

Fear of Teaching

A meditation on authenticity in human relationships

William S. Hatcher

You and I, like any two human beings, have a deep, God-created need to relate authentically to each other. An authentic relationship goes from the centre of my being to the centre of your being, as soon as we have each recognized the image of God in the other. God's image in us is our respective souls and their individual capacities of knowing, of loving and of willing. Mutual recognition of our souls enables us to relate in a way that we each give priority to the legitimate needs of the other rather than to our own needs (whether legitimate or otherwise). Thus, the trademark of relational authenticity is sincere, unselfish love -- a spark that comes from God through each to the other.

We can, of course, relate in many other ways, but they are all just variations of a single theme: we each give priority, however subtly, to our own (perceived) needs over the needs of the other. Whenever present in a relationship, this kind of entrenched egotism negates authenticity, giving rise to manipulation, exploitation, competition, and the mutual search for dominance. In a non-authentic relationship we each seek power -- to compel the other to satisfy our needs. Thus, authentic relationships are based on love and non-authentic relationships on power.

The process of relating authentically is an authentic dialogue in which we exchange ideas (seek truth together), share emotions, and work collaboratively. Thus, whatever we bring to such a dialogue is used towards the end of establishing an increasingly authentic relationship. When we relate non-authentically, we bring only our needs and it is the other who now becomes a means to their satisfaction. Hence, the pursuit of a non-authentic relationship leads not only to the passive negation of authenticity, but to its active reversal: what was the end has now become the means to a lesser end.

We express our love for others by seeking to satisfy their legitimate needs because this helps develop their soul's God-given potential (as well as our own). But this supposes that we have at least some ability to distinguish between legitimate (or proper) needs and unreasonably selfish desires. The knowledge of what is proper to the development of human potential is justice. Justice and love go together: love provides the motivation to serve the other, and justice provides the knowledge necessary for the proper and efficient implementation of this motivation.

Thus, authentic relationships involve not only sincere love for the spiritual reality of others, but also valid knowledge of that

reality. When love and justice express themselves in action, then we have all that is necessary for successful dialogue, i.e., for unity.

We now consider the most fundamental question of all: Are authentic relationships truly possible? As we shall see, the answer is "yes, but only under precise conditions established by God Himself." Of course, from a purely logical point of view, we can see immediately that authentic relationships are not automatic but require conscious effort on the part of everyone involved. This means being aware that authentic relationships are possible, being sufficiently motivated to pursue them actively, and having valid knowledge of how to engage this pursuit. But these ingredients, however necessary, are not in themselves sufficient, for unless we are consciously helped by God it is not within our human power to establish authentic relationships, no matter how sincerely we desire them, no matter how great the efforts we deploy, and no matter how much we truly understand what is necessary for their attainment.

Humanism is the name usually given to the philosophy that seeks to establish authentic relationships without explicit or conscious reference to God. Humanism is noble in its moral intention but defective in the means employed to attain this end. The strategies used to combat this intrinsic inadequacy of humanism are varied, and they give rise to different strains or varieties of humanism.

When faced with the full realization that their cherished goal may be unattainable, some humanists turn to a despair which borders on nihilism. This can be seen, for example, in the writings of Ibsen, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, or Lev Tolstoy, and can lead either to a deep cynicism about human nature or else to a kind of stoic resignation in which one conceives that the essential nobility of human life lies in the constant pursuit of a worthy but impossible goal. This latter brand of stubborn, fatalistic and stoic humanism is very common in both the historic and current mentality of the Russian people.

An entirely different strategy is exhibited by the current mindset in North America where people readily accept various slick substitutes for relational authenticity. From Disney's worlds to pop psychology and the proliferation of television talk shows that feign authenticity by publicly charting in excruciating detail the private wasteland of utterly empty lives, North America is virtually a vast enterprise singlemindedly dedicated to the creation of pseudo- authenticity and phony sincerity. And there are those who openly denounce the search for authenticity as misguided in the first place. They gaily exult in the "new freedom" in which

extremes of greed, exploitation and power seeking are not only accepted but welcomed as a "new morality."

But regardless of the strategies deployed in the face of humanism's failure, the world today stands in need of a force that is truly capable of empowering us to attain authenticity. That such a force exists and is accessible to all who turn towards it is the central message of the Baha'i Faith. It is the force that we Baha'is call the power of the covenant.

The Covenant.

Authentic relationships are possible, and successful dialogue attainable, only because God has Himself provided for those spiritual processes that allow them to occur. The ultimate basis of these processes is a particular dialogue between God and humanity -- a dialogue He initiates and whose parameters He determines. Baha'u'llah calls this divine-human dialogue a covenant. A covenant is, of course, an agreement or contract in which each party has both obligations and promised outcomes deriving from the fulfillment of these obligations. In the case of the divine covenant, it is God who stipulates our obligations, but who also makes firm promises concerning the outcomes. In a general way, it is promised that if we are faithful to God's covenant, then we will be empowered to achieve authentic relationships and experience the satisfaction, joy, unity and harmony that inevitably result from such an achievement.

The basic parameters of the dialogue between God and humanity are enshrined in the structure of creation itself, for God has endowed man with the capacity to reflect His attributes and commune with His spirit:

Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him -- a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation. . . . Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the reality of man, however, he hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self. Alone of all created things man hath been singled out for so great a favor, so enduring a bounty.¹

In all the revealed scriptures of history, we are told that it is by His Word that God creates. Thus, the parameters of the God-human dialogue are in fact part of the dialogue itself: they are an expression of the Word or Speech of God, the initiator of the dialogue. Moreover, as the above passage makes clear, the goal of creation is to produce a human being who is a worthy partner in dialogue with God the Creator.

It's basic parameters having been established, the dialogue itself is pursued by God's sending His Manifestations or Messengers. God has ordained that the most appropriate response on our part is to recognize and accept each Manifestation when he appears:

The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Day Spring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation. . . It behoveth every one who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other.²

This fundamental duty God places upon us is the first step towards the formalization of the Divine-human dialogue as a covenant or agreement, in which both obligations and the promise of rewards are specified. Indeed, Baha'u'llah has said that: "Whoso keepeth the commandments of God shall attain everlasting felicity."³

Thus, the divine-human dialogue is both collective and individual. The Manifestation comes to the whole of humanity and articulates principles that are social as well as individual. Yet, each of us must, within the context of our personal dialogue with God, consciously choose to accept the Manifestation. Hence, our individual dialogue with God takes place within the context of the collective dialogue.

In this way, each of our individual lives is the history of a personal dialogue with God that begins the moment we emerge from unconsciousness to consciousness. As this dialogue progresses, we generate responses of various degrees of adequacy, some very appropriate and others extremely inappropriate. Baha'u'llah makes it clear in his writings that acceptance of the Manifestation is the essential condition for ultimately successful dialogue. This does not mean that authentic dialogue does not occur before this step is taken, but it does mean that truly authentic dialogue will eventually lead anyone to take this step. It

also means that all history is sacred history. There is no history, individual or collectivity, that is truly "secular" — that is outside the context of the dialogue between God and humanity.

Because our dialogue with God is ongoing, it is dynamic and evolving. This progression is sometimes slow, subtle and imperceptible and at other times sudden, dramatic and obvious. The change that occurs when we truly accept the Manifestation is of the latter kind. We immediately enter a new phase in our relationship with God. We have succeeded in generating the most appropriate possible response to God's overtures in sending His Messenger, and so we begin to reap the benefits promised by His covenant.

One of the fundamental benefits resulting from our acceptance of Baha'u'llah is that we now belong to the community of believers established by His Covenant. This gives us access to close association with others who have also reached that same stage in their dialogue with God. The relationship between any two Baha'is is symmetric in that each has, in principle, the basic knowledge necessary for authentic dialogue. Whether or not these two believers will in fact be successful in their dialogue depends on many other circumstances, but mostly on the degree of sincere effort each one invests in the relationship.

Indeed, in a certain real sense, "becoming a Baha'i" means nothing more nor less than committing oneself to the pursuit of authentic dialogue in all human relationships. This commitment is founded on the recognition, formalized in the short obligatory prayer (part of the covenant!), that we are totally dependent upon God and that only He can empower us to defeat our egotism and participate in authentic dialogue: "I testify at this moment to my powerlessness and thy might, to my poverty and thy wealth."⁴

The experience of mutual association with other Baha'is is so positive because we each have learned to suppress some of our natural egotism and give priority to the needs of the other. We each recognize the image of God in the other, and this enables us to be authentic, non-judgmental, encouraging, trusting -- in a word loving -- with each other to a degree that is significantly different from what is possible in our relationship with those who are not Baha'is. We are each conscious of our dependence on God and, to the extent of this consciousness, receive the necessary spiritual power from Him to pursue authentic dialogue and thereby establish and develop an authentic relationship.

But our commitment as Baha'is is not just to the unity of the believers, but to the unity of humankind. This means that we are committed to the pursuit of successful dialogue with every human being we encounter, not just with other Baha'is. But the process of dialogue with those who are not Baha'is cannot have the same kind

of symmetry as with Baha'is, because the parties do not have equal access to authentic knowledge and divine assistance. God has therefore ordained a specific spiritual process of authentic dialogue between Baha'is and others: it is called teaching the Faith, and it is an integral part of the covenant that formalizes the dialogue between God and ourselves.

Teaching the Baha'i Faith is precisely the pursuit of authentic dialogue with the whole of humanity. It is not a technique, a strategy, an enterprise, a campaign, or an exercise in public relations. It is the essence of authenticity, the lateral extension of the divine-human dialogue. Because we are Baha'is (and for no other reason), we are empowered to see the image of God in the other, even when the other may be unaware of (forgetful of) his own self (soul). This knowledge enables us to relate to the true self of the other, independently of whatever false (unauthentic) behaviour or attitudes the other may, at present, manifest.

How is this done in fact? It is done by ignoring the false and gently but persistently encouraging the true, even if the latter is only one percent of the total profile of the other's present development. While we are talking to him we pray for him, even if we are engaged in some material transaction with him. With every word we say we seek to uplift him. We say a kind and praising word for any specific act of thoughtfulness he shows. In discussing, even casually, the conditions of the world, we introduce a spiritual perspective, mentioning the name of God and relating current events to the question of the Will of God: "How is it, indeed, that there is so much conflict in the world when every individual wants peace and harmony? Where indeed will all of the current disorder, anarchy and chaos lead? If politics is, as you say, not the answer, then where could the answer lie? If so many religions, cults and sects are based on dogmatic ideologies, or else on mindless fanaticism and emotionalism, then why not try to find a non-dogmatic religion, a scientific religion -- a religion that uses scientific method to discover the laws governing spiritual reality and then applies this knowledge to generate genuine love rather than a deceptive substitute. Here, I have with me some literature about just such a religion, and next Tuesday there is a gathering in my home of friends who freely discuss such questions. Come and tell us about your life, your history, what you have discovered in your dialogue with God. Your history is a sacred history. We need to hear it. Will you come and share it with us?"

No human on earth will respond negatively to such a dialogue. He may be indifferent, ultimately hostile to some of the teachings of the Faith or too broken and victimized by life to generate the energy necessary to respond to the opportunity of spiritual friendship you have offered him. But he will immediately

perceive the authenticity of your dialogue and he will respond with the greatest degree of authenticity of which he is currently capable. Whether or not his response will ultimately lead him to become an autonomous Baha'i depends on many factors over which we have no control. We have only been an instrument in the dialogue between that person and God.

Any authentic transaction of the type described above is an act of teaching the Faith. Moreover, regardless of the de facto response of the other, it is a teaching success. In the Baha'i community, there is much talk about techniques for successful teaching. This internal discourse frequently focuses on the question of how to elicit from others the response that we desire and anticipate. It tends to define successful teaching in terms of the number of "positive" responses that have been generated in the short run. But perhaps this discourse should focus more on the intrinsic nature of authentic interactions themselves, rather than so much on the visible response or short-term results of teaching activities. If we learn how to pursue authentic dialogue with God and with others, then surely God is capable of producing the results He desires from our efforts.

Still, a question remains. If teaching the Faith really is just the pursuit of authenticity in human relationships, and if there really is such hunger for authenticity abroad in the world today, then why are so many of us so complacent, apathetic or careless about teaching the Faith? And when we do teach the Faith, why are we so often perceived by others as non-authentic (e.g., as fanatic, pushy, forced, precious)?

Perhaps the answer lies in the conditions God has established as a basis for authentic dialogue. As we have seen above, the most fundamental of these conditions is that we recognize and acknowledge our total dependence on God, i.e., that we recognize and accept our own limitations. Such an acceptance on our part signifies that we really know -- at the deepest level of our being -- that everything positive comes from God and not from ourselves. Once we truly know this, then we are in a condition to become God's instrument in His dialogue with others -- in other words, a teacher of the Faith.

It may also be that our complacency about teaching the Faith results not from spiritual passivity but from an active (though unconscious) refusal to confront, recognize and accept the limitations of the self. Though putatively engaged in spreading the Truth, perhaps we are often fleeing the truth about our own selves. Even though we are genuinely thirsty for authenticity, when we begin to walk the path that leads to it we also begin to realize just how far from it we are. And this knowledge is painful. It summons us to call into question the whole premise of our lives -- our

received image of ourselves as authentically spiritualized human beings.

Our active refusal as Baha'is to confront the limitations of our selves takes many forms. Under the guise of "serving the Faith" we compete with each other, pursue power and control, and attribute to ourselves the force of attraction that comes from God through us but not from us. All of these attitudes and behaviours on our part dilute whatever modicum of authenticity we have. Under such conditions, the wonder is not that we sometimes fail but that we have any success at all. And when, in spite of these spiritual failings, God still grants us some measure of success (though much less than we would have under conditions of undiluted authenticity), then we may even attribute this success to our "abilities" rather than to the spirit of God working through us.

And if this inner condition of true recognition of our limitations is the essential prerequisite for successful individual teaching, might it not be also essential for collective success, for example, for entry by troops? Maybe the Baha'i community will become the magnet of attraction of which Shoghi Effendi speaks when we will have become a community of believers who have truly recognized that everything comes from God and nothing from ourselves. Perhaps only when we will have realized that all history is sacred history will we truly listen to others as they tell us their story. Maybe then we will learn from them what God is trying to teach us through His dialogue with them. When our community is in that condition, then people will pour into the Faith because they will have found the inner meaning of their history -- of their dialogue with God-- a meaning that they could not and cannot find anywhere else.