

The Oneness of Humanity

“The soul is endowed with the potential for growth, or continual positive change. As the soul—which is our reality and the animating force of all human beings—develops, it becomes aware of realities that remain hidden to those who reject the notion of a soul or neglect its development. One of those realities is the oneness of humankind. Once that reality is discovered, there is no going back....”

~ Reginald Newkirk and Nathan Rutstein, *Racial Healing*, p. 127



“While all things are interrelated, every living thing is different. This paradoxical aspect of reality manifests itself in the principle of unity in diversity. In nature, no two things are exactly alike, yet they all stem from the same reality. Every cell in our body is unique, as is each snowflake, each rose of the same color. Within a litter of puppies, each puppy has its own temperament, coloring, and size. No two human beings, including identical twins, have an identical set of fingerprints. None of a tree’s branches, twigs, leaves, blossoms, or fruits are exactly alike, yet they are all a part of the whole, tied to one set of roots, which are tied to the soil, as well as the Sun and the rain, the source of their nutrients.”

~ Ibid, p. 142

CHAPTER 18

An Even Bigger Family: Being an Intercultural Couple

Focus Points

- ▶ Oneness of humanity
- ▶ Intercultural relationships and marriages
- ▶ Experiences and responses with prejudice
- ▶ Exploring ethnicity, race, and culture
- ▶ Success factors

A Couple's Story

As Lindsay and James get to know one another's families, they experience many different responses to their being an interracial couple. One day they are attending a family reunion, and James' Aunt June approaches him privately.

"You have no business dating a girl of another race," she says angrily. "It will cause you nothing but trouble. Too many girls of our own race don't have men. Why can't you date your own kind?!" This has been a long-standing issue between them, as James has dated women of other races a number of times.

James takes a deep breath and says a quick silent prayer. "I'm sad that you feel that way, Aunt June. I don't date women based on their skin color. I really like Lindsay. She has a very generous heart, and I wish you would give her a chance."

"I agree, she seems nice. But I won't change my mind. Don't be planning on my coming to a wedding if it comes to that."

"We haven't decided yet about marriage, but if we do, we'll still invite you and hope that you come," replies James.

Story Reflection and Discussion:

1. What does James do to stay strong when faced with prejudice?
2. How does James treat his aunt and respond to her negative comments?

3. What else could James do to respond to his aunt?
4. What is Lindsay's role in responding to James' aunt? Does she have a role in addressing the prejudice or building unity in this situation?
4. How have you responded to prejudice from others?
5. What have you done that has helped to soften someone's prejudiced heart?
6. What have you done to eliminate your own prejudices?



Quotations for Guidance

1) Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth. ... It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 250)

2) O CHILDREN OF MEN! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with

the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light! Heed ye this counsel that ye may obtain the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous glory. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, from the Arabic, No. 68)

3) O well-beloved ones! The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Tabernacle of Unity*, p. 40)

4) In fact numerous points of partnership and agreement exist between the two races; whereas the one point of distinction is that of color. Shall this, the least of all distinctions, be allowed to separate you as races and individuals? ... But there is need of a superior power to overcome human prejudices, a power which nothing in the world of mankind can withstand and which will overshadow the effect of all other forces at work in human conditions. That irresistible power is the love of God. It is my hope and prayer that it may destroy the prejudice of this one point of distinction between you and unite you all permanently under its hallowed protection. Bahá'u'lláh has proclaimed the oneness of the world of humanity. He has caused various nations and divergent creeds to unite. He has declared that difference of race and color is like the variegated beauty of flowers in a garden. If you enter a garden, you will see yellow, white, blue, red flowers in profusion and beauty—each radiant within itself and although different from the others, lending its own charm to them. Racial difference in the human kingdom is similar. If all the flowers in a garden were of the same color, the effect would be monotonous and wearying to the eye.

Therefore, Bahá'u'lláh hath said that the various races of humankind lend a composite

harmony and beauty of color to the whole. Let all associate, therefore, in this great human garden even as flowers grow and blend together side by side without discord or disagreement between them. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 68-69)

5) The divine friends must be attracted to and enamored of each other and ever be ready and willing to sacrifice their own lives for each other. Should one soul from amongst the believers meet another, it must be as though a thirsty one with parched lips has reached to the fountain of the water of life, or a lover has met his true beloved. For one of the greatest divine wisdoms regarding the appearance of the holy Manifestations is this: The souls may come to know each other and become intimate with each other; the power of the love of God may make all of them the waves of one sea, the flowers of one rose garden, and the stars of one heaven. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, p. 52)

6) Note ye how easily, where unity existeth in a given family, the affairs of that family are conducted; what progress the members of that family make, how they prosper in the world. Their concerns are in order, they enjoy comfort and tranquility, they are secure, their position is assured, they come to be envied by all. Such a family but addeth to its stature and its lasting honor, as day succeedeth day. And if we widen out the sphere of unity a little to include the inhabitants of a village who seek to be loving and united, who associate with and are kind to one another, what great advances they will be seen to make, how secure and protected they will be. Then let us widen out the sphere a little more, let us take the inhabitants of a city, all of them together: if they establish the strongest bonds of unity among themselves, how far they will progress, even in a brief period and what power they will exert. And if the sphere of unity be still further widened out, that is, if the inhabitants of a whole country develop peaceable hearts, and if with all their hearts and

souls they yearn to cooperate with one another and to live in unity, and if they become kind and loving to one another, that country will achieve undying joy and lasting glory. Peace will it have, and plenty, and vast wealth. ...

Wherefore, O ye beloved of the Lord, bestir yourselves, do all in your power to be as one, to live in peace, each with the others: for ye are all the drops from but one ocean, the foliage of one tree, the pearls from a single shell, the flowers and sweet herbs from the same one garden. And achieving that, strive ye to unite the hearts of those who follow other faiths.

For one another must ye give up even life itself. To every human being must ye be infinitely kind. Call none a stranger; think none to be your foe. Be ye as if all men were your close kin and honored friends. Walk ye in such wise that this fleeting world will change into a splendor and this dismal heap of dust become a palace of delights. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, pp. 279-280)

7) Regarding the solution of the racial problem; the believers should of course realize that the principle of the oneness of mankind which is the cornerstone of the Message of Bahá’u’lláh is wholly incompatible with all forms of racial prejudice. Loyalty to this foundation principle of the Faith is the paramount duty of every believer and should be therefore whole-hearted and unqualified. For a Bahá’í racial prejudice, in all its forms, is simply a negation of faith, an attitude wholly incompatible with the very spirit and actual teachings of the [Bahá’í] Cause.

But while the friends should faithfully and courageously uphold this Bahá’í principle of the essential unity of all human races, yet in the methods they adopt for its application and further realization on the social plane they should act with tact, wisdom and moderation.

(Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 533)

8) ...[Y]our statement to the effect that the principle of oneness of mankind prevents any true Bahá’í from regarding race itself as a bar to

union is in complete accord with the Teachings of the Faith on this point. For both Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá never disapproved of the idea of inter-racial marriage, nor discouraged it. The Bahá’í Teachings, indeed, by their very nature transcend all limitations imposed by race.... (Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 386)

Quotation Reflection and Discussion:

1. How can you show your love for humanity?
2. What metaphors describe the nature of racial harmony?
3. How do you act to demonstrate the oneness of humanity?
4. What is the value in family unity?
5. How can you work to eliminate prejudice?
6. What is the Bahá’í perspective on interracial marriage?
7. How could prejudice between partners harm a relationship and marriage? What could be the effect on a relationship, marriage, and family of prejudice from others?



Perspectives to Consider

Families that have members from a variety of cultures, ethnicities, and races are becoming more common. Diversity in all aspects of society, including marriage, is encouraged in the Bahá’í Writings. Your culture, which is often connected to your ethnicity or race, includes what you feel, learn, and do. It incorporates your memories, preferences, and personal stories. Your culture affects both your worldview and how you act and react to most people and events in your daily life. It may take immersing yourselves in each other’s culture to determine exactly how to achieve a harmonious relationship and marriage. Your understanding and appreciation of one another will increase if you both put yourselves deliberately into experiences that are comfortable and familiar to the other.

Keep in mind that **more than one culture may have been an influence on you**. For instance, if one of you spent his/her early childhood in Japan, but he/she has lived in the United States since then, both cultures will have significant influence. Your exploration will then include more than one culture.

You can **explore each other's culture** in a number of ways. For instance, you can travel to where your partner grew up or spend time with his/her family and friends. You can also visit an area where your partner's culture is prominent, such as an area of a city where people of the same culture live and gather. However, be aware that there is a difference between getting to know a culture on a limited basis compared to living in it and connecting to it more regularly. Other ways of learning about each other include:

- Learning a language your partner speaks with others in his/her culture
- Reading books
- Taking courses in intercultural communication
- Watching culturally-based movies
- Listening to music
- Eating at ethnic restaurants
- Going to festivals and other events that celebrate the culture

The **cultural differences** between the two of you can provide you with a delightful variety of learning experiences that enrich your relationship and help you learn how to find points of unity and harmony. Often these differences provide excitement, fun, and balance, as well as sometimes offering challenging and complex learning experiences. As you gain understanding, you will each share what you appreciate and what you find more challenging to understand or accept of each other's culture.

When your differences cause you challenges, you will find it wise to step back and pause, working to avoid disunity. Any unexplored

and unaccepted differences can cause discord between the two of you. The more you **understand, appreciate, and accept each other**, the fewer misunderstandings will occur.

One way to prevent misunderstandings is to learn about what prejudices you may have learned throughout your life and how prejudicial experiences may have affected you. "...[P]rejudice...is an unquestioned emotional attachment to a falsehood that is assumed to be the truth. In other words, it is an emotional commitment to ignorance." (Reginald Newkirk and Nathan Rutstein, *Racial Healing*, pp. 101-102) Your own unexamined and unconscious prejudices and cultural superiority or inferiority can cause subtle negative actions and reactions to occur between you, thereby harming your relationship. Prejudice is a complex social problem. If you are clear that prejudice is a significant factor in your lives and the society around you, it will be beneficial for you to seek assistance with understanding and addressing the issues.

If you marry and have **children with someone of a different culture, ethnicity, or race**, you will want to understand the ways in which you are all part of a changing international culture. The world is increasingly experiencing the intermingling of races. Or you may adopt children from a different culture or with a different skin color than yours. The people around you will usually take their cue from how loving and accepting you are of this diversity. This will help others to see you and your children as a positive and vibrant example of intercultural unity. However, you and your children may also experience prejudice from others. Consult as a couple about how you would respond in a spiritual manner to negative words and actions from others. Your goal will be to help both the people involved and your children grow in their acceptance and understanding. How could you help your children respond to prejudice?

Some people are more **aware of prejudice from others and are more accustomed to**

responding to it. If this describes one of you but not the other, whichever of you is more sensitive may have to help explain situations to the other. If either of you is clear that you as a courting couple are receiving prejudiced reactions from people, then consult and agree on the character qualities and related behaviors you will use in responding. These can include kindness, courage, forgiveness, love, tolerance, wisdom, or justice, depending on the circumstances. Honest and loving discussions between you will assist you to understand the complexities of uncomfortable interactions.

You will be happiest as a couple when in a state of harmony and companionship. The following factors can help the **success of an intercultural or interracial relationship**:

1. Commitment to the relationship
2. Ability to communicate
3. Sensitivity to one another's needs
4. A liking for the other's culture
5. Flexibility
6. Solid, positive self-image
7. Love as the main marriage motive
8. Common goals
9. Spirit of adventure
10. Sense of humor

(Dugan Romano, *Intercultural Marriage*, pp. 183-184)

How many of these success factors above exist in your relationship? How will you develop each of them if they are not present? As you **examine the commonalities and differences** between your cultures and build understanding of each other, assess which aspects encourage you to feel hopeful about the future of your relationship. Your goal in courtship is to understand whether the differences between you are important and positive influences in your relationship. At this stage in your courtship, you may find your different cultures fascinating, and this view can sustain itself throughout your marriage. Your cultures may enhance and enrich your lives together.

Remember that if you were raised in very different ways, it will take **courtesy, flexibility,**

acceptance, and patience to understand each other. It may require perseverance to discern whether the differences you have will enrich or divide you. Are there differences that raise concerns for either of you? Over time, they may frustrate or annoy you. How will you address them? If they are unlikely to be resolved, they may cause repeated problems in marriage. The question to ask yourself is whether you can maintain unity given your differences. It is very unwise and unhappy to have a significant amount of time and energy in your relationship involved in disunifying conflicts.

As you work through the complexities of your cultural match, you may find it helpful to ask your **parents or other intercultural couples** for their insights. It will take wisdom to see whether your commonalities will be strong enough that you can stay together in unity and harmony.



Relationship Coaching

- ✓ Enjoy your cultural exploration activities as personal growth experiences.
- ✓ While it is very important to look for the positive between you, it is also wise to be realistic. Keep your focus on ways to sustain a marriage.
- ✓ Cultural exploration takes time, so be sure you are thorough.



Chapter Reflection and Discussion

1. What is your general attitude toward cross-cultural experiences?
2. How do you usually respond to differences between other people and you?
3. What are your thoughts and emotions when you think about having a spouse who grew up in a different culture?

4. What did your parents teach you about dating or marrying someone of another culture or race?
5. What will you be willing to do to learn about each other's culture?
6. Do you ever use verbal racial slurs against each other? Do you have prejudices against each other's culture? What are your concerns about this? What can you do to overcome the prejudices?
7. Do you tease each other about your cultures or upbringing? Is this done in a spirit that you each feel is acceptable, or are feelings hurt at all?
8. If you are an intercultural or interracial couple, how are you responding to reactions from others who may be prejudiced against you or your partner?
9. What challenges may arise in the future with neighbors, friends, coworkers, and family? Do you care what others think and say about your relationship? Why or why not?
10. Have you considered both the positive and the challenging implications for your children of rearing them in an intercultural family?
11. What do you most appreciate about being in an intercultural relationship?
12. How can your intercultural relationship send a positive message to others?



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Activities

1. Pray, meditate, reflect, and write in your journals about your perceptions of intercultural, interethnic, and interracial marriages.
2. If you identify that you/your families have different racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds, complete Worksheet 18A. Then study books on the different cultures and identify and carry out activities that will further your understanding of each other. This might include watching movies, attending a family activity, visiting a cultural museum, visiting each other's home countries, learning

each other's original languages, finding more about the music, clothing, and trends in the other's culture, and so on. What did you do? What did you learn from the experiences that will make a difference in your interactions?

3. Complete Worksheet 18B to explore your attitudes, behaviors, and perspectives about your own culture and share them with each other.
4. Describe your families to each other. Consider a wide variety of aspects about them; for example, their habits, regular activities, ways of communicating, expressions of affection, attitudes toward children, spiritual practices, ways of preparing and serving food, and entertainment choices. Be *creative* and develop a way to tell your partner about your family. This could include writing a story about your family or preparing a photo album with specific photos that reflect the aspects you want to communicate. Make notes below of the key points you want to communicate.

Visit one another's family. Did the descriptions match the reality? What else did you observe about their culture?

5. Go to an area with couples and families from a different culture or race than you. Bring a camera to take photos of the variety of people you see (with their permission and in a respectful manner). Then, create a display, slide show, or collage with the photos. [Note: You create a collage by cutting out pictures and/or words from magazines or other sources that reflect a particular topic or theme and gluing them onto a large piece of paper or cardboard. You can also use markers to add your own artwork or words.]

Reflect on your responses to the images. When you look at the photos, what do you notice someone doing that is different from the way you would do it? What do you appreciate about the people you are observing? What attracts you to them? What causes you to want to move away?

Share your display with friends and family and observe their responses. What do they notice and appreciate? Do they say anything that seems prejudiced? How do you feel about their response?

6. What will you do to learn more about each other's culture?

7. Carry out two activities to learn about each of your cultures, and write about and evaluate what you experienced and learned from the activities.

Date: _____

(See Appendix G to learn how to obtain a copy of this worksheet.)

Worksheet 18A: Understanding Diversity and Prejudice

Purpose: To describe your experiences and perceptions about cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity and to understand how they affect your relationship.

Instructions:

- A) Complete this worksheet individually.
- B) Share your answers with others who have culture, ethnicity, or race in common with you, and discuss them to verify their accuracy. Then share the answers with someone who is from a different culture, ethnicity, and race, and encourage them to ask questions. Include any additional insights or notes on your worksheet.
- C) Share and discuss your answers and insights with your partner.

Complete the following:

1. I describe my own and my family's culture, ethnicity, and race as:

2. I describe the culture of my society or the area where I live as:

3. Some unique features, beliefs, behaviors, or expectations of my culture, ethnicity, and race are:

4. I most appreciate these aspects of my culture, ethnicity, and race:

5. I dislike these aspects of my culture, ethnicity, and race:

6. My culture, ethnicity, and race are likely to affect my partner in the following ways: (Examples: customs, rituals, outlook, foods...)

7. My experiences with and reactions to prejudice toward me about my culture, race, or ethnicity are:

8. I have reacted with prejudice toward people that I describe this way:

9. My experiences with and reactions to observing expressions of prejudice are:

10. If my partner is of a different culture, ethnicity, or race from me, this is how I will learn about it/them:

11. I appreciate cultural, ethnic, or racial diversity for these reasons:

12. If my partner, our children, or I experience prejudice because of our relationship/marriage, I will struggle with the following emotions and responses:

I will choose to respond in the following ways:

13. If my partner, our children, or I experience prejudice because of our relationship/marriage, I want my partner to respond in the following ways:

Date: _____

(See Appendix G to learn how to obtain a copy of this worksheet.)

Worksheet 18B: Exploring Culture, Ethnicity, and Race in Your Relationship

Purpose: To describe and assess the views that your dominant culture, race, or ethnic group hold of various aspects of life and how your views differ from these, as well as determine how all these views will affect your relationship. If you have more than one significant culture, race, or ethnic group, then note all that apply.

Instructions:

- A) Complete this worksheet individually. Various aspects of life are listed below. On the first line (“Theirs”), write down what you see as the view of most people in your culture, ethnic group, or race. On the second line (“Yours”), write your own view *if it is different*. On both, note if the answers are different for women and men.
- B) Share your answers with others who have culture, ethnicity, or race in common with you. Discuss your answers with them to see whether they agree with you. Edit your answers as appropriate. Then share the revised answers with someone who is from a different culture, ethnicity, and race, and encourage them to ask questions. Include any additional insights or notes on your worksheet.
- C) Share and discuss your answers with your partner.

Complete the following:

1. Attitude toward family

Theirs: _____

Yours: _____

2. Roles of women and men

Theirs: _____

Yours: _____

3. Relationships with parents and other family members

Theirs: _____

Yours: _____

4. Relationships with and discipline of children

Theirs: _____

Yours: _____

5. Role of religion

Theirs: _____

Yours: _____

6. Importance of education

Theirs: _____

Yours: _____

7. Importance of employment/career

Theirs: _____

Yours: _____

- 8. Socioeconomic status
Theirs: _____
Yours: _____
- 9. Role of and importance of money/finances
Theirs: _____
Yours: _____
- 10. Physical disabilities
Theirs: _____
Yours: _____
- 11. Communication styles and techniques
Theirs: _____
Yours: _____
- 12. Specific political views or convictions
Theirs: _____
Yours: _____
- 13. Physical hygiene/body fitness
Theirs: _____
Yours: _____
- 14. Clothing/manner of dress
Theirs: _____
Yours: _____
- 15. People from a different race, ethnicity, or culture
Theirs: _____
Yours: _____
- 16. Children, teens, and elders
Theirs: _____
Yours: _____
- 17. Use of time (Examples: punctuality, no schedules, siestas, all work and no play...)
Theirs: _____
Yours: _____
- 18. Sex, monogamy, and faithfulness
Theirs: _____
Yours: _____
- 19. Food
Theirs: _____
Yours: _____

20. Interacting with friends and strangers

Theirs: _____

Yours: _____

21. Use of silence (Examples: when angry, sad, need to think, in the middle of a conversation...)

Theirs: _____

Yours: _____

22. Expressing strong feelings such as anger

Theirs: _____

Yours: _____

Couple Reflection and Discussion:

1. Based on comparing our answers to the above items, what factors are commonalities between us?

2. What are differences that we appreciate and that will contribute to the success of a marriage between us?

3. Based on the responses above (1-22), what differences between the two of us raise concerns about our needing to make significant adjustments in our relationship for cultural factors? What concerns do we have about disharmony arising between us?
