

Excerpt from Be Brave and Arise: My Life Quest As a Bahá'í Man
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17 – Learning and Growing from Difficulties

Challenge: When faced with difficulties, I sometimes make unwise or unhealthy choices in response that make the situations worse.

Opportunity: I can use difficulties as opportunities to learn and grow; they especially strengthen my character.

Summary:

- Difficulties can build my spiritual muscles and prompt me to strive for growth and well-being.
- Life works best if I'm responsible for my own development, and that means distinguishing what battles are mine to grapple with and which ones belong to others.
- Every problem generates learning that I can use in new circumstances and with new people.
- I'm grateful I don't have to go through challenges alone, since I can ask others to consult and pray with me, as well as assist and accompany me.

More:

Difficulties—A reality of life

Life has challenges and difficulties. It just does. You can pray to be spared from major ones, but tests are part of life on earth, and they can be a means of waking you up and strengthening your faith. How you respond and make use of them in ways that foster your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual growth is what's vital to address and improve. Here are perspectives on the purpose of difficulties:

“Tests are benefits from God, for which we should thank Him. Grief and sorrow do not come to us by chance, they are sent to us by the Divine Mercy for our own perfecting.”ⁱ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

“The mind and spirit of man advance when he is tried by suffering. The more the ground is ploughed the better the seed will grow, the better the harvest will be. Just as the plough furrows the earth deeply, purifying it of weeds and thistles, so suffering and tribulation free man from the petty affairs of this worldly life until he arrives at a state of complete detachment. His attitude in this world will be that of divine happiness. Man is, so to speak, unripe: the heat of the fire of suffering will mature him.”ⁱⁱ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

“Naturally there will be periods of distress and difficulty, and even severe tests; but if that person turns firmly towards the Divine Manifestation, studies carefully His Spiritual teachings and receives the blessings of the Holy Spirit, he will find that in reality these tests and difficulties have been the gifts of God to enable him to grow and develop.”ⁱⁱⁱ On behalf of Shoghi Effendi

It can be especially difficult to navigate a test when you don't see any good reason for it, and when you wish that something different were happening instead. Perhaps you are not accepted into the university of your choice, you lose a job, a child dies at a young age, or there is a pandemic. Reaching a point of contentment with the Will of God can take you through grieving and angry resistance, but with time, prayer, meditation, consultation, and love, you can persevere and trust in God's greater wisdom. This is the goal:

“The first and foremost duty prescribed unto men, next to the recognition of Him Who is the Eternal Truth, is the duty of steadfastness in His Cause. Cleave thou unto it, and be of them whose minds are firmly fixed

and grounded in God. No act, however meritorious, did or can ever compare unto it. It is the king of all acts, and to this thy Lord, the All-Highest, the Most Powerful, will testify....

“The virtues and attributes pertaining unto God are all evident and manifest, and have been mentioned and described in all the heavenly Books. Among them are trustworthiness, truthfulness, purity of heart while communing with God, forbearance, resignation to whatever the Almighty hath decreed, contentment with the things His Will hath provided, patience, nay, thankfulness in the midst of tribulation, and complete reliance, in all circumstances, upon Him. These rank, according to the estimate of God, among the highest and most laudable of all acts. All other acts are, and will ever remain, secondary and subordinate unto them....

“The spirit that animateth the human heart is the knowledge of God, and its truest adorning is the recognition of the truth that ‘He doeth whatsoever He willeth, and ordaineth that which He pleaseth.’ Its raiment is the fear of God, and its perfection steadfastness in His Faith. Thus God instructeth whosoever seeketh Him. He, verily, loveth the one that turneth towards Him. There is none other God but Him, the Forgiving, the Most Bountiful. All praise be to God, the Lord of all worlds.”^{iv} Bahá’u’lláh

Powerfully taking on the challenges

Often the way people respond to difficulties may not feel very enlightened. It can be easier to whine and complain or try to escape them than to handle them in a positive way. However, there are many spiritual benefits to tests and how you respond to them. They are often an opportunity to re-examine your spiritual life and re-connect to God and faith in an authentic way. They are designed for you to become a better person. Consider these quotations:

“Meditate profoundly, that the secret of things unseen may be revealed unto you, that you may inhale the sweetness of a spiritual and imperishable fragrance, and that you may acknowledge the truth that from time immemorial even unto eternity the Almighty hath tried, and will continue to try, His servants, so that light may be distinguished from darkness, truth from falsehood, right from wrong, guidance from error, happiness from misery, and roses from thorns.”^v Bahá’u’lláh

“The more one is severed from the world, from desires, from human affairs, and conditions, the more impervious does one become to the tests of God. Tests are a means by which a soul is measured as to its fitness, and proven out by its own acts. God knows its fitness before-hand, and also its unpreparedness, but man, with an ego, would not believe himself unfit unless proof were given him. Consequently his susceptibility to evil is proven to him when he falls into the tests, and the tests are continued until the soul realizes its own unfitness, then remorse and regret tend to root out the weakness. The same test comes again in greater degree, until it is shown that a former weakness has become a strength, and the power to overcome evil has been established.”^{vi} ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

When problems happen or you make a mistake, it’s an opportunity to learn and strengthen your wisdom and good judgment. However, wisdom also comes from studying and internalizing spiritual teachings, so sometimes you can prevent damaging results when you pay attention in advance:

“In exasperating situations, we must find the time to pause and reflect if we are not afterwards to regret our words and actions. The Golden Rule, ‘Do unto others what you would have them do unto you’ or ‘Do not do to others that which you do not wish done to yourself’ is a useful guideline for action.”^{vii} M. Sefidvash

Part of your life journey includes determining who a test belongs to. Sometimes you may try to rescue or manage other people’s tests for them, which often interferes in their learning and development. If you focus on your own challenges and inner battles in learning to live by spiritual principles, you will achieve your own victories and growth. Of course, you can still compassionately offer to help or accompany others, but it’s good to be clear

and wise in the process that you aren't doing for others what is vital they do for themselves. What can look initially like kindness to another person can result in handicapping them over time. Here is some guidance:

“Ultimately all the battle of life is within the individual. No amount of organization can solve the inner problems or produce or prevent, as the case may be, victory or failure at a crucial moment. In such times as these particularly, individuals are torn by great forces at large in the world, and we see some weak ones suddenly become miraculously strong, and strong ones fail—we can only try, through loving advice...to bring about the act on the part of the believer which will be for the highest good of the Cause. Because obviously something bad for the Cause cannot be the highest good of the individual Bahá'í.”^{viii} On behalf of Shoghi Effendi

The teachings encourage you in these ways:

“... [A]s we suffer these misfortunes we must remember that the Prophets of God Themselves were not immune from these things which men suffer. They knew sorrow, illness and pain too. They rose above these things through Their spirits, and that is what we must try and do too, when afflicted. The troubles of this world pass, and what we have left is what we have made of our souls; so it is to this we must look—to becoming more spiritual, drawing nearer to God, no matter what our human minds and bodies go through.”^{ix} On behalf of Shoghi Effendi

“Life in this world is a succession of tests and achievements, of falling short and of making new spiritual advances. Sometimes the course may seem very hard, but one can witness, again and again, that the soul who steadfastly obeys the Law of Bahá'u'lláh, however hard it may seem, grows spiritually, while the one who compromises with the law for the sake of his own apparent happiness is seen to have been following a chimera: he does not attain the happiness he sought, he retards his spiritual advance and often brings new problems upon himself.”^x Universal House of Justice

As you go through difficulties, your self-confidence grows, and you resiliently gain a mental toughness that helps you push through the next one that comes. You learn what you can do, and this spreads to all areas of your life.

Utilizing learning in action

The Universal House of Justice encourages the culture of the Bahá'í community to be one of acting and then learning. This makes it easier to relax and not try so hard to be perfect. You can step forward in courage to try something new with less worry about failure or criticism from others. It's also easier to accept a mistake if you gain learning from it. Here is guidance about “learning in action”:

“... [T]he friends participate in an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation in order to address obstacles and share successes, reexamine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time.”^{xi} Universal House of Justice

Remember from Chapter 9 this SCAR acronym that could potentially assist you to recall the various inter-related and synergistic elements of learning in action and that scars can result from being bravely in action:

S: Study
C: Consult
A: Act
R: Reflect

How does SCAR relate to learning in action for you?

This is someone's perspective:

"You need to understand with compassion that being alive is hard work. It's okay to have a cushion to sit down on instead of a hard rock though. You think better, think further. I believe in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, but I also believe in miracles. So, if a person lives without all the basics in life, do I believe their spirit is capable of having transcendental experiences? Of course I do. But do I think it's the best way, the efficient way to train a human? No I don't. Hardships and tests and difficulties do wake us up, but is it the only way to wake up? Very few of us trust the route of love, understanding, and education, waking up by learning it, and getting it."

While you are becoming a spiritual man, the following can be your attitude:

"See difficulties as learning opportunities that will expand your talents and capacities. Remind yourself that you can positively influence much of what happens in life. See yourself as capable and as an active participant in your world. Even when a problem has aspects that cannot be changed, trust that if you are resourceful, you will be able to use the situation to learn new ways of responding to it. Welcome change and challenge. Have faith that greater life meaning and satisfaction will emerge from each stressful situation."^{xii} Stephen Post

Even when you know the standards for how to best behave as a spiritual man, both individually and with others, you will still struggle to meet them at times. Our goal as human beings is always to strive for excellence, but perfection isn't possible. Here is some encouragement:

"He is very happy to see that you have put into practice one of the most encouraging precepts of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in which He said that we should try and make every stumbling-block a stepping-stone to progress. In the course of your past life you have all stumbled very gravely; but, far from being embittered or defeated by this experience, you are determined to make it a means of purifying your natures, improving your characters, and enabling you to become better citizens in the future. This is truly pleasing in the eyes of God."^{xiii} On behalf of Shoghi Effendi

Failures, which happen to everyone, teach humility and trust in the mercy and forgiveness of God. They provide opportunities to ask for assistance, make amends, and learn new ways of speaking and acting. Problems give you opportunities to strengthen your character and make better choices the next time. Addressing issues rather than hiding from them produces a life of high integrity.

Getting a hand up from others

As has been mentioned throughout the book, you can bravely turn to others for support when you have challenges, or to prevent challenges. Often the insights from others dramatically change the outcome. Here is some guidance:

"When a believer has a problem concerning which he must make a decision, he has several courses open to him. If it is a matter that affects the interests of the Faith he should consult with the appropriate Assembly or committee, but individuals have many problems which are purely personal and there is no obligation upon them to take such problems to the institutions of the Faith; indeed, when the needs of the teaching work are of such urgency it is better if the friends will not burden their Assemblies with personal problems that they can solve by themselves. A Bahá'í who has a problem may wish to make his own decision upon it after prayer and after weighing all the aspects of it in his own mind; he may prefer to seek the counsel of individual friends or of professional counselors such as his doctor or lawyer so that he can consider such advice when making his decision; or in a case where several people are involved, such as a family situation, he may want to gather

together those who are affected so that they may arrive at a collective decision. There is also no objection whatever to a Bahá'í asking a group of people to consult together on a problem facing him. It should be borne in mind that all consultation is aimed at arriving at a solution to a problem and is quite different from the sort of group baring of the soul that is popular in some circles these days which borders on the kind of confession that is forbidden in the Faith."^{xiv} Universal House of Justice

A man reflects:

"I think being raised with a strong Bahá'í foundation was what gave me the tools to navigate the negative influences. Even with that though, I did fall down a lot and gave in to many of those pressures. But having the Faith was what made me strong enough to pull myself back out. The junior youth and youth groups have become a powerful tool for helping young people get through that age with more strength. The hardest thing can be feeling like you are alone in life, and for youth to be surrounded with quality friends and other youth going through the same things, and studying how to handle the pressures, is so helpful. It's impossible to 'protect' young people from the pressures. Inevitably they will be exposed to them in some form, but the most important thing is addressing the negative influences and talking about how to handle them.

"Sometimes people think talking about negative forces in the world might make them more likely to happen, but I think talking about them directly makes them feel less daunting. It's also important to hear that making a mistake isn't the end, because I've known many people that made one mistake and then felt they were no longer good enough to be a Bahá'í. I think society creates the idea that we are born pure and then become less pure as we make mistakes. But in the Faith, it's through tests that we become more pure. And God knows we will fail. He sends us the same test over and over at a greater degree until that weakness becomes a strength. If God knows that and loves us even when we fall down, then as parents, peers, friends, and Bahá'ís we need to help people feel that as well."

Action

1. Invite a small group of trusted people to hold a reflection gathering and consultation about your life. The goal will be to identify challenges that you are tripping over and capture learning opportunities and devise solutions. Carry out the solutions and re-assess the situation(s).
2. Identify two lessons you have learned from difficulties and share them by creating a challenging learning activity for junior youth, youth, or others.
3. Set up and carry out a camping expedition with others that includes many elements of "roughing it". Look ahead to some of what may happen and plan for the challenges that you can. Experience the trip and assess the learning together with the others who participated, including a review of the character qualities that the group members applied and strengthened.
4. Identify a new sport, fitness workout, or martial art that you want to learn. Begin lessons or training and notice the difficulties involved. What are you learning? What is beneficial? What stops you from wanting to continue participating? How can you address any difficulties that are occurring?
5. Plan and go on a challenging hike with a small group. Look ahead and plan for safe passages. Work together to traverse the rougher areas. Afterward, reflect together on how you handled the difficulties involved.

Reflection

1. How do I generally respond to tests and challenges that arise?
2. When do I rely on avoidance or turn to alcohol, drugs, sex, or other means of trying to ignore or forget what is happening?
3. What would I like to improve about my responses to difficulties?
4. What have I learned from a difficulty in the past?
5. When have I successfully used learning from a difficult situation to improve actions in a new situation?
6. What specific character qualities have I strengthened or am I currently strengthening from working through a difficulty? [Refer back to Chapter 8 for a list of possible qualities.]
7. When have I successfully reached out and received assistance from a person, group, or institution when a problem was happening? What in my life now would benefit from doing this outreach?

ⁱ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, #14

ⁱⁱ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, #57

ⁱⁱⁱ On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, #247

^{iv} Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, # CXXXIV, pp. 290-291

^v Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 8

^{vi} ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in the “Understanding Tests” letter from the Research Department of the Bahá’í World Centre to the Universal House of Justice, July 17, 1989

^{vii} M. Sefidvash, *Coral and Pearls*, pp. 27-28

^{viii} On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, #1297

^{ix} On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, #1322

^x Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, #1209

^{xi} Universal House of Justice, *Framework for Action*, #54.5

^{xii} Stephen Post, *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*, p. 114

^{xiii} On behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá’ís of Kitalya Farm Prison, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, #1337

^{xiv} Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, #589