

The Divine Community 6/11/12

When I opened this website in March of this year, I imagined that it could be a forum in which people with varying spiritual views would comment from their own perspectives on the views of other responders to the articles on the site. Now the question arises in me, Why would someone want to engage in such a discussion? For me, the answer is easy. I find great value in considering the understandings of Divinity which others have come to. These differing views cause me to pose questions to myself about my perception of Divinity and my relationship with (or, my part in) Divinity.

But perhaps some who are dedicated to their individual spiritual growth may find no value at all in the views of others who approach spirituality from different viewpoints or on the basis of different assumptions.

So I am thinking these days that if there is other value in such a discussion among practitioners of a wide variety of religions and belief sets, it may be found in establishing **common ground** on which these adherents can agree and which can be used as the basis for a common social vision.

In particular, what can arise from conversation among spiritual people of good will is a mutually agreeable notion of *attainable peace*. Peace is the distant dreamy desire of peoples and religions around the planet. In the Christian scriptures, for example, the first thing that Jesus says when he comes back to his followers after his execution and his rising to life again is, "Peace be with you!" The word *Islam* itself means "peace." The great goal of humanity in the Baha'i Faith is intentional universal peace in our time. The goal of Buddhism is attainment of enlightenment through development of a peaceful mind and treating all living things with respect, in other words, interior and exterior peace. And so on.

What is it about us humans, then, that stands in the way of attaining peace? Two Jewish scriptural poems, Psalm 81 and Psalm 95, both point to human "stubbornness" or "hardness of heart" as the barrier to peace. On its face, this seems clear enough. But this observation leads nowhere unless the source of our hard-heartedness is identified so that a way of diminishing its impact in our lives might be discovered.

We can begin to identify this source of stubbornness by recognizing that stubbornness is an interior "stance" or attitude toward our perception of the exterior world. It is as though we adopt stubbornness as a filter or lens through which we interpret the circumstances of the world. In fact, stubbornness is one of many lenses which an individual might use to understand his perceptions. Another might be acceptance; another, humor; another, confusion; another, dismay; another, envy; and so on.

When we examine ourselves wholly, there are five components of ourselves which might be the source of our hard-heartedness and also perhaps the source of our resolution of that condition and the subsequent attainment of peace. These five are: awareness, thinking, choosing, emoting, and bodily actions.

Awareness, however, cannot be the source of our stubbornness because it is a receptive or participatory condition. We take no action in the outer world nor do we adopt any stances toward the world through our awareness. Rather, as I have written previously, awareness is a state of being in which we seem to *participate*. When we seek the source of awareness in ourselves, we find that awareness does not arise within us, like other spiritual functions, such as thinking or remembering. Rather, it seems to *fill* us. And it also seems to exist outside ourselves. It seems to surround us, as well as to fill us. So, it seems right to say that we “receive” awareness, or better, that we “participate in” it, or perhaps best, that we simply “find that we are in it.”

Thinking is a wholly interior activity that has two purposes. We think, first of all, in order to *understand* our perceived or imagined experience. That is, when we think, we recognize a pattern in our experience, or else we form an interpretation of it, that is, we find the connection between our experience and the larger mental structures we have previously developed, such as our “world-view” or our system of values. And second, we think in order to *plan* what we can bring about in the future, on the basis of our current understanding. In either case, thinking is no more than the manipulation of abstract concepts and/or concrete images within our minds. Since it is a completely interior activity, by itself thinking leads to no action in the outside world nor any intentionality or “stance” toward the outer world on the part of the thinker. So, thinking cannot be the source of our stubbornness although it may provide the analysis or understanding of a given exterior situation, and this understanding, in turn, may be used as the basis—the rationale—for our stubbornness.

Likewise, **bodily actions** cannot be the source of our stubbornness. Bodily actions exist in the external world, and so these actions in themselves—some of which we are able to control, most of which we are not—cannot be the source of our stubbornness, because stubbornness is an interior attitude or stance toward the external world. Nonetheless, once we have adopted that stance, we can easily employ those bodily actions which we can control to impress our stance upon the circumstances of the exterior world. We can “express ourselves” about the situation at hand.

That leaves us with the remaining two functions, emotions and will. When we examine our interior life, we find that **emotions** arise spontaneously within us in response to our experience of the outer world and/or in response to interior experiences—memories, imaginings, and so on. Emotions, then, are interior *reactions* to our circumstances. Sometimes the experiences that trigger our emotions are so powerful that they overwhelm us, and our emotions express themselves in unrestrained physical action: crying, outraged speech, cheering, and so on. But the emotions which express our stance toward a situation in the world, because they are spontaneous and short-lived, are not the cause of that stance.

When we take a second look at emotion, we find that our emotions are dependent on our desires and expectations. For example, the fans of a certain football team will spontaneously cheer when the team scores a touchdown, because they hope and desire that the team will do so. However, a person uninvolved in the success or failure of the team will watch the same touchdown dispassionately. Similarly, a car-owner who wants his Lexus to look perfect for resale will be angry when he finds a dent in his door left by another driver who opened his own car door into the Lexus. But the owner of a fifteen-year-old Chevy, already pretty banged up, who

spots the same sort of dent in his car's door, will not be upset because he doesn't care about another little dent. Our emotions, then, are keyed on our desires and expectations.

The source of our desires and expectations, and in fact, of our whole stance toward our experience of the world, is our **will**. The will is the faculty within us which evaluates and selects which of the manifold experiences that occur in our sensory and spiritual environments to present to our consciousness, and then holds the selected experience in our awareness, in order that we might analyze and understand it, or in order that we might react to it emotionally, or in order to perform some other mental function on it. In brief, our will brings to our attention those experiences which are important to us, both interior experiences and perceptions of the exterior world.

Our will is the glue that sticks us to what is important to us: persons or ideas or material things. Our will responds spontaneously from some unfathomable place in the depths of ourselves with desire or aversion or unconcern to what we perceive from outside ourselves or conceive from within our spirits.

(Those who hold that will is not a personal function but rather a characteristic of Divinity—that is, that what we might perceive to be our personal choice is in reality the will of the Divine manifesting itself in and through us—may reject this explanation of will in the individual. In that case, they must transfer what is said here from the individual to the Source of All Things.)

It is our will, then, which chooses the one understanding of our experience—of the many possible understandings—that we will hold as true or correct or preferable or desirable. That is, the will brings together our perceptual experience and the various possible understandings of that experience which our thinking might invent, and then chooses the preferred understanding and presents that understanding to our attention. (“That guy is driving crazily.” “She doesn't like me.” “I want something to eat.” And so on.) When the will operates in this way, we may or may not have an emotional reaction to what is presented to our attention. In other words, the will provides the interpretation of experience which may or may not stimulate our emotions.

The process just described is the way in which the will formulates our desires and expectations. Our will brings to our attention a preferred or favored set of understandings of how our future experience will play out. We evaluate these understandings of what future events will turn out to be as either good for us or to be avoided. At the same time, we may experience the emotion of desire or of aversion. (And, if the opportunity presents itself, our will might choose to use appropriate bodily actions to obtain for ourselves what we desire, or to avoid by “fight or flight” what we detest.)

The impact on us of the correspondence between our expectations and our lived experience is cumulative. Over time, we build a “stance” toward our lived experience. This occurs because our understanding recognizes a *pattern* in the correspondence between our expectations and our experience. For example, “I never win at checkers.” Our will receives these conclusions and presents them to our attention. Over time, our stance toward playing checkers, for example, is developed in this way. In the future, our will may choose not to accept an invitation to play checkers because it has formed a pre-disposition toward whether our experience will match our expectations—to continue with our example, we may refuse to play checkers because we know we always lose at checkers.

When a person creates expectations of future reality which correspond to his actual experience, that person is even-tempered, or at least, “realistic.” On the other hand, when a person’s expectations are unmet by his actual experience, there are two common responses. First, the person might *adjust his expectations* in light of his experience, so that in the next episode, his expectations correspond more closely to his experience. Such a person becomes “flexible” in his expectations.

Or else, when our expectations are frustrated repeatedly—as when we try to control situations, and fail, or when we trust that someone will behave in a way that’s beneficial to us, and they don’t—we might respond with bitterness. In this case, *we stubbornly refuse to give up or to change our expectations*. Rather, we expect that our lived experience in the future will change. If our future experience does begin to conform to our expectations, we feel arrogantly victorious over our destiny. On the other hand, if our expectations continue to be frustrated, we react negatively. Our bitterness causes us to recede into ourselves and to consider the external world as hostile to us. This is the source of the barrier of separation that we feel in such cases between our inner world and the external world which we hold to treat us badly.

This barrier between our interior experience and our experience of the world beyond the barrier prevents us from feeling included in the outer world, that is, from feeling a sense of participation in that world. We may feel that we are living several seconds behind the “live action” occurring in the outer world. We might feel betrayed by the outer world. In any event, we set up more and more resistance in our hearts to the impact on us of the events in the world around us. And in this way, the barrier grows “thick.” We become “hard-hearted.”

In this process of becoming stubborn, our will rejects the possibility that we should revise our expectations of the world, that is, that we should be *flexible*. Rather, our will causes us to demand that the exterior world behave in a certain way. We insist that the world change, not that we change. When this does not occur, we hold the exterior world accountable for not satisfying our demands.

For some of us, then, our will sustains those expectations of the outer world which we stubbornly refuse to surrender, in spite of the apparent contrary experience. We build our expectations, and then we retreat into ourselves with bitterness and recriminations when our experience of the outer world does not fulfill those expectations. These recriminations, built on the foundation of wounded expectations, can easily manifest themselves in the outer world as anger and vilification, and then as violence. The end of the hope for attaining peace.

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The process described here—the process of becoming hard-hearted—does not necessarily call for a condemnation of hard-heartedness. It’s true that no peace can be had while any of the parties see themselves as victims, or as dealing with opponents. But on the other hand, hard-heartedness is sometimes justified. Often, the contending parties can each make a case for its own hardened stance. Consider, for example, the Palestinians and the Israeli Jews. Both parties have a vested interest in the same piece of land, which each calls its “homeland.” The Palestinians feel aggrieved because the Jews displaced them in 1948 from the land they had lived on for two thousand years and had dominated since the 7th Century. The Jews, on the other hand,

make an ancestral claim to the same land, calling it a sacred gift from God which their ancestors had dominated for fifteen hundred years until the destruction of the nation of Israel in 132 A.D., which “the world” (represented by the United Nations) restored to them in 1948, and which they have successfully defended as their homeland ever since.

The point here is this. There is a set of preconditions for genuine and sustained peace. The first among these is *justice*. Justice means that each person has a right to what is his—and therefore, must be given what is his—simply because he is a human being, possessing human dignity. These rights include the right to life, to adequate food and shelter and medical care, to productive work for which the person is justly compensated, to refugee transit across borders in order to escape violence and persecution, to live at peace in one’s native land, and so on. When people believe that their basic human rights are being denied to them or are being ignored, they begin to feel oppressed and soon, they rebel. Because of this justice precondition, then, a coerced peace or an imposed peace is no peace at all. It is artificial. It is, in fact, oppression.

Genuine peace must rest on all parties feeling that they are being treated justly by the other parties—that their demands for justice have been met. They must enter peace voluntarily, and they must feel that they are entering into peace as dignified human beings. Then they must extend these same considerations to their “opponents.”

Such peace, of course, cannot be attained as long as any of the parties remains in a hardened stance. Justice can only come from open-heartedness. Justice can only be accomplished when the will turns away from “I want it my way” toward “I want to live in peace, and I want to cooperate in finding the peaceful way.”

The process of finding peace, then, requires that one’s will cease generating demands on the exterior world and instead, place behavioral expectations on one’s own interior spiritual process. In a word, the will must *surrender* its grasping demands. In order to enter peace, the will must release its grip on what it selfishly holds valuable and open itself humbly, servant-like, to the opportunities for freedom and the unexpected solutions which come from the uncontrollable beyond the self, from Divinity.

To find peace, then, our will must turn toward God and surrender its personal desire for control to the Divine Will.

When we surrender to the Divine Will and open ourselves to what Divinity presents to us, we find ourselves living entirely in the on-going present moment, experiencing the creative power of God. Immersed in the awareness of God and accepting the Divine Will as it manifests itself in the present moment, we release the injuries we experienced in the past. We recognize that our mental reconstructions of the past, born of our frustrated expectations, are skewed visions, and so we release them as inaccurate. And we open ourselves to the possibilities of a future which will arise from the potentiality of the present as the Will of God creates it.

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Freed of expectations, we live in the on-going, unbridled present moment. It is in this present moment of freedom, unburdened by the affliction of the past and the frustration of

unrealizable expectations, the moment dependent on the generosity of the Divine Will, that peace is found.

The present moment, lived in the presence of the Divine Creator, is the meeting place of those who desire peace. It is not doctrinal unity among our religions that we seek. We may never arrive at doctrinal unity, given the multitude of cultural and religious backgrounds we come from. And indeed, doctrinal unity is not necessary for peace. Doctrines, after all, are culturally conditioned attempts to express understandings of Divinity. They are experiences set into words. And the many different expressions used to characterize the experience of Divinity are secondary to the experience itself. And so, we release our hopes or expectations or demands for doctrinal unity, simply trusting that God will continue to draw us, all of us, into the Divine Presence in the present moment.

It is in the present moment, free of encumbrances, that seekers after God come into the Divine Presence, no matter what their religion, regardless whether they use formal religion or not. It is here, then, in the presence of the Divine, the Creator, the Universal Awareness, Being Itself, the Source, the Peace Beyond All Understanding—in the experience of Divinity—that we who seek peace can join one another in oneness of heart. Here we experience peace as unanimity—“one-heartedness”—as we come together in the Divine Presence in the on-going present moment. In the Divine Presence, we attain peace by living it there with one another. No special gatherings. No special ceremonies. Just day-to-day encounters with one another, lived out in the Divine Presence, and with the recognition of the dignity of every creature, treating one another with justice and respect at every encounter.

Many will not be convinced by this approach, even if we were to come together from many nations and religions, and live in this way. Those who are unconvinced will continue to seek what is valuable to them personally, and to refuse the path to peace. They will continue to have—and to make—enemies, to be comforted by conflict, to seek the power that comes from mayhem and killing, and to find societal cohesion in shared threats and shared fears.

We seekers after God, and after the peace that can come from unanimity in the experience of Divinity, should not be discouraged when others are not convinced, or when others persecute us, the peaceful, who do not share a love of violence, or when we are scorned or ignored. Unanimity in the Divine Presence—the “Divine Community”—appears to be the only hope of sustainable peace.

So we continue with this project of attaining peace, trusting that the example of peaceful living manifested in the Divine Community will pierce the terrible bombast of tyrants, and open an inviting way to those who yearn but cannot find a way to live in peace.

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