

Investigation of Character, Courtship Practices, and Selection of a Marriage Partner:

Excerpts from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi and of the Universal House of Justice

From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Marriage, among the mass of the people, is a physical bond, and this union can only be temporary, since it is foredoomed to a physical separation at the close.

Among the people of Bahá, however, marriage must be a union of the body and of the spirit as well, for here both husband and wife are aglow with the same wine, both are enamored of the same matchless Face, both live and move through the same spirit, both are illumined by the same glory. This connection between them is a spiritual one, hence it is a bond that will abide forever. Likewise do they enjoy strong and lasting ties in the physical world as well, for if the marriage is based both on the spirit and the body, that union is a true one, hence it will endure. If, however, the bond is physical and nothing more, it is sure to be only temporary, and must inexorably end in separation.

When, therefore, the people of Bahá undertake to marry, the union must be a true relationship, a spiritual coming together as well as a physical one, so that throughout every phase of life, and in all the worlds of God, their union will endure; for this real oneness is a gleaming out of the love of God.

(Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, paragraphs 84.2–84.4) [1]

As for the question regarding marriage under the Law of God: first thou must choose one who is pleasing to thee, and then the matter is subject to the consent of father and mother. Before thou makest thy choice, they have no right to interfere.

(Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, paragraph 85.1) [2]

Bahá’í marriage is the commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart. Each must, however, exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other, that the binding covenant between them may be a tie that will endure forever. Their purpose must be this: to become loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity....

The true marriage of Bahá’ís is this, that husband and wife should be united both physically and spiritually, that they may ever improve the spiritual life of each other, and may enjoy everlasting unity throughout all the worlds of God. This is Bahá’í marriage.

(Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, paragraphs 86.1–86.2) [3]

From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

I wish to assure you, in particular, of his supplications for your guidance in connection with your proposed plan to unite in marriage with Dr. May the Beloved help you in forming the right decision, and spare you the anxiety and suffering which too hasty action in such matters inevitably produces. You should give this question, which is of such vital concern

to your future, the full consideration it deserves, and examine all its aspects carefully and dispassionately. The final decision rests with you and Dr.

(From a letter dated 17 January 1939 to an individual believer) [4]

The Bahá'í youth should, on the one hand, be taught the lesson of self-control, which, when exercised, undoubtedly has a salutary effect on the development of character and of personality in general, and on the other should be advised, nay even encouraged, to contract marriage while still young and in full possession of their physical vigour. 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.

(From a letter dated 13 December 1940 to an individual believer) [5]

Your question regarding your marriage is one that the Guardian feels you must decide for yourself, through prayer, and the consideration of your own feelings in the matter.

(From a letter dated 11 January 1942 to an individual believer) [6]

He realizes your desire to get married is quite a natural one, and he will pray that God will assist you to find a suitable companion with whom you can be truly happy and united in the service of the Faith. Bahá'u'lláh has urged marriage upon all people as the natural and rightful way of life. He has also, however, placed strong emphasis on its spiritual nature, which, while in no way precluding a normal physical life, is the most essential aspect of marriage. That two people should live their lives in love and harmony is of far greater importance than that they should be consumed with passion for each other. The one is a great rock of strength on which to lean in time of need; the other a purely temporary thing which may at any time die out.

(From a letter dated 20 January 1943 to an individual believer) [7]

There is no teaching in the Bahá'í Faith that "soul mates" exist. What is meant is that marriage should lead to a profound friendship of spirit, which will endure in the next world, where there is no sex, and no giving and taking in marriage; just the way we should establish with our parents, our children, our brothers and sisters and friends a deep spiritual bond which will be everlasting, and not merely physical bonds of human relationship.

(From a letter dated 4 December 1954 to an individual believer) [8]

From Letters Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

... each prospective marriage presents highly individualized relationships, and the decision to marry should preferably be made after acquaintanceship and exploration of each other's character and background and, if necessary, with counsel from trusted friends.

(From a letter dated 23 March 1980 to an individual believer) [9]

The House of Justice ... feels you may wish to stress the importance that marriage has for the whole structure of human society, for the two families and for the children who would be the fruit of the union. Entering into a marriage is a step that has tremendous implications for a whole range of people beyond the couple themselves, both in this life and in the next....

...

The choice of a marriage partner is left to the individual, and then the choice is conditioned upon the consent of the parents. The Assembly has no right to enter into the question of the character or beliefs of the non-Bahá'í partner to a marriage; these are issues for the Bahá'í bride or groom and the parents to weigh in coming to their decisions.

(From a letter dated 16 April 1980 to a National Spiritual Assembly) [10]

The question you raise is a very important one but, as you yourself say, the decision lies in your own hands. You are right to consider the matter very carefully because a Bahá'í should enter into married state with the full intention of establishing a union that will not only be life-long but will be an eternal companionship in all the worlds of God.

A married couple can be a tremendous strength and support to each other, but building a strong, united marriage requires persistence, effort, and the overcoming of many difficulties together. Thus 'Abdu'l-Bahá advises a young couple to get to know each other's characters thoroughly before taking this very important step. They must think not only of the effect on each other but of the effects of their characters on the children who will be the fruit of the marriage.

(From a letter dated 19 April 1981 to an individual believer) [11]

The Bahá'í Teachings do not contemplate any form of "trial marriage". A couple should study each other's character and spend time getting to know each other before they decide to marry, and when they do marry it should be with the intention of establishing an eternal bond.

(From a letter dated 3 November 1982 to an individual believer) [12]

The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of 4 October 1982 asking a number of questions about marriage, and we have been asked to convey the following in reply.

1. With regard to the importance of money in establishing a happy and stable relationship between partners to a marriage, it is obvious that the circumstances of the partners vary from case to case and much depends on their attitudes towards material comforts. Many couples are able to be extremely happy with relatively little income. In a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer it is stated, "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 over stressed."
2. As to qualities a man should look for in seeking a life partner, no universal guidelines can be set forth as whatever characteristics or conditions one considers essential are, of course, subjective and relative....

3. Concerning marriage customs in the East and West, one must remember there are qualities and customs in both eastern and western cultures which are undesirable, while there are others which are in harmony with the spirit of Bahá'í teachings. For example, the importance of family life is stressed in some cultures, and means less in others....
4. A study of the writings and letters of Shoghi Effendi will disclose that he has enumerated several "characteristics of a decadent society" which bear on the breakdown of marital bonds and are at the basis of the rising tide of divorce. Several of these are set forth below for your study.
 - . The weakening of family solidarity
 - . The laxity of parental control
 - . The irresponsible attitude towards marriage
 - . The refusal to regard the procreation of children as sacred and primary purpose of marriage
 - . The attitude of the young in caring less and less for their parents' wishes
 - . The notion that divorce is a natural right, and that it can be sought on the flimsiest, most unwarrantable and shabby pretexts
 - . The corrosive forces of present-day society which destroy home life and the beauty of family relationships
5. Concerning your last question it is not within the purview of functions of the Universal House of Justice to advise anyone to marry a particular individual....
(From a letter dated 9 November 1982 to an individual believer) [13]

Your letter describes a dream you had recently which you feel may have bearing on the question of whether to marry a man who has proposed to you. The House of Justice has asked us to say that, while the Bahá'í Writings recognize that truth is sometimes conveyed through dreams, we are also told that dreams are subject to influence by the mind of the dreamer. For this reason, Bahá'ís are advised not to attach too much importance to dreams as a source of guidance.

In deciding about marriage, you should give careful attention to the advice of 'Abdu'l-Bahá....¹

In the process of becoming "thoroughly acquainted with the character" of the individual to whom you are considering marriage, you may also wish to consult with members of your family and those friends whose judgment you trust.

(From a letter dated 29 December 1989 to an individual believer) [14]

The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of 26 June 1990 in which you raise certain questions concerning courtship and marriage.

Regarding your first question, there is nothing in the Bahá'í Writings which relates specifically to the so-called dating practices prevalent in some parts of the world, where two unmarried people of the opposite sex participate together in a social activity. In general, Bahá'ís who are planning to involve themselves in this form of behaviour should become well

¹ Quoting "Bahá'í marriage ... time and eternity...." (See extract no. 3)

aware of the Bahá'í teachings on chastity and, with these in mind, should scrupulously avoid any actions which would arouse passions which might well tempt them to violate these teachings. In deciding what acts are permissible in the light of these considerations, the youth should use their own judgment, giving due consideration to the advice of their parents, taking account of the prevailing customs of the society in which they live, and prayerfully following the guidance of their conscience. It is the sacred duty of parents to instil in their children the exalted Bahá'í standard of moral conduct, and the importance of adherence to this standard cannot be over-emphasized as a basis for true happiness and for successful marriage.

(From a letter dated 2 August 1990 to an individual believer) [15]

In contemplating the choice of a future marriage partner, it is suggested that you study the Writings on marriage and family life to glean general principles to guide you. Your Local or National Spiritual Assembly could undoubtedly recommend sources of material on the subject. There are several steps you could consider should you contemplate marriage at some time in the future and if you would like advice on your choice of a marriage partner: turn to the Blessed Beauty in prayer for guidance and assistance; weigh carefully the character of the person according to the guidelines on marriage you find in the Holy Writings; and consult with your Local Spiritual Assembly, family or trusted friends to obtain their views. Ultimately such a decision rests with you, and depends also on the consent of parents; however, the above may provide the support you require in taking such an important step in your life.

(From a letter dated 23 December 1992 to an individual believer) [16]

As you know, courtship practices differ greatly from one culture to another, and it is not yet known what pattern of courtship will emerge in the future when society has been more influenced by Bahá'í Teachings. However, there is no indication that it will resemble the practices extant in existing cultures.... In this interim period, the friends are encouraged to make great efforts to live in conformity with the Teachings and to gradually forge a new pattern of behaviour, more in keeping with the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. In this context, we offer the following comments.

Although a Bahá'í may, if he chooses, seek his parents' advice on the choice of a partner, and although Bahá'í parents may give such advice if asked, it is clear from the Teachings that parents do not have the right to interfere in their children's actual choice of a prospective partner until approached for their consent to marry. Therefore, when discussing the issue of courtship with your sons, it would be best to discuss it on the level of principle without reference to individuals.

In the context of the society in which your family now lives, a society in which materialism, self-centredness and failing marriages are all too common, your sons may well feel that it is wise to have a long period of courtship in which the prospective partners spend much time together and become thoroughly acquainted with each other's character, background and family. This practice does not in itself contradict Bahá'í law and, as it is not unacceptable in ..., it appears to be a viable option. As you are aware, Bahá'u'lláh ordained that Bahá'í engagement should not exceed 95 days, and, although this law has not yet been applied universally, it highlights the desirability of marrying quickly once the decision to marry has been firmly taken and parental consent obtained. However, in a relationship in which such a decision has not been taken and in which the law of chastity is strictly observed, there is no objection, in principle, to a prolonged friendship in which the two individuals entertain the possibility of marrying each other at some time in the future.

(From a letter dated 28 August 1994 to an individual believer) [17]

The Bahá'í teachings set clear prerequisites for marriage which, if carefully applied, minimize the possibility of a breakdown of this important institution. One such requirement is that the couple should independently choose each other and confidently have a mutual desire to be united in marriage, and such desire should be founded not only on love but also on mutual satisfaction arising from an investigation of the character of each other. All this is preliminary to their seeking parental consent.

(From a letter dated 6 June 1997 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[18]

One of the cardinal principles of the Faith, and one of the primary duties given to every individual in this Dispensation, is to investigate reality independently. This is an aspect of the quality of justice, “the best beloved of all things”, as Bahá'u'lláh says. An application of this principle and of this duty in relation to marriage is for the individual to become fully informed of the character of any prospective partner he or she is contemplating for marriage....

Although the primary responsibility for so doing naturally rests with the two individuals concerned, their parents have a vital role to play in this respect, as they must decide whether or not to give their consent for the marriage. They can provide a different and perhaps more detached perspective in determining whether a potential spouse is suitable for their child. Parents give or withhold their consent for marriage for reasons of their own, and in this regard they are responsible to God alone; the expectation is that they will act with justice and with fairness to the parties concerned.

As is the case with other situations that require the investigation of facts so as to be able to make informed decisions, information must be gathered from reliable sources until the individuals responsible for making the decision are satisfied that they have an adequate picture. Even so, all the facts that one would wish to have in hand are not always obtainable, as one cannot go beyond reasonable measures of investigation....

One of the questions that may arise in connection with the investigation of the character of a potential spouse is whether the sharing of facts and the consultation with others that may be necessary for an informed decision constitute backbiting. In this respect, there is a clear distinction between speaking ill of others and passing on important information out of genuine concern for the good of innocent persons. It is worth noting that the House of Justice, in answers to previous queries, has clarified that the injunction against backbiting is different in character from disclosing, in an appropriate remedial context, the abusive actions of others towards oneself and others. Where such action is justified, as in the case where one may be recovering from the effects of abuse or when the protection of other innocent individuals is concerned, then one should not hesitate to take whatever action, consistent with Bahá'í principles, is needed.

(From a letter dated 3 May 2007 to an individual believer)

[19]

When two believers begin to investigate each other's character with the possibility of marriage in mind, they must establish between them a level of openness and close communication. They will themselves determine if, when and how they will share past and personal experiences. In this process, it is necessary to reconcile a variety of spiritual principles and obligations. Truthfulness and trustworthiness are essential of course, yet other aspects of the teachings must be weighed, such as Shoghi Effendi's guidance that

while a believer may choose to acknowledge to another a wrong or fault of character, one is not obliged to do so. In connection with preparation for marriage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

Bahá'í marriage is the commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart. Each must, however, exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other, that the binding covenant between them may be a tie that will endure forever. Their purpose must be this: to become loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity....

As this sensitive interaction unfolds, generally, it is not the business of others to interfere. It is understandable that family or friends may feel a desire to contribute to a particular outcome, but they must not overstep the bounds of the explicit guidance provided in the teachings.

There is a distinction to be made between speaking about the mistakes and shortcomings of others, which is backbiting, and protecting someone from the harmful or evil intentions of an abuser, a chronic liar or a sociopath. Serious concerns can, of course, be brought to the attention of the relevant institution of the Faith should circumstances require.

(From a letter dated 16 September 2013 to an individual believer)

[20]

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 11 January 2015, in which you enquire whether you should consider potential marriage partners who are not Bahá'ís....

To date, nothing has been found in the Writings of the Central Figures of the Faith or the letters written by or on behalf of Shoghi Effendi that offers an explanation of why Bahá'u'lláh allowed marriage to non-believers. Similarly, no statement has been found that suggests that such marriages are either encouraged or discouraged. Thus, you are free to come to your own conclusions. You may wish to meditate on the matter as you consider the question of marriage as it relates to the purpose and direction of your life. In this connection, you may find it helpful to consult with family or friends whose judgement you respect.

(From a letter dated 22 March 2015 to an individual believer)

[21]