

Devotional Gathering: Character & Marriage Preparation

Introduction

An important task as you think about a possible future marriage is to use reflection, prayer, and meditation to assess your own character completely and honestly. This process assists you with understanding your strengths as well as your areas for growth. It will also give you knowledge about character that will help you to learn about a partner's character.

You may or may not be familiar with character. Simply put, **character is:**

- The sum of all the qualities you develop throughout your life as you make choices about how to speak and act; character affects the majority of your words and actions
- The spiritual essence of who you are as a human being
- Your moral compass or ethical strength that provides the unwavering drive to choose what is right, even when that choice could cause you difficulties, and even if no one else is watching you or knows what you are doing

Your reputation is what others think about you. Your character is who you truly are. And you have significant ability to practice these qualities with others for their benefit and yours, as well as to transform the ones that are weaker. You can build a good reputation for yourself by developing strong character qualities. That change comes from the inside and will naturally reflect outward, rather than reputation, which often affects how we then act or react inside.

Throughout your life, you will feel inner forces pulling you toward either beneficial or harmful behaviors. Whichever direction you choose controls your word, actions, and attitudes, and therefore all your interactions with others. Of course, your choices then significantly affect your life and relationships. Your higher nature or best self is composed of your character strengths. Some people refer to this higher nature as the spiritual self, which they believe reflects the qualities of God. Regardless of what you believe, you can still be aware of this higher nature within you and the importance of developing character strengths.

As you practice character strengths effectively, and you experience positive outcomes from your words and actions, your higher nature evolves. Imagine yourself as a mirror reflecting the life-giving and warming light of the sun as you reflect character strengths to others. The more you polish your mirror by paying attention to character strengths, the more clearly you will reflect them.

Once you have a potential partner or partner, you will begin the process of assessing his or her character and behavior to the best of your ability. No one would expect a partner to be perfect...or would they?! If you pause and honestly evaluate your hopes for a partner, you might find that you have that unrealistic expectation and will need to work on detaching from it. However, it *is* wise to choose a partner who can practice many qualities effectively, especially the ones that are most important to you. While being attracted to each other is important, character is more lasting than simply initial chemistry, and it can sustain the bond between the two of you.

Musical selections are wonderful for touching people's hearts, and you are encouraged to use them whenever appropriate.

Quotations

1. O Divine Providence! This assemblage is composed of Thy friends who are attracted to Thy beauty and are set ablaze by the fire of Thy love. Turn these souls into heavenly angels, resuscitate them through the breath of Thy Holy Spirit, grant them eloquent tongues and resolute hearts, bestow upon them heavenly power and merciful susceptibilities, cause them to become the promulgators of the oneness of mankind and the cause of love and concord in the world of humanity, so that the perilous darkness of ignorant prejudice may vanish through the light of the Sun of Truth, this dreary world may become illumined, this material realm may absorb the rays of the world of spirit, these different colors may merge into one color and the melody of praise may rise to the kingdom of Thy sanctity. Verily, Thou art the Omnipotent and the Almighty! (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 105)
2. The light of a good character surpasseth the light of the sun and the radiance thereof. Whoso attaineth unto it is accounted as a jewel among men. The glory and the upliftment of the world must needs depend upon it. (Bahá’u’lláh: *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 36)
3. ...[M]an should know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty. (Bahá’u’lláh: *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 35)
4. Let there be naught in your demeanor of which sound and upright minds would disapprove, and make not yourselves the playthings of the ignorant. Well is it with him who hath adorned himself with the vesture of seemly conduct and a praiseworthy character. He is assuredly reckoned with those who aid their Lord through distinctive and outstanding deeds. (Bahá’u’lláh: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 77)
5. In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. ... Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his Divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature. Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man's spiritual nature.... (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 60)
6. It is my hope that you may consider this matter, that you may search out your own imperfections and not think of the imperfections of anybody else. Strive with all your power to be free from imperfections. Heedless souls are always seeking faults in others. What can the hypocrite know of others' faults when he is blind to his own? ... As long as a man does not find his own faults, he can never become perfect. Nothing is more fruitful for man than the knowledge of his own shortcomings. [Bahá’u’lláh] says, “I wonder at the man who does not find his own imperfections.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 244)

7. 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... (*Abdu'l-Bahá: Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 118)
8. 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. (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 380)
9. God has given man the eye of investigation by which he may see and recognize truth.... Man is not intended to see through the eyes of another, hear through another's ears nor comprehend with another's brain. Each human creature has individual endowment, power and responsibility in the creative plan of God. Therefore, depend upon your own reason and judgment and adhere to the outcome of your own investigation... (*Abdu'l-Bahá: Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 293)
10. 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. (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 206)
11. Each person read the name of a character quality that is very applicable to relationships and marriage:

Acceptance	Faithfulness	Patience
Assertiveness	Flexibility	Peacefulness
Beauty	Forgiveness	Perseverance
Caring	Fortitude	Purity
Chastity	Friendliness	Purposefulness
Commitment	Generosity	Resilience
Compassion	Gentleness	Respect
Confidence	Helpfulness	Responsibility
Contentment	Honesty	Self-Discipline
Cooperation	Humility	Service
Courage	Idealism	Sincerity
Courtesy	Integrity	Spirituality
Creativity	Joyfulness	Tactfulness
Detachment	Justice	Thankfulness
Discernment	Kindness	Thoughtfulness
Encouragement	Love	Thriftiness
Enthusiasm	Loyalty	Trustworthiness
Equality	Mercy	Truthfulness
Excellence	Moderation	Unity
		Wisdom

12. Glory be unto Thee, O my God! Verily, this Thy servant and this Thy maidservant have gathered under the shadow of Thy mercy and they are united through Thy favor and generosity. O Lord! Assist them in this Thy world and Thy kingdom and destine for them every good through Thy bounty and grace. O Lord! Confirm them in Thy servitude and assist them in Thy service. Suffer them to become the signs of Thy Name in Thy world and protect them through Thy bestowals which are inexhaustible in this world and the world to come. O Lord! They are supplicating the kingdom of Thy mercifulness and invoking the realm of Thy singleness. Verily, they are married in obedience to Thy command. Cause them to become the signs of harmony and unity until the end of time. Verily, Thou art the Omnipotent, the Omnipresent and the Almighty! (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Bahá’í Prayers* (US 2002), p. 120)
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Reflection and Discussion

1. What is the value of knowing your own self?
 2. How do you know when you are being pulled between your higher and your lower nature? How can you strengthen yourself to make higher nature responses?
 3. How do you know that you are actually beginning to understand your own character? A partner’s character?
 4. What gets in the way of becoming “thoroughly acquainted” with your own character? How can you overcome these challenges? What is easy and wonderful about discovering your own character?
 5. What gets in the way of becoming “thoroughly acquainted” with the character of another person? How can you overcome these challenges? What is easy and wonderful about discovering the character of another person?
 6. What character qualities are most important for you in a partner? How would you identify that your partner practices these qualities consistently and effectively? That they are weak or not present?
 7. What are your possible responses to discovering that a partner is weak at practicing a quality that is important to you? How might discovering something you perceive as a weak character quality affect your relationship and interactions with a partner?
 8. What absent or weak qualities in someone might make you hesitate to be married to him/her?
 9. What roles could others, including your parents, play in the assessment of your own and another’s character in preparation for marriage?
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Non-Religious Quotations About Character

1. “Make it your guiding principle to do your best for others and to be trustworthy in what you say.” (Confucius: *The Analects*, Book IX, p. 99)
2. “Virtuous action depends not just on what we do but also on doing the right thing for the right reasons, and knowing that we are acting for the right reasons.” (Blaine J. Fowers: *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness*, p. 116)
3. “When you relax into the virtues of moderation, peacefulness, and contentment, you will find that you no longer digress into scattered, anxious multitasking. Thus, the energy you spend working on whatever task is before you will be far more purposeful and focused.” (Linda Kavelin Popov: *A Pace of Grace*, p. 139)

4. “Kind words do not wear out the tongue.” (*More African Proverbs* (Liberia), p. 47)
5. “We need to realize the seeds we plant in the spring will be what show up in our summer season of growth and will be the fruits that we will harvest in our fall season. We really have a lot to do with what shows up in our lives.” (Don Coyhis of the Mohican Nation, www.whitebison.org)
6. “Sensitivity to the feelings and needs of others and a willing disposition to help and serve are hallmarks of a person committed to the path of spiritual development.” (Joan Barstow Hernández: *Love, Courtship, and Marriage*, p. 41)
7. “We...believe that positive traits need to be placed in context; it is obvious that they do not operate in isolation from the settings...in which people are to be found.” (Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman: *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, p. 11)
8. “All too often we underestimate the importance of a smile, an embrace, a kind word, a sincere compliment, or the giving of one’s attention. It is precisely the small things that can change difficult moments into special ones.” (Mehri Sefidvash: *Coral and Pearls*, pp. 11-12)

Skill-Building: Affirming Character Qualities by Using Character Quality Language

Using positive words and tone of voice builds love, respect, and confidence in one another and in the stability of your relationship. It is wise to begin this practice from the earliest days of your relationship and marriage so that it becomes a long-term practice, but it is never too late to start. A positive interaction can include greeting one another warmly after you have been apart, perhaps hugging or kissing at the same time. Saying, “I love you” is also affirming. However, speaking positively about one another’s character is especially vital in your day-to-day interactions. Of course, this means your actions toward one another sincerely reflect character strengths!

Like many people, you may find it easier to spot someone doing something *wrong* than to spot someone doing something *right*. Marriage research clearly demonstrates that couples who regularly attack each other’s character destroy their marriages. Dr. John Gottman says, “By simply reminding yourself of your spouse’s positive qualities—even as you grapple with each other’s flaws—you can prevent a happy marriage from deteriorating.” (John Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, p. 65)

Do not take each other for granted or think that your partner does not need encouragement for something you think they are obligated or just responsible for doing. It takes practice to look consciously for one another’s positive actions, but it is very affirming for both of you when you do. The more positive thoughts and words you can generate about one another, the more you are likely to avoid destructive conflict. Most people typically feel a great sense of satisfaction when someone notices the good job they have done or the effort they put into it. You need to be able to count on one another for positive affirmation and encouragement, especially on difficult days.

It will help you to learn about each other’s character when you use *Character Quality Language* to affirm specific qualities in each other. This practice also builds love, appreciation, and happiness between you, particularly when you are specific and sincere. Below are some simple examples:

- “Thank you for being (Helpful, Flexible, Truthful...)”.
- “I appreciate your (Courage, Respect, Faithfulness...)”
- “I love how (Accepting, Enthusiastic, Encouraging...) you are!”

Your character affirmations become even more powerful when you include specifics about your partner’s words or actions. Consider these examples:

- “Your Patience in working with my Dad on the car in the garage yesterday and how Helpful you were to him really touched my heart.”
- “It was great watching you be so Enthusiastic at my son’s soccer game this morning. Thank you for being so Flexible about the change in starting time.”
- “Thank you for picking me up even though you do not like driving in downtown traffic. It was very Thoughtful of you...my day was hectic with deadlines, and I could not leave early to meet you at home. I especially appreciate that you were so Caring in bringing an umbrella to protect me from the rain.”

Using Character Quality Language will help you to strengthen and keep practicing these qualities. Having someone notice your use of a quality encourages your continued use.

This practice is also a key tool for parents in helping children learn about and strengthen specific qualities. For example, you can say, “Please be Patient” instead of “Oh, just hold on a minute!” and it helps the child (and you) with learning Patience. Learning the names of the character qualities and highlighting them in your children builds their self-respect. Then you can say, “Thank you for being Caring to your little sister today when she was sad” instead of “You were nice to your sister today.” If the children see you affirming these qualities in each other, this will also give them Confidence in your marriage.

Practice: Turn to the person next to you and acknowledge them for practicing a character quality. Take turns until you both feel comfortable with the tool. Discuss as a group how everyone felt about this practice.