

Growing the Next Generation

Our 40th wedding anniversary, celebrated a short while ago, was a bit of an oddity in several ways. Our son was visiting from Japan for the occasion, so we had a small gathering of a couple of friends, a few of our son's friends, and our daughter and son-in-law. It was held in the Polynesian Room of our condo building, which is exactly as it sounds, colourful tropical-themed wall carvings and bamboo bar, circa 1962. What it lacks in modernity it makes up for in character.

The BBQ party in the courtyard moved indoors to get out of the wind. Laughter was mixed with serious conversation. We mused that the 70's were pretty good years. A surprising number of friends are celebrating their own 40th, or more. Looking around at the younger folks, mostly unmarried, we wondered about the similarities and differences between generations.

Social circumstances have changed. Young women, in particular, are so much more confident. The young, demure Princess Diana has given way to the equally lovely, self-assured Kate. There's a lot less confidence in the institution of marriage but there seems to be the same hope in it, with huge cultural capital centred in the ceremony, as well as huge expense.

A more worrisome change, to my mind, is the scarcity of hope for the future. Who would disagree that we've gotten seriously off course, politically, economically, environmentally? There's plenty of reason for despair. Yet in the natural design of things, each generation surpasses the last.

Looking around at the younger faces in the room, it was obvious that there was no lack of capacity to surpass all past generations. Studying patterns, drawing conclusions, creating solutions – these come easily, and now we have information technology instead of encyclopaedias. Some consensus around how to proceed would be useful. How can the world be made a happier place for these kids?

Tolstoy remarked, "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." The patterns, processes and inner workings of unhappiness are studied endlessly. What about happiness?

My unproven theory is that the essential principles that govern our happiness are as simple and unwavering as those that govern chemistry and physics. They're no mystery, but they tend to be embedded in the ancient language of myth and religion, on the outskirts of mainstream culture.

We can usually recognize these principles, even if we call them by different names. They have to do with kindness, self-discipline, detachment, patience, wisdom, faithfulness, gratitude. They're central to every oral and written tradition, across cultures, across time. Most of us know, at some level, that justice and fairness are necessary to our happiness, and that you can't obtain happiness without giving it selflessly. Such dogma-free laws are our spiritual gravity, our common heritage.

Who or what in our children's lives teaches them the principles of health and happiness? What program or curriculum teaches impartial truth-seeking, service to humanity, democratic empowerment, creativity? It's amazing that they crop up like persistent plants through the concrete of our consumer-driven values.

How do we consciously cultivate them? On a small scale, in the Bahá'í community, there's a relatively new [junior youth spiritual empowerment program](#) that teaches the language of those principles, combined with service to the community. I'd love to see such programs in our schools and community centres, devoid of dogma but honouring the multi-faith sources of this wisdom that grounds and centres us. What a fabulous garden might grow – organically of course! – from the seeds of all past generations.