is a reflection of the Will of God or the subtle promptings of self.

Truth and Discipleship

Those who imagine truth to be merely an intellectual construct, or a series of interwoven constructs, circumscribe the magnitude of truth itself. Truth is not just a net with which to entrap little fish. Truth is a reality greater than intellect, greater than the multitude of rational configurations contained within it. Truth is not an idea or conglomerate of ideas, or even a Meta-Idea. Truth is an immense metaphysical force field, a *terra firma* on which one may build – for self-realization, for peace, for historical evolution and societal progress, for the noble strength and beauty of knowledge. Truth is not merely a matter of intellectual curiosity seeking to be satisfied, of propositions waiting to be discovered, connected, synthesized, juxtaposed and presented, new facts uncovered. It exerts a far profounder influence on spirits, souls, and lives.

To fully understand truth's import, we must consider the teaching of Jesus that the truth will make us free: 'And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.'[1] Let us see, however, the whole context of Christ's saying: 'Jesus then said to the Jews who had

believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."[2]

Christ is indicating a clear relationship between belief in Him, between His word and discipleship, on the one hand, and knowing the truth on the other. In other words, recognition of the True Prophet and obedience to Him will lead us into truth. And this truth will be better known by taking on the yoke of discipleship. This one saying alone forever shatters the narrower definitions of truth as being confined to mere philosophical concepts and identifies it clearly as a living dynamic, capable of profoundly altering and influencing lives and leading us to clearer vision. The truth will make us free if we become disciples. Disciples[3] are committed, know how and why to obey.

Simple Truths

TRUTH is the one great manifold. There are many types of truths, as there are truths both great and small. The greatest truths are the simplest and these essential truths are the ones most capable of effecting spiritual transformation and moulding conduct. We need not be deceived nor frustrated in our attempt to understand the truth by seeking out subtle and obscure formulations. That God loves every soul more than it loves itself is a simple but most profound truth, one that few souls fully grasp. Were the full significance of just this one truth to be fully realized, the face of the whole earth would change dramatically. That God has a Cosmic Will that is already revealed to the world and to every individual who believes in a Divine Plan, is another truth which makes for world-shaping, world-shaking consequences, were it only to be realized by every conscientious soul. Many of the great truths are not only simple and self-evident, but remain as yet unrealized and ineffective because they are neither entertained, cherished nor lived by with the greater mass of humanity. It is also true that truth, when it shall be fully realized, will liberate humanity from the chains of sorrow. One of the greatest truths is that for those who love God and do His will, there is really never any need to fear and never any need to sorrow. With them all will be well.

The Biggest Lie of All

The biggest lie we will ever tell is the one we tell ourselves. Sometimes we lie to ourselves because we cannot bear to hear what the truth is whispering in our ears. So we write our own script and it sounds believable for a time. Sometimes lying to ourselves is a temporary palliative measure. We think it is care and it supports the dying patient for a while. The fictitious ego clings to the lie because it falsely believes that it needs this delusion to survive. Sooner or later we learn that when we lie to ourselves, we belittle who we are and minimize the potentialities for freedom and strength contained within our own being. But the truth is strong, very strong. Truth will out.

Gradually, the rising, midmorning sun of truth begins to dispel the mists of deception and circumstance. We become peaceful and thankful for the clearer vision of reality. We let go of illusion. Soon we are grateful to be liberated. Like the snake that sloughs off its dead skin, we move into a freer, more spacious atmosphere. We understand then that the lies we tell ourselves are not huge, deceptive monsters but only spectres in the mind – little, white fairies we create ourselves because we cannot bear to walk alone in the dark.

What the Martyr Knows

The martyr knows that only in dying can she be made whole. She knows that only in returning to God the most precious gift of all, the gift of life itself, can she be fulfilled. By divine decree she was created free. Whatever she chooses now must be made in that field of clarity where compulsion no longer reigns. She knows that there can be no deep, no true satisfaction for her, no lasting fulfilment, until she has done her all, given her all, let her life's blood flow, let the pith and heart of her devotion be crushed by the millstone of suffering, that it might yield up the precious oil to light the wick in the lamp of the love of God.

The name she loves most, the name she loves above all, is Bahá'u'lláh's name, and it is written on her heart. Whatever other name she may have carried there for a while is now but a faded memory. She lives, she breathes for Him alone.

She wonders if she did not secretly will this agony for herself in some hidden part of her soul, for she was not whole without it, not quite happy before. Perhaps, childlike, she was too content to bask in that innocent joy that never knew sorrow's name. Perhaps she was too content to gambol in the green, pleasant spaces of Eden, free just to roam and to feel secure in the paradise of His love, happy just to mention His name, to teach His truth.

But now she knows that the paradise she once knew had to be snatched away in order that love's gift might be yielded up, in order that others might live, feel, know, rejoice in what she knows now. This most awful of secrets, most terrible of mysteries exacts payment with the heaviest of prices. Only in dying to self may she truly live. Only in dying to self may others live because of her.

She knows that this martyrdom is not selfishness, knows that it is a true desire for communion with the Blessed Beauty, a desire to be in His presence. But does she know, does she really know, she wonders, what it is to desire to be in that presence? Can such a desire which has so freely entered her heart, and which seemingly costs nothing, be won so easily? No, this dying to self is not selfishness. Her desire for communion is a longing to share with all who may care to drink from the same heady cup, a communion she proffers to all those who seek to know and to understand. She prays that all may feel, all may know what she feels and knows. She prays that all may taste the precious love she has found.

The Martyr and the Lie

(remembering the faithful in Iran)

'O perverse hater! Didst thou imagine that martyrdom could abase this Cause?'[4]

The martyr cannot lie about the truth he has embraced, for he knows that the lie is both the master and monster of self-betrayal and deception. When one fools oneself, one cheats oneself out of the possibility of being faithful to the truth which alone, as Christ has said, will set us free.[5] If a believer denies his faith, he puts the densest of veils over his soul and clouds over his mind. In so doing, he darkens the truth which is the brightest of all the bright things in the world since its primary source lies in the shining Word of God.

Some individuals lie in order to avoid embarrassment, deprivation, pain, or in more serious circumstances, imprisonment or death. This is a *natural* thing to do. It is natural for all living organisms to seek self-preservation and protection from bodily injury. So in that sense, fountain of all vices though it is, lying is natural, since by it men hope to protect and preserve their lives. But when one denies one's faith, this avoidance of pain is bought at a terrible cost. The cost is self-deception to both oneself and the oppressor. It is double-deception. The final cost is betrayal of oneself and the community of the faithful. More important, it is a breaking of one's covenant with the Almighty.

For the believer, denial takes on dramatic dimensions and the profoundest of meanings. If a believer denies the truth to avoid imprisonment, torture or death, he knows that in so doing he must deny the One whom he has loved, been faithful to and believed in. But if he denies, he proves, alas, that he is not grateful for such bounties. Thus does he prove that he has not really loved, been faithful to, and believed in his sole salvation.

Denial is the antithesis not only of faith but also of life, for faith is life-affirming. Faith is saying Yes to God. I think it is true to say that the true believer always says Yes to God. This saying Yes to God, however, sometimes means saying No to other people and to situations. If the believer is placed in life-threatening circumstances because of his faith, the whole outcome of the meaning of the situation hinges precisely on his affirmation or denial, of his saying Yes to God and No to man or No to God and Yes to man. The case of the martyr or the apostate is a crystal clear illustration of the either/or in which all is won or lost purely in the meaning of the situation.

Some have wondered why the believer does not just dissimulate his faith in order to save his life, following the practice of *taqíya (katmán)* (dissimulation) which is condoned, for example, in Shí'ah Islam but which, according to twelver theologian Ḥasan ibn Yúsuf (died 1326 CE), could not be legitimately practised after the coming of the Qá'im, who did in fact appear in 1844 in the person of the Báb.[6] After all, according to this strategy, the believer does not really deny. He just pretends to deny but really goes on believing in his heart. But this cannot be, for the true believer is always and forever

a true witness. The true witness will lift up his voice to proclaim the truth, even, and especially, in the face of indifference or opposition.

If a believer denies the Truth and the One whom he has loved and been faithful to, he commits the worst kind of treachery. For that One whom he has loved and been faithful to has given him spiritual life and has granted him eternal salvation. To deny the truth of one's faith is analogous to that son or daughter who sinks to cursing or execrating the parents who have loved him and given him life. His parents brought him into the world, raised him up and educated him to discriminate between the truth and falsehood, upon which the progress of his soul and the entire world depends. The apostate commits such ingratitude just by breathing the word No. The believer, then, cannot just pretend to deny the truth in order to save his life, any more than a loving son or daughter can curse or deny his parents. In so doing, he would in effect be denying the genesis of his own spiritual life. By so doing, he would bring shame not on them, but on himself.

But there is another important point here, one that concerns the other parties involved in this double deception – the oppressors. In such dire circumstances, the denial or the affirmation of the believer will profoundly affect the oppressor, be he guard, judge or executioner. For it has to be considered that the fate of the oppressor's soul hangs in the balance as well. If the believer denies his faith, he will also deceive the oppressor into believing that he has won the day by his insatiable lust for power and control.

Martyrdom is not a pathetic kind of powerlessness, a sheep going to the slaughter. Martyrdom is both a silent and a vocal protest against oppression. It is the most telling of all silent protests and the most eloquent of all declarations. The martyr's silent protest is made in his refusal to breathe the word No. But his voice echoes from the mountain tops as he cries out: 'Yes, I believe!' This silent protest against oppression and this eloquent affirmation of faith rise up in the martyr's heart as an anthem to the loftiest freedom of conscience, as an emancipation of being that cannot be bound by chains and fetters or threatened with extinction. It is complete triumph over the fear of a cowardly death.

Perchance, in the midst of such heart-wrenching circumstances the oppressor may be changed too. And if the oppressor's heart cannot

be changed by the love and devotion, the sincerity, the strength of spirit, the remarkable courage, the kindness and tender-heartedness of the one whom he oppresses, then he will never be changed. The oppressor must also see, as much as the martyr, that the threat of death, and death itself, will not force the true believer to recant. And perhaps it may so happen that through the sacrifice of such a pure life, the oppressor will also be changed and by some great miracle and by some sorrowful repentance become a believer.

LOGOS AND MYTHOS

The Convergence of Theology and Poetry

I ask here whether one may find parallels between the work of poetry and theology, whether they can in some fashion co-exist or complement one another. How can two such different *métiers* converge or co-inhabit the same intellectual space?

I maintain that poetry and theology are not to be found at the antipodes but rather share connex spheres. At first view, this does not appear to be so. On the one hand, the theologian bends his or her mind to the discipline of rational thought as it relates to the unveiling of truth in the field of philosophical theology. The theologian aims for a kind of 'fixity' or permanence in the thinking. Without this element of permanence the theology will not be considered durable. The poet, on the other hand, is not bound by the framework of established beliefs or by rational argument, and is thus able to give free reign to the powers of the imagination. The poet remains unbound by any discrete language of systems and doctrines.

Poetry is above all an intensification of experience. It is first of all that moment of mundane life which has become hyper-intensive in the experience and imagination of the poet. The poetic act comes to life in that moment when, through the lens of the living eye, mind and heart, the poet takes 'the stuff of life' and transforms it into a more elevated, articulated form of discourse. Poetry is essentially a creation of vision, a vision that transports the poet beyond the context of everyday waking-consciousness, that transcends the ordinary mental/emotional state in an experience akin to the mystical. In this view, poetry is primarily transformation.

Here, then, is the first meeting-place of the two domains. Both poet and theologian dwell in the land of the mystical vision. By 'mystical', however, I do not mean any rarefied state such as being absorbed into the Godhead, nor do I intend the classical types or forms of religious consciousness that phenomenologists such as Rudolf Otto and others have defined.[1] By 'mystical' I intend for the theologian a quest for a vision of God in the objective structures of human thought. For the poet, it means a highly sharpened and sensitized focus, an intense awareness, a keen joy, a transformation of the quotidian. Both poet and theologian may experience cosmic consciousness, illumination, intimations of divine love and the like.

Poetry is a dancing, theology a conversation with angels. Poets experience verse as entering into a symphony of joy. The intensified experience of the poet is akin to the grace of which the theologian speaks. For there is a kind of grace in the poetic act. One cannot create the poetic experience through effort alone, in the same way that one cannot attain salvation by effort alone. Some poets may well complete a poem, to echo Thomas Alva Edison's remark on genius, by dint of perspiration,[2] but the initial impulse is most often one of inspiration. The task of the theologian, however, is to wrestle and to plod, to finally articulate to full satisfaction the clean, noble structures of human thought as they pertain to the Divine. In this he too finds joy and when he comes to the end of his labours, he knows that they have been greatly assisted by the grace of God.

Inspiration, whether poetical or theological, is a type of grace. The poetic experience is a flight into rarer space, a moment when the wind of song fills your sails or the picture gallery of the imagination seizes your eye or profounder insights capture the mind. You are delightfully plunged into a mystery, not at all sure how this process has come about. It is a given. Thus, 'the purpose of poetry'[3] is not didactical, although there is to be sure a didactical element in some poetry, and particularly in the verse of the 'metaphysicals'.[4] The purpose of poetry is rather to represent a transformational vision of reality. That it is practically impossible to avoid the abstract, metaphysical element in poetry[5] is another common ground. The two fields converge in the metaphysical.

The poet, as Northrop Frye's metaphor with respect to all of literature has it, 'swallows' life, or at least as much as he or she is able at one sitting: 'Literature does not reflect life, but it doesn't escape or withdraw from life either: it swallows it. And the imagination won't stop until it's swallowed everything.'[6] But the poet not only swallows life whole: the poet also prepares the meal in a particular way. To use another commonplace suggested by Frye's analogy, the poet and poetic art are akin to the activity of the skilled chef and the dishes concocted in fine cuisine.

The master chef takes the raw materials of the vegetable and herb garden and marketplace and transforms them into something that is both palatable and satisfying; something that not only attracts the eye, but delights the taste buds and ultimately rewards, not just the stomach, but the whole organism. The poet uses a roughly equivalent process, selecting the same commonplace experiences available to almost everyone within a given culture – a journey, a love experience, a life event, some insight or realization, a daily occurrence, a glimpse of nature or a dip into the future – in short, anything that captures the attention. The poet, like the chef, arranges the material according to his or her skills and undoubtedly hopes to satisfy, or at least to impress, the reader's literary palate.

Some poets use mundane experience to erect a highly complex metaphysical world view as did T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, a metaphysical scheme that takes great acumen to decode and interpret as a coherent whole. The work of criticism is an art and a skill all unto itself, a complement to the poetic act. Other poets, like Yeats, have delved into the storehouse of myth, dream, symbol, folklore and nature religion. For Blake, the poem revealed both heaven and hell. But whatever poetry is, it starts in some sense on earth, within the purview of the poet's immediate experience.

Poetry is consequently not the non-substantial, ethereal art that those who devalue, ignore or do not understand it so often claim. This is so simply because poetry does not and cannot escape the sense world. The five senses furnish in the first place the raw material for the poetic imagination, not the other way around. This means that poetry is not essentially a flight into fancy or a series of woven vagaries; it is rooted in the real world. This rootedness in the sense world means that poetry has as a constant referent the concrete as

much as the abstract. It is rather the arrangement or juxtaposition of those concrete elements that renders some poetry resistant to facile interpretation. Poetry transforms the concrete world through the imagination and the intuitive sense, injecting into the process an intellectual element of interpretation, an extended vision which characterizes the poet's *Weltanschauung*.

Now theology is not just a dogmatic piece of writing that promotes the protective doctrines of a religious institution. The work of theology is to uncover a spiritual truth where it was not apparent before. The theologian's work is to make explicit that which was formerly obscure in the storehouse of God's wisdom. Theology takes months and years, often with great effort or labour, to elaborate what is given in poetry in minutes or hours. What requires a six-day cycle of creation in theology is created in verse in a few intense atomic moments.

Poets work with the pen, the creative powers of the mind, the ambient world and the world of experience. Their chief source of material lies both within the human psyche and the relationship of self to the world. The poet has only to call on these powers through the faculty of imagination.

Theologians, however, as a convention of the discipline, must show proof of book-learning. They must be familiar with the thoughts of the masters before professing a view. Thus the theologian must become a seeker of truth, a scholar engaged in research and discovery, frequenting the university library and classroom, unshelving tomes, wading into them, taking notes, reflecting and concluding. Although wordcraft requires an equally disciplined attention to detail, poets need no credentials other than themselves, their own experience and vision.

Theologians, as much as they may explore the knowledge of bygone days, remain in constant search of the living truth, truth for our time, truth for now, truth that will speak to the requirements of our age in a language that seekers will understand. Theology, like poetry, is a minute-by-minute unveiling of the mysterious. It is that impenetrable sense of the mysterious that both poet and theologian are called upon to reveal. Both are called upon to reveal and explain the inexplicable, the hidden things of God.

The process in which the theologian participates, as stated above, is the way of intellectual labour and the revelation sought is not in

the beginning a way made plain. Like the Amerindian on a vision quest, the theologian must wait for his own vision in the wilderness, pray for coherence and meaning to descend, or like Peter, the Apostle of Christ, wait for the Angel of the Lord to liberate him from the prison of his own ignorance.[7] Theology, then, is labour, a labour in which the theologian seeks to engage in a finer definition of the truth, a cogent construct of the intellect from which others may profit in their efforts to understand the knowledge of God which according to Bahá'u'lláh is 'the most exalted station to which any man can aspire'.[8]

The theologian, like the poet, seeks to bring the things which have captured his vision into sharper focus, so that a greater number of seeking souls may participate in the understanding he offers. In so doing, the theologian works in a way analogous to a photographer developing a negative in the dark room, in the acid bath of truth in which he attempts to dissolve all that is spurious in what he has thought and written. The theologian must 'work patience' for this time-consuming process. The result of one's efforts does not literally descend from heaven in a sanctified moment. It is born of the fruit of effort and labour.

In this day of unity, theology can no longer mean dogmatism: the dead weight of sclerotised thought that vainly attempts to fix forever what must inevitably yield to history and to the fresh insights of an ever-expanding consciousness. Poetry, for its part, must continue to be viewed as one of the most consequential forms of art. For poetry is the unveiling of all life, all human experience. Theology, like the larger literature of which it forms a part, must increasingly seek the universal and seek it in the human condition. The theologian's subject, like the poet's, should be life itself and be related to all of life. Rilke's broad definition that 'poetry is existence'[9] applies also to theology. Theology is existence and requires the participation of the existential.

Theology today can no longer be meted out through the 'violence of logic' or dry morsels of sterile information incapable of feeding the human soul. Theology must be somehow connected to the whole person, to the intellectual, moral and spiritual dimensions of human experience. Theology should be a comprehensive science, collaborating not only with the poetic arts, but with all learning.

Both poetry and theology cause '...the tender light of faith to shine/By which alone the mortal heart is led/Unto the thinking of the thought divine.'[10]

The Power of Poetry and Holy Writ

Some view poetry as a purely decorative thing, fitting only for circumstance, or as an activity having a certain aesthetic value but lacking the cogency of propositional thought. We can readily admit that the power of poetry does not lie in its propositional value. But this is not an impediment. Rather, the power of poetry resides in its ability to move and sensitize the soul, to challenge the mind and to heighten the imagination. These abilities take on increased importance when we consider the poetic features possessed by Holy Writ to empower the soul.

That Holy Writ has strong poetic features is evident even from a cursory reading of scripture, regardless of its tradition of origin. Within the Abrahamic faiths, the poetry of scripture was released millennia ago through the repetitive, commanding power of the prophetic announcement and the prophetic song. The power and pathos of the warnings, invocations and lamentations of the Hebrew prophets strike us as being marked by strong poetic features. At the end of the Hebrew prophetic cycle, Christ taught Gospel truth through a great variety of poetic allusions and forms, allusions and forms that were not used as mere didactic tools or artifice but were unveiled to the listener as an intrinsic part of the message of wisdom itself. The relentless enemies of the prophet of Ḥijáz tried to belittle both Muhammad and His mission by referring to Him as merely a mad poet. We read in the Sura called 'The Ranks' that when Muhammad exhorted the Meccans to worship no God but Alláh, they replied: 'Shall we then abandon our gods for a crazed poet?'[11] If the barbaric tribes of Saudi Arabia had fallen under the spell of poetry in the Arabic tongue, they clung to idol worship no less, at least for a time.

Both prophet and poet make their appeal in the same way. The urgency of the prophetic announcement is made chiefly through a harmony of voice, by captivating attention through the auditory

sense. As St. Francis de Sales (1567–1622) has so incisively pointed out in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, the way to the heart is through the ear.[12] Faith grows, as St. Paul said, by hearing: 'So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.'[13] Thoughtful listening to sacred scripture can be likened to reaping the harvest of one's understanding.

Sacred scripture comes to the awakened spirit as a great, celestial river whose purifying waters baptise both the mind and soul of the consecrated listener. These waters educate, purify, inspire, reprove and guide aright. In a process of cross-fertilization with scripture, poetry helps to prepare the soul for that greater poem which is divine revelation. Sacred scripture in turn cultivates an appreciation of all that is fine in poetry.

The sacred word, like the great traditions of poetry, is clothed in the garments of lyricism and beauty. Divine revelation rarely expresses itself without the poetic elements of lyricism, beauty, weight, feeling, proportion, form and balance. Even that individual who might otherwise remain unmoved to the precepts of religion can be moved all the same by the lyricism and power of divine verses. He would be a dead soul indeed who claims to love poetry and who is not moved by the poetry of heavenly verse.

Very little divine discourse, when one surveys it broadly, is strictly cognitive in nature. One should not reduce the value of sacred scripture by making it out to be a mere receptacle for ideas or concepts about God and creation. For when God speaks to humanity, He does not speak primarily as the God of the philosopher but as the God who awakens the mind and heart of the humble soul and as the God who demands spiritual transformation. In this transformation, poetry has no small part to play.

In Plato's *Republic* we find that Socrates experienced a crisis of confidence vis-à-vis the poets as guardians of the lamp of wisdom[14] because he feared that the volatile nature of poetry might lead the soul into excess and thereby dethrone reason. For the ancient Greeks, passion led to excess, and for a people who valued above all balance and moderation, excess was an offence against the gods. While today we may not view poetry as being antithetical to either reason or wisdom, we still have to be wary of dismissing it as inconsequential.

'Fain Would They Put Out His Light With Their Mouths'

Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Iqán (Book of Certitude)* quotes from the Qur'án: 'Fain would they put out God's light with their mouths: But God hath willed to perfect His light, albeit the infidels abhor it.'[15] The fuller context of this passage[16] develops the contrast between spiritual sovereignty and earthly sovereignty; between the passing temporal authority of kings on the one hand, and the eternal sovereignty of God and His Manifestations on the other.

Bahá'u'lláh tells us in this passage that a cyclically recurring event in the lives of the Divine Manifestations is the fiercest opposition to their Cause by the clergy and the people. Chief among their arsenal of weapons is the vitriolic tongue. These opponents of the Divine Messenger wage an unholy war of words against the sayings and doings of the Promised One and His followers whom they have so wrongly judged to be imposters. Their campaign of defamation is waged through denial and ridicule, distortion and slander, falsification and hate. These thoughtless gainsayers are more preoccupied by the preservation of their vested interests than they are by the search for truth and the recognition of the True Prophet.

This emphatic rejection of the Manifestation of God is a salient *leitmotiv* in the historical pattern of comparative religions. Albert Schweitzer wrote that 'it is the fate of every truth to be a subject of laughter until it is generally recognized.'[17] His statement applies in preeminent fashion to the initial reception accorded the Manifestations of God and Their teachings. Although the naysayers cause incalculable harm to the Prophet, His followers and loved ones, in the end they are defeated. Ultimately, their calculated machinations prove to be a blessing for the promotion of the Word of God, since this very opposition provides an opportunity for the irresistible power of the Divine Word to assert itself.

But the Quranic maxim's meaning is not restricted only to the concrete once-and-once-only historical *Sitz im Leben*[18] of the Divine Manifestation while He walks upon the earth. It has meaning for us now. Those of us who live in contemporary western society may witness other ways of putting out God's light with the mouth. These ways are more subtle, unconscious and passive and although they may

be less motivated by vindictiveness and ill-will than by neglect they can be just as fatal.

It is the hollow 'white noise' of secular speech with its incessant, meaningless chatter that never utters the words God, faith and spirituality that is today dimming the light of God. Such endless talk, with no divine referent, with no spiritual framework as ground, gives off nothing but static. It sounds as the merest passing wind, giving vent to the vaguest and vainest of fancies. Its incessant discussion and analysis, even if trenchant, are mere sophistry. Its idle speculation brings no peace. For secular speech at the end of the day does not tell what is *really* happening – the good news that the Promised One has come and that a new world is being born. Yet, thankfully, history does repeat itself. Just as opposition to the True Prophet and His message created opportunities in the past to proclaim the teachings, so does hollow secular speech create opportunities today for God-talk.

Then there are the silent tongues, the ones who put out the light of God by default because they do not speak, because they dare not be heard. These silent ones let pass without contest each new advance of the forces of irreligion: a compromise in principle here, a giving in to expediency there, turning a blind eye to wrong-doing, 'going with the flow', taking the path of least resistance, following the fashionable but fleeting present moods and trends, failing to take a stand or falling in unthinkingly with the mounting tide of the current political will, whether it be right or wrong. These silent ones put out God's light with the mouth because they do not speak. They too create victims – the victims of silence: those who become victims because those who are silent dare not speak out against the power-hungry, the misguided and the perverse.

Caught in the Web of Words

'Abdu'l-Karím and Ḥasan were talking about their Lord.

'God', said 'Abdu'l-Karím, 'is truly incomparable in His gifts to humanity.'

'How truly you speak,' replied Ḥasan.

'Abdu'l-Karím continued, 'He has blessed us with a mind divine, the rarest of blessings.'

'You speak truly,' asserted Ḥasan.

'Abdu'l-Karím resumed, 'It has been the one great joy of my life to use this divine mind to the fullest of my capacity. I have spent many pleasure-filled hours in my study reading, composing and investigating, in contemplation of the abstruse realities of the metaphysical world.'

'Blessed be the Blessed One,' rejoined Ḥasan.

'But I have one great fear,' ventured 'Abdu'l-Karím.

'May the Banisher of all fears banish this one too,' Ḥasan responded sympathetically.

'Abdu'l-Karím continued, 'I fear that I may forget that I am dust and my ego may overwhelm me. I fear lest I forget that all my gifts come from the Blessed One. At that moment I shall lose my several powers and abilities, for I know that without Him I am nothing. I could do nothing, teach nothing, compose nothing. Should that day come, and should I fall into the trap of my own ego and forget my Lord, then all will be lost. I shall even lose my own soul.'

Ḥasan remained silent, thought for a moment and then replied. 'Dear 'Abdu'l-Karím, should that day come, and you forget that the Blessed One – on Him be glory – is the source of all of your gifts, will that make you any less His son? Even if you should renounce the Source of all gifts to rely upon your own powers, will you be any less of a man? Will your soul be less eternal because you will have forgotten its divine origin?'

Just then an angel of light, one of the company on high, appeared in a vision before Ḥasan and spoke to his heart. 'O my servant Ḥasan,' intoned the messenger, 'fall silent and speak no more, for you are weaving a tangled web of words in which you will entrap both yourself and 'Abdu'l-Karím. Speak one more word, both his soul and yours will fall into the abyss of hell!'

Thus did 'Abdu'l-Karím test himself. Thus did 'Abdu'l-Karím test Ḥasan. Thus did Ḥasan test 'Abdu'l-Karím. Thus did Ḥasan test himself. Thus did the angel of the Lord test Ḥasan.

For a moment, their very souls hung in the balance. The outcome is with God.

Blessed be the silent ones who do not entangle themselves and others in the web of their own fearful words, who do not entrap

themselves in the veil of their own doubts. Words are perilous things, the cause of our salvation or damnation. The tests of the tongue shake our very foundations with fear and trembling.

The Four Books

There are four books I am fond of reading: (1) the book of revelation (2) the book of nature (3) the book of the philosophers (4) the book of humanity. When I read the book of revelation, I am conscious that the Omniscient One is pouring out the spirit of life from on high upon my soul. When I read the book of nature, my eyes are filled with the beauty of the colours, the sounds and the forms of this great mysterious work of God. When I read the book of the philosophers, my mind is challenged and strengthened by the precise discipline, the keen perception and high resolve of the geometers of thought. But when I read the book of humanity, I read the three other books at once.

The Sound and the Fury

Words are like shifting sands in a Sahara of meaninglessness. They are as fluid as water. Never to be nailed down, they invent a dance of point and counterpoint. No sooner are they spoken than they can be called back, renounced, recanted. These curious black markings on a page give the impression of permanence but vanish like the wind into the stores of memory. Words are maddeningly imprecise, though we sometimes fancy that writers possess the art and precision of jeweller's tools.

In conversation, we are astonished how often we stumble about our meaning, leaving the company of our friends less than content with the thought we have striven to convey. How often have we regretted words we may have spoken in anger or thoughtlessness, words which cut to the quick and carry their wounds for days, months, even years. Yet how often, too, have words come as a heaven-sent blessing, as a welcome balm of healing and relief to both body and soul.

Words are volatile and chaotic. They can be as unpredictable and ruinous as a roaring tornado that devastates a countryside, or as

measured and stately as the noble utterances of a speech from the throne. Watch out for words, the concealed weapons that can be foisted upon you with lightning speed by the cunning or the cruel. Watch out for words that beguile the unsuspecting victim. Yet know and appreciate the awesome power of these fond friends to heal, to transform and to create, the floating jewels at their brilliant best when they speak the words of love.

BEING-IN-THE-WORLD

Self-Revelation and Community

Some of the religious prefer concealment behind the veil of discretion, behind the quiet and moderate tones of tact, caution and diplomacy. For these believers, self does not figure into the discussion. One's hopes, feelings, disappointments, life experiences have no relevance. Instead, one stays on the safer ground of the mollifying effect of objectivity and detachment.

I wonder if this veiling of self, this mood of caution, is always desirable. Discretion and the spirit of diplomacy may quiet souls and pacify spirits. That may be a lesser good. Such an approach, however, tells nothing about the soul, nothing about the real life experiences or the wisdom gained by the spiritual pilgrim. That is the greater good. This concealment of self does not reach out to the one who is striving to understand or to endure the heat of the day. The guarded voice says in effect: 'Only this question exists. Let us look at it objectively. *We* do not matter in all of this. I do not exist. You do not exist.' Such are the drawbacks of objectivity. Objectivity, so highly prized by the scholar, does a disservice in personal interaction and community life. For objectivity in these circumstances means treating persons and life situations as if they were objects. This approach is artificial and dehumanizing.

It is important to distinguish self-revelation from confession. The person who reveals self is sharing wisdom or counsel, not offering cold comfort by admitting to the lowest common denominator. There is, to be sure, something discreet, a certain modesty in the concealment of self. But there is also something lacking in this reticent voice, something properly amiss. It is precisely the very thing

that it is wont to pass over in silence – the life of self. By 'self' I mean especially that sense of compassion and sympathy that does not draw back from sharing learned experiences, honest perceptions, the treasures found at the deepest levels of the mine of life's most strenuous ordeals. It is only by daring to share this intimate sense of self that the bonds of friendship and community will be forged. Although self-revelation runs the risk of vulnerability, true community cannot emerge without the sense of intimacy in which we become guides and physicians to one another.

The Revealing Self

The revealing self is the affirmative voice of the man or the woman who speaks as the honourable creation of God. But let all of us who reveal ourselves and who wish to utter this imperious word 'I' also shrink before its many dangers. Let us take care that we grow not sick with promoting self rather than truth. For self-revelation means that he who dares to speak must know that, at the same time as he lifts up his voice, he will err. She who dares to reveal herself must know that when she does speak, the same divine light that has illumined her lantern will also reveal at the same time her shabby clothes.

All the same, we the 'generation of the half-light'[1] must in the here and now, and for the swiftly passing days that are still ours, dare to utter the word 'I'. This is the I of the divine subjectivity, the I of the self that 'is not rejected but beloved', the self that 'is well-pleasing and not to be shunned',[2] the I of the divine actor who shares his soul and makes himself present to all those who long to change the world.

The Abolition of Priesthood: Self-Knowledge and Ministering to Society

There is much wisdom in Bahá'u'lláh's edict abolishing the priesthood and the cloistered life, in enjoining His followers to live in the world.[3] Closed societies, we have long since come to discover, are inhabited by demons of their own. The 'knight of faith'[4] or the spiritual pilgrim naturally welcomes a moment of retreat from the

world. But if we hope to flee permanently from the inevitable oppression that marks human society today, we shall be furthering a process that is only self-defeating.

By withdrawing our spiritual resources from an increasingly dysfunctional society, we become unable to minister to its pressing needs. While the world clearly does expose the individual to grave dangers for spiritual well-being, it also creates at the same time opportunities for healing, transformation and social welfare. We have all been thrown into the gaping jaws of society and we must learn to live in the world with nothing but our own wits and resources to enable us to survive.

The Bahá'í writings voice strong warnings of the corrosive influence that would be let loose on spiritual souls living in contemporary society. Yet facing the tests of the world through spiritual discipline is the chief means of acquiring virtue in this promised day. Virtue, to be virtuous, must be virtue tested. John Milton (1608–1674) made the point in his *Areopagitica*, a pamphlet written on the model of classical rhetoric in which he argued for the repeal of the censorship laws passed by Parliament on 14 June 1643:

> As therefore the state of man now is, what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear, without the knowledge of evil? He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true wayfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary.[5]

Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote in his great dramatic monologue *Ulysses* these words that well express the fortitude that believers must develop living in today's society: 'One equal temper of heroic hearts/ Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will/To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.'[6] Tennyson also wrote about his poem *Ulysses* that it gave 'the feeling about the need of going forward and braving the struggle of life ...'[7] This is a good description of those souls who

choose to live in the world. I emphasize the word *choose*, for one can live out a meaningless existence by default, blindly and passively submitting to what one views to be either a cruel fate or a deadening, humdrum existence.

Shoghi Effendi also alerted us to another reality bearing on this question. He wrote that the pernicious influences to which we are all exposed would originate not just from without, but from within ourselves. The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith tells us that when trouble comes to believers, it originates not only in the contrary behaviour of the thoughtless or the malicious. Spiritual souls, he wrote, often bring their troubles upon themselves: 'Generally speaking nine-tenths of the friends' troubles are because they don't do the Bahá'í thing, in relation to each other, to the administrative bodies or in their personal lives.'[8]

The frank realism with which Shoghi Effendi conveys this point remedies an all too common tendency to blame society or others for one's troubles. This self-inflicted harm of which the Qur'án also speaks[9] is, however, the rite of passage, the necessary training, the price one pays for acquiring the gift of self-knowledge and for becoming fit to advance the cause of an 'ever-advancing civilization',[10] of becoming a source of social good. But believers know that they have a shelter, a refuge and a guide as they navigate through stormy seas. If they are shipwrecked, it does not matter. If they be faithful to Him, in time they shall be rescued.

Yet for all the hard lessons we may be destined to learn as we fathom her mysterious ways, Lady Wisdom is a wonderful teacher. For if we allow her, she teaches us to become wiser than our own unwisdom. Sophia teaches us that even when we become ensnared by our own folly or fall into the trap of the malicious, Bahá'u'lláh will graciously assist those who are willing to profit by their mistakes and who implore His help in their peril.

We Can Still Celebrate the World

We can still celebrate the world today in spite of its dire threat to human happiness. The Bahá'í Faith, as is true of the other great religions, calls for a rejection of the world. But in doing so, it defines

the 'world' only as anything which prevents us from loving God.[11] Following this definition, the world actually enables us to love God more completely through a deeper appreciation of His many beautiful names and attributes revealed in all of creation.

We can still celebrate the world today by celebrating ourselves. We can rejoice in the realization that there is still much left in the soul to be loved and because wherever we are in our spiritual journey, we have been able to endure our lives up to this moment and because we are still here learning to live and to love, to understand, to suffer and to forgive, to work and to praise – with this end in mind: that we might make a difference in the world and become a cause of healing.

We can still celebrate the world today by admiring the soul beauty in others. A myriad faces of joy are still to be seen, faces of bliss mirroring mystery, individual waves that have emerged from that vast unknown Sea of Reality. For that greatest of all mysteries, the endless, unfathomable Sea of Being, in its profound mystery, in its heights and depths, contains us one and all. In that Great Sea, we may all learn to swim secure and be confident in the realization that its salutary waters will carry us safely to the farthest shore.

The Call of the Wild

This morning at dawn, I heard the birds crying. I say crying because dominating all the rest was the seagull, a waterfowl that is becoming less of a marine creature. Gulls are becoming skilful adapters to urban living and are quite content to fly in from nearby rivers and scavenge what they can at the local fast food outlets.

These pesky birds come diving boldly into parking lots and amble ungainly along the pavement in search of scraps. Resented as intruders in the sprawling shopping malls of towns and cities, I like to think of them in their natural environment, white feathered, airborne creatures, soaring silently above the blue water. There they are a welcome image of beauty.

Other songsters I heard at daybreak, both the delicate and the rakish: peepers, twitterers, rollers, squawkers, whistlers, sparrows, jays, canaries, thrushes and other unidentifiables in the motley avian crew. There were melodies of all shades on the tonal scale, songs to

please every ear. But strangely, all the various tunes did not make for cacophony, even though one could not have found the noise harmonious. It was more like the prattle of a large family starting off a busy day at home. Even the birds of the air seemed to be enjoying the sense of community.

Yet as I listened intently, I heard something else in the dawntime singing of these birds. It was the cry of the wild, or in Jack London's phrase, 'the call of the wild'.[12] The call that I heard that morning was the call of 'let it be'. It was a call that invoked the memory of something both ancient and primitive, wild and free, a mystery that is at once sacred and unknowable, a natural phenomenon to be revered because of its sheer duration since the dawn of time. The call of the wild has endured for eons. For eons yet let it remain, the voice said, as long as the rivers flow, as long as the grasses grow, as long as the oceans roll.

In the pensive mood that lingered within me this morning, I sent out a quiet prayer that this ancient call might yet fall on kinder ears, on more sensitive and determined hearts. But with that prayer came also the stark and frightful realization that all things wild and free could just as well *not* be, that all this could be irretrievably lost because of our own stupidity, lethargy and negligence. Finally, as this state of consciousness waned, I recalled the ever meaningful, passionate prayer of the poet-priest Gerard Manley Hopkins in *Inversnaid*: 'O let them be left, wildness and wet;/ Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.'[13]

THE LONG JOURNEY HOME

Death as a Going Away to a Far Land

Sometimes death comes with gentleness or kindness, merely as a going away to a far land. When the death of a friend does not occasion profound grief, we apprehend the transition into second birth as a long but safe journey to an unknown place. This is not the wrenching death that shocks and dislocates but that passing away that comes with acquiescence.

This experience of death comes as a welcome visitation by a distant relative who one day appears at our door to carry us off to a mysterious destination. The angel of mercy comes and carries off the earth child to an unseen realm. The departure is a merciful ending that contains, as all endings do, the seeds of new beginnings. We may wonder that we are not more affected by this departure, why we do not mourn or weep or see the black of night in the light of day. It is because our friends and loved ones who have travelled to that far-off realm are simply 'away'. This is the kindly death, the death serene, the going away to a far land.

The Dead and Gone, and Divine Motion

Written after hearing of the sudden death of Dr. Jacques Breton from his bereaved wife, 17 August 1995

Certain ones in the land of the living consider the dead as poor unfortunates who have been decisively deprived of enjoying the benefits of life in this world. Yet in the perspective of faith, it is the dead who are fortunate. For the faithful lovers of God among the

departed have moved on and are continuing their journey. They have been launched into the next orbit of that great spiritual adventure which for now, at least, eludes us by its mystery and its unfathomable greatness.

It is both an insight and a consolation to realize that the whole movement of creation in this world of *Nasút*[1] and beyond – and this is one of the great laws of creation – flows from death to life, from nonexistence to existence, from the material to the spiritual, from sorrow into joy. The *telos* (Gk.=end, goal) of the cosmic order always drives toward a larger life of immortality, detachment, freedom and joy. In the design of God, that larger life can be fully realized only in the Great Beyond. This lesser world, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said, is a world of inestimable value for our spiritual development, but it is one in which the gains are slowly and sometimes painfully achieved through hard knocks, reversals and set backs: 'The world of mortality is a world of contradictions, of opposites; motion being compulsory everything must either go forward or retreat.'[2] Also: 'It is easy to approach the Kingdom of Heaven, but hard to stand firm and staunch within it, for the tests are rigorous and heavy to bear.'[3]

Death is a great enigma, perhaps the greatest, but it cannot be reduced only to the word mystery, a mystery that forbids us to break silence and to make any conscious breakthrough this side of the veil into that light beyond. Death has many faces and many meanings. In death one may discover the drama of sacrifice or heroism, the welcome end, or the broken heart. For death is all of these things. For those unable to bear up under the weight of the world any longer, we find in death both solace and *pathos*. As we contemplate death, we come face to face with the realization of the awesome overlordship of God, that He holds in His mighty hand not only the fate of our own poor soul, but the final destinies of all the inhabitants of the earth, past, present and future.

That a countless multitude of souls have passed on, some 'old and full of days',[4] others in tragic and untimely fashion, while still others in their tenderest days and years – and all being thronged in the unseen realms above – must arouse the greatest wonderment in every believer. These realizations should cause us to pause and to reflect on our own mortality and the brevity of life itself and to

impel us to find in the brief days that are still ours, a way to God, the path to peace and reconciliation both with ourselves and others. And, if we are not still too numb with grief, if only recently touched by death's icy hand, this final departure should cause us to meditate profoundly on the hope-giving promises of eternal life recorded in holy scripture, the new beginning destined in the worlds of God above. This inevitability of ever-approaching death may then enable us to see that for those who truly love and trust Him, the motion of our little lives is nothing but a journey to the throne of God.

Death Breaks Nature's Endless Cycle

The flow of life that we call nature moves along a circular and cyclical path (Gk. *kyklos*=circle) from death to life and from life to death. All creatures are locked into this eternal cycle that transits continuously between the phenomena of life and death. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has expounded grandly on this theme. Within the cycle of this eternal return, He teaches, nature moves from death to life and life to death as matter undergoes a never-ending eventual reintegration in the physical world in higher forms.[5] At the moment of death, these higher forms which reach their summit in the human being are gradually broken down and recommence the slow journey back to the various elements of nature, culminating finally again in man. The pattern recommences *ad infinitum*.

Although the nonbeliever considers death to be the final curtain in the drama of human existence, by God's grace it is but the means of attaining the fullness of life. The endless movement of this eternal cycle is broken each time the soul leaves the body to take on the celestial form that befits it best. With the departure of the soul from the body, an extraordinary event takes place that both transcends and defeats the blind, cyclical pattern that imprisons all of nature's elements in blind obedience. The final link in the great chain of nature is broken by the spirit when it pierces the shell of the body and casts off its corporeal existence to assume a higher, spiritual life form. Death reveals that 'coincidence of opposites' in which the final defeat of the body signifies at the same time the victory and crown of an earthly life and the ushering in of a larger existence as yet unimagined.

The Best Legacy

Most people, whether they find themselves handicapped by old age or still robust enough to live out their dreams, desire to bequeath a legacy. That legacy, whether one's descendants, a material endowment, a complex of values, a significant body of work, or simply the hope of being lovingly remembered, are all indirect ways of ensuring immortality. We all yearn for something essential to remain once we have departed, something associated with what we once were or stood for, what we once loved.

I ask, what is the greatest, the most lasting legacy? What is the most valuable treasure that we may leave behind, the means by which we may continue to best benefit the living? What is that legacy to which one may truly aspire without fear of futility? Good questions all, for their answer will reveal nothing less than one of life's great secrets and the purpose of existence itself.

I estimate that the greatest legacy bequeathed by any soul is a life of service to humanity performed for the sake of the love of God.[6] For sincere service to humanity, however a believer conceives God and such service to be, will prove to be a triple benefit: to the cause for which it is performed, to the recipient of the deed and to the doer. It is relatively unimportant what kind of service one performs. It is selfless service that counts. For Bahá'u'lláh has written that 'the reward of no good deed is or ever will be lost'.[7] One should consider consequently the larger horizon, the one that begins with dedication and the zeal of effort and ends in a spirit of detachment and humility. Whether the service be found in the professions or works of philanthropy, charity or social action, the field of development, scholarship, teaching, counsel, healing, bestowing the gift of love or the spirit of compassion – all these deeds are the best legacy. 'Greater than the prayer is the spirit in which it is uttered.'[8] And greater than the deed is the spirit in which it is performed.

It is the entire devotion of the soul that determines the value of the legacy in the end. Each and every devoted act has the power to send its lasting effects vibrating down the succeeding generations. The heart offered up in the spirit of sacrifice is the best legacy of all, the meagerest thanks for the life He has bestowed upon us, for all He has taught us and wrought in our lives.

What this legacy really is can never be fully described and is known in *toto* to God alone, for it is an expression of that mystery of mysteries, that divine gem, the human soul. If the cause be unknown (the soul), the effect likewise can never be fully known (the deed). In bequeathing this legacy, there is and must remain an unknown, a vast horizon which we simply cannot see. We can never fully appreciate, never fully estimate, what a life devoted to the love of God has been, all that it has meant. So much more is this true of great souls and their mission. In future times and in other realms, so 'Abdu'l-Bahá tell us, it will become clearer what that legacy has meant.[9] For now, we may find joy in securing a legacy that we may pass down to honour those who came before us and to be a cause of celebration to those who may one day rejoice in our memory.

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Notes and References

Introduction

[1]The expression is from an unnamed source in Reck, *Speculative Philosophy*, p. 2.

[2]'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.336.

[3]Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p.26.

[4]See, for example, the following essays: *Love Divine, The Silence of the Sacred, The Dream of Knowledge, Happiness for its Own Sake, The Void of Forgetting, Positive Detachment, What Can I Refuse to the Universe?*

[5]Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 94. Notes on Quranic references have been provided by Stephen Lambden.

[6]*Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 99.

[7]See, for example, 'The Tablet of Visitation' in Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 313.

[8]See Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, XXIX, p.70: XLII, p.91: XCVIII, p.198. See also Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 94.

[9]The summary points that follow I have greatly compressed and simplified from Stephen Lambden's article 'The Lote-Tree Beyond Which There Is No Passing (*Sidratu'l-Muntahá*)' (forthcoming *Shorter Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith*). I have combined Lambden's findings with some of my own readings.

[10]Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Mahomet*, p. 94 (my translation).

[11]See, for example, Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 270 ff.

[12]Eliade, 'Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism' in *History of Religions*, p. 93.

[13]Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, CXII, p. 218.

[14]Eliade, as in note 11.

The Book of Knowledge

[1]From William Blake's four quatrains, 'And did those feet...' in the Preface to his prophetic poem *Milton*. The last one reads: 'I will not cease from Mental Fight/Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand/Till we have built Jerusalem/In England's green & pleasant land.' Blake, *Selection*, p.162. See also Abrams (ed.), *Norton Anthology*, vol. 2, p. 78.

[2]I love the clouds... the passing clouds... over there... over there... the marvellous clouds!' From Baudelaire's short essay *L'étranger* in *Le spleen de Paris*, p. 15 (my trans.).

[3]The story of Icarus and his father Daedalus was told by both Ovid and Apollodorus. Daedalus and Icarus were imprisoned by King Minos in the Labyrinth on the island of Crete. To escape from the island, Daedalus fashioned two pairs of wings that were affixed to the body by wax. Before escaping, Daedalus warned his son to keep to a middle course because if Icarus flew too high, the heat of the sun would melt the wax and disaster would result. Icarus disregarded the counsel of his father, and delighted by the new and wonderful power of flight soared blissfully higher until, as his father had predicted, the sun melted the wax and he fell into the sea. This myth is an object lesson in the Greek ethical preoccupation with the Golden Mean.

[4]The phrase 'unfolding destiny' is from the title of Shoghi Effendi's messages to the Bahá'ís of the British Isles, *The Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá'í Community* (1981).

[5]The 'spiritually learned' is a key phrase of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. See, for example, pp. 33, 36, 39, 58.

[6]Regarding the first Bahá'í principle of the independent investigation of the truth, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written: 'The first [principle] is the independent investigation of the truth; for blind imitation of the past will stunt the mind. But once every soul inquireth into truth, society will be freed from the darkness of continually repeating the past.' *Selections*, p. 248.

[7]The concept of *Dasein* (being there: Ger. *da*=there, *sein*=to be) is basic to Heidegger's philosophy. In the introductory key sentence of his seminal work *Being and Time*, Heidegger explains *Dasein* with this somewhat obscure statement: '*Das Wesen des Daseins liegt in seiner Existenz.*'('The essence of being there (*Dasein*) lies in its existence.') *Dasein* refers to typically human existence and is the prelude to the greater discussion of *Sein* (Being). It connotes an openness or an availability to reality and a willingness to participate in being.

[8]From Blake's Notebook, this poem is variously titled *Several Answered Questions* or *Liberty*. See Untermeyer (ed.), *Living Verse*, p.184.

[9]'Know that, although the human soul has existed on the earth for prolonged times and ages, yet it is phenomenal. As it is a divine sign, when it has come into existence, it is eternal. The spirit of man has a beginning, but it has no end; it continues eternally... The meaning of this is that, although human souls are phenomenal, they are nevertheless immortal, everlasting and perpetual...' 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 151–152.

[10]One of the translations of the title of Marcel Proust's monumental novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

[11]The expression is from the title of psychologist Abraham Maslow's *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (1978). Basically, Maslow's peak experience refers to an altered state of consciousness, fleeting but totally spontaneous 'moments of highest happiness and fulfilment' and 'harmonious oneness' with the universe in which the individual loses self-consciousness and ceases to be concerned by the events of the past or the future. It is a vital experience of focusing on and living in the now when all things flow with ease.

[12]Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, p. 247.

[13]Pascal in *De l'esprit géométrique* ('On the geometrical spirit') refers to 'definitions of names' as arbitrary definitions which are commonly understood and accepted. *Thoughts and Minor Works*, p. 429.

[14]The complete quotation reads: 'My name is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My qualification is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My reality is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My praise is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Thralldom to the Blessed Perfection is my glorious and refulgent diadem, and servitude to all the human race my perpetual religion . . . No name, no title, no mention, no commendation have I, nor will ever have, except 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This is my longing. This is my greatest yearning. This is my eternal life. This is my everlasting glory.' Quoted by Shoghi Effendi in 'The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh' in *World Order*, p. 139.

[15]Exodus 3:14.

[16]The Báb, Qayyúmu'l-Asmá', in *Selections*, p. 54.

[17]Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 176.

[18]Quoted by Bahá'u'lláh in *The Seven Valleys*, p. 34.

[19]This is the phrase used by Bahá'ís to refer to a universal prophetic cycle beginning with Adam and whose 'supreme Manifestation' is Bahá'u'lláh. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 161.

[20]Genesis 2:19.

[21]ibid.

[22]I Corinthians13:12.

[23]See Part IV of Spinoza's *Ethics*, 'Of Human Bondage or of the Strength of the Emotions'.

[24]See Carnap's essay 'The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language' in *Logical Positivism*, pp. 60–81.

[25]Quoted from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* by Passmore, *Hundred Years*, p. 382.

[26]From Bell's poem *Epistle on the Subject of the Ethical and Aesthetic Beliefs of Herr Ludwig Wittgenstein*, partially quoted by Passmore, ibid. p. 381.

[27]See above, note 7.

[28]Kenny, *Aquinas*, p. 26.

[29]ibid.

[30]ibid.

[31]'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 297–98: '...Plato at first logically proved the immobility of the earth and the movement of the sun; later by logical arguments he proved that the sun was the stationary centre, and that the earth was moving.'

[32]See 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discourse on 'The Four Methods of Acquiring Knowledge', *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 297–299.

[33]See Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

[34]'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'The Four Methods of Acquiring Knowledge', *Some Answered Questions*, p. 299.

[35]An antinomy is a contradiction between two conclusions drawn from equally credible premises.

[36]Einstein later applied Riemann's geometry to the physical universe.

[37]Proverbs 29:18 reads: 'Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.'

[38]Buber writes: 'In every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us, we look out toward the fringe of the eternal Thou; in each we are aware of the breath from the eternal Thou; in each Thou we address the eternal Thou' (*I and Thou*, p. 6). This 'Thou' is nothing other than the holy, the numinous or the sacred encountered in the process of becoming.

[39]The expression is from St. Paul: 'And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus' (Philippians 4:7).

[40]See J.A. McLean, *Dimensions*, p.139, commenting on Holley's article 'The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh', in *Star of the West* (1922), p.105.

[41]See, for example, Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, and his essay on *Perpetual Peace*.

[42]Cited by Gabriel Marcel in his talk 'Being and Nothingness' in *Homo Viator*, p. 169.

[43]Holley, 'The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh', p. 105.

[44]'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p. 296.

[45]Luke 22:44.

[46]ibid. v.42.

[47]See, for example, Matthew 17:23, Luke 22:20, Mark 14:24.

[48]Bahá'u'lláh says in the *Gleanings*: 'Know thou, O fruit of My Tree, that the decrees of the Sovereign Ordainer, as related to fate and predestination, are of two kinds. Both are to be obeyed and accepted. The one is irrevocable, the other is, as termed by men, impending. To the former all must unreservedly submit, inasmuch as it is fixed and settled. God, however, is able to alter or repeal it. As the harm that must result from such a change will be greater than if the decree had remained unaltered, all, therefore, should willingly acquiesce in what God hath willed and confidently abide by the same. The decree that is impending, however, is such that prayer and entreaty can succeed in averting it' (*Gleanings*, LXVIII, p.133). 'Abdu'l-Bahá says in *Some Answered Questions*: 'Fate is of two kinds: one is decreed, and the other is conditional or impending' (p.244).

[49]Matthew 26:25.

[50]'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 163.

[51]Jesus said: 'The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born' (Matthew 26:24). Christ here indicates the inexorable nature of his predestined death: 'The Son of man goeth as it is written of him.' This underscores the principle of fate or predestination. Yet it is clear from His saying that predestination (it must be) does not absolve one of moral responsibility. Judas in betraying Christ fulfils the will of God, yet is held to account for the betrayal.

[52]Mark 14:31.

[53]Matthew 26: 71–72.

[54]ibid. v.73.

[55]In his discourse on the relationship of the will to the intellect in the Fourth Article of Question 82, 'The Will' in *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas engages in circular arguments as to which is a

greater power, the intellect or the will. He seems to lean strongly in favour of the superiority of the will. He says that the intellect, unlike the will, is capable of apprehending 'universal being and truth' (Reply, Obj. 1). Yet he also states in the same Reply that 'will is higher than intellect' since it can move the intellect to perform the good. Finally, Aquinas recognizes the futility of such circular argument and settles for the synthesis that 'these powers include one another in their acts' (Reply, Obj. 1).

[56]Luke 22: 31–31. Christ's phrase 'when thou art converted' is remarkable, for it is likely that Peter had already considered himself to be converted but he had not yet been really tested by the searing flames of self. There is an object lesson here for all religious. Some may consider themselves to be already believers and converted, whereas in reality they are still not yet ripe.

[57]I remember visiting the church of St. Francis de Sales while I was a student in Paris during the 1960s. The church lies not far from the Jardin du Luxembourg and from where I once lived at Place de l'Estrapade in the vicinity of the Panthéon and the Sorbonne. In that church stood a life-sized bronze statue of St. Peter on a high pedestal. The feet of St. Peter stood approximately at shoulder height. When I looked at the bronze feet, I marvelled at how the individual toes had been worn completely smooth over the centuries from the number of times pious hands had touched the fisherman's foot in order to invoke his blessing.

[58]Toben, *Space-time and Beyond*, p. 11.

[59]John Archibald Wheeler coined the term 'black hole' in the late 1960s. Wheeler, 'the archetypal physics-for-poets physicist', published with his mentor Niles Bohr the first paper that successfully explained nuclear fission in terms of quantum physics. Wheeler was involved in the construction of the first fission bomb during World War II and the first hydrogen bomb in the early years of the Cold War. After the war he became one of the leading authorities on general relativity. Both Wheeler and Bohr held that the behaviour of *quanta* was indeterminate and depended on the act of observation itself. See John Horgan, *The End of Science*, p. 80.

[60]As an alternative to Bohr's subjectivistic and indeterminate particle theory, David Bohm proposed the 'pilot wave' by which particles are particles at all times and not just when they are being observed. Thus his theory was less dependent on metaphysical interpretation. Bohm is also known for his philosophy of 'implicate order' which drew analogies between quantum

mechanics and eastern religion. Implicate order holds that underlying the world of appearances there is always a deeper, hidden layer of reality. For Bohm the pilot wave was the implicate order of the particle. Bohm was influenced by Krishnamurti and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and coauthored *Science, Order, and Creativity* with F. David Peat. Reality for Bohm was ultimately unknowable. New discoveries also create new mysteries. See Horgan, *The End of Science*, pp. 86, 87, 89.

[61]Theoretical physicist Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1975) became the breakthrough book on the parallels between modern physics and Hindu, Buddhist and Chinese thought.

[62]Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World*, pp. 332 and 333.

[63]Quoted by David Foster in *The Philosophical Scientists*, p. 11.

[64]See note 38 above for a description of Buber's 'Thou'.

[65]'Abdu'l-Bahá, from a Bahá'í prayer for assemblies. *Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 110.

[66]Quoted by Wilber, *Quantum Questions*, p. 97.

[67]In his Introduction to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Huxley as a proponent of the Perennial philosophy outlined 'four fundamental doctrines' which constituted a 'Highest Common Factor' or 'its chemically pure state'. Summarized, these four doctrines of the great religions are: (1) all forms of life, both organic and inorganic, conscious and unconscious, are manifestations of the 'Divine Ground' without which they would be non-existent; (2) human beings have 'direct intuition' of the Divine Ground, a form of knowing superior to 'discursive reason'; (3) the human being possesses a dual nature: a 'phenomenal ego' and 'an eternal Self', 'the spark of divinity within the soul'; (4) the human being's purpose in life is to identify with the eternal Self and thus come to know directly the Divine Ground. *Bhagavad-Gita*, p.13.

[68]Joachim Wach, 'Universals in Religion' in *Types of Religious Experience*, pp. 30–47.

[69]Heiler's scholarly article 'The History of Religions as a Preparation for the Co-operation of Religions', is rich in scriptural detail and makes a convincing case for the unity of the world's great religions. Heiler argues for 'seven principal areas of unity which the high religions of the earth manifest'. I greatly compress the main points here: (1) the transcendent Reality underlying all being; (2) the immanence of the transcendent reality in human hearts; (3) the supreme Reality is the highest goodness and truth to which the soul of humanity may aspire; (4) the Reality of the Divine reveals itself

to all as boundless, outpouring love; (5) the way to God is the way of renunciation, sacrifice and prayer; (6) service to humanity, love and compassion for all creatures; (7) love is the superior way to God. In Eliade and Kitigawa (eds.), *The History of Religions*, pp. 132–160.

[70]Smith's best presentation on this theme is perhaps *Forgotten Truth* (1976).

[71]Wilfred Cantwell Smith writes in *Toward a World Theology*, p.4: 'those who believe in the unity of mankind, and those who believe in the unity of God, should be prepared therefore to discover a unity of mankind's religious history.'

[72]See Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1975).

[73]Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine*, p. 97.

[74]'The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens' is one of Bahá'u'lláh's most frequently cited quotations. *Gleanings*, CXVI, p. 250.

[75]Addressing the seeker, Bahá'u'lláh says: 'Let thy soul glow with the flame of this undying Fire that burneth in the midmost heart of the world, in such wise that the waters of the universe shall be powerless to cool down its ardour. Make, then, mention of thy Lord, that haply the heedless among Our servants may be admonished through thy words, and the hearts of the righteous be gladdened.' *Gleanings*, XV, p. 38.

The Fragrance of Spirituality

[1]Milton's celebrated line is from his sonnet *On His Blindness* (1655?). *Complete Poetical Works*, p.190.

[2]The phrase 'spirituality of imperfection' is taken from the title of Jurtz and Ketcham's excellent volume *The Spirituality of Imperfection. Modern Wisdom From Classic Stories*. The underlying theme of the book is that failure and acceptance are the precursors to spiritual growth.

[3]Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, pp. 39–40.

[4]This is the title of Daniel C. Jordan's publication *Becoming Your True Self*. First issued as a pamphlet, *Becoming Your True Self* has been revised in booklet form. Jordan points to certain psychospiritual aspects of faith and self-understanding as being necessary for spiritual transformation.

[5]Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 4, pp. 20–21.

[6]ibid. para. 116, p. 61.

[7]'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.' John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2, p. 823.

[8]Mrs. Brown kindly gave permission for the use of her story.

[9]'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, pp. 186–187 (emphasis mine).

[10]'Abdu'l-Bahá states the Bahá'í position on miracles as follows: 'For if we consider miracles a great proof, they are still only proofs and arguments for those who are present when they are performed, and not for those who are absent.' 'Abdu'l-Bahá looks to the pragmatic and universal proofs of prophethood as more solid proofs of revealed religion. His example is that of Christ's being empowered to establish a world religion through the power of his own person, even though he faced crucifixion alone. 'Now this is a veritable miracle which can never be denied. There is no need of any other proof of the truth of Christ.' *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 100–101.

[11]From a prayer for spiritual qualities. *Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 147.

[12]Meaning here capable of physical sensation.

[13]This is an echo of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that 'Thoughts may be divided into two classes: (1st) Thought that belongs *to the world of thought alone*. (2nd) Thought that expresses itself in action.' *Paris Talks*, p. 4. It is the italicised phrase that has been transposed above into another context.

[14]'Abdu'l-Bahá teaches that the development of 'spiritual susceptibilities' forms an integral part of the essential and timeless aspect of religion. In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks there are many such references to susceptibility to things spiritual. I include here just one quotation: 'Each of the divine religions embodies two kinds of ordinances. The first is those which concern spiritual susceptibilities, the development of moral principles and the quickening of the conscience of man. These are essential or fundamental, one and the same in all religions, changeless and eternal – reality not subject to transformation.' *Promulgation*, p. 106.

[15]'The animal lives this kind of life blissfully and untroubled, whereas the material philosophers labour and study for ten or twenty years in schools and colleges, denying God, the Holy Spirit and divine inspirations. The animal is even a greater philosopher, for it attains the ability to do this without labour and study. For instance, the cow denies God and the Holy Spirit, knows nothing of divine inspirations, heavenly bounties or spiritual emotions and is a stranger to the world of hearts. Like the philosophers, the cow is a captive of nature and knows nothing beyond the range of the senses.' *Promulgation*, pp.311–312. This is a sublime example of the maxim that 'ignorance is bliss'.

[16]ibid.

[17]*Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 263. Partially retranslated at the Bahá'í World Centre.

[18]Translation from *The Jerusalem Bible*. The King James' version reads '...eat the fat of the land'.

[19]This statement of Bahá'u'lláh is recorded in *Gleanings*, p.212: 'It is not Our wish to lay hands on your kingdoms. Our mission is to seize and possess the hearts of men.'

[20]I know a dedicated, very exemplary Bahá'í who said to me that she declined to go on pilgrimage when Shoghi Effendi was the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith because: 'I did not want him to look into my face and know everything about me.'

[21]This essay does not intend to suggest that a Bahá'í should not be conscious of his or her strengths as the quotation from Shoghi Effendi has indicated in note 23 below. My reflection here consciously exaggerates one perspective in order to make a point.

[22]Shoghi Effendi so qualified Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl in *God Passes By*, p. 195.

[23]Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in *The Light of Divine Guidance*, vol. 1, p. 70.

Fire and Light

[1]Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, p. 99. Pascal's famous saying is found in Section Four, no. 277 of *Les pensées*: 'On the Means of Belief'. The complete thought reads: 'The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things. I say the heart naturally loves the Universal Being, and also itself naturally, according as it gives itself to them; and it hardens itself against one or the other as it will. You have rejected the one, and kept the other. Is it by reason that you love yourself?'

[2]'Abdu'l-Bahá, 4 January 1912: 'The Four Kinds of Love', in *Paris Talks*, pp.192–4. This statement would seem to be both an interpretation and a clear textual parallel of Bahá'u'lláh's statement in *The Seven Valleys*, p.25: 'The journeys in the pathway of love are reckoned as four: From the creatures to the True One; from the True One to the creatures; from the creatures to the creatures; from the True One to the True One.'

[3]'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 193.

[4]ibid.

[5]St. Paul in Philippians 4:7. The complete sentence reads: 'And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.'

[6]'The source of all good is trust in God, submission unto His command, and contentment with His holy will and pleasure.' 'Words of Wisdom', in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 155.

[7]The phrase 'all our affairs' is from a line in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's beautiful prayer that begins: 'O God, refresh and gladden my spirit.' The fourth line of the prayer reads: 'I lay all my affairs in Thy hand.' *Bahá'í Prayers*, no. 61.

[8]Matt. 5:48.

[9]ibid. 21:22.

[10]Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 15.

[11]*Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 254 (italics added by the present author).

[12]Marzieh Gail, 'Commemoration of the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Visit to America', *The Bahá'í World*, vol. VII, p. 219. Gail does not identify the source of her reported statement. The statement 'The temple is already built' is not recorded in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's address on 1 May 1912 at 'high noon' at the dedication of the first stone on the temple ground at Wilmette, Illinois. See 'Address of Abdul-Baha at the Dedication of the Mashrak-el-Azkar Grounds, Chicago, High Noon, May 1, 1912' in *Star of the West*, vol. 3, no. 4, 17 May 1912.

[13]The Báb, *Selections*, p. 68.

[14]The phrasing is patterned after 1 Corinthians 13.

[15]The Pharisee who was 'tempting him' had asked Jesus: 'Master, which is the great commandment in the law?' (Mark 12:30).

[16]'Abdu'l-Bahá teaches that 'The first thing which emanated from God is that universal reality, which the ancient philosophers termed the "First Mind", and which the people of Bahá call the "First Will". This emanation, in that which concerns its action in the world of God, is not limited by time or place; it is without beginning or end – beginning and end in relation to God are one.' In this same talk, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the relationship of dependence of the creatures upon God is a relationship of 'emanation'. Creatures do not manifest (God in another form) but rather emanate from Him. 'The Relation Between God and the Creature', in *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 202–203.

[17]In the Fourth Valley of *The Four Valleys*, Bahá'u'lláh cites the tradition/verse: 'O My Servant! Obey Me and I shall make thee like unto Myself. I say "Be", and it is, and thou shalt say "Be", and it shall be.' *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 63.

[18]Bahá'u'lláh has revealed that the full expression of all the names and attributes of God are found within the human being: 'All these names and attributes are applicable to him'... 'In this connection, He Who is the eternal King – may the souls of all that dwell within the mystic Tabernacle be a sacrifice unto Him – hath spoken: "He hath known God who hath known himself" ... From that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God.' *Gleanings*, pp. 177–178.

In Search of Nothing

[1]'The secret of self-mastery is self-forgetfulness.' Despite searching, I have not been able to locate the source of this line.

[2]The expression, sometimes misquoted as 'thorn in the side', is St. Paul's from 2 Corinthians 12:7. Paul says that he was given a 'thorn in the flesh' and was buffeted by 'the messenger of Satan' lest he should feel himself too exalted with the abundance of revelations he had received.

[3]Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 36.

[4]Merton, *The True Solitude*, p. 16.

[5]Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 326.

[6]From Blake's Notebook, see note 6 to 'The Book of Knowledge' above.

[7]See also below, 'The Epiphanic Moment', p. 116.

[8]In Islam, *Jihad* refers not only to 'holy war', those who 'fight for the Cause of God' (2:186), but it also has an ethical meaning (*ḥisba*) by which the believer is exhorted to strive/struggle/reform/contend with oneself and to 'bid to good and reject the reprehensible', according to the *ḥadíth* of the Prophet: 'Whoever sees something reprehensible, let him change it with his own hand, and if he is unable, with his tongue, and if he is unable to do that, in his heart.' Quoted in Williams, *Islam*, p. 195. In the context above, I am of course referring to its symbolic meaning.

[9]I have used the word 'mechanism' here but it does not convey exactly what I mean. The word is somewhat too fixed and stilted, but since machines are usually characterized by mobility, I have settled for mechanism. The world I saw on that afternoon was not mechanical in the strictest sense, but it was organized and definitely moving.

[10]This expression I have taken from another context but it seems suitable here. The original context is Shoghi Effendi's reference in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* to the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. He stipulates that Bahá'ís, if they are to maintain their own organic unity, must strictly refrain from partisan politics and formal affiliation – as distinguished from association – with other religious organizations (p. 199).

[11]The phrase 'wondrous system' is borrowed from Bahá'u'lláh's description of His new World Order: 'The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, 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.' *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, v. 181, quoted by Shoghi Effendi in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 109.

[12]In Chinese philosophy and religion, the *Tao* is the 'way' which Lao Tzu, the sage of the sixth century BCE, taught all forms of life should follow. The word *Tao* means literally 'teachings of the Way' but has come to have a wide variety of meanings in the perspective of a western world-view. According to context, the word *Tao* has been translated variously as: road, nature, path, course, even being, reason and speech. The *Tao* comes closest in western thought to the ground of being, or natural order of the universe or cosmic spirit, a monistic principle reflected in the harmony and balance of *yin* and *yang*. It is the individual's duty to submit to and to put oneself in harmony with *Tao*. D.C. Lau contends, however, that 'no term can be applied to the *tao* because all terms are specific, and the specific, if applied to the *tao* will impose a limitation on the range of its function.' *Lao Tzu*, p. 19.

[13]For the story of Icarus, see above, p. 165, note 3.

[14]'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 76. The full sentence reads: 'Let all be set free from the multiple identities that were born of passion and desire, and in the oneness of their love for God find a new way of life.'

[15]Bahá'u'lláh, in a passage reminiscent of the words of Jesus (Matt. 7: 26–27), writes: 'Build ye for yourselves such houses as the rain and floods can never destroy, which shall protect you from the changes and chances of this life. This is the instruction of Him Whom the world hath wronged and forsaken.' *Gleanings*, CXXIII, p. 261.

[16]The context is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's arguments against reincarnation. He wrote: 'What peace, what ease and comfort did the Holy Ones of God ever discover during Their sojourn in this nether world, that They should continually seek to come back and live this life again? Doth not a single turn at this anguish, these afflictions, these

calamities, these body blows, these dire straits, suffice, that They should wish for repeated visits to the life of this world? This cup was not so sweet that one would care to drink of it a second time.' *Selections*, p. 184.

[17]Psalm 51:17 (Revised Standard Version).

[18]Shakespeare, from Hamlet's famous soliloquy 'To be or not to be: that is the question:/Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer/The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune/Or to take arms against a sea of troubles/And by opposing end them.' *Hamlet*, Act. III, sc. i.

[19]Mark 10: 27. The full verse reads: 'With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible.' This was Christ's response to the assembly who had asked who might be saved after Jesus uttered the famous words: 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' (Mark 10:25). The 'needle's eye' was the common Hebrew name for a small door or gate in the city wall. To spare the trouble of opening the main gate, a smaller one was built in the side of the wall through which the camel might pass. But in order to do so, the camel had to be lowered to its knees and struggle through.

The Supreme Talisman

[1]Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, CXXII, p.259. 'Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. Through a word proceeding out of the mouth of God he was called into being; by one word more he was guided to recognize the Source of his education; by yet another word his station and destiny were safeguarded. The Great Being saith: Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value.'

[2]Taken from George Sale's 1734 translation of the Quranic phrase *Sidratu'l-Muntahá*, 'the lote-tree beyond which there is no passing'. The translation was subsequently adopted by Shoghi Effendi.

[3]*Selections*, no. 88, p. 120.

[4]Genesis 2:19.

[5]Gleanings, XC, p. 177.

[6]Shoghi Effendi writes in 'The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh': 'He is...the "Mystery of God" – an expression by which Bahá'u'lláh Himself has chosen to designate Him, and which, while it does not by any means justify us to assign to Him the station of Prophethood, indicates how in the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the

incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized.' *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.134.

[7]This satirical piece is meant to underscore the soporific futility of those discussions, following Bahá'u'lláh's dictum, that 'begin and end in words alone'. 'Such academic pursuits as begin and end in words alone have never been and will never be of any worth. The majority of Persia's learned doctors devote all their lives to the study of a philosophy the ultimate yield of which is nothing but words.' From the Tablet of Maqsúd, in *Tablets*, p. 169.

[8]A quodlibet was an academic exercise held in the medieval university in which the master and a student or students voluntarily agreed to a disputation. The answers were afterward set down and published.

[9]The expression 'still small voice' is from 1 Kings 19:12. It refers to the voice of God heard by the prophet Elijah in a cave on Mount Horeb (Sinai) after he had fled there following Queen Jezebel's threat to kill him in the aftermath of the slaying of the 450 prophets of Baal in the famous contest on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:1–40). Among other things in this encounter with Yahweh, God gave to Elijah the mission of appointing as his successor the farmer Elisha. This Elijah did by casting his prophetic mantle on him (1 Kings 19:19).

[10]An expression once used in personal conversation by a scholar of Bábí-Islamic studies, Todd Lawson of McGill University. He was referring to another scholar.

[11]Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 69.

[12]From the poem by Robert W. Service, *The Cremation of Sam McGee*. The fuller reading is: 'There are strange things done in the midnight sun/By the men who moil for gold;/The arctic trails have their secret tales/ That would make your blood run cold.' *Collected Poems*.

[13]The complete quotation reads: 'For self-love is kneaded into the very clay of man and it is not possible that, without any hope of a substantial reward, he should neglect his own present material good. That individual, however, who puts his faith in God and believes in the words of God – because he is promised and certain of a plentiful reward in the next life, and because worldly benefits as compared to the abiding joy and glory of future planes of existence are nothing to him – will for the sake of God abandon his own peace and profit and will freely consecrate his heart and soul to the common good. "A man, too, there is who selleth his very self out of desire to please God"(Qur'án 2:203).' 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp. 96–97.

[14]Bahá'u'lláh wrote: 'All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.' *Gleanings*. CIX, p. 215.

[15]From Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Bahá'í World*, April 1956, p. 102.

[16]This is one line of a two-line Zenrin Kushu poem quoted by Allan Watts in *The Way of Zen*, p. 134. The couplet reads: 'Sitting quietly, doing nothing/Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself.' The *Zenrin Kushu* was compiled by Toyo Eicho (1429–1504 CE) and is an vast anthology of some five thousand two-line poems drawn from a great variety of Chinese religious and popular sources. Zen students were required to quote from the *Zenrin Kushu* once they had solved the *koan* (puzzle) the Zen Master had put before them. The poem gave the answer to the *koan*.

[17]From a Tablet translated from the Persian, quoted from 'Trustworthiness' in *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol. II, p. 333.

[18]See the essay 'Mirzá Abu'l-Faḍl's Humility and One's Gifts and Accomplishments', p.47 above.

[19]Bahá'u'lláh, from the 'eleventh leaf' of Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih (Words of Paradise), *Tablets*, p. 72.

[20]*God Loves Laughter* is the title of Sears' book (London: George Ronald, 1960). The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi, appointed William Sears a 'Hand of the Cause of God' in October 1957, among the final contingent of Hands of the Cause appointed by him. 'Hand of the Cause' was a title given by Bahá'u'lláh to exemplary Bahá'í teachers to assist in the work of teaching and protecting the Bahá'í Faith.

[21]See *Bahai News* [sic], vol. 1, no. 14, 23 November 1910, in *Star of the West*, vol. 1, 1910.

[22]ibid.

The Body Beautiful

[1]'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 110.

[2]Plato, *Symposium*, p. 94.

[3]ibid. p. 95.

[4]ibid.

[5]As far as I know, a word of my own making.

[6]This is the theme of my essay 'Science, Consciousness and the Personal Category' on page 29 above.

[7]Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, LXXXV, p. 168.

[8]ibid. LXXXII, pp. 161–162.

[9]Gk.=end. Teleology is that branch of cosmology that treats of end causes. By the telos of history I refer to it being driven by a Master Plan that reflects the Will of God toward some ultimate end which for Bahá'ís is the inevitable establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.

[10]'He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it' (Matthew 10:39). 'For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' (Mark 8:36-37).

Nothing Gold Can Stay

[1]From a prayer by 'Abdu'l-Bahá for meetings: 'May each one become beautiful in colour and redolent of fragrance in the kingdom of God.' *Bahá'í Prayers*, p.110.

[2]'Les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdus.' Literally 'The true paradises are the paradises we have lost.' I have retained the singular in my translation above for euphonic reasons. Marcel Proust, *Le temps retrouvé (Time Regained)*, 1926, Chapter 3, p. 215.

[3]From Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem *Tears, Idle Tears*. The first verse reads: 'Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean/Tears from the depth of some divine despair/Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes/In looking on the happy Autumn-fields/And thinking of the days that are no more.' *Norton Anthology*, vol. 2, p. 1123.

[4]We read in the Book of Genesis that once the Lord God banished Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden '...he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life' (3:24).

[5]Also from Tennyson's poem quoted in note 3 above. The last verse reads: 'Dear as remembered kisses after death/And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feigned/On lips that are for others; deep as love/Deep as first love, and wild with all regret/O Death in life, the days that are no more.'

[6]*Nothing Gold Can Stay*, from *Selected Poems of Robert Frost*, p. 138.

[7]'Lament not in your hours of trial, neither rejoice therein; seek ye the Middle Way which is the remembrance of Me in your afflictions and reflection over that which may befall you in future. Thus informeth you He Who is the Omniscient, He Who is aware.' *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 43, p. 35.

[8]Ecclesiastes 1:18.

[9]The phrase is taken from Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Persian no. 39: 'O offspring of dust! Be not content with the ease of a passing day, and deprive not thyself of everlasting rest. Barter not the garden of eternal delight for the dust-heap of a mortal world. Up from thy prison ascend unto the glorious meads above, and from thy mortal cage wing thy flight unto the paradise of the Placeless.'

[10]The hearts of all children are of the utmost purity. They are mirrors upon which no dust has fallen. But this purity is on account of weakness and innocence, not on account of any strength and testing, for as this is the early period of their childhood, their hearts and minds are unsullied by the world. They cannot display any great intelligence. They have neither hypocrisy nor deceit. This is on account of the child's weakness, whereas the man becomes pure through his strength...This is the difference between the perfect man and the child. Both have the underlying qualities of simplicity and sincerity – the child through the power of weakness and the man through the power of strength.' 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p. 53.

[11]This is an allusion to Genesis 3:7 in which Adam and Eve after having eaten of the fruit of the tree of good and evil in the midst of the garden and having had their eyes opened '...knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons'. This consciousness of their own nakedness, I take as a symbol of the pain that is inherent in self-consciousness or the rude awakening from the bliss of innocence which must inevitably accompany true self-knowledge.

[12]Luke 18:17.

[13]The derived meaning is: the appropriate result of deeds.

[14]The complete verse reads: 'Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'

[15]According to science writer John Horgan who interviewed Thomas Kuhn and a number of other leading scientists in *The End of Science: Facing the Limits of Knowledge in the Twilight of the Scientific Age*, the phrase 'paradigm shift' was not invented by Kuhn (p. 43). In cryptic fashion, Horgan does not tell us who did first use the term. In Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), the paradigm was the 'keystone of his model' (of science) (p. 42): 'a collection of procedures or ideas that instruct scientists, *implicitly*, what to believe and how to work' (p. 43). The 'shift' occurs with anomalies, phenomena that the paradigm cannot account for. By following through on anomalies,

new paradigms are created in revolutionary fashion and the old ones sometimes abandoned. Kuhn stated in the interview that the term 'paradigm shift' had become 'hopelessly overused' and 'out of control' (p. 45). Kuhn assumed partial responsibility himself for not defining the term closely enough. It could refer in one context simply to an experiment; in another to a scientific world-view or collection of beliefs.

[16]In 1879 Edison spent $40,000 developing the forerunner of the electric light bulb. This was the incandescent lamp which made light by means of a carbonized cotton thread that glowed in a vacuum for more than 40 hours. Edison had tried many filaments before he found a durable one.

In Extremis

[1]'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Contentment, Jewels From The Words Of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 13. The complete quotation reads: 'Be thou not unhappy; the tempest of sorrow shall pass; regret will not last; disappointment will vanish; the fire of the love of God will become enkindled, and the thorns and briars of sadness and despondency will be consumed!'

[2]'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 109.

[3]'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Contentment. Jewels From The Words Of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 11.

[4]Job 3:25.

[5]From Browning's metaphysical poem *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, in *Norton Anthology*, vol. 2, p. 1302. Abraham Ibn Ezra's (1092–1157) reputation was made principally as a commentator of the Hebrew Bible. The later period of his life was reportedly happier than the earlier part.

[6]Shoghi Effendi makes a binary distinction in the Bahá'í understanding of self. One is the divine self, the identity of the individual created by God; the other is the ego '..the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on'. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 10 December 1947, in *Lights of Guidance*, p. 113, no. 386.

[7]The foregoing forms of address are taken from Bahá'u'lláh's Hidden Words, nos. 50, 65, 67, 68 respectively (Persian).

[8] From the title of Wordsworth's poem *Surprised by Joy.*

[9]For a moving poetic envisioning of this unparalleled spiritual event, see Robert Hayden's poem *Bahá'u'lláh in the Garden of Ridwan* in *Selected Poems*.

[10]From my essay 'The Possibilities of Existential Theism for Bahá'í Theology', in *Revisioning the Sacred*, pp. 200–201.

[11]Here I am using the two expressions 'arc of ascent' and 'arc of descent' as metaphors for higher and lower spiritual states or simply for joy and sorrow – differently from their original context in the Bahá'í writings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá used them in a more technical way in his refutation of reincarnation in *Some Answered Questions*. In His talk, the expressions would seem to refer to: (1) higher or lower incarnations respectively (p.284) (2) the various degrees of the material and spiritual worlds which find themselves joined in the human being (p.286) (3) 'beginning' (descent) and 'progress' (ascent) (p.286).

On Real Ground

[1]John 8:32.

[2]ibid.

[3]There is an evident but sometimes unnoticed connection between the words 'disciple' and 'discipline'. The Latin words *discipulus* (disciple) and *disciplina* (discipline) are cognates.

[4]Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 101.

[5]John 8:32.

[6]The Báb invalidated the doctrine. Bahá'u'lláh confirmed the Báb's abolition of *taqíya*. The Twelvers were the largest of the Shí'ah sects and practised *taqíya (katmán)* which condoned the propriety, even the necessity, of concealing one's beliefs among non-Shí'ah. The doctrine dated from the times when the Shí'ah were a persecuted minority. Williams, *Islam*, p. 216.

Logos and Mythos

[1]See Otto's classic study of the phenomena of religious consciousness in *The Idea of the Holy* (1958).

[2]Edison said in a newspaper interview: 'Genius is one per cent inspiration and ninety-nine per cent perspiration.' *Life* (1932), ch. 24.

[3]This is the title of an article by Shirin Sabri in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* (vol. 1, no. 1, 1988–1989, pp. 39–58). Both David L. Erickson and I took issue with some of Sabri's points in the same journal, vol. 2, no. 1, 1989–1990, pp. 73–82. Sabri's response to these comments is found in vol. 2, no. 2, 1989–1990, pp. 77–82.

[4]John Donne (1572?–1631) is usually designated as the founder of the 'metaphysical school' that predominated in England especially in the first half of the seventeenth century. Other poets of this spiritual tendency include George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, Thomas Traherne and Francis Quarles, while in secular poetry Cleveland, Marvell and Cowley employ a similar poetic style. Metaphysical poetry generally treats of love, both human and divine, the soul's relationship to God, and personal relationships. It is prone to making arguments and often strikes one as a kind of search for truth in the making, with the poet speaking out loud to himself in poetic dialectic. Some critics find that the metaphysicals employ the terminology and even the arguments of the medieval schoolmen. Donne rejected the elevated language of Elizabethan poetry and made good use of startling similes and metaphors ('metaphysical conceits') that had a certain vivid shock value. For an excellent introduction, see Gardner (ed.), *The Metaphysical Poets.*

[5]In my commentary to *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* referred to above in note 3, I wrote that it is practically impossible to avoid the metaphysical element in poetry: 'Spiritual and metaphysical thematics are a basic substratum of a great deal of poetry, modern or otherwise' (p. 79).

[6]Frye, *The Educated Imagination*, p. 33.

[7]There are two accounts in the Acts of the Apostles which speak of Peter's miraculous release from prison by an angel. Acts 5:19 speaks of the release of Peter and the apostles from the 'common prison' in Jerusalem by an angel of the Lord who opened the prison doors by night. Acts 12:1–12 recounts Peter's deliverance while he was chained to two Roman guards and his escape to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where the believers had been praying.

[8]Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, XXXV, p. 85. The complete quotation reads: 'Whatever, therefore, He saith unto you is wholly for the sake of God, that haply the peoples of the earth may cleanse their hearts from the stain of evil desire, may rend its veil asunder, and attain unto the knowledge of the one true God – the most exalted station to which any man can aspire.'

[9]Quoted from an uncited source by Patrick Bridgewater in the Introduction to *Twentieth Century German Verse*, p. xii.

[10]From poet-philosopher George Santayana's poem *O World*, in *Poems* (1923).

[11]Qur'án 37:36.

[12]The context is 'Remedies for False Friendships', St. Francis' advice to Philothea (Madame de Charmoisy) who had placed herself under his spiritual direction in 1607. St. Francis writes: 'In God's name, Philothea, be ruthless in this matter; your heart and your ears are so closely associated that is as impossible to prevent love from flowing down from your ears into your heart as to stay a torrent once it begins to flow from the mountain tops.' *Introduction to the Devout Life*, p. 145.

[13]Romans 10:17.

[14]Plato attacked the point of view that poets such as Homer were valid sources of ethical knowledge. According to Socrates, only those who had studied at the Academy and were masters of Dialectic had any knowledge of the 'real' world of Forms. A verbal presentation, no matter how skilful, of the heroes who adorned Greek epic poetry did not signify for Socrates that the poets possessed the sure knowledge that guided right conduct. Moreover, such verbal presentations were only representational, not the real thing. For Socrates dramatic poetry appealed to the emotions, not to reason, and had deleterious effects on the character since it led to the expression of emotions that one normally suppressed in real life. See the discussion in *The Republic of Plato*, Book X, Sections 25, 26 and 27.

[15]Qur'án 9:33.

[16]See Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, pp. 124–126.

[17]Schweitzer's statement was made in the context of racial equality. He wrote: 'Once it was considered folly to assume that men of colour were really men and ought to be treated as such, but the folly has become an accepted truth.' Such thinking forms part of Schweitzer's guiding philosophy of 'reverence for life' (*veneratio vitae*). *Civilization and Ethics*, Part 11: 'The Philosophy of Civilization', p. 215.

[18]German for 'seat in life' or 'setting in life'. This expression originates from the German school of form criticism early in the twentieth century which had a tremendous impact on Biblical studies. Form criticism broke Biblical texts down into smaller literary units and raised questions relating to the setting in which such texts arose prior to oral tradition or circulation, the intention

of the author, the target audience, etc. I use it above to refer only to the historical and cultural setting in which the Manifestation of God lived.

Being-in-the-World

[1] Quoted by Shoghi Effendi in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.168

[2] Bahá'u'lláh, The Four Valleys, in *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*. Both the previous quotations are from p. 50.

[3]Note 61 of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas (The Most Holy Book)*, p. 195, states that the following verses of paragraph 36 of the same book constitute 'the prohibition of monasticism and asceticism': 'How many a man hath secluded himself in the climes of India, denied himself the things God hath decreed as lawful, imposed upon himself austerities and mortifications.' Bahá'u'lláh also forbade monasticism to his followers in a Tablet to Napoleon III: 'O concourse of monks! Seclude not yourselves in churches and cloisters. Come forth by My leave, and occupy yourselves with that which will profit your souls and the souls of men. Thus biddeth you the King of the Day of Reckoning...Enter ye into wedlock, that after you someone may fill your place.' *Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 95.

[4]The expression 'knight of faith' is Kierkegaard's and refers to Abraham. In his *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard elaborates upon Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac: 'The knight of faith is obliged to rely upon himself alone, he feels the pain of not being able to make himself intelligible to others, but he feels no vain desire to guide others' (p. 90). 'The true knight of faith is always absolute isolation, the false knight is sectarian.' *Fear and Trembling*, p. 89.

[5]John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in Abrams, *Norton Anthology*, 6th ed. 1993, vol. 1, p. 1462.

[6]In many poetry anthologies, e.g. Abrams, *Norton Anthology*, 5th ed. 1979, vol. 2, p. 1111.

[7]Unidentified source in editor's introductory note to the poem, *The College Survey of English Literature* (1945), p. 903.

[8]From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 8 January 1949. *Lights of Guidance*, no. 388, p. 114.

[9]'Say: O my servants, who have transgressed to your own hurt, despair not of God's mercy, for all sins doth God forgive.

Gracious, Merciful is He!' 39:54: 'The Troops' (Rodwell's translation).

[10]'All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.' Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, CIX, p. 215.

[11]'Whatsoever deterreth you, in this Day, from loving God is nothing but the world. Flee it, that ye may be numbered with the blest.' Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, CXXVIII, p. 276.

[12]*The Call of the Wild* is the title of the book by Jack London (1903). It is the delightful, skilfully written story of the adventures of the dog, Buck, 'dognapped' by an unscrupulous gardener from Judge Miller's home in the Santa Clara Valley of California and forced to perform dog sled service during the Klondike gold rush in the Yukon.

[13]Inversnaid is a Scottish town by Loch Lomond. Hopkins, *Poems*; also in various anthologies, e.g. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, p.106; *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, p.49.

The Long Journey Home

[1]In Bahá'í theology God is manifest on various planes both in this world and the realms beyond. Bahá'u'lláh delineates these realms in his mystical, cosmological Tablet, Lawḥ-i-kullu't-ta'ám (The Tablet of All Food). The realm of *Násút* is the lowest of these realms, God's manifestation in the physical world. All things, whether animal, vegetable, mineral or human, emanate from God at the phenomenological level. For a provisional translation of the Tablet that gives the historical background and a very detailed commentary, see Lambden, 'A Tablet of Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí'.

[2]'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p.88.

[3]'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, no.219, p. 274.

[4]The Hebrew Bible refers to the death of Isaac in the following manner: 'And Isaac gave up the ghost, and died, and was gathered unto his people, being old and full of days: and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him'(Gen: 35:29).

[5]The theme of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's address to the students of Leland Stanford Junior University at Palo Alto, California on 8 October 1912 was the 'intrinsic oneness of all phenomena', the idea that 'all things are involved in all things' (*Promulgation*, p. 349). In this address, 'Abdu'l-Bahá expounds on the predetermined and cyclical coursings of the 'cellular elements' as they are transferred from the lower to the higher kingdoms during their evolutionary journey.

He explains that the human being has the power of intellect which is able to transcend the limitations of nature and to produce wonderful scientific discoveries.

[6]A theological clarification is required by the phrase 'for the sake of the love of God'. God does not need our services. It is we who need to perform such services for His sake, that is, at His behest for our own benefit as well as the benefit of others. 'For His sake' means to please Him, for in pleasing Him we please and benefit ourselves and others at the same time. In sum, 'for the sake of God' means to do His will.

[7]From a Tablet translated from the Persian and Arabic, quoted from the compilation *Women* in *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 2, no. 2144, p. 379. The fuller context reads: 'By the Day-Star of ancient mysteries! The sweet-scented fragrance of every breath breathed in the love of God is wafted in the court of the presence of the Lord of Revelation. The reward of no good deed is or ever will be lost. Blessed art thou, doubly blessed art thou! Thou art reckoned amongst those handmaidens whose love for their kin hath not prevented them from attaining the shores of the Sea of Grace and Mercy.'

[8]Source uncited, in Ruth J. Moffett, *Do'a: The Call to Prayer*, p. 32.

[9]The idea expressed in the above sentence is transposed from another context referring to the greatness of the twentieth century and the future rapid growth of the Bahá'í Cause. I include it here as a parallel expression of the idea that the true understanding of the greatness of present things is garnered in future times: 'In the ages to come, though the Cause of God may rise and grow a hundredfold and the shade of the Sadratu'l-Muntahá shelter all mankind, yet this present century shall stand unrivalled, for it hath witnessed the breaking of that Morn and the rising of that Sun. This century is, verily, the source of His Light and the dayspring of His Revelation. Future ages and generations shall behold the diffusion of its radiance and the manifestations of its signs. Wherefore, exert yourselves, haply ye may obtain your full share and portion of His bestowals.' 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 67.

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