

# *‘Liberating the Spirit’*

Promoting Creative Expression in Study Circles

Janet Khan, in her recent work on the life of Bahiyyih Khanum, states that, *“The purpose of religion is to give rise to true liberty of the human spirit, so that each individual can be free to develop his or her own capabilities.”* We can see the Ruhi sequence of courses being implemented at this time by Training Institutes across the world in this regard. Indeed, they have been specifically designed with this in mind – to release the potential of every believer to **confidently, systematically**, and (as a result of these two combined) **effectively** teach the Faith. We can now truly become agents of change and growth in our communities. Through putting into practice what we learn through this unique process of education, we ‘liberate’ ourselves from the ‘fear’ and ‘inertia’ that often dog our efforts.

Janet Khan continues, *“This liberation is the basis for the expression of the powers of creativity and innovation.”* A new release of creativity can be both an impetus to and a by-product of this liberation. Artistic expression and creative exploration in the training process is an *essential* part of the tapping into and releasing of the potential of the individual. Not only do individuals come to understand themselves and their spirit better, but they also come into closer association with their fellow participants as they explore their potential together, and can nurture talents and skills within themselves that can then be used to enhance the entire community, releasing potential on all levels. This article will explore these three precious benefits of promoting and experimenting with arts in study circles.

Both Bahá’u’lláh and Abdu’l-Bahá have written much about the strong link between artistic expression of the individual and communion/worship of God, making it clear that we are reflecting or channelling God’s light when engaged in creative acts. In their writings, the words ‘craft’ and ‘art’ can be read synonymously:

**“One of the names of God is the Fashioner. He loveth craftsmanship. Therefore any of His servants who manifesteth this attribute is acceptable in the sight of this Wronged One.”**

**“The One True God, exalted be He, loveth to witness handiworks of high craftsmanship produced by His loved ones ... Please God, every one of His friends may be enabled to acquire one of the crafts, and be confirmed in adhering to what has been ordained in the Book of God, the All-Glorious, the All-Wise.”**

In some of the clearest, and indeed most mystical, passages on this subject, Abdu’l-Baha states:

**“Art is worship ... If a man engageth in the perfection of an art, it is as if he has been worshipping God in churches and temples ...”**

**“All art is a gift of the Holy Spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies. Again, shining through the mind of a poet, it is seen in fine poetry and poetic prose. When the light of the Sun of Truth inspires the mind of a painter, he produces marvellous pictures ... These gifts are fulfilling their highest purpose when showing forth the praise of God.”**

So, in any artistic endeavour we are channelling God’s Spirit, but it is in those endeavours where we are exploring the Word of God and praising Him that art achieves the purpose for which it was “created” so to speak. The Ruhi courses are *“a sequence of courses that seeks to build capacity for service by concentrating on the application of the spiritual insights gained through a profound study of the Writings”*, involving *“discussions that revolve around the Creative Word, in the serious and uplifting atmosphere of the study circle.”* (27<sup>th</sup> Dec 2005). Artistic expression within the study group should not be

a momentary distraction or relaxation from the study itself, but seen as an *essential* part of the exploration of the infinite meanings and subtleties of the Word of God and its implications for our lives. In this way, the creation of this kind of art becomes a profound spiritual act, connecting more closely the individual with his/her creator.

The second benefit of artistic activity within the study circle group is that it serves to bind the participants together, as they explore their potential in a highly encouraging and supportive environment. Often people, especially older adults, experience a certain degree of vulnerability and its associated anxiety when asked to “create” something, whether a picture or painting, a drama dialogue, a song, a dance, a poem ... This is, unfortunately more often than not, either due to their experience of creating art as a child and the lack of encouragement in their first attempts, or a damaging competitive approach that focussed excessively on the quality of the product rather than the process of creation. For many, this avenue of worship, then, must be lovingly and tactfully re-opened to them. And it is the tutor’s responsibility to create as nurturing a creative environment as possible. By focussing primarily on the *process* rather than the *product*, and by making it clear that their creations do not have to be shared with anyone if the participants choose not to do so, a certain amount of that anxiety can be alleviated. This in turn allows creativity to flow, unblocked by any self-consciousness, releasing a depth of joy not often felt in the hectic pace of our lives that does not give us much time to undertake such acts. When the participants do feel emboldened to share their art with each other a very intimate relationship bond can develop, as it is through art that we reveal our innermost selves, whether consciously or sub-consciously. And it is important to realise that this bond is often a result of actually overcoming the hesitancy and fear people might feel at the beginning. Without fear there is no courage, and without courage there is no joy! When the group has reached the point where all feel comfortable doing this, it is a great moment to be celebrated. One tutor shares her thoughts and experiences about the effect that creative acts undertaken by the study circle group can have:

*I always notice that the entire atmosphere of the course uplifts when they are doing an artistic activity. They are probably the greatest moments of joy for me as a tutor, just listening to the chat and sharing of their lives with each other as they focus on a creative task together. And the sharing afterwards of what they’ve worked on, which is something I never insist on, is always so full of laughter and sheer pleasure, that I would never contemplate not having a series of arts sessions in any course I tutor. They are the best bits!*

Another youth tutor shares his experience of working with (and transforming) ‘anti-art’ people in a study circle:

*...the scepticism felt when the word 'art' is mentioned to a bunch of scientists! Apart from one gal who does an art course at college, the rest somewhat lacked experience in the traditional strands of art (ie using a pencil). So is art off the menu? Oh no - we simply took a piece of card and threw a load of paints, sprays, inks, pens and pencils at it in as creative a way as possible, then stuck our favourite quote from book 1, printed on transparent paper, on top of it. The result: a genuinely attractive poster to get a Bahá’í quote stuck on their wall; but more important than the product was their glee at mining their inherent artistic gems that they never knew existed.*

The third precious result from art in study circles is the myriad ways that the entire community benefits. If participants feel courageous enough to share what they have created in the study group – a drama piece, a poem, a piece of embroidery – and have seen the joy it brings, they might also feel that the local community Feast could be enhanced by it as well, or the Cluster Reflection Meeting. But when feeling the urge to share an artistic work, it is important to detach the act of creation and the created object from the ego of the creator. If we reflect again on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words that the piece of art or craft is primarily created by the Holy Spirit “*shining through the mind*” of the artist, we cannot ascribe total ownership of what we create! (and by ‘artist’ is meant here *anyone* who creates anything artistic at whatever level). We become *channels* as artists, not *sources*. It is not the desire for self-

glorification that prompts us to want to share what we create as spiritual agents. On the contrary, it is a desire to assist others in the development of their attraction to beauty, a desire to uplift a holy gathering of souls, a desire to shed the light of the spirit of God that has shone through the mind of the creator into the created object.

This is a direct way that art can enhance community gatherings, but there is another indirect, but no less potent way which may even be of even greater benefit. As The Universal House of Justice explains in their monumental 27<sup>th</sup> Dec message, “... *the graceful integration of the arts into diverse activities enhances the surge of energy that mobilises the believers.*” The arts have a very crucial role to play in actually spurring the believers on, and giving them the energy and joy they need in order to carry out the tasks of wide-scale expansion and consolidation. The participants of study circles in every corner of the world, are being systematically nurtured by their tutors in an open and supportive environment to create increasingly wonderful works of art that explore the implications of the Word of God that can then be “*gracefully integrated into diverse activities*” of the community. One tutor describes below an activity of her study circle that was shared at local community gatherings and its effect:

*We made puppets from wooden spoons to enact a short story/play on the life of the soul. The play was shared at a 19-day Feast, at another Book 1 study circle and also at a cluster reflection meeting with great effect and enjoyment of the ‘players’ and the ‘audience’. Using puppets and drama to tell a story really helped to illustrate the meaning of the life of the soul and our understanding of the writings. In the 19-day Feast and the Book 1 study circle the play led to more discussion afterwards of the Writings and their application to our daily ‘true’ life.*

We have been told so clearly in the 27<sup>th</sup> Dec message that “*the elements required for a concerted effort to infuse the diverse regions of the world with the spirit of Baha’u’llah’s Revelation have crystallized into a framework that now needs only to be exploited.*” What is an ‘element’? The dictionary defines it as ‘a basic, necessary part of something’. Based on the above thoughts, perhaps one of those ‘basic, necessary’ elements required for the concerted effort is in fact the exploration of our creativity and the production of artistic works of beauty as part of the study of Ruhi courses in study circle groups. If we are to “steel [our] resolve and to proceed with the full force of [our] energies on the course that has been so decidedly set”, then each individual and their art has a vital ‘pART’ to play. Let’s get discovering those gems!

*If you, as a participant or tutor, have any ideas for arts activities that have been effective in study circles or photos taken of art produced by participants, please email them to the Training Coordinator for England, as arts manuals for the courses will be updated regularly.*