

Forsaking Personal Profit for Collective Gain

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The brief span of time we each have here on Earth is our most precious possession – if we make our physical lives on this plane of existence a wondrous period of discovery, progress and fulfillment.

Life, however, is not just a personal experience; we all share it with the rest of humanity.

Our time here is not merely an individualistic preparation for the next stage in our personal spiritual development, but a priceless opportunity to assist in the social development of the planet.

The Baha'i teachings say that we each have a personal and collective responsibility to leave this planet in a better condition than that in which we found it:

Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements. – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*

The world has so many problems to solve today – poverty, war, disease, environmental degradation, ignorance, hunger, hatred and oppression – that it requires the concerted effort of everyone to overcome them and replace them with abundance, health, education, love and unity.

Baha'is all around the world work to achieve these goals. Both of the distinctive aspects of the Baha'i way of life described above reflect this: as individuals, Baha'is pray and meditate on how best to serve humanity; and collectively they consult together towards this same end:

Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth. – Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*

Service to humanity is an integral part of being a Baha'i, reflected in the Baha'i attitude towards concepts such as work, motives, and achievement:

Work done in the spirit of service is the highest form of worship. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Divine Philosophy*

But for Baha'is, the purity of one's motives is more important than the result of one's actions; and in achievements, the process is just as important as the product. The Baha'i teachings offer a philosophy of deeds which replaces the anarchic belief that the ends justify the means. In the Baha'i Faith, the means are the ends.

Fundamental to the concept of service is the belief that personal morality and ethical social behavior are of great benefit to the progress of humankind. No one is powerless to effect beneficial change. Each person can therefore see themselves as a significant component of the world and of collective human society; we should never feel helpless or insignificant. Everyone has the ability to help the world on many different levels.

We can be productive individuals, responsible members of society, loving husbands and wives, exemplary parents, honorable sons and daughters, considerate neighbors, and good citizens, all at the same time. Basically, we all have the responsibility to be environmentally friendly to the spiritual, social, emotional and physical well-being of the planet. All these elements of service help the condition of the world immensely.

Beyond one's personal morality and ethical social behavior, everyone has skills and talents that can be useful to humanity on a professional level. Personal capacity often depends upon health and opportunity, but fulfilling one's capacity is everyone's duty. The person who has employed all of his few talents to the betterment of the planet is of greater value to humanity than the person who has a multiplicity of talents but selfishly uses them solely for his own benefit:

O son of man! If thine eyes be turned towards mercy, forsake the things that profit thee and cleave unto that which will profit mankind. And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou chooseth for thyself. Humility exalteth man to the heaven of glory and power, whilst pride abaseth him to the depths of wretchedness and degradation. – Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*

The concept of service extends beyond the Baha'is themselves. The Baha'i Faith as a religion supports the non-governmental activities of the United Nations and the European Community in their efforts to overcome the political differences which divide us, and organizations like the Worldwide Fund for Nature which work toward understanding the planet's ecology and

improving the environment. Baha'u'llah exhorted his followers to serve humanity in whatever way they could:

Address yourselves to the promotion of the well-being and tranquillity of the children of men. Bend your minds and wills to the education of the peoples and kindreds of the earth, that haply the dissensions that divide it may, through the power of the Most Great Name, be blotted out from its face, and all mankind become the upholders of one Order, and the inhabitants of one City. – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*

Ultimately, everyone who becomes a Baha'i brings his or her talents and experience to the global Baha'i community, and contributes to the range of services the Baha'i Faith can offer the world.