

WHAT IF WE CAN'T DO IT?

We have just begun the 183rd year of the Baha'i Dispensation according to the Badi' Calendar. By the way, for those of you who don't already know this, Badi' is an Arabic word (بديع) which means "New". Isn't it interesting that the name of the first day of our calendar year in the Persian language, "Naw" means "New" while the name of our calendar, which begins every year on that day of Naw-Ruz is called Badi', meaning "New"? Let's continue to digress from today's topic for a moment. Have you ever thought about how this Faith is new? Not just because it is the most recent revelation from God, because that would only make it new for us, while for those living when the next Manifestation of God appears will experience that as the "new age"...but because this calendar begins a new cycle, what the Guardian called the Cycle of Fulfillment, and what Baha'u'llah called the "coming of age of humanity". The big picture is that this Cycle will be new for a very long time, at least a half million years.

Now back to our topic for today. All of us have experienced, at some point or another, the realization that we can't do something. Not that we don't want to do it, for we may want to do that thing with our whole being, heart, mind and body. But we can't. We may have tried a thousand times, or more, and we simply can't. *What if we can't do it?*

Let's examine this question in light of Baha'u'llah's teachings rather than in the scales of our own fears and disappointments.

Know thou that all men have been created in the nature made by God, the Guardian, the Self-Subsisting. Unto each one hath been prescribed a preordained measure, as decreed in God's mighty and guarded Tablets. (*Baha'u'llah, Gleanings LXXVII*)

Baha'u'llah says that we have been created by God. Is that surprising? Didn't you think your mother and father created you? But Jesus agrees. Jesus said "**9And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven.**" (*Gospel of Matthew 23:9*)

How is that? How can God be our Creator? Because both Baha'u'llah and Jesus are referring not to our bodies, which are indeed the creation of our mother and father, as miraculous as that process is...but rather to our souls, which come into existence at the moment of conception. And they are not created by our parents, but by God. Baha'u'llah wrote: "**Know, verily, that the soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel. It is the first among all created things to declare the excellence of its Creator, the first to**

recognize His glory, to cleave to His truth, and to bow down in adoration before Him.”
(*Baha'u'llah, Gleanings XXXII*)

As to the innate character, although the innate nature bestowed by God upon man is purely good, yet that character differs among men according to the degrees they occupy: All degrees are good, but some are more so than others. Thus every human being possesses intelligence and capacity, but intelligence, capacity, and aptitude differ from person to person. This is self-evident. (*Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions, chapter 57*)

"Regarding your question concerning the passage in 'Seven Valleys' referring to pre-existence. **This in no way presupposes the existence of the individual soul before conception.** The term has not been absolutely accurately translated, and what is meant is that man's soul is the repository of the ancient, Divine mysteries of God." (*From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, January 5, 1948, in Lights of Guidance, no. 1699*)

"With regard to the soul of man. According to the Bahá'í Teachings the human soul starts with the formation of the human embryo, and continues to develop and pass through endless stages of existence after its separation from the body. Its progress is thus infinite." (*On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, letter dated December 31, 1937, to an individual believer, in Lights of Guidance, no. 680*)

"...First concerning the human soul and its true nature. According to the Bahá'í conception, the soul of man, or in other words his inner spiritual self or reality, is not dualistic. There is no such thing, as the Zoroastrians believe, as a double reality in man, a definite higher self and a lower self. These two tendencies for good or evil are but manifestations of a single reality or self. (*From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to Alfred Lunt, May 25, 1936; in Lights of Guidance, no. 698*)

All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition. Your own acts testify to this truth. Consider, for instance, that which hath been forbidden, in the Bayán, unto men. God hath in that Book, and by His behest, decreed as lawful whatsoever He hath pleased to decree, and hath, through the power of His sovereign might, forbidden whatsoever He elected to forbid. To this testifieth the text of that Book. Will ye not bear witness? Men, however, have wittingly broken His law. Is such a behavior to be attributed to God, or to their proper selves? Be fair in your judgment. Every good thing is of God, and every evil thing is from yourselves. Will ye not comprehend? This same truth hath

been revealed in all the Scriptures, if ye be of them that understand. (*Baha'u'llah, Gleanings LXXVII*)

The attainment of any object is conditioned upon knowledge, volition and action. (*'Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, #58*)

Mere knowledge of principles is not sufficient. We all know and admit that justice is good, but there is need of volition and action to carry out and manifest it. For example, we might think it good to build a church, but simply thinking of it as a good thing will not help its erection. The ways and means must be provided; we must will to build it and then proceed with the construction. All of us know that international peace is good, that it is conducive to human welfare and the glory of man, but volition and action are necessary before it can be established. Action is essential. (*'Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, #47*)

These two tendencies for good or evil are but manifestations of a single reality or self. The latter is capable of development in either way. All depends fundamentally on the training or education which man receives. Human nature is made up of possibilities both for good and evil. True religion can enable it to soar in the highest realm of the spirit, while its absence can, as we already witness around us, cause it to fall to the lowest depths of degradation and misery." (*From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to Alfred Lunt, May 25, 1936; in Lights of Guidance, no. 698*)

Every act ye meditate is as clear to Him as is that act when already accomplished. There is none other God besides Him. His is all creation and its empire. All stands revealed before Him; all is recorded in His holy and hidden Tablets. This foreknowledge of God, however, should not be regarded as having caused the actions of men, just as your own previous knowledge that a certain event is to occur, or your desire that it should happen, is not and can never be the reason for its occurrence. (*Baha'u'llah, Gleanings LXXVII*)

'Abdu'l-Baha explained this truth:

The knowledge of a thing is not the cause of its occurrence; for the essential knowledge of God encompasses the realities of all things both before and after they come to exist, but it is not the cause of their existence. This is an expression of the perfection of God.

As to the pronouncements which, through divine revelation, have issued from the Prophets regarding the advent of the Promised One of the Torah, these likewise were not the cause of Christ's appearance. But the hidden mysteries of the days to come were revealed to the Prophets, who thus became acquainted with future events and who proclaimed them in turn. This knowledge and proclamation were not the cause of the occurrence of these events.

For instance, tonight everyone knows that in seven hours the sun will rise, but this common knowledge does not cause the appearance and rising of the sun.

Likewise, God's knowledge in the contingent world does not produce the forms of things. Rather, that knowledge is freed from the distinctions of past, present, and future, and is identical with the realization of all things without being the cause of that realization.

In the same way, the record and mention of a thing in the Scriptures is not the cause of its existence. The Prophets of God were informed through divine revelation that certain events would come to pass. For instance, through divine revelation they came to know that Christ would be martyred, which they in turn proclaimed. Now, did their knowledge and awareness cause the martyrdom of Christ? No: This knowledge is a sign of their perfection and not the cause of His martyrdom.

Through astronomical calculations, the mathematicians determine that at a certain time a solar or lunar eclipse will occur. Surely this prediction is not the cause of the eclipse. This of course is merely an analogy and not an exact image. (*Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions, #35*)

Why is it so important that we understand these principles? Because we may not be able to do something because it is not our nature to do it. We may have been told that everyone has the potential to do whatever they wish. We are all the same, all equal, all of one nature. This is the spirit of democracy as it has been interpreted in modern times. It was understood differently by the founders of the United States of America, because they applied this principle only to the rights of the individual man, regardless of his wealth or education. As we well know, they did not apply this principle to women, nor to slaves or indentured servants. However, later generations of Americans did so, and believed that they were heading in the right direction. In our time there are many more people who are treated as equals than in 1776, and this is seen as a positive good. Indeed, during the French Revolution and the Russian Bolshevik and Chinese Communist Revolutions it was implemented to such an extent that those who disagreed with absolute equality and sameness were eliminated. To this day there are many people who believe that equality should characterize all of our words and actions. This tendency has perhaps been reinforced by the industrial revolution, the replacement of craftsmen with factories, of the handmade with mass production, and with the availability of everything to everybody, first with the telegraph, then the radio and telephone, then the television, now with the internet and AI.

Baha'u'llah calls upon us to understand reality in a different way:

Furthermore, consider the signs of the revelation of God in their relation one to another. Can the sun, which is but one of these signs, be regarded as equal in rank to darkness? The one true God

beareth Me witness! No man can believe it, unless he be of those whose hearts are straitened, and whose eyes have become deluded. Say: **Consider your own selves. Your nails and eyes are both parts of your bodies. Do ye regard them of equal rank and value? If ye say, yea; say, then: ye have indeed charged with imposture, the Lord, my God, the All-Glorious, inasmuch as ye pare the one, and cherish the other as dearly as your own life.**

To transgress the limits of one's own rank and station is, in no wise, permissible. The integrity of every rank and station must needs be preserved. By this is meant that every created thing should be viewed in the light of the station it hath been ordained to occupy. (*Baha'u'llah, Gleanings XCIII*)

In another passage He tells us how we must behave towards each other, by respecting and having compassion for our different capacities:

Show forbearance and benevolence and love to one another. Should anyone among you be incapable of grasping a certain truth, or be striving to comprehend it, show forth, when conversing with him, a spirit of extreme kindness and goodwill. Help him to see and recognize the truth, without esteeming yourself to be, in the least, superior to him, or to be possessed of greater endowments.

The whole duty of man in this Day is to attain that share of the flood of grace which God poureth forth for him. Let none, therefore, consider the largeness or smallness of the receptacle. The portion of some might lie in the palm of a man's hand, the portion of others might fill a cup, and of others even a gallon-measure. (*Baha'u'llah, Gleanings V*)

Then Baha'u'llah explains what will happen if we do not observe such respect and compassion for others:

Every eye, in this Day, should seek what will best promote the Cause of God. He, Who is the Eternal Truth, beareth Me witness! **Nothing whatever can, in this Day, inflict a greater harm upon this Cause than dissension and strife, contention, estrangement and apathy, among the loved ones of God. Flee them, through the power of God and His sovereign aid, and strive ye to knit together the hearts of men, in His Name, the Unifier, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.** (*Baha'u'llah, Gleanings V*)

'Abdu'l-Baha also spoke of the difference in capacity of individuals:

Equality is a chimera! It is entirely impracticable! Even if equality could be achieved it could not continue—and if its existence were possible, the whole order of the world would be

destroyed. The law of order must always obtain in the world of humanity. Heaven has so decreed in the creation of man.

Some are full of intelligence, others have an ordinary amount of it, and others again are devoid of intellect. In these three classes of men there is order but not equality. How could it be possible that wisdom and stupidity should be equal? Humanity, like a great army, requires a general, captains, under-officers in their degree, and soldiers, each with their own appointed duties. Degrees are absolutely necessary to ensure an orderly organization. An army could not be composed of generals alone, or of captains only, or of nothing but soldiers without one in authority. The certain result of such a plan would be that disorder and demoralization would overtake the whole army. (*Paris Talks, #46*)

Indeed, Baha'u'llah insisted on this principle when He wrote perhaps the most stirring words in His last book:

The utterance of God is a lamp, whose light is these words: Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship. He Who is the Daystar of Truth beareth Me witness! So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth. The One true God, He Who knoweth all things, Himself testifieth to the truth of these words.

Exert yourselves that ye may attain this transcendent and most sublime station, the station that can insure the protection and security of all mankind. This goal excelleth every other goal, and this aspiration is the monarch of all aspirations...At one time We spoke in the language of the lawgiver; at another in that of the truth-seeker and the mystic, and yet Our supreme purpose and highest wish hath always been to disclose the glory and sublimity of this station. God, verily, is a sufficient witness! (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*)

The fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch are not identical. Neither are those who respond to “the language of the lawgiver” and to “that of the truth-seeker and mystic”. Baha'u'llah follows these words with a familiar statement about how we are to teach His Faith:

Consort with all men, O people of Bahá, in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. If ye be aware of a certain truth, if ye possess a jewel, of which others are deprived, share it with them in a language of utmost kindness and goodwill. If it be accepted, if it fulfill its purpose, your object is attained. If anyone should refuse it, leave him unto himself, and beseech God to guide him. Beware lest ye deal unkindly with him. A kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding. (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*)

'Abdu'l-Baha likewise imparts this same teaching in a passage with which most Baha'is are familiar:

As difference in degree of capacity exists among human souls, as difference in capability is found, therefore, individualities will differ one from another. But in reality this is a reason for unity and not for discord and enmity. If the flowers of a garden were all of one color, the effect would be monotonous to the eye; but if the colors are variegated, it is most pleasing and wonderful. The difference in adornment of color and capacity of reflection among the flowers gives the garden its beauty and charm. Therefore, although we are of different individualities, different in ideas and of various fragrances, let us strive like flowers of the same divine garden to live together in harmony. Even though each soul has its own individual perfume and color, all are reflecting the same light, all contributing fragrance to the same breeze which blows through the garden, all continuing to grow in complete harmony and accord. Become as waves of one sea, trees of one forest, growing in the utmost love, agreement and unity. (*Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, #10*)

Consider the flowers of a garden. Though differing in kind, color, form, and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm, and addeth unto their beauty. How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruits, the branches and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and color! Diversity of hues, form and shape, enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest. Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas, and convictions of the children of men. (*Abdu'l-Baha, Tablets of the Divine Plan, #14*)

We return now to the original question: *What if we can't do it?*

It may be that what you can do and what I can do is different, and if so, Baha'u'llah assures us that this is good, this is how God created us, and we don't have to be the same. What a huge relief that is! What a blessing to know what we feel deep within us...that we are unique, that no two of us is identical. Factories make identical products...God doesn't.

In answer to one of the participants in the presentation, I cited this quotation from Baha'u'llah, and I believe it appropriate to introduce it here:

He hath endowed every soul with the capacity to recognize the signs of God. How could He, otherwise, have fulfilled His testimony unto men, if ye be of them that ponder His Cause in their hearts. He will never deal unjustly with anyone, neither will He task a soul beyond its power. He, verily, is the Compassionate, the All-Merciful...Take heed lest ye allow yourselves to be shut out as by a veil from this Daystar that shineth above the dayspring of the Will of your Lord, the All-Merciful, and whose light hath encompassed both the small and the great. Purge your sight, that ye may perceive its glory with your own eyes, and depend not on the sight of anyone except yourself, for God hath never burdened any soul beyond its power. Thus hath it been sent down unto the Prophets and Messengers of old, and been recorded in all the Scriptures. (*Baha'u'llah, Gleanings LII*)

We may feel that our lives are burdened with tests and difficulties that are unbearable, that exceed our capacity to endure. But Baha'u'llah has assured us that **“He will never deal unjustly with anyone, neither will He task a soul beyond its power”**. This is not a promise made only in this Dispensation, it has **“been sent down unto the Prophets and Messengers of old, and been recorded in all the Scriptures”**!

However, it doesn't stop there, does it? Because we know that we have potential that we haven't realized, that we have capacity that has not yet been manifested. And Baha'u'llah addresses that reality straightforwardly, speaking to all of us:

Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds.
(*Arabic Hidden Words, #31*)

He said the same to the kings of the earth and their ministers, at a time when they were still governing most of the world:

Set before thine eyes God's unerring Balance and, as one standing in His Presence, weigh in that Balance thine actions every day, every moment of thy life. Bring thyself to account ere thou art summoned to a reckoning, on the Day when no man shall have strength to stand for fear of God, the Day when the hearts of the heedless ones shall be made to tremble.
(*Baha'u'llah, Suriy-i-Muluk, in The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*)

We are commanded to bring ourselves to account each day because of what characteristic of our nature?

That characteristic is what defines our responsibility, for God does not burden us beyond our capacity.

Really? Don't each of us feel, sometimes, maybe more often than we care to admit, that we feel burdened beyond our capacity? Don't we feel inadequate, unmotivated, failing? Who can honestly say, "no, never"?

Baha'u'llah assures us otherwise:

Remember, each one of us is unique. You don't have to measure up to someone else's capacity. You only have to do what you are capable of doing. And Baha'u'llah tells each of us exactly how to do that:

Strive, O people, to gain admittance into this vast Immensity for which God ordained neither beginning nor end, in which His voice hath been raised, and over which have been wafted the sweet savors of holiness and glory. Divest not yourselves of the Robe of grandeur, neither suffer your hearts to be deprived of remembering your Lord, nor your ears of hearkening unto the sweet melodies of His wondrous, His sublime, His all-compelling, His clear, and most eloquent voice. (*Baha'u'llah, Gleanings LII*)

What are the key words of this statement by our Beloved? **"Strive...Divest not yourselves...neither suffer your hearts to be deprived...nor your ears of hearkening"**. We must take action!!

Indeed, Baha'u'llah counts action as being the monarch of virtues:

We verily behold your actions. If We perceive from them the sweet smelling savor of purity and holiness, We will most certainly bless you. Then will the tongues of the inmates of Paradise utter your praise and magnify your names amidst them who have drawn nigh unto God. (*Baha'u'llah, Gleanings CXLI*)

Say: O brethren! Let deeds, not words, be your adorning. (*Baha'u'llah, PHW #5*)

It behooveth the people of Bahá to render the Lord victorious through the power of their utterance and to admonish the people by their goodly deeds and character, inasmuch as deeds exert greater influence than words. (*Baha'u'llah, Kalimat-i-Firdawsiyyih, in Tablets of Baha'u'llah revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas*)

Words must be supported by deeds, for deeds are the true test of words. Without the former, the latter can never quench the thirst of the yearning soul, nor unlock the portals of vision before the eyes of the blind...

Words must be followed by deeds. Whoso accepteth the words of the Friend is in truth a man of deeds; otherwise a dead carcass is verily of greater worth. (*Baha'u'llah, The Tabernacle of Unity, #1, #4*)

The capacity of each person is individual, and it is up to that person to determine for herself or himself what she or he could have done better every day. There is no moment of enlightenment in which we suddenly become perfect. It is a daily exercise that we are called upon to engage in, and for which there are consequences. If we do not bring ourselves to account each day, if we do not face our failings and make every effort to learn from them, and most important if we do not rekindle our commitment to do our very best to serve all of humanity, then there will be consequences and we have no one but ourselves to blame for suffering divine chastisement.

We know that this is the only chance we have to serve God in this world. We know that we are not reincarnated here, so that we might have another opportunity to make the most of our innate capacity. We know that our actions will define us, not our intentions, not our words, not our wishes.

We need to replace that question, *What if I can't do it?* With another question, *What if I can do it?* Our heroes are those who, like Martha Root, have done their utmost to serve the Cause. We are all called to be heroes, each one of us. Not identical but individual. Each one of us is unique and pleasing to God, for God created all of us in His image and likeness.

In case it feels overwhelming and beyond our capacity, we will surely benefit from remembering this promise to “every confident believer” and whoever has truly recognized the Manifestation of God, to the utmost of our personal capacity, and in deeds:

Death proffereth unto every confident believer the cup that is life indeed. It bestoweth joy, and is the bearer of gladness. It conferreth the gift of everlasting life.

As to those that have tasted of the fruit of man's earthly existence, which is the recognition of the one true God, exalted be His glory, their life hereafter is such as We are unable to describe. The knowledge thereof is with God, alone, the Lord of all worlds. (*Baha'u'llah, Gleanings CLXV*)

Peter Terry
peterry19@gmail.com