



Starting with Me

Knowing Myself *Before* Finding a Partner



**9 Transformative Steps Based on the Bahá'í Faith's Teachings
About Relationships and Marriage**

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Excerpt: Chapter 1 – Living an Integrated, Joyful Life:
Foundation for a Happy Marriage

A happy life. A purposeful life. An integrated life. One with a joyful marriage that provides eternal companionship. Helping you take foundational steps toward all of these is the goal of this book.

Each of us has the capacity to build a happier, more fulfilling life now. As we're then ready to consider a relationship and marriage, the foundation-building is already under way.

This first chapter asks you to take a broader view of your life. If you are concentrating more on wondering how you will meet someone and knowing if they're the *right* person, please set these questions aside for now. We will address them later. Instead, please think about your life context, such as:

- How you spend time
- What brings you joy and laughter
- How much you are oriented toward helping and serving others
- How much you balance reflection and action
- What brings you peace and contentment
- How you are approaching the progress of your professional life along with the possibility of creating a marriage and family

When you envision yourself in a relationship or marriage, it's natural to imagine you and your partner as very happy. Many of us have been led to believe this state of happiness should begin the instant we meet our beloved, that we are quickly soul-connected, and that this happiness will endure uninterrupted for all time. When difficulties do occur, then it's natural to think something is wrong. While a lifetime of being happy with a partner most of the time *is* possible, it's merely a delightful fantasy that it's as easy as many hope or as many movies and books imply!

Key Learning Points

- Integrating “being” and “doing” (who I am and what I do)
- Constructing a full, coherent life—Integrating career and marriage
- Creating laughter, happiness, and joy

Integrating Being and Doing (Who I Am and What I Do)

Please read and reflect on the quotations below that frame the benefits of building a purposeful, integrated life.

1. “It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action. ... That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race. ... Blessed and happy is he

that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth.”ⁱ
Bahá’u’lláh

2. “The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct.”ⁱⁱ Bahá’u’lláh
3. “We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life molds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it.... Through them [the Bahá’í teachings] will the human heart be changed, and also our social environment provides the atmosphere in which we can grow spiritually and reflect in full the light of God...”ⁱⁱⁱ On behalf of Shoghi Effendi
4. “To follow a path of service, whatever form one’s activity assumes, requires faith and tenacity. In this connection, the benefit of walking that path in the company of others is immense. Loving fellowship, mutual encouragement, and willingness to learn together are natural properties of any group of youth sincerely striving for the same ends, and should also characterize those essential relationships that bind together the components of society. ... You ... are aware of your part in a mighty, transforming process that will yield, in time, a global civilization reflecting the oneness of humankind. You know well that the habits of mind and spirit that you are nurturing in yourselves and others will endure, influencing decisions of consequence that relate to marriage, family, study, work, even where to live. Consciousness of this broad context helps to shatter the distorting looking glass in which everyday tests, difficulties, setbacks, and misunderstandings can seem insurmountable. And in the struggles that are common to each individual’s spiritual growth, the will required to make progress is more easily summoned when one’s energies are being channeled towards a higher goal—the more so when one belongs to a community that is united in that goal.”^{iv} Universal House of Justice
5. “Experience suggests that a discussion about contributing to the betterment of society fails to tap the deepest springs of motivation if it excludes exploration of spiritual themes. The importance of ‘doing’, of arising to serve and to accompany fellow souls, must be harmonized with the notion of ‘being’, of increasing one’s understanding of the divine teachings and mirroring forth spiritual qualities in one’s life.”^v Universal House of Justice
6. “... [E]very aspect of a person’s life is an element of his or her service to Bahá’u’lláh: the love and respect one has for one’s parents; the pursuit of one’s education; the nurturing of good health; the acquiring of a trade or profession; one’s behavior towards others and the upholding of a high moral standard; one’s marriage and the bringing up of one’s children; one’s activities in teaching the Faith and the building up the strength of the Bahá’í community ... and, not least, to take time each day to read the Writings and say the Obligatory Prayer, which are the source of growing spiritual strength, understanding, and attachment to God.”^{vi} Universal House of Justice

“What have you been up to lately?” “What do you do for a living?” These common ways of talking to each other center on actions, accomplishments, and external achievements. As the quotations above support, while we are “doing” essential action, education, work, and service, we also can answer questions about our “being”. These could be: “Who am I?”, “What is my purpose?”, or “What brings me joy?”. The answers are complex, because each of us has physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual attributes that are part of body, mind, heart, and soul. Each of these influences our “being” and our “doing”. When you contemplate “Who am I?”, you might think of examples like these:

- Your personality: “I’m lively; I’m quiet and shy”
- Your character: “I’m thrifty; I’m courageous”
- Your spiritual state: “I love to pray; I find it difficult to meditate consistently”

Balancing our “doing” with these and other aspects of “being” helps us live an integrated, coherent life.

We can enhance our “being” by reflecting on and centering our lives around our beliefs and internal purposes, as well as by strengthening our spiritual qualities. Integrating our “doing” and “being” enables us to make choices that align our behaviors with moral and spiritual principles. The Bahá’í teachings promote service to others for the betterment of the world as an integral and necessary part of leading a fulfilling, purposeful life. One way to serve humanity is to marry and raise a family that contributes to the progress of society. Integrating who you are alongside what you do is a lifelong process; practicing it now will help prepare you for being in a relationship and marriage.

Reflection

1. What do I include in my life that helps me “be”, feeling spiritually centered as a happy, healthy individual?

2. When do I most benefit from time spent “being” and not “doing”?

3. How do I feel when I am not “doing”?

4. What “doing” activities are most important for me to include in my life?

5. What do I generally think of as “service”? In what ways has this section helped me to think of service more broadly?

Constructing a Full, Coherent Life—Integrating Career and Marriage

Choices about our education and profession are part of integrating “being” and “doing”. Effectively managing choices in work life and community service includes harmonizing these with our personal life, especially marriage and family life. We invite you to reflect on the quotations below.

1. “It is enjoined upon every one of you to engage in some form of occupation.... Waste not your time in idleness and sloth. Occupy yourselves with that which profiteth yourselves and others. ... When anyone occupieth himself in a craft or trade, such occupation itself is regarded in the estimation of God as an act of worship; and this is naught but a token of His infinite and all-pervasive bounty.”^{vii} Bahá’u’lláh
2. “... [A]ll effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity. This is worship: to serve mankind and to minister to the needs of the people. Service is prayer.”^{viii} ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
3. “The more we search for ourselves, the less likely we are to find ourselves; and the more we search for God, and to serve our fellow-men, the more profoundly will we become acquainted with ourselves, and the more inwardly assured. This is one of the great spiritual laws of life.”^{ix} On behalf of Shoghi Effendi
4. “The Bahá’í youth ... should be advised, nay even encouraged, to contract marriage while still young and in full possession of their physical vigor. Economic factors, no doubt, are often a serious hindrance to early marriage, but in most cases are only an excuse, and as such should not be overstressed.”^x On behalf of Shoghi Effendi
5. “... Bahá’í youth can accept—and should be encouraged to accept—a responsibility of their own for moral leadership in the transformation of society.”^{xi} Universal House of Justice

6. "... [Y]oung women and men become acutely conscious of the exhortations of the Supreme Pen to 'enter into wedlock' that they may 'bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants'.... This generation of youth will form families that secure the foundations of flourishing communities.... Through their growing love for Bahá'u'lláh and their personal commitment to the standard to which He summons them will their children imbibe the love of God, 'commingled with their mother's milk', and always seek the shelter of His divine law. Clearly, then, the responsibility of a Bahá'í community towards young people does not end when they first start serving. The significant decisions they make about the direction of their adult lives will determine whether service to the Cause of God was only a brief and memorable chapter of their younger years, or a fixed center of their earthly existence, a lens through which all actions come into focus."^{xii} Universal House of Justice

Sometimes under the guise of other interests, people postpone marriage in pursuit of prolonging adolescence or self-focused activities. While it is important to reflect on a career and professional identity, trying to figure this out may become an unnecessary distraction from moving a relationship toward marriage. It is also common in many cultures for people to say they need to complete their education and establish themselves professionally or financially before they can seek a relationship or marriage partner.

Take a moment to consider what timeframe in your life would be ideal for you to marry. What do you think has to happen before you marry? Do your family or any others have perspectives? How does your current thinking relate to some of the quotations above?

In some parts of the world, marrying relatively young and growing together with your partner is counter-cultural and the benefits of it are overlooked. While young marriage has the benefit of stronger physical well-being, practical matters would still need to be addressed. Marriage at a younger age may require resource support from family, especially when both partners are still in school. It can be difficult for independent-minded adults to accept this help from family—and not all families are able to offer support. However, this doesn't mean that a marriage at a young age can't succeed.

Marrying at a later age presents its own challenges. Living independently for a long time and developing one's own household and financial habits may make it more challenging to adjust and live harmoniously with another person. Later marriages can also benefit from family and community encouragement—although financial support is less likely to be needed than with younger couples.

Although each phase of life brings with it potential challenges in getting married, excellent marriages can be created at any age. Even if you are beyond the time in your life when you want to raise children, companionship and a partner to offer service with are parts of marriage that can bring great joy at any point in life.

And yet, in a world where divorce has become common, some question whether to marry at all. We understand this. We also ask you to reconsider. In addition to the many emotional and physical benefits of marriage, an individual who was studying marriage shared their perspective about some of the positive spiritual aspects of marrying:

"It seems to me that primary reasons to marry include having a spiritual relationship and to deeply embrace the development of virtues necessary for marriage and family life.

Marriage is a spiritual companionship that continues to evolve, reinforced by each partner abiding by the will of God. Our souls' progress throughout eternity is contingent on our acquisition of virtues, expressed through 'pure and goodly deeds.' Marriage is a fortress where prayer, encouragement, love of each other, and the love of God, help us acquire and cultivate virtues necessary for the development of our eternal soul and for the betterment of this world."

Researcher Shaunti Feldhahn spent years reviewing all the research about marriage to discover what was true and what were myths widely reported in the media. One myth that she debunked was the 50 percent divorce rate statistic in the United States, which turned out to be a forecasted number from a researcher, rather than a proven fact. You can see details about her research at shaunti.com or in the book *The Good News About Marriage: Debunking Discouraging Myths About Marriage and Divorce*.

To avoid the false dichotomy of thinking *either* I marry, *or* I pursue my career, and to remain open to marriage while building one's education and profession, consider the passage below about viewing life as a "coherent whole".

It is essential then that ever-growing numbers of those in the prime of their lives 'steel themselves for a life of service'^{xiii} to society. Naturally, many matters occupy their time and energy: education, work, leisure, spiritual life, physical health. But they learn to avoid a fragmented approach to life that fails to see the connections among life's various aspects. Such a disjointed view of life often makes individuals fall victim to the false choices suggested in questions such as whether one should study or serve, advance materially or contribute to the betterment of others, pursue work or become dedicated to service. Failure to approach one's life as a coherent whole often breeds anxiety and confusion. Through service, young people can learn to foster a life in which its various aspects complement each other.^{xiv} (Universal House of Justice; Bahá'í Youth Conferences Participants' Handout)

Especially when we're young, a healthy marriage can provide a partnership that fosters consultation and conversation about life choices. It offers a structure for mutual support to help each partner navigate many potential life paths—including questions about their education and profession.

It will be helpful to consider what a partnership can bring you and whether you want to adjust anything in your life before starting a serious relationship. For example, you may be well-established in your profession. Assess whether the amount of time you spend working will allow you to sustain a relationship. Alternatively, will moderating your time choices be helpful.

Reflection

1. Did any of the concepts in the quotations in this section surprise me? In what way?

2. Do any of them invite me to consider a new approach or behaviors when it comes to marriage preparation? If so, how?

3. What am I already doing that aligns with the quotations? What would be helpful to strengthen? How could I do this?

4. What is important for me to accomplish before a relationship or marriage? Why? Does it align with the quotations? To what extent are finances a factor in my thinking? What are possible solutions?

5. What might be some benefits of being in a relationship or married while I am attending university or in my early working years? What are some challenges, and how could they be overcome?

6. Who might be able to help me approach school or work—as well as a relationship or marriage—in a more coherent manner, so I don't fall into the trap of thinking of them as a dichotomy, an either-or choice?

7. What are some benefits of marriage even if I am no longer considered a “young person”?

Creating Laughter, Happiness, and Joy

Consider the quotations below on the merits of building joy and happiness in your life.

1. “Soar upon the wings of joy in the atmosphere of the love of God.”^{xv} Bahá’u’lláh
2. “Let not the happenings of the world sadden you. I swear by God! The sea of joy yearneth to attain your presence, for every good thing hath been created for you, and will, according to the needs of the times, be revealed unto you.”^{xvi} Bahá’u’lláh
3. “... [M]an’s supreme honor and real happiness lie in self-respect, in high resolves and noble purposes, in integrity and moral quality, in immaculacy of mind.”^{xvii} ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
4. “But real thankfulness is a cordial giving of thanks from the heart. When ... the heart is happy, the spirit is exhilarated.”^{xviii} ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
5. “... [L]augh, smile and rejoice in order that others may be made happy by you.”^{xix} ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
6. “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!”^{xx} ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
7. “If the heart turns away from the blessings God offers how can it hope for happiness? If it does not put its hope and trust in God’s Mercy, where can it find rest?”^{xxi} ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
8. “Abandonment of ‘a frivolous conduct’ does not imply that a Bahá’í must be sour-faced or perpetually solemn. Humor, happiness, joy are characteristics of a true Bahá’í life. Frivolity palls and eventually leads to boredom and emptiness, but true happiness and joy and humor that are parts of a balanced life that includes serious thought, compassion and humble servitude to God are characteristics that enrich life and add to its radiance.”^{xxii} Shoghi Effendi; On behalf of the Universal House of Justice
9. “... [L]aughter should not ... be indulged in at the expense of the feelings of others. What one says or does in a humorous vein should not give rise to prejudice of any kind. You

may recall ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s caution ‘Beware lest ye offend the feelings of anyone, or sadden the heart of any person....’^{xxiii} ‘Abdu’l-Bahá; on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

10. “It is good to laugh. Laughter is a spiritual relaxation. When [we] were in prison [for our religious beliefs] ... and under the utmost deprivation and difficulties, each of [us] at the close of the day would relate the most ludicrous event which had happened. Sometimes it was a little difficult to find one but always [we] would laugh until the tears would roll down [our] cheeks. Happiness ... is never dependent upon material surroundings, otherwise how sad those years would have been. As it was [we] were always in the utmost state of joy and happiness.”^{xxiv} Howard Colby Ives reporting words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Whether you are in a relationship or not, and whether you marry or not, it will benefit you to live your life fully, with both happiness and joy—concepts that are often used interchangeably. The Bahá’í quotations above link happiness to how we speak and act, to our close connection to God, and to goodness in the world. As we contribute to the world’s well-being, engage in service to others, pray and meditate, and proceed with our life’s purposes, intentions, and interests, we are bound to experience authentic joy. Joyfulness is a spiritual quality that can uplift us even in moments of sadness or difficulty. When challenges arise, our ability to handle them well, and seek gratitude in their midst, can help us feel spiritual joy. Generally speaking, thankfulness brings happiness.

Happy people tend to attract others, so cultivating this quality not only helps us in our own lives but also helps us build relationships and nurture communities. Friendships with others and a romantic relationship founded on spiritual values can also bring joy. A key element of all relationships is the ability to connect through meaningful interactions and conversations. As people share about themselves, tell humorous stories, and invite others to discuss important topics, a connection is built between those individuals.

Throughout the book, we will include perspectives from people who have studied the Bahá’í teachings about marriage. These will help further broaden your view of relationships and marriage. Below are some brief reflections from individuals on their experience of joy.

“I believe gratitude is key to being able to experience joy, and it’s especially important to look for opportunities for gratitude during times of difficulty.”

“Laughter is a healing medicine for the soul, mind, and heart. Laughter melts away imagined differences and brings to the forefront that we are actually all related in a very real way. It unites us. Joy for me is about detachment from the changes and chances of this world. Joy is a kindness to ourselves and to others. When I am experiencing joy, I have more energy, I find life more pleasing and funnier in general. I am more compassionate and better able to empathize with others. I am able to serve others with grace and cheerfulness. I find it easier to think of others’ needs and forget my own selfish wants. Others are happier around me when I am happy and joyful!”

“I have been tuning in more to what naturally boosts my level of happiness and joy. Really, I think of it as my ‘joy level,’ since joy—the joy that comes from accepting the will of God—is stable and always there for me to access. Whenever I feel that joy ebbing (like when I see so

much injustice and disunity), I become aware that I am becoming attached to worldly things. Now I have some tools to reconnect my soul to the grace of God! Prayer and reading quotations from the Bahá'í writings and from other faiths, as well as uplifting words of other people, are among these tools. Nature is and has always been a big one for me too. Water is intensely relaxing for me. So are trees and birds."

As we have read, gratitude, laughter, self-respect, and making positive choices in life all contribute to happiness and joy. Having goals and aspirations that uplift us and contribute to others' lives gives us direction and increased gladness.

Reflection

Take time to pause, maybe re-read the quotations, and consider the following questions. Answering them will help you gain insights about yourself. If you get stuck on how to answer a question, consider asking a friend for their insights.

1. What seems to consistently increase my joy and laughter?

2. How do I feel physically when I am happy and joyful? What is my mental state? How do I feel spiritually?

3. How can I use laughter and humor to create positive outcomes in my interactions and relationships with others?

4. When have I responded to challenges in my life by trying to look at my circumstances from a positive perspective?

5. When have I been thankful during or after a difficulty?

6. How does expressing gratitude affect my feelings and thoughts?

7. Do I joke or tease in a way that seems to uplift others? Do I ever use humor in a way that may be hurtful to others?

8. When have I effectively used my sense of humor to deal with problems or imperfections in myself?

9. When have I seen my own happiness affect others? How do they respond? How can I build more of that in my life?

Activities

1. List three activities or occurrences in my life that prompt me to feel happiness or joy:

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

Choose one and carry it out within the next week. What was my experience like?

2. I am grateful for these three blessings or positive circumstances in my life:

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

Choose one of these and talk about it with someone you meet for the first time in the next week. If possible, ask them to share about something they are grateful for. What was my experience like?

Choose a friend and participate with them in an activity that brings you each happiness. Here are some examples: tell each other jokes, watch an uplifting movie or video clip, sing, dance, draw, play with a child, act like a joyful child yourselves, tell each other two qualities you admire in each other, or go for a walk in a naturally beautiful setting. What was my experience like?

Encouraging Reminder: To assist you to track and complete all the reflections and growth steps in this book, we have provided suggestions and tools in “Appendix A: Tracking My Action Commitments”.

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- ⁱ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXVII
- ⁱⁱ Bahá'u'lláh, cited by Shoghi Effendi in *Advent of Divine Justice*, pp. 24-25
- ⁱⁱⁱ On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. I*, #3.3
- ^{iv} Universal House of Justice, July 1, 2013, to Bahá'í youth conferences
- ^v Universal House of Justice, *Framework for Action*, #35
- ^{vi} Universal House of Justice, December 7, 1992, European Bahá'í Youth Council; Ocean software program
- ^{vii} Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 26
- ^{viii} 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 176-177
- ^{ix} On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, #391
- ^x On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. I*, #146
- ^{xi} Universal House of Justice, *Turning Point*, p. 165
- ^{xii} Universal House of Justice, *Framework for Action*, #35
- ^{xiii} Universal House of Justice, February 8, 2013
- ^{xiv} Bahá'í Youth Conferences Participants' Handout, July-October 2013
- ^{xv} Bahá'u'lláh, *Tabernacle of Unity*, p. 74
- ^{xvi} Bahá'u'lláh quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 82
- ^{xvii} 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 19
- ^{xviii} 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 236
- ^{xix} 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 218
- ^{xx} 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 109-110
- ^{xxi} 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 108
- ^{xxii} Shoghi Effendi; On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Compilations of Compilations, Vol. I*, #138
- ^{xxiii} 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Vol. 1*, p. 45 quoted on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, quoted in a Bahá'í World Centre Research Department Memorandum, "The Humorist", January 12, 1997
- ^{xxiv} Howard Colby Ives sharing the reported words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Portals to Freedom*, p. 120

Starting with Me: Knowing Myself Before Finding a Partner can be ordered through popular online booksellers or through Marriage Transformation, www.marriagetransformation.com. Groups who wish to study the book together can contact Marriage Transformation for a group discount on the books.