

The Power of Meekness

And so, we discover the power of meekness, the might hidden in vulnerability ...

IN A POWERFUL passage, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s exhortation rings out luminous and challenging:

“To the spears and arrows rained upon you, expose your breasts for a target mirror-bright; and in return for curses, taunts and wounding words, show forth abounding love. Thus will all peoples witness the power of the Most Great Name, and every nation acknowledge the might of the Ancient Beauty, and see how He hath toppled down the walls of discord, and how surely He hath guided all the peoples of the earth to oneness; how He hath lit man’s world, and made this earth of dust to send forth streams of light.”

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 22)

In this passage an awesome vulnerability is intimated, pregnant with potent consequences. It appears to suggest that there is an immense strength in the act of vulnerability, a suggestion that resonates powerfully in the tragic yet sublime history of the birth of all divine religions. It seems to be, indeed, precisely through the power of vulnerability that the Messengers and Chosen Ones of God have established their ascendancy and effected change in society beyond their contemporaries’ wildest dreams. It was not through the might of arms or wealth or dissimulation or guardedness that They conquered the hearts of humanity, but rather through Their willingness to trust in human beings when all around Them was betrayal and outward disappointment. It was Their willingness to offer love to those who would spurn Them, even unto torture and death. It was Their acts of self-disclosure when the mere thought of the risks entailed in Their unveiling were enough to throw a lesser being into utter consternation – as Bahá’u’lláh Himself tells us in the *Íqán* referring to the Báb’s divine and daunting mission:

“Another proof and evidence of the truth of this Revelation, which amongst all other proofs shineth as the sun, is the constancy of the eternal Beauty in proclaiming the Faith of God. Though young and tender of age, and though the Cause He revealed was contrary to the desire of all the peoples of earth, both high and low, rich and poor, exalted and abased, king and subject, yet He arose and steadfastly proclaimed it. All have known and heard this. He was afraid of no one; He was regardless of consequences. Could such a thing be made manifest except through the power of a divine Revelation, and the potency of God’s invincible Will? By the righteousness of God! Were any one to entertain so great a Revelation in his heart, the thought of such a declaration would alone confound him! Were the hearts of all men to be crowded into his heart, he would still hesitate to venture upon so awful an enterprise. He could achieve it only by the permission of God, only if the channel of his heart were to be linked with the Source of divine grace, and his soul be assured of the unfailing sustenance of the Almighty.”

(Bahá’u’lláh: *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 232)

This passage seems to give us the secret of this most healing of vulnerabilities: “*He could achieve it only by the permission of God, only if the channel of his heart were to be linked with the Source of divine grace, and his soul be assured of the unfailing sustenance of the Almighty.*”

It seems to me that, to effect healing and build genuine spiritual intimacy within our communities, we need to achieve this spiritual vulnerability, this self exposure before one another that can deepen and refine love but that to do so this vulnerability should be

“linked with the Source of divine grace” and sustained by the assurance of the *“unfailing sustenance of the Almighty.”* In other words, in our vulnerability and powerlessness, in expressing our frailty or identifying our brokenness, whether as individuals or as communities, we should not do so expecting redress or relief from one another, but rather depending on the bounty of the Lord God. For we are all ultimately a community of broken winged birds, and our flight is very slow. *“We come with no provision but our sins, with no good deeds to tell of, only hopes”* as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote in the exquisite prayer that forms the second section of Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l Bahá.

An inevitable effect of bringing diversity together, not only of ethnicity or culture but also of temperament, inclination, personality, and emotional strength, is the noticeable emergence of blindspots that keep us from appreciating or effectively honouring each other’s distinctiveness. Our very diversity means that of necessity, as we get to know each other, we will tread on each other’s sensibilities, display ignorance about each other’s values and, generally inadvertently, act in ways that unconsciously exclude one another from full, heartfelt participation in our emerging community. In this context, our readiness to be vulnerable can act both as healing water that gently fills the gaps in our understanding and our insight into each other, or as fuel to fan the flame of disharmony when tied to expectations of each other that are unrealistic, or when expressed in language that is immoderate, or when touched by bitterness or lingering resentment.

When the act of vulnerability is divorced from consciousness of the presence and almighty assistance of God, it generally comes to depend on human or material means for fulfilment, exposing one to disappointment in each other, to hopelessness, and disconnection. When, on the contrary, the act of vulnerability is “linked with the Source of divine grace”, then spiritual abundance sustains the act of self exposure, confidence in ultimate fruition in God’s will informs the manner and tone of our communication, and the possible outward disappointments and rejections we might suffer are powerless to disillusion or divide us. For such a link with the Source of grace implies a trust in Him above and beyond this world, which is the source of true inner peace and contentment. Indeed, it seems to me that this spiritual vulnerability is captured in the sublime words addressed by the Master to Hand of the Cause Taráz’u’lláh Samandari, whose bounty it was to have attained the presence of Bahá’u’lláh:

“O thou who art turning thy face towards God! Close thine eyes to all things else, and open them to the realm of the All-Glorious. Ask whatsoever thou wishest of Him alone; seek whatsoever thou seekest from Him alone. With a look He granteth a hundred thousand hopes, with a glance He healeth a hundred thousand incurable ills, with a nod He layeth balm on every wound, with a glimpse He freeth the hearts from the shackles of grief. He doeth as He doeth, and what recourse have we? He carrieth out His Will, He ordaineth what He pleaseth. Then better for thee to bow down thy head in submission, and put thy trust in the All-Merciful Lord.”

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 52)

This means to me that, even as we turn to address the challenges and problems that affect or afflict our community or our relationships within it, in our hearts we seek the remedy from God “alone”; becoming independent and free from material causes and human capacities; depending in Him and trusting in His merciful Will.

We supplicate to God, as in our Long Obligatory Prayer, even in the midst of our ardent yearnings and desires, *“Look not upon my hopes and my doings, nay, rather look upon Thy*

Will that hath encompassed the heavens and the earth”. Then, in the words of Bahá’u’lláh, will we feel *“the winds of divine contentment blowing from the plane of the spirit.”* Then will we burn away *“the veils of want, and with inward and outward eye, perceiveth within and without all things the day of: ‘God will compensate each one out of His abundance.’”*

(Bahá’u’lláh: *The Seven Valleys*, p. 30)

Our vulnerability, then, begins in a consciousness of God’s omnipotence and mercy, and human beings’ ineradicable imperfection and inadequacy of response (our own included):

“Look ye not upon the creatures, turn ye to their Creator. See ye not the never-yielding people, see but the Lord of Hosts. Gaze ye not down upon the dust, gaze upward at the shining sun, which hath caused every patch of darksome earth to glow with light. O army of God! When calamity striketh, be ye patient and composed. However afflictive your

of God. When calamity smitten, be ye patient and composed. However grievous your sufferings may be, stay ye undisturbed, and with perfect confidence in the abounding grace of God, brave ye the tempest of tribulations and fiery ordeals.”

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 75)

Only in such a plane will we attain the divine meekness to which Bahá’u’lláh called His own son when he counselled:

“Be unjust to no man, and show all meekness to all men.”

(Bahá’u’lláh: *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 95)

For with the detachment implied in our absolute reliance “on Him alone” and not on each other, comes, inseparably, a meekness towards one another which Bahá’u’lláh Himself exemplified to us, and which is to me the very essence of the vulnerability that transforms and heals communities:

“Exalted, immeasurably exalted, is His detachment above the reach and ken of the entire creation! Glorified, glorified be His meekness – a meekness that hath melted the hearts of them that have been brought nigh unto God!”

(Bahá’u’lláh: *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 244)

It is this divine meekness that holds the secret of unity, as explained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

“His reason for putting on the heavy iron chains and for becoming the very embodiment of utter resignation and meekness, was to lead every soul on earth to concord, to fellow-feeling, to oneness; to make known amongst all peoples the sign of the singleness of God, so that at last the primal oneness deposited at the heart of all created things would bear its destined fruit, and the splendour of ‘No difference canst thou see in the creation of the God of Mercy,’ (Qur’án 67:3) would cast abroad its rays.”

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 264)

And so, we discover the power of meekness, the might hidden in vulnerability: its capacity to make us channels for the unific grace of God, the Omnipotent, the Ever-merciful. May we, then, through His most potent and limitless bounty, attain to such divine meekness, expose our breasts for a target mirror bright, and, our hearts linked with the Source of divine grace and our souls assured of the unfailing sustenance of the Almighty, thereby taste of such concord and fellow-feeling, such primal oneness, as is deposited, already, at the heart of all created things.

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