

The Theory and Practice of Moral Education in the Rays of the Sun Baha'i Children's Class

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This document was written in response to a friend doing her thesis on moral development. She asked me to answer the question: "What is your personal theory of moral development and how do you apply it?"

So many times in class I witness students obviously controlling and overcoming their lower inclinations in various situations. Some do it more deliberately and consciously than others, but it is so beautiful to see regardless. I have often pondered how I can concretely teach children to heed their higher self instead of obeying the truly loud lower self. I truly believe that the foundation of moral behavior is a spiritual perspective on life, or more specifically, the belief that humans are primarily spiritual beings with an eternal soul whose actions in this world will affect their soul in the afterlife, as well as in this life. This really is just a cognizant definition of the meaning and purpose of life--something which your average child and youth do not possess. But having a spiritual belief system is not enough---in order for the child to act on spiritual belief, she must be given tools--the virtues. She must have an awareness of their beauty and power, how to express them in differing situations and which ones are applicable to which situation. She must become very familiar with them so that they are readily accessible in her repertoire of responses. So basically, to sum it up--**belief and awareness** form the basis of moral development. The key is teaching these concepts in such a way that is attractive, meaningful, concrete, and fun to children. I am especially fond of using beauty, love, joy, and unity to win children over to a belief or value. I think their hearts are naturally tender and attracted to, sensitive to, and receptive to beauty. Thus, I often put a huge effort into creating a beautiful setting, art project, dramatic activity or multi-sensorial experience for the children. Baha'u'llah exhorts us to "*Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.*" ~*Baha'u'llah, The Kitab-i-Aqdas, p. 20.* The beauty in this physical world is a metaphor for the beauty of God and is a powerful tool in attracting a soul to Godliness.

Allow me to elaborate even more on this idea that belief and awareness form the foundation of morality. For example, once a child believes that she is a spiritual being with a soul answerable to God, and becomes aware of the virtues or attributes of God and the will of God for her to develop them, she is far, far, more likely to make moral choices b/c the cognitive and emotional dissonance produced by behaviors and attitudes at variance with those beliefs is just too uncomfortable. (You can also label this guilt or shame, but I think that *under most circumstances, it is destructive for parents and educators to use guilt and shame as a way to influence character development*). The spiritual belief system provides the reason/rationale to behave in the moral (also more difficult) way. So the belief sets the stage, then the awareness of what the virtues are and how to express them enables the child to actually act on them. Especially in emotionally charged or stressful situations the lower self is likely to take over, so it is so critical that the child have an awareness of how to express virtues and which ones are appropriate for the situation. Otherwise impulses will have no resistance. Eventually the experience/memory of the positive impact of virtues etches itself firmly into a child's consciousness and then the child begins to more consistently choose morality over immorality based on the knowledge of the joy and positive feelings the virtues create, rather than fear of sinning, shame, etc..... the child is becoming wise and experienced.

I would like to suggest that that the 2 quotes below support the above presuppositions that one's beliefs and an awareness of virtues are fundamental to moral development. (I interpret the bolded phrases to refer to virtues). Also, it is abundantly clear from these quotes that being sensitized to the absence of virtues and feeling great discomfort with unethical behaviors definitely plays a role in determining moral behavior.

*The root cause of wrongdoing is ignorance, and we must therefore hold fast to the tools of perception and knowledge. Good character must be taught. Light must be spread afar, so that, in the school of humanity, all may acquire the **heavenly characteristics of the spirit**, and see for themselves beyond any doubt that there is no fiercer hell, no more fiery abyss, than to possess a character that is evil and unsound; no more darksome pit nor loathsome torment than to show forth qualities which deserve to be condemned.*

The individual must be educated to such a high degree that he would rather have his throat cut than tell a lie, and would think it easier to be slashed with a sword or pierced with a spear than to utter calumny or be carried away by wrath.

*Thus will be kindled the sense of **human dignity** and pride, to burn away the reappings of lustful appetites. Then will each one of God's beloved shine out as a bright moon with **qualities of the spirit**, and the relationship of each to the Sacred Threshold of his Lord will be not illusory but sound and real, will be as the very foundation of the building, not some embellishment on its facade."*

--Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha, pages 136-137.

"There is thus a great difference between the prevention of crime through measures that are violent and retaliatory, and so training the people, and enlightening them, and spiritualizing them, that without any

*fear of punishment or vengeance to come, they will shun all criminal acts. They will, indeed, look upon the very commission of a crime as a great disgrace and in itself the harshest of punishments. They will become enamoured of **human perfections**, and will consecrate their lives to whatever will bring light to the world and will further **those qualities** which are acceptable at the Holy Threshold of God. " ~ `Abdu'l-Baha: Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Baha, pages 132-133*

It is clear, then, that we need to shape the beliefs of children in ways that promote moral behavior and offer them an awareness of the virtues within them and how to express them. There are many creative ways to do this, but as a Baha'i, I would have to say that the most powerful and essential force available to accomplish this daunting task is the mystical impact of the Word of God operating on a soul, especially a soul who is exposed to His Creative Word on a regular basis. The Word of God nurtures a deep love for God and a powerful connection to Him, and thus stimulates the desire to express ourselves in ways that would please our Beloved. Regular study of the Creative word is the most potent educator of the human soul, it purifies our character and enlightens our awareness and beliefs in ways that are truly transformative:

The vitality of men's belief in God is dying out in every land; nothing short of His wholesome medicine can ever restore it. The corrosion of ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society; what else but the Elixir of His potent Revelation can cleanse and revive it?the.....task of converting satanic strength into heavenly power is one that We have been empowered to accomplish..... The Word of God, alone, can claim the distinction of being endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change. ~Baha'u'llah: Gleanings, page 200

Were any man to ponder in his heart that which the Pen of the Most High hath revealed and to taste of its sweetness, he would, of a certainty, find himself emptied and delivered from his own desires, and utterly subservient to the Will of the Almighty. Happy is the man that hath attained so high a station, and hath not deprived himself of so bountiful a grace. Baha'u'llah: Gleanings, page 343

Peruse ye every day the verses revealed by God. Blessed is the man who reciteth them and reflecteth upon them. He truly is of them with whom it shall be well. Gather ye together with the utmost joy and fellowship and recite the verses revealed by the merciful Lord. By so doing the doors to true knowledge will be opened to your inner beings, and ye will then feel your souls endowed with steadfastness and your hearts filled with radiant joy. Peruse My verses with joy and radiance. Verily they will attract you unto God and will enable you to detach yourselves from aught else save Him. Thus have ye been admonished in God's Holy Writ and in this resplendent Tablet. ~Baha'u'llah: The Importance of Deepening, page 188

The Baha'i teaching of the belief in the oneness of humanity is also key to moral behavior because one needs to believe that all humanity deserve our love and respect, etc. Otherwise, it may be possible to have people who only in respect to their tribe, nation, ethnic group, religious affiliation, are consistently moral. If they deem others as infidels or less than human, they may not practice their virtues in relation to them!

I have many concrete activities I do with children to foster the 2 concepts of belief and awareness. A few examples: Children sharing negative behaviors and as they do, they scrawl a big black smudge on a heart shaped mirror. When they share examples of virtue expression or of prayer and study of the Creative Word, they wipe a section clean. They also hold a light up to both the soiled and the clean mirror, which represents the light of God, the beauty of God, etc. It is very graphic how a dirty mirror reflects so little light. *The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light.* ~ `Abdu'l-Baha: Promulgation of Universal Peace, pages 14-15 (Most of the metaphors I use in class are straight out of the Baha'i writings, such as the mirror of the heart, the garden of the heart, gems of divine virtue, etc.) Another example is about hurting others. I hold up a large red shiny cardboard heart decorated with rhinestones and explain this is a person's soul or spiritual heart, and it is precious and beautiful. The gems represent the attributes of God. (Another metaphor from the Baha'i Writings). Then children go around a circle and as they hold up an evil Indonesian mask to their face, blurt out a put down or insult, etc. as they do, I tear a rip in the heart, explaining that this is the effect it has on others. The mask, I tell them is ugly and it represents their inner self when they are mean to others. Then they share ways to affirm and serve others, and as they do, they hold up an iridescent star to their heart and they get to place a pretty colored bandaid on one of the tears. Another ex: students each get a large green heart shape on the wall, which I explain represents the garden of their heart. Whenever a classmate or I catch them expressing a virtue, they get a flower sticker planted in it. –Baha'u'llah often refers to the rose of love, the hyacinths of wisdom, etc. I also emphasize that they must practice a diversity of virtues so that they expand their repertoire--in other words the same action using the same virtues only gets a sticker once. I am always telling students that virtues are like flowers--they bring joy and beauty to the world. I frequently talk about how

actions affect their souls, how they will face God someday, how what they do comes back to them, etc. etc. I do this in a loving, positive, and pleasant way, always avoiding being threatening, scolding, or harsh.

Following are 3 samples of my philosophy on developing virtues in action—i.e. the concrete application. They are excerpts from former parent letters.

1. At the table many children nominated each other for virtues and so, many decorated their virtue crowns with new jewels. I love listening to the children describe the good in their fellow classmates. I also nominate students, but as I can not possibly be aware of all the virtuous acts of all the students, I encourage them to notice the inner beauty in each other and share this. This also teaches them to see the good in others, which can be less obvious than our faults. Focussing on the good in others promotes unity, harmony, kindness, and creates an atmosphere of security and positive feelings. Focussing on the negative breeds insecurity, anxiety, disunity, criticism, exclusivity, judgmentalism, negative acting out, and distrust. One of the most frequent exhortations of the Baha'i Faith is to focus on the good in others and try to ignore the bad. I believe that that when children feel loved and respected, they strive to be better and to live up to the positive image they see reflected in the eyes of others, and that the opposite is also true. Backbiting, put downs, criticism and cliques are very popular activities in schools and I do not want this spiritually poisonous influence in our class!!! I also want children to be reinforced for their inner beauty, to get plenty of practice with the virtues, and to experience how good it feels to express the attributes of God and to perceive the positive impact virtues have on relationships. Eventually, of course the goal is to have them internalize the value of being virtuous in and of itself and to realize that being kind and loving, etc, feels wonderful, and that feeling, along with the unity and harmony it promotes in relationships is reward enough. But they need reinforcement and practice to learn the power of virtues, especially in a society that exalts and reinforces selfism, materialism, and hedonism above spirituality. As I have said before, I explain to the students again and again that just because someone did not notice you expressing a virtue, doesn't mean it was not worth it—God notices and your soul grows more luminous each time you polish it with a virtue. That is the true reward, not the jewels on the crown—these are only symbols.

2. You will notice in my parent letters that I consistently ask students to label and dramatize virtues. This is because I believe that in order for children to integrate the virtues into their daily lives on a regular basis, to apply them to diverse situations, to understand their relevance in healthy relationships and the power of virtues to solve conflicts and to create happiness and unity, they need to be fully aware and conscious of them. They need to understand the definition of the virtue and how it is expressed concretely in a wide variety of situations. Kids of course can express a virtue without knowing it, without being able to define it, but I am talking about children getting to the point that they are so spiritually mature that they deliberately choose to practice a virtue, that they strive in a very conscious manner to develop a virtue, that when faced with a dilemma, they have the virtue as an option and use it. Familiarity and experience with virtue expression will make it far more likely children will be able to summon a particular virtue to his/her aid in times of need. Also, I often do contrast work with virtues—showing how ugly or painful a situation can get without a particular virtue and then showing the difference with the virtue. This not only elucidates the beauty and power of the virtue, but it can also enable children to quickly recognize the symptoms and what virtue(s) are missing in a negative situation. I want children to love and cherish the virtues, to perceive and crave their beauty—to be sensitive enough that they can quickly sense the absence of a virtue and desire to express it, kind of like seeing litter in a beautiful setting inspires many of us to clean it up. The virtues are also the attributes of God, and we want our children to love Him and be attracted to His beauty. If children learn how incredibly beautiful, powerful, and rewarding virtues are, they will love and appreciate those aspects of God (and themselves) even more. The more children are attracted to the virtues, (as opposed to their opposites which are so abundantly reinforced in our culture and much easier to manifest), the more they will desire to express them in their daily lives and the closer they will grow towards God. Abdu'l-Baha said that nearness to God is likeness to God. (Promulgation of Universal Peace p. 148.) I hope that our children grow up to be so attracted to and endowed with virtues that they shed light where ever they go.

3. A note and plea on virtue development: In every class I try very hard to notice and reinforce virtue expression in the students, to point out when a virtue is needed (or ask the students to ascertain which virtues are missing in a conflict, etc.), note them in stories, ask the students questions relating to virtues, and continually associate virtues with beauty, (such as flowers) light, power, fruits, and attractiveness, and their opposites with negative metaphors such as wilting flowers, besmirched mirrors, ugliness, monsters, pollution, toxicity, sadness, disunity, darkness, etc. Hopefully, this emphasis will help prevent them from becoming spiritually callous and hard hearted as they grow older and are immersed in a culture which has such high tolerance for, and even glorifies, disrespect, violence, sexual using and immodesty, pride, ego, materialism, rudeness, selfishness, etc. It is amazing to me how often people can treat each other in insulting and degrading ways, lie, steal, maliciously gossip, swear at each other, and verbally and physically abuse others—and show no signs of remorse or embarrassment. Kids grow up so accustomed to degrading and abasing images and behavior (especially via the media) that they are no longer appalled, shocked, disgusted, or even upset and disturbed when they should be. In educating children, my goal is to increase awareness of, and sensitize the soul to, the beauty of virtues (which are the expressions of their higher nature) and also to the ugliness, danger, influence, and impact of our lower nature. I do this so that children's perceptions and judgments do not become dulled, numbed, distorted, clouded, and defective through continual exposure to our cultures' examples of models who display such little proof of the nobility and beauty of the human soul. In this way, I hope that when they perceive greed, selfishness, cruelty, etc, in themselves or in other's behavior, they will have such a strong negative association with those characteristics, that they instantly recoil, and do not continue to succumb to them or support those that do. And conversely, when they perceive the attributes of

God, the virtues, they are attracted and uplifted, and strive to express those qualities in themselves and to support and associate with those who are spiritually nourishing to be around because they too are practicing the virtues.

Also, from a practical, teacher standpoint, I have learned that if I can convince the children of the beauty, power, and importance of virtues, especially the ones of courtesy, kindness and unity, the class is so much more productive, unified, peaceful, and joyful. These virtues are the foundation of the relationships in the class. Love for one another will gradually grow if they treat each other with courtesy and kindness and strive for unity. But I need your help. A measly twice a month class will not be enough to convince children that the development of virtues is the most important task of their life---unless you reinforce it in the home. Please always look for opportunities to emphasize the incredible importance of the virtues. Taking time to do this sends a clear message: You really care about virtues in their life, you really value the virtues and your children's spiritual development, their inner beauty. It is much easier to take time out to address their physical, outer beauty, (you're so cute, good at sports, etc.)—let's give equal or greater time to the inner beauty!!

Some more musings on moral development and the condition of our world:

The Baha'i Universal House of Justice in their peace statement says: "For in essence, peace stems from an inner state supported by a **spiritual or moral attitude**, and it is chiefly in evoking this attitude that the possibility of enduring solutions can be found."

It is these spiritual or moral attitudes I am trying to evoke and develop in children via the activities I use in class. Attitudes ultimately will form the values which guide and shape their own and other's lives. If we examine closely the root cause of all environmental problems, crime, corruption, violence, oppression, war, hunger, injustice, poverty, conflict, etc., we find certain negative attitudes—especially those of greed, self-exaltation and self gratification as a primary motive. These attitudes reflect a core **belief** that the purpose of life is to gratify the self under all conditions. This belief and these attitudes generate destructive, materialistic and selfish values, --values which ultimately translate into the under-development or absence of many noble virtues essential to unity and justice. For ex., virtues such as service, respect, humility, and generosity find barren soil in the human heart which worships/values the self and things above all else.

Attitudes, beliefs, and values are all intimately connected and related and they are also directly responsible for the condition of our world:

Arise, O people, and, by the power of God's might, resolve to gain the victory over your own selves, that haply the whole earth may be freed and sanctified from its servitude to the gods of its idle fancies - gods that have inflicted such loss upon, and are responsible for the misery of their wretched worshippers. These idols form the obstacle that impedeth man in his efforts to advance in the path of perfection.

~Baha'u'llah: Tablets of Baha'u'llah, page 86

Arise and, armed with the power of faith, shatter to pieces the gods of your vain imaginings, the sowers of dissension amongst you. ~Baha'u'llah: Gleanings, page 217

To illustrate the above point, please ponder for a moment the following question: what problems and conflicts in the world today would continue to exist if most people sincerely believed and acted on the following **4 beliefs**:

1. We are one family, our well being is interconnected in seen and unseen ways.
2. All the world's major religions come from the same 1 God.
3. True fulfillment and happiness comes from loving and serving humanity, not domination, control, and material possessions.
4. The meaning and purpose of our existence on this planet is to develop life giving and noble virtues such as love, kindness, compassion, service, generosity, selflessness, truthfulness, self-control, moderation, humility, etc.

Even disease would be eradicated b/c so much of it is caused by poverty, self indulgence, war, lack of education, and lack of resources which are diverted to less noble pursuits.

Now, if thou wishest to know the true remedy which will heal man from all sickness and will give him the health of the divine kingdom, know that it is the precepts and teachings of God. Focus thine attention upon them. ~`Abdu'l-Baha: Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Baha, pages 151-152

Every horrid condition in the world today testifies to a gross absence of noble virtues, and an active expression of these virtues, accompanied with a solid belief in and commitment to our oneness, could eradicate all these conditions:

"Man is like unto a tree. If he be adorned with fruit, he hath been and will ever be worthy of praise and commendation. Otherwise a fruitless tree is but fit for fire. The fruits of the human tree are exquisite, highly desired and dearly cherished. Among them are upright character, virtuous deeds and a goodly utterance. Were the trees of men's lives to be adorned in this divine Springtime with the fruits that have been mentioned, the effulgence of the light of Justice would, of a certainty, illumine all the dwellers of the earth and everyone would abide in tranquillity and contentment beneath the sheltering shadow of Him Who is the Object of all mankind. The Water for these trees is the living water of the sacred Words uttered by the Beloved of the world. " ~Baha'u'llah: Tablets of Baha'u'llah, page 257

Educating children to be virtuous, united, and free of prejudice is truly challenging in today's world. Spiritual or moral education must be reinforced with a definition of what a human being is and why we are here---our meaning and purpose in life---b/c the answer to these questions will immensely determine how our children live: The answers will determine the goals they set, the means they choose to achieve those goals, the values and beliefs they adopt, their standards of behavior, the choices they make, and how they treat themselves and others..... Thus, if we define a human as just a higher animal, here primarily to acquire material possessions and to gratify all personal desires, we will have one type of world. If however we define a human as primarily a spiritual being, here to acquire spiritual attributes and serve humanity, we will have another, very different world indeed.

I am afraid that too many of our children and youth via the media and many other out spoken sources are behaving as if they believed in the first definition. And they are not happy---when we are alienated from our spiritual reality, our souls, we cannot help but be miserable and spread misery. We are prisoners of self and ego. Basically, all the destructive and negative forces we see assailing us from every side are the direct result of a loss of spiritual purpose, vision, goals, and guidance.

I can't help but think that if one wants to know how to inspire children and adults to consistently make moral choices, one must first assist them to believe that:

- the purpose of life is more than self-gratification,
- that morality is good for our souls,
- and that a relationship with, and the expression of the Divine within us will bring us joy throughout eternity.

My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting. ~Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words, #1

I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore, do thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of life. ~Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words #4

Thy Paradise is My love; thy heavenly home, reunion with Me. Enter therein and tarry not. This is that which hath been destined for thee in Our kingdom above and Our exalted dominion. ~Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words #6

If thou lovest Me, turn away from thyself; and if thou seekest My pleasure, regard not thine own; that thou mayest die in Me and I may eternally live in thee. ~Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words #7

Thou art My lamp and My light is in thee. Get thou from it thy radiance and seek none other than Me. For I have created thee rich and have bountifully shed My favor upon thee. ~Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words #11

Is it not astonishing that although man has been created for the knowledge and love of God, for the virtues of the human world, for spirituality, heavenly illumination and eternal life, nevertheless, he continues ignorant and negligent of all this? Consider how he seeks knowledge of everything except knowledge of God. ~`Abdu'l-Baha: Promulgation of Universal Peace, page 227

And finally, another way I promote moral development in children is to vigilantly guard against subjecting them to images, music, and other experiences that undermine a self concept of spiritual nobility, that corrupt their inner beauty and contradict spiritual laws and principles. I make a conscious effort to expose them to ennobling, positive, meaningful, and beautiful music, books, videos, and the beauty of nature to nourish their souls. I analyze every video, children's book, song, and activity for its underlying messages and the values, beliefs, and attitudes they convey. The quotes below describe the effect of music, for

good or ill. I am certain that videos can have an equally powerful influence on kids. Just ask a child who has seen a violent movie that was meant for much older audiences. It profoundly disturbs them—as it should everyone, of all ages!

We have made it lawful for you to listen to music and singing. Take heed, however, lest listening thereto should cause you to overstep the bounds of propriety and dignity. Let your joy be the joy born of My Most Great Name, a Name that bringeth rapture to the heart, and filleth with ecstasy the minds of all who have drawn nigh unto God. We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion. Truly, We are loath to see you numbered with the foolish. ~Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, page 38

The art of music is divine and effective. It is the food of the soul and spirit. Through the power and charm of music the spirit of man is uplifted. It has wonderful sway and effect in the hearts of children, for their hearts are pure, and melodies have great influence in them. The latent talents with which the hearts of these children are endowed will find expression through the medium of music. Therefore, you must exert yourselves to make them proficient; teach them to sing with excellence and effect. It is incumbent upon each child to know something of music, for without knowledge of this art the melodies of instrument and voice cannot be rightly enjoyed. Likewise, it is necessary that the schools teach it in order that the souls and hearts of the pupils may become vivified and exhilarated and their lives be brightened with enjoyment. ~Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 52