

**1999 Bahá'í Conference on Social and Economic Development for the Americas**

**SOLTANI É H EDUCATIONAL CENTER  
THE HUMAN PLENITUDE PROGRAM – BRAZIL**

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Luis Henrique Beust (Brazil)

### Project Summary

#### Introduction

Since its foundation, in April 1984, the Soltaniéh Bahá'í Educational Center has been gathering experience in developing and offering courses for the public and private sectors in Brazil. *Human Plenitude*, the most complete experience so far, has been hired by private groups, state and municipal governments, and has been taught as extension course in two universities. Four *facilitators* have offered the course to some four hundred participants during the last three years, mainly school principals from the public school system. As a result of the conscience that was raised among school administrators, around one hundred schools have contracted the services of Soltaniéh to give training to parents, teachers and students on different subjects, specially moral behavior and peaceful coexistence (prevention and peaceful resolution of conflicts).

Also during the last three years, some seven thousand people have participated in seminars offered by Soltaniéh, on different subjects. Some groups have attended various meetings, while others were restricted to one or two. During 1998 a new program called *To Educate is to Teach to Live* (*Educar é Ensinar a Viver*) was given to some three thousand parents of pupils of the public schools of the municipality of São Caetano do Sul. The parents had eight seminars during the years, hired by the local government, on issues related to parenting. This year a sequence to that program is the one called *Paths to Maturity*, which focuses parenting of adolescents. All these activities are branches of the Human Plenitude Program, and have grown organically in order to attend the requests of those who came into contact with our educational approaches.

Many of the early participants of the courses continue to contact Soltaniéh on a regular basis, and among them many have developed new approaches to teaching and to life due to the insights acquired during the training. A group of principals in the city of Santo André continues to meet, and have developed, with the collaboration of the local Bahá'í community, eight modules for teaching Education for Peace in public schools. The pedagogic material are based on the message of the Universal House of Justice to the peoples of the world: The Promise of World Peace.

Soltaniéh's ultimate goal is to educate and influence thousands of people, specially educators, in the context of *applied spirituality*, spreading the spirit and the content of Bahá'í principles through the materials, courses, seminars, training and human resources developed by either by Soltaniéh and by other Bahá'í institutions.

During two days, 2-3 August 1997, a group of friends invited by the Council of Soltaniéh helped to define the "Vision" of Soltaniéh, writing down the feeling that has been growing during the years. It reads, in part:

*The Soltaniéh Bahá'í Educational Center is an Institute of excellence in education and research, generating and disseminating knowledge, aiming at human plenitude and social transformation, inspired by the ideal of unity in diversity among human beings.*

### **The Human Plenitude Program**

The Human Plenitude Program came into being in response to a recognition on the part of educational authorities in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, of the need for further personal and managerial development of school principals, vice-principals, pedagogic coordinators and teachers from the public school system. The Soltaniéh Bahá'í Educational Center was asked to develop a program that could address those needs, based on its ten years of successful experience with adult and youth informal education in the form of courses on parenting, improvement of marriages, preparation for marriage, peace education, and conflict prevention and resolution. As the name of the program suggests, it orients itself toward human *plenitude*, understood as fullness, completeness, and as different than *plentitude*, or abundance, plenty (Webster's New World Dictionary, 1988).

The Human Plenitude Program was first taught in 1996. It spans over 9 months of in-service training, and involves monthly meetings of 8 hours per class. Each meeting focuses on the study of a specific subject related to personal and managerial development, on which the participants are offered a broad range of readings ahead of time. The discussions take place in an atmosphere of non-competitiveness, patience, kindness, and acceptance, aimed at fostering a gradual shift in perceptions of reality.

Why Human Plenitude? The basic premise of this program is that personal and managerial development involves more than just cognitive and technical sophistication; rather, it involves ethical, moral, and ultimately spiritual integration, which brings about human empowerment.

As educational professionals confront their students' and their own underlying deeper belief systems about the nature of human beings, and the nature of education, they experience and report a sense of helplessness in spite of the surface layer of conceptual knowledge provided by academic training in human development, education, psychology, law, and administration. Doubts in students' intrinsic goodness and potential for positive development undermine their ability to truly trust and foster development. Although trained to teach and improve minds, and to foster the transformation of students into good, competent, and socially responsible citizens, education professionals generally seem to struggle with a deep-seated fear of students. This fear is released when the best educational efforts do not bring about the expected change.

Hence, the Human Plenitude Program approaches the dilemma facing educational professionals of how to foster more successfully the transformation of students into good, competent, and socially responsible citizens, by asking the question: what brings about personal transformation? On what plane is it possible to begin to integrate our academic understanding of human development, education, psychology, law, administration, etc, into a single approach to human empowerment? What would human plenitude mean, in us, and in our students? The Program answers this question by fostering a shift in world views. Here is how a woman pedagogist recapitulates her experience of the course:

“Having begun the course seeking a new perspective on fundamentals, I believe I found *a new perspective on what it means to be human*. The participation in this course has led me to internalize attitudes, which, once put into practice, have contributed to *a change in my world*

*view*, in my relationship to relatives and colleagues, and especially in the way I run my daily tasks as

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coordinator. I believe this is due to the dynamics of the program, with the readings of various sacred texts which foster *a profound meditation on the attitudes we take in daily life.*”

The professionals with whom we have been working are highly educated people, many of them with masters degrees, and all of them with many years of experience in the educational field. Most of them exhibit a compartmentalized understanding of reality, limited to different tools of analysis in different areas, and revealing significant contrast and conflict between areas. In the course of the program, two things seem to happen.

1. The participants seem to undergo epistemological development as a result of a nine-month long process of dialogical co-construction of core beliefs, based on the discussion of a rich body of scientific and religious texts which invite a consistent examination of different facets of one's epistemology.
2. The participants also seem to experience in varying degrees shifts in their epistemic styles, characterized by a change in the way they know the world, with subject-object distinctions becoming less pronounced, and a movement from being thinking observers to being connected, aware participants (Hart, Nelson, Puhakka, 1997).

This combination of cognitive and experiential expansion that seems to occur is what we refer to as a holistic approach to adult development. The Human Plenitude Program both explicitly addresses world views and core beliefs, and also provides experiential opportunities for people to undergo an epistemic shift. It touches the deeper levels of consciousness, and brings about an expansion of awareness *"often described as Plato's anamnesis – the soul's remembrance of truth"*, and an ensuing sense of *"spiritual sustenance"* through remembering the deeper realities of human existence (Hart, 1997, p. 59).

Here is how some participants describe the overall experience:

“At first we thought this would be just another course; but it exceeded our expectations: it was *the course*. It *provided reflections about the human condition itself, making it possible for one to reconfigure himself in terms of a cultural, political, social, psychological, and above all spiritual being*. We came to realize that we have to re-educate ourselves if we want to accomplish changes in the work environment with the objective of stimulating the integration of the teaching and administrative staff, and favoring problem resolution in a peaceful and efficient manner based on respect for diversity. The course did not try to teach 'techniques' of school management, but provided *reflections about human nature integrated with the dynamics of the universe itself*, such that each participant perceived himself as unique, and at the same time as heir to characteristics common amongst other individuals.”

## **A Holistic Approach**

The Program emphasizes the complementary effectiveness of science and religion as means for personal and social development. It upholds the fundamental unity of science and religion in understanding human nature and the nature of life.

Religion is not understood as a specific religious denomination, but, rather, as those systems of knowledge and belief which, historically, have accessed and empowered the deepest reaches of

consciousness of individuals and peoples. A clear distinction is drawn between what we would call the essence of religion, and its crystallization into social practices and rituals, directed to the specific needs of the time, and prone to fossilize later into religious institutions as strongholds of dogma.

The essence of religion, or eternal spiritual principles guiding human behavior, such as love, humility, service, righteousness, interconnectedness, compassion, love of truth, sacrifice, self-transcendence, etc., are richly revealed in the spiritual lore of all the great spiritual traditions of the world. In spite of its fabulous variety of forms (parables, metaphors, promises and warnings, stories and laws), the content of this spiritual lore in essence bears on universal human themes. It seems extremely efficient in evoking that area of consciousness which is concerned with beliefs, archetypal images, values and world views; in this sense, it seems to touch the "spiritual cords" of human consciousness.

Hence, the Program curriculum is based on a singular blend of scientific interdisciplinarity and religious transecumenism. Core readings from anthropology, psychology, sociology, history and administration, are combined with selections from world spiritual traditions (Hindu, Judaic, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, Bahá'í). The overall body of readings is organized around nine subjects: (1) human nature; (2) intrapersonal intelligence; (3) emotional intelligence; (4) interpersonal intelligence; (5) development of reasoning; (6) building a mature, realistic, and positive world view; (7) tests and resolution of problems; (8) unity in diversity: natural and social paradigms; (9) unity in diversity: intersubjective paradigms.

In its investigation of each subject area, the program employs a scientific methodology of analysis and comparison. For example, the first module, on human nature, brings together the insights of three domains, which are consecutively explored in three different sections of the module. In the first section, participants explore what psychology has to say about human nature. They read and discuss selections from Victor Frankl (1975) and Abraham Maslow (1968). In the second section, they bring the same analytic tools to a selection of religious writings from the major world spiritual traditions, all of which speak to the two natures of the human soul. In the third section, they examine human virtues and life priorities.

As adults from different religious denominations, as well as atheists and agnostics, are exposed to a combination of readings from the social sciences and various sacred texts, their first reactions of distrust and curiosity appear to be superseded by a progressive grasping of unifying themes and their continuous reconstruction. When some common features of different systems of belief are brought together to the attention of educated adults, they act as catalysts for change in their established *Weltanschauungen*. Even those participants who initially exhibit entrenched dualistic and conventional views, slowly open up to a more dialogical approach to the texts and the rest of the group. This process draws the whole person, along with their most deeply berried archetypal beliefs; it opens hearts and minds to constructing new world views, and seems to have a tremendous effect on their personal transformation, which needs to be researched and assessed further.

Gradually, people discover that the scientific belief in reason and human progress need not contradict metaphysical faith, and that the dualistic tendency to absolutize one at the expense of the other has led to an impoverished understanding of life. They discuss abundant historic examples of both the absolutization of faith, resulting in fanaticism and oppression; and the absolutization of reason in reaction, resulting in neutral instrumentality, utilitarianism, and moral and social disintegration. The understanding begins to emerge that an integrated approach to life and human growth requires a balance of both.

This understanding does not emerge solely through the cognitive co-construction of fundamental questions. Linear scientific investigation and proof, aiming at the rational mind, is not considered sufficient for permanent and effective individual and social development. Through the rich body of diverse spiritual lore, as well as through non-formal techniques such as relaxation, visualization, prayer and meditation, the Program accesses "*the depth dimension of human existence*", whose activation Marcuse

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(1989) identified as the sole path to a liberated human consciousness, empowered to negotiate life successfully.

The facilitator of The Human Plenitude Program approaches the discussion of scientific and religious texts in a spirit of "*emotional responsiveness*" and "*resonance with cultural and idiosyncratic meanings*", both of which Puhakka identifies as a condition for direct knowing (pp. 7-8). He models empathy and contact, which gradually encourage the participants to immerse themselves in these texts in a spirit of openness and discernment, and to experience, or know directly, the meanings conveyed. This brings feelings of "bliss" and love, which Puhakka describes as accompanying direct knowing (p. 21). Fear of the loss of self is no longer part of the process of knowing, hence the individual experiences a taste of freedom and fulfillment.

How can such momentary experiences produce lasting transformations which can be referred to as accessing the depth dimension of experience? Once a person discovers in themselves the ability to know so powerfully and so directly, subject-object distinctions become a little less rigid, permeability increases, and one's awareness opens progressively to new dimensions of understanding. Such direct encounters with meaning are generally referred to as spiritual knowing. Spiritual knowing constitutes an epistemic shift to a deeper and more direct understanding of "*our relationship with matter, mind, culture and spirit*" (Hart, Nelson & Puhakka, 1997, p. 2).

The spiritual knowing that happens as people immerse themselves in these parables, metaphors, promises and warnings, stories and laws, can be described as recurring moments of inspiration (Hart, 1997). It transcends the subject-object dichotomy of customary rational knowing, and allows a more "*intimate relationship with some aspects of the world*" (p. 50). Hart (1997) identifies four general phenomenological characteristics of inspiration:

- People experience **direct contact and a feeling of connectedness**, which may generate a feeling of empathy, understanding, love, and compassion.
- People experience **an openness, an availability, a receptiveness to being filled** with a sense of awe and wonderment. That often results in an overall sense of energy, light, warmth.
- People experience **a sensory clarity and clarity of understanding**, i.e. some degree of a transient synesthetic where there is "*a grasping of unexpected connections or seeing a kind of hidden layer of order of reality*" (p. 56).
- People experience "*a dramatic shift in emotional, physical, and 'energetic' states*", commonly described as "*joy, elation, excitement, enthusiasm, fulfillment*" (p. 57).

During the Human Plenitude Program, the degrees of inspiration, hence the intensity of each of the above, will vary greatly from person to person, and throughout different stages in the work. Yet, overall, people report a sense of personal transformation, a unique experience with both the content of the curriculum, and the form and method through which it is offered, which leaves them changed. Here are some participants' comments:

“The Program has *brought to my life enormous doses of love, patience, respect towards myself* and, consequently, *ability to value my interactions with the people* I live with (family, colleagues, friends). In such a short time, *the content of a lifespan!*” (woman, principal)

“The course has contributed as a whole to my private and professional life. *My spiritual side is much richer. I am feeling much securer, happier and lighter* in all my personal circumstances.” (woman, assistant principal)

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“*Wisdom is infinite* and there are techniques to acquire it, as I was able to observe in these classes, all very rich... Thank you for all *the happiness* given!” (woman, principal)

“Until these meetings, *I considered myself 'almost' an atheist*, then *I discovered that I have a very strong spiritual side.*” (male, assistant principal)

For now, we can say we observe an epistemological movement which bears the following general characteristics:

1) People's beliefs about human nature undergo change, along with what they define as their personal responsibility in intrapersonal and interpersonal processes, and emotional development.

“I was surprised when I perceived, through the classes, that *I can change my behavior* in certain situations that would leave me depressed. I also noticed that *the relationship with other people, in order to be satisfactory, depends a lot more on myself than the other people*. I am trying to learn and put in practice *all the marvelous things a human being can be* and is capable of sowing and harvesting.” (woman, principal)

“The course *succeeded in fueling hope* and enlarging the positive perspective of educators that face serious problems in their schools. We *felt strengthened* in carrying out our duties, even under adverse circumstances.” (woman, principal)

“I feel that *I am growing inwardly*, I am learning to control myself, and teaching others around me to do the same. I am looking at people with friendlier eyes, listening more attentively to people's complaints and trying to understand their reactions.” (woman, assistant principal)

“I feel that this is the way: redeem values, know oneself better, and always keep in mind that we must evolve more and more.” (woman, pedagogue)

“I leave here today more *relieved*, and maybe *illuminated* to rethink attitudes that can lead me to perfection.

“The Human Plenitude Program has *given me a magnificent view*, showing that all religions, in their teachings, elevate our spirituality, and that this spirituality has to be put to practice and taught by means of our attitudes; that it is *necessary that above all we practice true love*. Through this love we change, we grow and we help others to do the same.” (woman, principal)

“The Human Plenitude Program has come to me as a divine gift, a balm, a spiritual upliftment, at the right time in my life. What has moved me the most was *the irradiation of positivity and harmony* that I constantly felt during the classes.” (woman, assistant principal)

2) Reasoning becomes more dialectic (Basseches, 1984), and conflict and its resolution are understood differently. There are not, anymore, absolute truths, nor final answers. The essence of things becomes more important than the things themselves.

“I feel that there was an *evolution in my way of seeing the problems and solutions*. I am performing my work with *more sensibility, more tranquility, more satisfaction*. Even facing the problems and difficulties we live with at school, I try to contain the frustrations, uncertainties, and disappointments.” (woman, principal)

“I was *very enriched* and I came to understand that life is an eternal school, the more we live and overcome obstacles, the more we grow.” (woman, teacher)

“The course has been important for me as a reference for personal reflection. I have come to realize that people's reactions around me mirror forth my attitudes towards them. The study of

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the sacred texts has brought *a vision of spiritual unity in the diversity of the life of humankind.*” (woman, pedagogue)

3) The internalized dichotomy of reality, finds, ultimately, a unifying ground in spiritual reality, which is perceived as both relative, and at the same time eternal and universal. When this happens, not only the participants' understanding, but also their deepest feelings are touched. Consciousness is broadened as a whole, and the educational process itself is viewed as a dialogue and a mutual unfolding.

“The Human Plenitude course was a marvelous thing. It led us to *reflection on various aspects of our existence that we were not aware of; thus enabling each individual to have a new outlook as a cultural, spiritual, historical being.*” (woman, assistant principal)

“This course *allowed me to readjust my harmonies and energies*. It gave me support, help to get back in the swing of things with *moderation, consideration, and joy*, and also to live better day by day, with more *serenity and assurance.*” (woman, principal)

“It is impossible to say how much this course was beneficial, as it is also *impossible to measure faith, love, wisdom. I came to really believe that life, the world, mankind can be better*. I still have a lot to learn and put into practice. It makes me very happy when *I try to solve a problem using love, dialogue, understanding.*” (woman, assistant principal)

“We had the opportunity to reflect upon what we are, our commitments as an integral part of humanity, and especially, to be aware that *the search for harmony, happiness, growth is collective.*” (male, principal)

“Through this course I had cultural and spiritual enrichment, and *the certainty that we can live in peace with everyone.*” (woman, assistant principal)

In summary, the holistic approach of The Human Plenitude Program is expressed in a broader understanding of the intellect as consisting of both the mind and the spiritual faculty of inner vision (Weil, 1987). Hence, the Program does not limit its efforts to facilitate personal and managerial transformation to working with reasoning only. It also cultivates the inner vision through direct experiences of spiritual knowing, through which people *“uncover and are reminded of the sacred in everyday life”* (Hart, 1997, p. 61). This helps participants overcome feelings of depression, anxiety, alienation, confusion, which they often describe as part and parcel of their day-to-day encounters and efforts as educators and decision-makers. Epistemic shifts seem to occur as a result of a holistic process of alternation of reasoning and direct knowing through inner vision, where each informs, and ultimately expands, the other.

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### **Nature of the Key Problems Being Faced by the Project**

In the process of moving forward, some difficulties are specially perceived:

- 1) the fact that the Program is offered by a Bahá'í institution creates some suspicion in some environments and may even prevent the courses from being hired. This happens specially because we do emphasize the role of religion during the course. If it were simply a technical course, these prejudices would probably not be as manifest as they are.
- 2) As we have the goal to be self-supported, we depend greatly on the selling of courses in order to keep the program going. As our main goal is to influence the educational system, this becomes a very delicate matter, because it is very difficult to sell training courses to local and state governments, which themselves provide technical training to their personnel, and generally do not have budget to training offered by others.
- 3) Training people to become *facilitators* of the course, capable to conduct the classes and also to find potential clients, negotiate with them and take care of the logistics of the courses has proven to be a very difficult task. The fact that the 9 modules of the course (and the additional training that issues from them) integrate a wide variety of information and because the target population is formed by people of capacity, the quality of the facilitators is quite demanding.
- 4) For this reason also, the 9 modules need revision and improvement in order to become more self-explanatory and not to depend so much on the inputs of the facilitator. Nevertheless, there has been impossible to find adequate time to conduct this task.
- 5) Soltaniéh's major need is to acquire capable personnel (with personal initiative and responsibility) for complex administrative and academic activities, such as administrative tasks and the development of curriculum materials. The problem with depending upon Year of Service volunteers is that when they have finally learned everything they need to be efficient in their positions, their period is over and they go away. Difficulties with the Bahá'í funds and lack of self-supporting income limit the number of possible collaborators, and the distance from the city and lack of regular municipal bus service prevent the possibility of depending upon the help of many other local volunteers at present.