

# **Building a Fortress for Wellbeing,**

## **An Essay on Bahá'í Marriage Preparation**

by David Bowers

1

Our culture virtually brainwashes us young folk into being obsessed with sex and relationships. Certainly, finding a spouse is a worthy pursuit, yet we are so overtaken with this desire that we forget to ask *how* to find the right partner in the first place. The thought that we should have to learn such a thing is itself a novelty. We get into relationships only to get out of them again. Everyone knows that relationships hardly ever last for life, and many have given up hope that they ever can. Fortunately, I have found the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith to be invaluable in formulating a response to this crisis of love, especially in terms of helping young people like me acquire a refined character as a solid foundation for marriage, as well as an understanding about the family's role in the world, both of which will help ensure the happy relationships we so strongly desire.

2

People today often speak about love as if it "just happens," as if we must "find the right person" and discover "a match made in heaven." We often tend to look for romance as a passion-filled festival of the heart without considering the logic of our search at all. We end up failing to take full responsibility for the health of our married life by acting as if there is nothing we can actively do to prepare for marriage. We usually just wait for magic to happen all on its own.

3

This creates a predicament for those people who recognize that God will probably not deliver to them a wonderful marriage without effort on their part. Since so few people are trying to learn how to be married, effective guidance on the matter is scarce at best. ***"What 'oppression' is more grievous,"*** wrote Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, ***"than that a soul seeking the truth, and***

**wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it? For opinions have sorely differed, and the ways unto the attainment of God have multiplied.”** (*The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 31). We see a torrent of “advice” about relationships constantly raining down on us, but true understanding is as rare as fresh water in the ocean.

4

In reversing this trend, we must radically change our perspective. The Bahá'í Teachings indicate that successful marriage has a lot more to do with our conscious efforts to acquire the attributes of God than it does with fate. God does not make the “right one” magically appear for us without action on our part. Rather, God guides us through the efforts we make in His path. Bahá'u'lláh said that marriage is **“a fortress for well-being.”** God’s greatest gift is in making us work at building this fortress brick by brick. He will never do it for us. A friend of mine once told me, “God can’t steer a parked car.”

5

Rather than ask ourselves, “How will I *find* the right person?” we might find it much more fruitful to ponder, “How shall I *become* the right person?” Clearly, the foundation of the fortress of marriage, a praiseworthy character, is laid in the two partners’ hearts long before they get engaged, and usually before they even meet each other. If we understand this, we have a precious opportunity to demonstrate the process of self-discovery through prayer, meditation, and self-refinement that one must undertake before being ready for marriage.

6

Only after a number of the necessary qualities for marriage have been acquired in this process can we recognize other potential partners who have acquired them also. Then the question of finding will be much simpler. For me, this process has meant getting a clear idea of what qualities are most useful in a marriage and then setting out to acquire them, long before looking for marriage myself. One must examine the various difficulties people have in marriage, try to understand what usually brings them about, and prepare oneself for

overcoming them. A healthy sense of humility will encourage us on our way, too: we can never know everything about this, and frankly, we don't have to. God knows everything. We have to become as connected to Him as possible, and then seek out that knowledge through our relationship with Him.

7

My general rule of thumb is this: my future wife (whoever she is) and I will be more or less the same together as we are apart. If each of us maintains a happy disposition individually, we will probably be happy together. If each of us looks for the best in each person we meet, and succeeds in loving all humanity on a daily basis, then we should be able to love each other very well. If the two of us naturally take the initiative in service to humanity, if we are each different enough to complement one another in this service, and if we both handle great difficulties with maturity and composure, then we will probably be of great benefit to the world together. We should each have our own passionate love for God; we should each have similar goals in this earthly life, as well as harmonious lifestyles, world-views, dispositions and habits; we should both be socially adept enough to know how to emotionally gratify the other person, to set them at ease, to make them laugh, and to let them know our deep, sincere love for them on an daily basis, and we should already be doing this for our other friends and family; if we are not, then we will probably not do it for each other. Finally, we should both be attracted to each others' bodies, and feel very comfortable in each other's arms for hours on end.

8

On this last point, I find that physical attraction in a mature person has as much to do with the mental and spiritual qualities of the loved one as it does with their physical appearance. Furthermore, as we refuse to let society tell us what beauty should look like, we will find that great varieties of features make most people very attractive.

9

Attaining all of this requires a lot of individual work outside of romantic relationships. We must learn these qualities based in everyday life before we even think about using them in marriage or romance. It is unfortunate that our society never systematically teaches us these qualities, and encourages us to “practice” with romantic relationships instead. Such practice tends to confuse the issue more often than it helps, because it focuses us so much on specific relationships instead of on the broader skills of living that we need to make them work. We get involved as lovers before we can even make ourselves happy. We try to fill a void in our lives with a new person instead of a new attitude.

10

Relationships cannot “make us happy” so much as they can add to a happiness that we already have. Romance without readiness will bring misery, just as romance with readiness will almost never end.

11

Consider for a moment, if I may slightly digress, that we could teach these qualities in kids very early. It is a lot harder for a 23-year-old such as myself to develop them in himself than it is for a 10- or 11-year-old. If we “grown-ups” had been encouraged to greedily acquire happiness and maturity as children, it would be a lot easier for us to marry wisely, even at a young age. If we, in our turn, look to the future of the children we educate, we may see them thanking us profusely for actively teaching them how to have healthy relationships before the big questions about “love” even arise. As their peers begin to blunder terribly with the opposite sex, they will already be equipped to protect themselves and to use their knowledge in assisting others.

12

Another radical change the Bahá'í Teachings call for is in our perspective on the nature and purpose of marriage. We often think of marriage as a “fortress for (*our own*) well-being.” This view, definitely the predominant one in our society, is a self-centred

approach. The Bahá'í Writings imply that God created marriage for the betterment of the whole human race. If we do not recognize this, our efforts to make ourselves happy will only lead to our misery.

13

In general, a fortress is not a place of peace and tranquillity. A fortress is often a stronghold in a battlefield, a particularly strategic spot on the landscape that requires protection from enemy forces. As I understand Bahá'u'lláh's vision for a spiritual World Order, there is no school more important than the family, no teachers more necessary than the mother and the father, and no pupils more worthwhile and critical than the children. That strategic spot on the landscape is none other than the future of these kids.

14

It is the family's responsibility to secure their children against the manifold forces of evil in the world by imbuing them with the love of God and the knowledge of His teachings for this Day. These children will, in their turn, grow up to be the redeemers of humanity, the dawn-breakers of a peaceful world civilization, the bricklayers of a great peace beyond our wildest dreams. As the challenges and difficulties of the world they inherit from us must increase, so we need to empower them to surmount heights we could never dream of, and surpass us in all the paths of service to God and humanity. That is the primary goal of this "fortress" for the "well-being" of the whole human race.

15

This fortress, if it understands its role properly, should constantly devote itself to the good of all people. Each member of the family needs to be aware of his mission as a servant of God and humanity, and work unitedly with the others to expand the borders of the country of God's Love. A spiritual family will naturally, collectively arise to promote spiritual thought and action. Children can be progressively encouraged to share their spirituality with their fellow human beings from the time they are first able to speak and reason. The parents can first lead their children by example, and then

systematically instruct them as to how to do what they are doing. Action is the primary text in this school, and words but supplements to it.

16

In sum, we need not seek at first to “find someone,” but rather to “become someone.” By steadily adopting a spiritual perspective, and acquiring those skills of love that enable us to be happy, selfless, and mature, we will become most able to discern a good partner from a bad one, and will firmly establish a “fortress for well-being.” We will ensure our own happiness in the quest to serve humanity and nurture the future of our children. As we understand our role in history as parents and educators to be sacred and inestimably important, we will extend through our actions a priceless gift to all the thousands of human generations yet to come.

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***Note About the Author:***

David Bowers was born in the United States, but since writing this article in 2003, he has spent years as a teacher abroad, mostly in China. He married in 2009, and now has two sons, born in 2010 and 2015.