

Tests of God

Notions of Suffering, Health, and Healing in the Baha'i Faith

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WHEN A TRUE SEEKER determineth to take the step of the search, the path leading unto the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must, before all else, cleanse his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy.

—Baha'u'llah, "Guidance for a Seeker of Truth," *The Hidden Word*

The following paper, the product of a fruitful process of research that involved numerous interactions with members of the Greater Boston Baha'i community and the reading of Baha'i histories and scriptures, focuses on Baha'i notions of suffering, healing, and health.

Through my research I found out how important the Baha'i scriptures are to the followers of the Baha'i Faith, and that is the reason that I start each section of this paper with a different Baha'i passage that is relevant to that particular section.

I
And since there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute, He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure and stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven.

—Baha'u'llah, "The Purpose of Creation and the Station of God's Messengers," *The Hidden Word*

A Baha'i is a believer in the revelations of Baha'u'llah, meaning they believe that Baha'u'llah is a manifestation of God and that God spoke through him, just as God has spoken through other manifestations in the past. It is interesting to note that Baha'is believe in all the other former manifestations of God, whether they be the Son of God (Jesus), the Prophet of God (Muhammad), or the incarnation of God (Krishna), for they believe there is but one God who shows himself through various manifestations at various times.

A brief history of the Baha'i Faith is needed before beginning any discussion of the Baha'is or their notions of suffering, healing, and health

because, for Baha'is, their history is another act in the divine drama, which narrates the relationship between humankind and God. The central figure in the Baha'i Faith is Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri, otherwise known as Baha'u'llah. The Baha'is believe that Baha'u'llah, which means Glory or Splendor of God, was a manifestation of God, and they use the scriptures revealed to Baha'u'llah by God as guidance for action in everyday life. Baha'u'llah was born in Iran in 1817. While Baha'u'llah was alive, he drew quite a following in Iran, and also in parts of the Ottoman Empire, where he went after he was exiled from Iran. Before he died, Baha'u'llah designated his son, Abdu'l-Baha, as his spiritual inheritor. During the period of Abdu'l-Baha's leadership, the Faith began to spread beyond the borders of the Ottoman Empire and Iran. Abdu'l-Baha traveled all over Europe and America, spreading the teachings of the Baha'i Faith. His writings, though not from a divine source like Baha'u'llah's, clarified much of his father's teachings, and thus are regarded as very important to Baha'is. From 1866 to the present day, the Baha'i Faith has grown so much that it has "more than five million members from at least 2100 ethnic, racial and tribal groups" (*Christianity and the Baha'i Faith*, a pamphlet).

It is fair to say that Baha'i history and scripture bind Baha'is the world over. This is not only evident in the worldwide diversity of Baha'is and the number of translated scriptures and histories written in various languages; it also came out in the interviews I did with Boston-area Baha'is. They consistently referred to their scriptures and to their history to explain their beliefs. Thus, it is through an understanding of their history and their scriptures that we are better able to understand the Baha'is' theology and views on suffering, health, and healing.

II

O God! Recompense those who endure patiently in Thy days, and strengthen their hearts to walk undeviatingly on the path of Truth. Grant then, O Lord, such goodly gifts as

would enable them to gain admittance into Thy blissful Paradise.

—The Bab, from *Baha'i Prayers*, 21.

Two of the resources I used for my research were histories written on the Baha'i Faith and the various Baha'i scriptures. While these two sources were crucial, because Baha'is regard them as most important, what was most useful, and what brought the various histories and scriptures alive, were the people I was able to talk to about their faith, suffering, healing, and health.

Over a period of three months I was fortunate to be able to interview sixteen people using a structured interview, all of whom were informed on healing in the Baha'i Faith. They were all excited about sharing their views on the subject. Though there is much cultural, ethnic, religious, and generational diversity in the Boston Baha'i community, I found many of the answers to be similar, which was most interesting, especially in light of the importance of history and scripture in the lives of the Baha'is. In the following sections of this paper, I will try to show how, in the immense diversity of the Baha'is, there is much unity in belief. However, one thing is certain: in no way are their similarities the cookie-cutter variety. As we shall see, each of my informants related to their faith in a different way, though all held the same beliefs. And, when it came time to make a call on whether they were healthier than non-Baha'is, the pool was decisively split.

III

O Thou Whose tests are a healing medicine to such as are nigh unto Thee, Whose sword is the ardent desire of all them that love Thee, Whose dart is the dearest wish of those hearts that yearn after Thee, Whose decree is the sole hope of them that have recognized Thy truth! I implore Thee, by Thy divine sweetness and by the splendors of the glory of Thy face, to send down upon us from Thy retreats on high that which will enable us to draw nigh unto Thee. Set, then, our feet firm, O my God, in Thy Cause, and enlighten our hearts with the effulgence of Thy knowledge, and illumine our breasts with the brightness of Thy names.

—Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, 152:5.

All of my informants mentioned that suffering was a type of test, given by God to his devotee. One of my informants, Dr. Clare Levesque, told me that “Baha'is believe there are tests given to us all the way throughout our life on this plane of existence” (Levesque interview, p. 2). She goes on to mention that a test can be anything, from personal issues to maybe an illness. Naseem Alizedeh, told me she thinks “people need suffering,” for suffering is the

“cleansing that makes your spirit grow and develop” (Alizedeh interview, p. 2). Eleanor Mitten, who had recently miscarried her twins told me:

Even though tests are incredibly difficult to go through, they really improve who you are. All the things I have been through since 1996, all those things, through drawing upon my faith, have assisted me in coming to a better understanding of why I am here, and given me a better ability to serve people. I would not have the kind of understanding I have, the kind of gratefulness I have about even being alive, without tests. Abdu'l-Baha says sometimes sickness happens to prevent worse things from happening to you, and that is one interesting way of looking at it. (Mitten interview, p. 2)

Last, on the nature of tests, it was said to me best by Courtney Craig, that “God never gives you a test you cannot handle,” which Courtney thinks is “another benefit to being Baha'i, because you have that understanding that you have the capacity” (Craig interview, p. 2).

These views on suffering come from two sources: the Baha'i scriptures and Baha'i history. Since Baha'is seem to be very aware of their history, they know that Baha'u'llah and his followers were persecuted, and it seems that they in some way identify with the suffering of Baha'u'llah and the early Baha'is. Saeed Khase told me a story of a letter being written to Abdu'l-Baha, which said “he [the follower] has to leave the city, a lot of people are getting martyred” (Belotti/Khase interview, p. 4). Saeed told me that Abdu'l-Baha wrote back: “Don't worry, Baha'u'llah is with you. You will be successful” (4). Saeed then said, “Shreena, I remember those words and everyday I feel that Baha'u'llah is walking with me” (4). If Baha'u'llah, the splendor of God, suffered, then why would the present followers of the Baha'i Faith also suffer? Suffering was a way for Baha'u'llah to access God; thus, naturally, suffering become a way for Baha'is to become closer to God. As Courtney Craig told me, Baha'is know they are suffering for a reason, they have an understanding of why they suffer, and part of that understanding comes from the in-depth knowledge Baha'is seem to have of their history and the strong identification they also have with Baha'u'llah and what he went through (Craig interview).

The writings of Baha'u'llah also reinforce that suffering is a necessary part of being human and being Baha'i, and suffering is God's will and good for his cause. Baha'u'llah writes:

I sorrow not for the burden of My imprisonment. Neither do I grieve over My abasement, or the tribulation I suffer at the hands of Mine enemies. By My life! They are My

glory, a glory wherewith God hath adorned His own Self. Would that ye know it! (Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, 100:1)

Baha'u'llah seems to be welcoming the suffering: he is steadfast when confronted with it, for he knows that it is a test from God, a test that he has to draw meaning from. It becomes clearer that Baha'u'llah is stalwart and will not be brought down by the suffering inflicted upon him. He writes:

Dost thou imagine, O Minister of the Shah in the City (Constantinople), that I hold within My grasp the ultimate destiny of the Cause of God? Thinkest thou that My imprisonment, or the shame I have been made to suffer, or even My death and utter annihilation, can deflect its course? Wretched is what thou hast imagined in thine heart! Thou art indeed of them that walk after the vain imaginings which their hearts devise. No God is there but Him. Powerful is He to manifest His Cause, and to exalt His testimony, and to establish whatsoever is His Will, and to elevate it to so eminent a position that neither thine own hands, nor the hands of them that have turned away from Him, can ever touch or harm it. (Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, 19:1)

It is clear that Baha'u'llah is accepting this suffering, these tests, just as the people I interviewed accept them as natural consequences in life. The use of the word “test” also implies that action needs to be taken, that the test needs to be addressed in some way. And this is where healing comes in, to which the Baha'is have a two-fold approach.

IV

Thou art He, O my God, through Whose names the sick are healed and the ailing are restored, and the thirsty are given drink, and the sore-vexed are tranquillized, and the wayward are guided, and the abased are exalted, and the poor are enriched, and the ignorant are enlightened, and the gloomy are illumined, and the sorrowful are cheered, and the chilled are warmed, and the downtrodden are raised up. Through Thy name, O my God, all created things were stirred up, and the heavens were spread, and the earth was established, and the clouds were raised and made to rain upon the earth. This, verily, is a token of Thy grace unto all Thy creatures.

—Baha'u'llah, *Prayers and Meditations*, 236:1.

Just as suffering comes from God, so does all healing—and just about everything else. For Baha'is, God is the source of all. This does not mean that Baha'is just sit around and wait for God to heal them when they are sick. The people I interviewed were most clear about the fact that they take action when they or someone else is sick or suffering.

First, it is important to note that sickness is not in any way indicative of the state of a person's soul.

Philippe Copeland told me, “illness is like when a cloud passes over the sun, and the sun is the soul and illness sort of impedes the powers of the souls, but I know they are fundamentally healthy because God made them that way” (Copeland interview, p. 1). This sentiment is reinforced by a passage written by Baha'u'llah. He writes”

Know thou that the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose themselves between his soul and his body, for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments. Consider the light of the lamp. Though an external object may interfere with its radiance, the light itself continueth to shine with undiminished power. In like manner, every malady afflicting the body of man is an impediment that preventeth the soul from manifesting its inherent might and power. When it leaveth the body, however, it will evince such ascendancy, and reveal such influence as no force on earth can equal. Every pure, every refined and sanctified soul will be endowed with tremendous power, and shall rejoice with exceeding gladness. (Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, 80:2)

Since the human soul is always seen as healthy, despite the existence of physical and mental illnesses, Baha'is use two methods to combat attacks on the body. Brian Aull informed me that “The Baha'i teachings say that we should rely on a combination of spiritual and physical remedies . . . following spiritual and ethical teachings of the faith are the path to healing, but at the same time when you have a cut on your hands, you put something physical on it to stop the bleeding” (Aull interview, p. 1). Eric Walker mirrored these sentiments, saying, “Baha'is believe that healing can be achieved through spiritual and physical healing, and they are not separate” (Walker interview, p. 1). Courtney Craig related healing to some of her everyday situations. She said: “I have been sick, and I found myself saying prayers over and over, and it makes me feel better . . . but you know what, God gave us Advil—take the Advil. There is a reason that God gave us Advil” (Craig interview, p. 2). Physical remedies do not necessarily mean consulting a doctor trained in the West or taking pharmaceutical drugs. All those I interviewed said that they were open to other forms of physical healing, and one even pointed out to me that “there are so many Baha'is that are not Western, that I am sure are using old-school remedies” (Craig/Diehl/Sani/Schuster/Walker interview, p. 3).

A two-fold approach is not only used when one is sick, but also when others are sick. Many of my informants told me that they prayed for the well-

being of people who were sick, even people they did not know. This does not mean they prayed for the curing of those that were sick. Susan Boyd told me, “Abdu’l-Baha wrote that sometimes if a person is sick and they pray for a cure, God will give them whatever is the best solution” (Boyd/Majzoubi/Tomarelli interview, p. 2). I was informed by Sharon Schuster that “The long healing prayer is actually endowed with special potency, like if someone is ill, people will gather together and say that prayer or other healing prayers” (Craig/Diehl/Sani/Schuster/Walker interview, p. 2). Baha’is not only pray for those who are sick; they also do their best to help out. Saeed Khase said that Abdu’l-Baha “would always visit the sick, always ask about them, always try to send something if he could not visit” (Belotti/Khase interview, p. 7). Naseem Alizedeh takes physically helping one who is sick to mean “to show love and nurture the person, if they need your help or assistance, whether that is a ride to the hospital or some facility or just keeping them in your heart and praying for them” (Alizedeh interview, p. 2).

What my informants do when they or someone else is sick comes straight from the writings of Baha’u’llah and Abdu’l-Baha. Baha’u’llah requires that: “Whenever ye fall ill, refer to competent physicians. Verily we have not abolished recourse to material means, rather have We affirmed it through this Pen which God hath made the Dawning Place of His luminous and resplendent Cause” (Baha’u’llah, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, 60). Abdu’l-Baha adds to this teaching. He informs Baha’is that

The prayers which were written for the purpose of healing are both for the spiritual and material healing. Therefore chant them for the spiritual and material healing. If healing is best for the patient surely it will be granted. For some who are sick, healing for them shall be the cause of other ills. Thus it is that wisdom does not decree the answer to some prayers. (Abdu’l-Baha, *Daily Lessons Received at Akka*, 86)

I believe that I received such similar responses from people on the subject of healing in part because of the clarity of the Baha’i teachings and the importance of consulting the scriptures in times of guidance. Baha’is do not just fall back on prayer when it is needed. The Baha’is I talked to follow what the teachings say on a daily basis, not just in times of crisis. That, for them, is a major factor in living and staying healthy.

V

My servants! Through the might of God and His power, and out of the treasury of His knowledge and wisdom, I have brought forth and revealed unto you the pearls that

lay concealed in the depths of His everlasting ocean. I have summoned the Maids of Heaven to emerge from behind the veil of concealment, and have clothed them with these words of Mine—words of consummate power and wisdom. I have, moreover, with the hand of divine power, unsealed the choice wine of My Revelation, and have wafted its holy, its hidden, and musk-laden fragrance upon all created things. Who else but yourselves is to be blamed if ye choose to remain unendowed with so great an outpouring of God’s transcendent and all-encompassing grace, with so bright a revelation of His resplendent mercy?

—Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah*, pp. 327–28

Following the teachings revealed by Baha’u’llah is not merely seen as obligatory when one is a Baha’i; many Baha’is believe that by following the teachings, they maintain a good level of health. The teachings prohibit Baha’is from sex before marriage, the consumption of alcohol, and the abuse of drugs and strongly discourage the use of tobacco. These are just some of the physical things mentioned in my interviews that Baha’is are told to adhere to. Clare Levesque also said, “We are told we are supposed to pray and read the writings everyday, and I think that centers you and gives you a spiritual cord in your life” (Levesque interview, p. 1). Again we see that there is also a two-fold approach to staying healthy, which is also reinforced in the writings. I want to reiterate that the answers I received were fairly uniform. That is, they were uniform, until I asked the one question which explicitly solicited an opinion from the informants. To answer this question, no one was really able to draw upon the scriptures or on history to justify their response. The question was: “Do you think Baha’is are more or less healthy than non-Baha’is?” Seven said, yes, Baha’is are healthier. Another seven said, no, that the Baha’is are not protected from the ills that other communities suffer from. One informant said that the Baha’is may lead a healthier lifestyle than non-Baha’is, for there are such specific guidelines for Baha’is to follow. The most interesting answer was from Philippe Copeland. Philippe felt that it was too early to say one way or the other, whether Baha’is were healthier or not. He said: “I think the Baha’i community is very young, and it’s a global community, so I would say that the Baha’is are in a process of learning a new culture and new ways of being in the world. We bring all our different cultural gifts and problems with us” (Copeland interview, p. 2). I found this to be a very astute observation. I interviewed an array of Baha’is, from different faith backgrounds, ethnic backgrounds, and generations. Because the question “Do you think Baha’is are more or less healthy than

non-Baha'is?" produced two such different sets of answers, it is even more amazing to me that all the other questions produced very similar answers from all my informants. I think that in order to understand why this unity exists in such diversity, one must go back to the importance of Baha'i history and scripture in the lives of the Baha'i. Because they have a common, written history and common, written scripture, which is so specific and detailed, from which to draw, their approach to suffering and healing, at least, is uniform. I do not mean to suggest that all Baha'is think alike, nor that their history is not contested in any way. One thing that came out in all my interviews was that, although the answers were similar, the ways in which each individual informant related his or her answer to a certain Baha'i passage or event in history was unique. Also, as I delved deeper into Baha'i history, I did find that many groups do challenge the Baha'i reading of history. The Baha'i community is a young community, and it will be fascinating to see the ways it develops as the years progress.

The important point that can be extrapolated from this initial research is the unique approach that Baha'is have toward suffering and healing. To Baha'is, suffering is a test from God, and overcoming that test, healing from the pains of any test—whether this means full recovery or death—is a means by which an individual moves closer to God. I also think that their two-fold approach to healing, to overcoming tests, is a unique fusion of religion and science, in that Baha'is do not see the two as independent of each other, but rather as complementary to each other; for the two come from one source—God.

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