

The Spiritual Nature of Work

INTRODUCTION: *Approaching the threshold...*

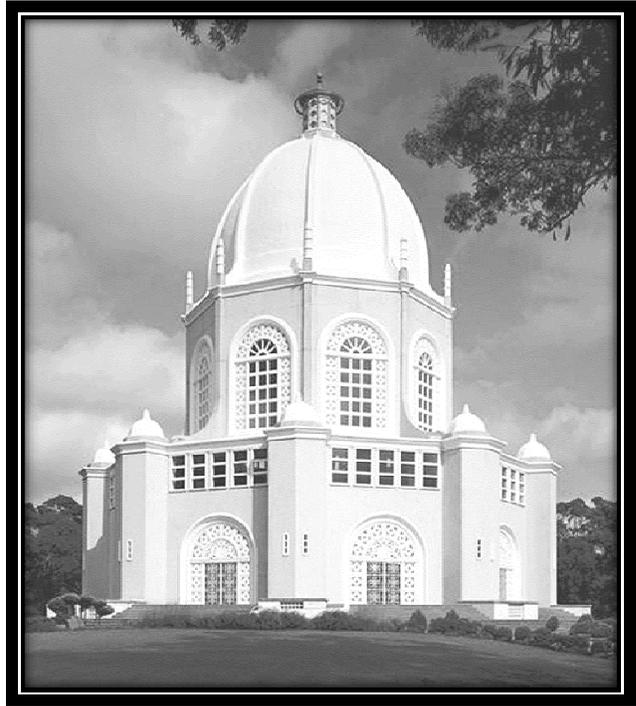
One of the wonderful features of the Bahá'í Revelation is the abundance of guidance addressing questions about daily life and how it relates to our spiritual reality. One such subject so addressed is the matter of working for a living. In the history of some religions, it was thought pious to give up work and all material possessions and subsist on the charity of others. At the other extreme, in societies dominated by materialism, one's work, and the consequent acquisition of wealth, is considered the measure of one's success as a human being. The Bahá'í perspective on work is motivating, refreshing, practical, and spiritual in its character.

Bahá'u'lláh has elevated work performed in the spirit of service to the rank of worship. Further, He has forbidden us to remain idle and ask for, or rely upon, support from others, unless, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has clarified: "...a person is incapable of earning a living, is stricken by dire poverty or becometh helpless..."¹

The Bahá'í teachings emphasize an early education in the arts, crafts and sciences, that each person may learn a trade or profession and become an active contributor to his or her family and society. Neither the inheritance of wealth, the acquisition of wealth, nor any handicap exempts one from the spiritual obligation of performing some kind of productive work.

About government work the Universal House of Justice has written: "Bahá'ís ... may freely undertake non-political administrative work with governments, may hold appointive posts which are not political in character, or may serve on local councils if they do not campaign for office and are not required to undertake partisan political activities."²

As to work in the home: "In response to a question concerning whether Bahá'u'lláh's injunction requires a wife and mother, as well as her husband, to work for a livelihood, the Universal House of Justice has explained that Bahá'u'lláh's directive is for the friends to be engaged in an occupation which will profit themselves and others, and that homemaking is a highly honourable and responsible work of fundamental importance to society."³



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¹ *KA*, Notes, p. 193

² *LOG*, p. 445, #1451

³ *KA*, Notes, p. 193

OBJECTIVES: *A look to the horizon...*

Facilitator

Review the following objectives with the participants:

1. An objective of this study is to understand the fundamental verities or basic truths regarding the importance and necessity of working in a craft, art, science, trade, or profession.
2. An objective of this study is to understand the fundamental verity or basic truth that work performed in the spirit of service is elevated to the rank of worship of the one true God.

THE STUDY PROCESS: *Attaining the water of life...*

Facilitator

Review the following study process with the participants. Then study the numbered quotations on the following pages, one at a time as described below.

1. **READING:** *A drink from the cup of guidance...*
Have two participants take turns reading the quotation out loud so that it is read twice.
2. **CONFIRMING MEANING:** *A spray from the fountain of light...*
 - A. If anyone would like to have better understanding of a word used in the quotation, now is the time to look up its substitute phrase, definition or synonym, which can be found in the boxes below each quotation. Read the substitute phrase, definition or synonym out loud so everyone can hear.
 - B. Read the sentence again that contains the word you looked up, while **substituting for that word**, its given phrase, definition or synonym from the box below the quotation.
 - C. If anyone would like a better understanding of another word, repeat the process above until everyone is satisfied with their understanding of the words.
3. **FINDING VALUE:** *Mining the gems of truth...*
Take turns stating each basic fact or truth you can find in the quotation about the importance or necessity of work and its relationship to worship.

QUOTATIONS: *Within the meadows of Thy nearness...*

1. *O people of Bahá! It is incumbent upon each one of you to engage in some occupation—such as a craft, a trade or the like. We have exalted your engagement in such work to the rank of worship of the one true God. Reflect, O people, on the grace and blessings of your Lord, and yield Him thanks at eventide and dawn. Waste not your hours in idleness and sloth, but occupy yourselves with what will profit you and others. Thus hath it been decreed in this Tablet from whose horizon hath shone the day-star of wisdom and utterance. The most despised of men in the sight of God are they who sit and beg. Hold ye fast unto the cord of means and place your trust in God, the Provider of all means.*
(Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 30)

blessings: divine gifts and favors
 cord: moral influence
 craft: occupation providing goods or services that require artistic skill
 day-star: literally the sun; figuratively the spiritual source of light that breaks the night of ignorance and hastens the dawn of truth
 decreed: officially determined or ordered
 despised: looked down upon with disfavor or contempt
 engage: begin and carry on activity
 exalted: highly praised, elevated, and glorified
 grace: special favors of affection that makes one morally pure and strong
 horizon: greatest extent of perception
 idleness: inactivity or without occupation
 incumbent: imposed as a duty
 means: material resources that provide a ↗

secure life
 occupation: work in which one is regularly employed
 occupy: engage the attention or energy [of]
 people of Bahá: Bahá'ís
 profit: be of use or advantage [to]
 rank: dignified, eminent, or excellent degree
 sit and beg: are inactive, and ask for and rely upon support from others
 sloth: apathy or inactivity in the practice of virtue
 trade: occupation in business, industry or commerce
 utterance: powerful communication
 work: occupations requiring activity of body or mind
 We: used by one in authority to denote himself
 worship: an expression of respect, honor, and reverence

2. In the Bahá'í Cause arts, sciences, and all crafts are counted as worship. The man who makes a piece of note paper to the best of his ability, conscientiously concentrating all his forces on perfecting it, is giving to God.

Briefly, all effort and exertion put forth by man in the fullness of his heart is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to serve humanity. This is worship: to serve mankind and to minister to the needs of the people.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in *Star of the West*, Vol. 19, p. 119)

arts: occupations requiring knowledge or skill
 Cause: Faith
 conscientiously: with a sense of rightness
 crafts: occupations providing goods or services that require artistic skill
 exertion: active exercise of any power or faculty
 highest: more supreme, superior, or noble

minister: give aid or service
 motives: emotions or desires that move one to act
 prompted: moved to action
 sciences: occupations concerned with departments of systematized knowledge
 worship: an expression of respect, honor, and reverence to God

3. Concerning thine own affairs, if thou wouldst content thyself with whatever might come to pass it would be praiseworthy. To engage in some profession is highly commendable, for when occupied with work one is less likely to dwell on the unpleasant aspects of life. God willing thou mayest experience joy and radiance, gladness and exultation in any city or land where thou mayest happen to sojourn.

(Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 175)

affairs: business, public, and professional matters or personal concerns
aspects: appearances to the mind
come to pass: happen or occur
commendable: worthy of approval and praise
content: be happy enough with what one has or is [within]
dwell: keep the attention directed
engage: begin and carry on activity

exultation: extreme joy
occupied: engaging the attention or energy
profession: principal calling, vocation or employment
radiance: lively and beaming happiness or satisfaction
sojourn: temporarily stay
work: an occupation requiring activity of body or mind

4. Thou hast asked regarding the means of livelihood. Trust in God and engage in your work and practice economy; the confirmations of God shall descend and you will be enabled to pay off your debts. Be ye occupied always with the mention of Bahá'u'lláh and seek ye no other hope and desire save Him.

(`Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 375)

confirmations: validations and assurances that cause spiritual strength
economy: thrifty and efficient use of material resources
engage: begin and carry on activity

livelihood: support or subsistence
means: useful methods
work: occupation requiring activity of body or mind

5. For it must be clearly understood that working for the Cause does not and cannot constitute a sort of professional activity of the type current in ecclesiastical organizations, whether Christian, Muslim or otherwise. We have no priesthood, no specialized class of people who can make the Cause their only life-work. In the Bahá'í Cause . . . men and women are commanded to work for the Cause not as a substitute to their daily professional occupation but in addition to them.

(Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, pp. 625-26, #2111)

Cause: Bahá'í Faith
commanded: ordered and directed
constitute: make up or form
ecclesiastical: the formal organization of a religion, or church related
life-work: labor or service extending over a lifetime

occupation: work in which one is regularly employed
priesthood: body of professional ministers
professional: occupational; vocational; requiring training or skills [type of]
substitute: replacement
working: engaging in labor or service

6. *True reliance is for the servant to pursue his profession and calling in this world, to hold fast unto the Lord, to seek naught but His grace, inasmuch as in His Hands is the destiny of all His servants.*

(Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 155)

calling: station or position in life
destiny: predetermined course of events
grace: special favors that makes one morally pure and strong
profession: principal occupation, vocation or ↗

employment
pursue: proceed along in
reliance: demonstration of confidence, trust and dependence

SHARING: *A breath from the spirit of inspiration...*

Facilitator

Ask the participants to complete the statements below. When everyone has finished, have each person share, in a round, the one thing that was most outstanding or inspiring and how it made him or her feel. Please remind everyone not to remark on the comments of others.

The one thing from the quotations that was the most outstanding or inspiring to me was _____

It made me feel _____

Explain _____

SOME QUESTIONS: *A gentle breeze from the testing winds...*

Facilitator

Ask the participants to answer the following questions. They can usually find answers in the quotations just studied or in the introduction. When everyone has finished, review the questions, then share and discuss the answers.

1. Only when work is _____ is it considered worship of God.

| | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a. performed in the spirit of service to humanity | <input type="checkbox"/> c. prompted by the highest motives |
| <input type="checkbox"/> b. what will profit you and others | <input type="checkbox"/> d. hard, laborious, and dreaded |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> e. done to the best of one's ability |
2. Homemaking is considered a highly honorable occupation for a Bahá'í.

| | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> true | <input type="checkbox"/> false |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
3. If a Bahá'í seeks employment or a career in the armed forces he must do so without making himself liable to undertake _____ .
4. Mendicancy is begging or asking for and relying upon others for support. Is this an acceptable livelihood for Bahá'ís?

| | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
5. One is less likely to dwell on the unpleasant aspects of life when _____

6. Bahá'ís are required to engage in some kind of work, which may include the fields of
- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a. arts. | <input type="checkbox"/> d. trades. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> b. sciences. | <input type="checkbox"/> e. professions. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> c. crafts. | <input type="checkbox"/> f. commerce. |
7. Bahá'u'lláh wrote: *“The purpose of learning should be the promotion of the welfare of the people, and this can be achieved through crafts. It hath been revealed and is now repeated that the true worth of artists and craftsmen should be appreciated, for they advance the affairs of mankind. Just as the foundations of religion are made firm through the Law of God, the means of livelihood depend upon those who are engaged in arts and crafts. True learning is that which is conducive to the well-being of the world, not to pride and self-conceit, or to tyranny, violence and pillage.”*¹

pride: high esteem of oneself for some real or imagined merit or superiority
self-conceit: an exaggerated opinion of one's own powers, endowments, merits, or the like

tyranny: oppressive or abusive power
violence: the unjust or unwarranted exercise of force
pillage: to take money and goods by force

What does this say to you about how we should approach learning, or how we should carry out our trade or profession? _____

8. A true Bahá'í approach to work is to
- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a. pursue it with joy and radiance. | <input type="checkbox"/> c. make conscious efforts to excel. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> b. pursue it for the purpose of accumulating wealth. | <input type="checkbox"/> d. put our trust and reliance in God. |
9. Can Bahá'ís who serve the Faith by teaching it to others, or serve the Faith in some elected or appointed administrated capacity consider either of these activities their trade or profession?
 yes no
10. What do you think `Abdu'l-Bahá considered his profession?
- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a. being a merchant | <input type="checkbox"/> c. mat-making |
| <input type="checkbox"/> b. public speaking | <input type="checkbox"/> d. writing |

APPLICATION: *Showing forth divine light..*

Facilitator

Read through the following paragraph together and proceed as stated. Then take time for the participants to write out their individual plans for action. When everyone has finished, move on to the closing reading.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote: *“It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action....”* Imagine how the Bahá'í Teachings in this study class could be translated into reality and action. Take turns sharing the possibilities. Begin your statements with: **“One could....”**

From your experience in this study class on the spiritual nature of work, describe what **you** are inspired to put into reality and action. **I will make conscious efforts to...** _____

¹ COC, Vol. I, p. 3

From a talk in Paris by 'Abdu'l-Bahá...

In this world we are influenced by two sentiments, joy and pain.

Joy gives us wings! In times of joy our strength is more vital, our intellect keener, and our understanding less clouded. We seem better able to cope with the world and to find our sphere of usefulness. But when sadness visits us we become weak, our strength leaves us, our comprehension is dim and our intelligence veiled. The actualities of life seem to elude our grasp, the eyes of our spirits fail to discover the sacred mysteries, and we become even as dead beings.

There is no human being untouched by these two influences; but all the sorrow and the grief that exist come from the world of matter—the spiritual world bestows only the joy!

If we suffer it is the outcome of material things, and all the trials and troubles come from this world of illusion.

For instance, a merchant may lose his trade and depression ensues. A workman is dismissed and starvation stares him in the face. A farmer has a bad harvest, anxiety fills his mind. A man builds a house which is burnt to the ground and he is straightway homeless, ruined, and in despair.

All these examples are to show you that the trials which beset our every step, all our sorrow, pain, shame and grief, are born in the world of matter; whereas the spiritual Kingdom never causes sadness. A man living with his thoughts in this Kingdom knows perpetual joy. The ills all flesh is heir to do not pass him by, but they only touch the surface of his life, the depths are calm and serene.

Today, humanity is bowed down with trouble, sorrow and grief, no one escapes; the world is wet with tears; but, thank God, the remedy is at our doors. Let us turn our hearts away from the world of matter and live in the spiritual world! It alone can give us freedom! If we are hemmed in by difficulties we have only to call upon God, and by His great Mercy we shall be helped.

If sorrow and adversity visit us, let us turn our faces to the Kingdom and heavenly consolation will be outpoured.

If we are sick and in distress let us implore God's healing, and He will answer our prayer.

When our thoughts are filled with the bitterness of this world, let us turn our eyes to the sweetness of God's compassion and He will send us heavenly calm! If we are imprisoned in the material world, our spirit can soar into the Heavens and we shall be free indeed!

When our days are drawing to a close let us think of the eternal worlds, and we shall be full of joy!

You see all round you proofs of the inadequacy of material things—how joy, comfort, peace and consolation are not to be found in the transitory things of the world. Is it not then foolishness to refuse to seek these treasures where they may be found? The doors of the spiritual Kingdom are open to all, and without is absolute darkness.

Thank God that you in this assembly have this knowledge, for in all the sorrows of life you can obtain supreme consolation. If your days on earth are numbered, you know that everlasting life awaits you. If material anxiety envelops you in a dark cloud, spiritual radiance lightens your path. Verily, those whose minds are illumined by the Spirit of the Most High have supreme consolation.

I myself was in prison forty years— one year alone would have been impossible to bear— nobody survived that imprisonment more than a year! But, thank God, during all those forty years I was supremely happy! Every day, on waking, it was like hearing good tidings, and every night infinite joy was mine. Spirituality was my comfort, and turning to God was my greatest joy. If this had not been so, do you think it possible that I could have lived through those forty years in prison?

Thus, spirituality is the greatest of God's gifts, and "*Life Everlasting*" means "*Turning to God*". May you, one and all, increase daily in spirituality, may you be strengthened in all goodness, may you be helped more and more by the Divine consolation, be made free by the Holy Spirit of God, and may the power of the Heavenly Kingdom live and work among you.

This is my earnest desire, and I pray to God to grant you this favour.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 109-12)

ANSWERS: *Affirming treasures...*

1. a, b, c, and e
2. true
3. combatant service
4. no
5. occupied with work
6. a, b, c, d, e, and f
7. all answers are valuable
8. a, c, and d
9. no
10. c; "Of course you know that He always said His [profession] had been mat-making." (LOG, p. 625)

This study guide, and many others, is available as a free download at bahaessentials.com.