

Now That I'm Here, What Should I Be Doing?

Discover Life's Purpose

Bill Harley & Jean Harley

The logo for Wisdom Editions features the word "Wisdom" in a serif font with a small crown-like symbol above the 'i'. Below it, the word "Editions" is written in a similar serif font, separated by a thin horizontal line.

Wisdom
Editions

Minneapolis, Minnesota



FIRST EDITION MAY 2016

NOW THAT I'M HERE, WHAT SHOULD I BE DOING?

Copyright © 2016 by William B. Harley and Jean K. Harley.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations used in critical articles and reviews. For information, write to Calumet Editions, 8422 Rosewood Drive, Chanhassen, MN 55317

Printed in the United States of America.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover and interior design: Gary Lindberg

ISBN: 978-1-939548-48-1

Chapter 1

The Search for Purpose

Our personal lives and professional experiences (as a life coach and a psychotherapist) have motivated us over several decades to search for the ultimate purposes of life in order to guide others and ourselves to greater meaning. The fruit of our search is this book about the purposes of life, the spiritual growth patterns designed into life, and how to make use of these purposes and patterns to live an optimally meaningful life.

From time immemorial human beings have wondered why they were born. Is there something we're supposed to be doing—or do we just survive and try to have some fun? A song written by Americans Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, and popularized by singer Peggy Lee in the 1960s and 70s, has relevant lyrics. After enumerating dramatic and emotional high and low points in life that seem without purpose and meaning, the song's closing lyrics are as follows:

Is that all there is, is that all there is?
If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing.
Let's break out the booze and have a ball
If that's all there is.

For most of us, the song's central question is profound, but its answer is unsatisfactory. Somehow it seems that an All-Knowing,

All-Loving God would have more in mind for His creatures in terms of purpose. But what could that be?

Theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is often credited with the statement “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.” However, the larger part of our lives seems to involve material experiences that are very human in nature. So, what does it mean to be a spiritual being, and how can we bring forth this dimension in our lives?

The Holy Writings of all the major religions, the repositories of guidance about the meaning and purposes of life, give clues that can be pieced together to provide answers and, sometimes, more questions. The Zoroastrian teachings say: “O pious one, you must purify the character!”¹ The Muslim teachings indicate that we need to look both outwardly and inwardly to discover God’s purpose for us: “And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the variety of your tongues and hues, surely there are signs in this for people who have knowledge.”²

The Jewish teachings have us turn to our hearts to discover the mystery of our being: “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he.”³ The Hindu teachings also tell us to go inside to find a secret place that might reveal what we are to be doing: “In the city of Brahman is a secret dwelling, the lotus of the heart... As great as the infinite space beyond is the space within the lotus of the heart.”⁴ How do we purify our character, look around to discover God’s signs, and think from our heart?

In the Christian teachings we are told: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”⁵ This is an extraordinarily challenging purpose for us humans who usually prove to be anything but perfect. Further, the Christian teachings tell us: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s spirit dwells in you?... For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are.”⁶ How do we go about our daily lives being “God’s temple?” How do we manage the messy business of living while following all these dimensions of purpose?

The teachings of the Bahá'í Faith tell us: “The Purpose of the one true God, exalted be His glory, in revealing Himself unto men is to lay bare those gems that lie hidden within the mine of their true and inmost selves.”⁷ The Holy Writings of all the major religions indicate that every one of us has gems within us. So, it would seem that at least part of our work as spiritual beings is to bring forth as many of these gems as we can—in essence, to mine and polish these gems. But with all our weaknesses, our issues, our problems, how do we do that? And, if we can get clear about the ultimate purposes of life, what are the growth patterns we need to identify and the processes we need to go through to fulfill these purposes in our own personal way?

Our mission in the pages that follow is to discover answers to these very important questions. To do so, we will be exploring sacred scriptures from the world's revealed religions, and drawing upon our professional experiences coaching and counseling individuals and groups.

We will also be exploring, in-depth, a powerful parable that describes the spiritual growth patterns that have been designed into our lives by an all-loving Creator. Indeed, much of this book is devoted to examining the spiritual truths in this parable and how we can apply them in our own lives. We have found that when people go on this journey with us they discover aspects of themselves and their struggles that bring profound new insights to their lives. We will introduce this parable in Chapter 3; but for now, let us enter the path of discovery together.

Chapter 2

The Three Ultimate Purposes of Life

We have posed the question, *Now that I am here, what should I be doing?* In doing so, we are really considering human existence from a transcendent perspective and asking ourselves *what is the purpose of life on this earthly plane?*

A thorough review of the Holy Books of the world's major revealed religions ¹ yields three ultimate and interrelated purposes of life: to know and love God, to develop spiritual attributes, and to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. Let us consider each of these three purposes.

Life Purpose #1: To Know and Love God

In the Old Testament, Moses says to His followers:

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.²

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ confirms Moses' teaching when He says:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.³

A revealed prayer in the Bahá'í Scriptures states:

I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee.⁴

The life purpose of knowing, loving, and worshiping our Creator is a consistent theme throughout the centuries in the world's Holy Books. This suggests that life in the physical world should be used as a vehicle to strengthen our ability to know, become attracted to, and love our Creator. As we do so, we also develop our innate spiritual and intellectual capacities.

Life Purpose #2: To Develop Spiritual Attributes

The sacred texts of the world's religions are the repositories of the spiritual attributes we strive to develop in our earthly existence. As the foundation for her book, *The Family Virtues Guide*, Linda Kavelin Popov and her colleagues in The Virtues Project researched these sacred texts and found over three hundred key virtues or attributes propounded in common in these diverse faith traditions.⁵ The centrality of spiritual virtues and attributes in these sacred texts makes it clear that their acquisition is a key purpose of our earthly existence. These are “the gems that lie hidden within the mine” of our “true and inmost selves” referred to earlier. We must mine and polish these virtues or attributes that lay latent within us and require a conscious effort to be brought forth and put into practice.

The focus placed by these sacred texts on the importance of developing spiritual attributes—such as forbearance, courtesy, mercy, purity, compassion, detachment, loving kindness, and a sense of justice—suggests that we are spiritual beings who are born into a physical body in order to have a human experience. Another way to look at this is that the spirit begins its eternal journey with a human experience, but continues this journey beyond this earthly plane into the spiritual realm where spiritual attributes will be essential.

A comparison can help us understand the importance of this work.⁶ In the same way that a living human fetus is content in the confined realm of the mother's womb, yet must develop physical attributes such as eyes, ears, arms, and legs in order to be prepared

to navigate the more spacious physical world it is moving toward, so living, breathing human beings may be content in this more spacious realm of the world. Yet they must develop spiritual attributes here such as courage, patience, generosity, selflessness, knowledge, honesty, and humility in order to be prepared to navigate the still more spacious spiritual world they are moving toward after this earthly existence. Just as failure to develop physical attributes while in the womb would handicap our earthly existence, failure to develop spiritual attributes while in this world would handicap our existence in the next world. Consequently, one of our purposes in this world is to persistently attend to our work of spiritual attribute development.

Life Purpose #3: To Carry Forward an Ever-Advancing Civilization

While Life Purposes #1 and #2 could conceivably justify people's focus solely on *self*-transformation, salvation, and the importance of the *next* world, Life Purpose #3 relates to *collective* transformation and salvation and the importance of society in *this* world. Concern for the welfare and progression of society is expressed in the world's Holy Writings as being in the hands of both God and those who are righteous.

The Holy Writings of Judaism convey the sense that the well-being of human society is dependent on spirituality and moral, ethical behavior.

There are [always] thirty righteous men among nations, by whose virtue the nations of the world continue to exist.⁷

These same Writings also impart the idea that a spiritual connection to the Creator must be maintained to protect society.

Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman wakes but in vain.⁸

In the Hindu Writings, we find the following:

Strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world; by devotion to selfless work one attains the supreme goal of life. Do your work with the welfare of others always in mind... The ignorant work for their own profit, Arjuna; the wise work for the welfare of the world, without thought to themselves.⁹

In the Holy Writings of Christianity, we find Jesus Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan, which tells the story of a man traveling along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is beaten, robbed, and left for dead by the side of the road. A priest sees the helpless man lying by the roadside but passes him by on the other side of the road. Then a Levite does the same thing. The scripture continues:

But a certain Samaritan as he journeyed, came where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion on him. And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.¹⁰

While this noble story is usually taken to mean simply that we should be compassionate and nurturing to others, it can also be seen as a call to view all human beings as neighbors within one community and to progressively engage the larger society in effectively attending to the needs of all its members. After all, before leaving, the Samaritan takes an additional step.

And on the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii and gave them to the host, and said to him, Take care of him; and whatever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.¹¹

The Samaritan makes provision for engaging *others* in delivering on-going care for the dispossessed. He advances the social compact.

In the Holy Writings of Islam we find these confirming words:

The best of men are those who are useful to others.¹²

In the Bahá'í Faith's Holy Writings, we find even more explicit exhortations in this regard.

All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.¹³

And:

Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.¹⁴

And:

Great is the station of man. Great must also be his endeavors for the rehabilitation of the world and the well-being of nations.¹⁵

Consequently, it is our mandate to build a civilization in which spiritual advancement guides and informs scientific, social, and technological advancement; a civilization in which individual and collective action are based on spiritual principles and values; and a civilization founded on service to others and having a concern for how one's thoughts, attitudes, communication, and actions contribute to the advancement or regression of human civilization.

Ultimately, this life purpose entails the responsibility of contributing to spiritual, scientific, and social advancement in the components of civilization—in the self, marriage, family, community, organization, city, state, nation, and global society at large. It involves having a concern for building justice, spirituality, compassion, unity, integrity, harmony, knowledge, civility, and coherence into civilization. In our daily lives, this might involve raising our children to be stronger than we are in spirituality, knowledge, and social conscience; or it could entail making honesty, integrity, and justice inform all of our acts both personally and professionally—even when it may work to our disadvantage materially.

Seen overall, fulfilling the first two purposes of life—knowing and loving God and developing spiritual attributes—helps us to achieve our individual, spiritual, and intellectual potential while bringing a spiritual orientation and spiritual attributes to fulfill the third purpose; and the third purpose—carrying forward an ever-advancing civilization—provides a social milieu and collective proving ground in which to practice and further develop all three purposes.

Chapter 3

The Dynamics of Growth on the Personal Path to Purpose

In Chapter 1, we posed questions about the ultimate purposes of life and then answered them in Chapter 2 based on a survey of the world's Holy Writings. At the end of Chapter 1, we also asked, "And, if we can get clear about the ultimate purposes of life, what are the growth patterns we need to identify and the processes we need to go through to fulfill these purposes in our own personal way?" This latter question is about the dynamics of change and spiritual growth each of us typically encounters on the way to achieving purposes, and we want to begin addressing it in this chapter.

Over the years, our own personal experiences with navigating change and spiritual growth, as well as our observations of our clients' experiences, have taught us that the pathway is more often winding than straight, the process more often messy than tidy, and the emotion more often disequilibrium than equilibrium. We noticed that there were many theoretical models of change and growth around, but we could find none that helped explain the role of our Creator in the process. We remained fascinated with the subject, but dissatisfied with our understanding.

Then, one day, we encountered a profound parable that helped us understand and begin honoring some of the dynamics of change

and spiritual growth that are designed into life by an all-loving Creator. We refer to this parable as the "Watchman Parable," and it tells the story of a lover who is lost in hopeless suffering as a result of his seemingly unsuccessful search for his beloved.

Here is the parable:

There was once a lover who had sighed for long years in separation from his beloved, and wasted in the fire of remoteness. From the rule of love, his heart was empty of patience, and his body weary of his spirit; he reckoned life without her as a mockery, and time consumed him away. How many a day he found no rest in longing for her; how many a night the pain of her kept him from sleep; his body was worn to a sigh, his heart's wound had turned him to a cry of sorrow. He had given a thousand lives for one taste of the cup of her presence, but it availed him not. The doctors knew no cure for him, and companions avoided his company; yea, physicians have no medicine for one sick of love, unless the favor of the beloved one deliver him.

At last, the tree of his longing yielded the fruit of despair, and the fire of his hope fell to ashes. Then one night he could live no more, and he went out of his house and made for the marketplace. On a sudden, a watchman followed after him. He broke into a run, with the watchman following; then other watchmen came together, and barred every passage to the weary one. And the wretched one cried from his heart, and ran here and there, and moaned to himself: "Surely this watchman is 'Izra'il, my angel of death, following so fast upon me; or he is a tyrant of men, seeking to harm me." His feet carried him on, the one bleeding with the ar-

row of love, and his heart lamented. Then he came to a garden wall, and with untold pain he scaled it, for it proved very high; and forgetting his life, he threw himself down to the garden.

And there he beheld his beloved with a lamp in her hand, searching for a ring she had lost. When the heart-surrendered lover looked on his ravishing love, he drew a great breath and raised up his hands in prayer, crying: "O God! Give Thou glory to the watchman, and riches and long life. For the watchman was Gabriel, guiding this poor one; or he was Israfil, bringing life to this wretched one!"

Indeed, his words were true, for he had found many a secret justice in this seeming tyranny of the watchman, and seen how many a mercy lay hid behind the veil. Out of wrath, the guard had led him who was athirst in love's desert to the sea of his loved one, and lit up the dark night of absence with the light of reunion. He had driven one who was afar, into the garden of nearness, had guided an ailing soul to the heart's physician.

Now if the lover could have looked ahead, he would have blessed the watchman at the start, and prayed on his behalf, and he would have seen that tyranny as justice; but since the end was veiled to him, he moaned and made his plaint in the beginning. Yet those who journey in the garden-land of knowledge, because they see the end in the beginning, see peace in war and friendliness in anger.¹

The Watchman Parable comes from a book called the *The Seven Valleys* by Bahá'u'lláh,² the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. The parable is based on the legendary story of the lovers, Layla and Majnun, originating in ancient Arabia; however, Bahá'u'lláh has re-

fashioned the story to give it universal meaning in the context of the soul's journey through this world to its Creator.

Sensing that this parable carried a profound message, we read and reread it in order to better understand its significance; and we took the traditional stance that parables have universal application, that characters in them represent every man and every woman. The first thing that struck us was that the Watchman Parable described a process that, in the beginning, seemed accidental and damaging to the lover but in the end was personally tailored to produce growth in him. Considering the dynamics between the lover, the watchmen, the beloved, and the Creator in the parable, we asked ourselves, *could it be that life has been designed for each person as a personal learning and spiritual growth lab?* We turned to other Holy Books to see whether we could confirm this hypothesis.

The Learning & Spiritual Growth Lab of Life

In the Hindu Holy Writings, we find a description of this learning and spiritual growth lab.

The policy of conquerors, the potency of kings,
 The great unbroken silence in learning's secret
 things;
 The lore of all the learned, the seed of all which
 springs.
 Living or lifeless, still or stirred, whatever beings
 be,
 None of them is in all the worlds, but it exists by
 Me! ³

In the Christian Holy Writings, we find these words:

For what can be known about God is plain to [all]
 because God has showed it to them. Ever since the
 creation of the world his invisible nature, namely,
 his eternal power and deity, has been clearly per-

ceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ⁴

In the Holy Writings of Islam we read:

How many a sign there is in the heavens and the earth which most men pass by and ignore. ⁵

And returning once again to the Holy Writings of the Bahá'í Faith, we find another description of the learning and spiritual growth lab of life.

I...have ordained for thy training every atom in existence and the essence of all things. ⁶

Confirmed by both the Watchman Parable and the other scriptural references, we concluded that a compassionate Creator has designed a spiritual growth lab curriculum for each one of us tailored to the unique needs of our own mind, heart, and spirit. Just as in the parable, the intent of this curriculum is to give each of us repeated opportunities to make choices that will fulfill our spiritual potential and the ultimate purposes of life.

Further reflection about the Watchman Parable and the dynamics between the lover, the watchmen, the beloved, and the Creator led us to ask the additional question, *is it possible that a primary feature of the tailored learning and spiritual growth lab God has provided to each of us is the prevalence of tests and difficulties that are meant to provide us with opportunities for spiritual growth?* We turned to other Holy Books, to see whether we could confirm this hypothesis.

The Prevalence of Tests & Difficulties

In the Hindu Holy Writings, we find reference to the prevalence of suffering in life.

That which is beyond this world is without form and without suffering. They who know it, become immortal, but others suffer pain indeed. ⁷

In the Buddhist Holy Writings, we find reference to the same.

What, now, is the Noble Truth of Suffering? Birth is suffering; Decay is suffering; Death is suffering;

Sorrow, Lamentation, Pain, Grief, and Despair, are suffering; not to get what one desires, is suffering; in short: the Five Groups of Existence are suffering.⁸

In the Christian Holy Writings, we find insight into the prevalence and purpose of suffering.

Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God.⁹

In the Jewish Holy Writings, we see that suffering can come as a consequence of being off the path toward the three ultimate purposes of life.

Slothfulness casteth into a deep sleep; and an idle soul shall suffer hunger.¹⁰

In the Muslim Holy Writings, the connection between suffering and learning is emphasized.

Whenever We sent a prophet to a town, We took up its people in suffering and adversity, in order that they might learn humility.¹¹

In the Bahá'í Holy Writings, we find further clarification about the value of tests, difficulties, and suffering.

Tests are benefits from God, for which we should thank Him. Grief and sorrow do not come to us by chance, they are sent to us by the Divine Mercy for

our own perfecting. While a man is happy he may forget his God; but when grief comes and sorrows overwhelm him, then will he remember his Father who is in Heaven, and who is able to deliver him from his humiliations.¹²

Confirmed by both the Watchman Parable and the other scriptural references, we concluded that spiritual growth is achieved largely by navigating through tests and difficulties in the spiritual growth lab of life. Like the experience of the lover in the parable, each of our life journeys is a spiritual drama that will bring us into encounters with obstacles and suffering that are intended to perfect us. Whether the sources of our suffering seem to be accidental, the result of our own doing, or the doing of others, it is how we respond to these difficulties that will determine whether we grow from them or sink under their weight.

Answer Progress Report

So far, we have two answers to the question, *now that I am here, what should I be doing?* The *first answer* is to fulfill the three ultimate purposes of life—to know and love God, to acquire spiritual attributes, and to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. The *second answer* is about the perspective we need to hold and it has two dimensions: as we work on our own personal approach to achieving the three purposes, we need to see the world as a spiritual growth lab that provides a curriculum tailored to our own mind, heart, and spirit; and we need to expect this tailored curriculum to be characterized by tests and difficulties that we must navigate to achieve our purposes. These two answers represent the larger spiritual drama of each of our lives.

Becoming Mindful of Our Own Spiritual Condition

The spiritual growth lab of life encourages us to become mindful of the reality of our own spiritual condition from moment to moment. This reality is implicit in the two answers identified in the last

paragraph. In this book, we are defining the *reality of our spiritual condition* at any given moment as *the degree to which we (individually or collectively) are mindful of the value of tests in the spiritual growth lab of life and making progress on achieving the three purposes of life.*

Being mindful of our own spiritual condition in this way enables us to change our approach to life. Rather than passively flowing along with the currents of our culture and being preoccupied with the material “stuff” of life, we can proactively consider the spiritual implications behind the material conditions and our struggles with others. We can consider the spiritual implications of what we think and do and consider not just the “what” of things, but the “how” and “why.” For example, if we are mindful of the three purposes of life and how they relate to each other, we can consider whether or not the way we intend to go about something will strengthen our connection with God, foster the development of our spiritual attributes, and serve our fellow human beings in a way that advances civilization. By changing our perspective in this way, we prepare ourselves to leverage the forces of both the spiritual growth lab of life and the tests and difficulties we encounter to make wiser choices that will fulfill our spiritual potential.

The Challenge of Keeping the Focus on Our Spiritual Condition

One of the challenges of manifesting the two answers in action is that the pull of the outer material world can keep us so busy that we can easily lose sight of the larger spiritual drama. The temporal or physical reality can blind us to the spiritual reality. When this happens, the noble part of ourselves that is equipped to see the big spiritual picture of our life, respond to divine guidance, and make wise decisions becomes overwhelmed; and then life's events can seem random and purposeless.

Yet, one of the Watchman Parable's messages seems to be that God sends the watchmen into our lives in succession to awaken the noble self in us. In other words, the dynamics of change and spiri-

tual growth in our earthly existence have been designed by a compassionate Creator to continually provide tests as *reminders* to us of the larger spiritual reality in our life and *new opportunities* to make choices that can enable our noble self to refocus, reengage, and grow.

Further Exploring the Watchman Parable & the Spiritual Growth Lab of Life

Having established increased clarity about the purposes of life and the growth lab context in which we try to fulfill them, let us now return to the Watchman Parable to see what else it can teach us about the spiritual growth lab of life and the dynamics of change and spiritual growth each of us must manage in order to fulfill our potential.

Chapter 4

The Spiritual Growth Lab of Life Is Calling Us Toward Spiritual Reality

Examining the Watchman Parable and other scriptural references more closely can help us understand five apparent truths about the spiritual growth lab of life and what we should be doing during our time on earth. An understanding of these truths can help us effectively and expeditiously navigate the pathways to our beloveds. The first of these apparent truths is that *the spiritual growth lab of life is calling us toward spiritual reality*.

The Interplay between Material Reality & Spiritual Reality

The parable gives us insight into the interplay between material reality and spiritual reality. On one side of the wall, the lover's perspective is grounded in material reality. When the watchmen appear, he sees them two-dimensionally and assumes they are enemies locked with him in the physical struggle for survival. On the other side of the wall, his perspective becomes grounded in spiritual reality. He is able to see things three-dimensionally—in terms of his own role, the role of the watchmen, and that of his Creator. Through the grace of God and his own struggles, the lover learns: the two perspectives are radically different; the forces of both material and spiritual reality are constantly at play on both sides of the wall; and he has a choice over what perspective he will hold.

Becoming a Seeker of Spiritual Reality

The Watchman Parable suggests that we are designed to go through our earthly life in the spirit of a seeker grounded in spiritual reality. As discussed earlier, we seem to have a built-in longing for deeper meaning, clarity of purpose, and fulfillment during our brief time on earth; and the lover's search for a beloved can be seen to contain these longings. The parable conveys that on this seeking path we are designed to be mindful and reflective about our own role, the roles of others, and the role of our Creator as our hearts and souls prompt us to discover the truth.

Other Holy Writings also confirm the value of being a seeker of spiritual reality.

In the Judaic Writings, God says:

Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.¹

In the Christian Writings, Jesus Christ says:

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.²

In terms of daily action, what does it mean for us to take these spiritual admonitions to heart? It would seem to involve discovering the unique gifts and capacities God has given us and then putting them to use in a way that is aligned with the three purposes of life.

The Potential Subversion of Our Search for Spiritual Reality

If our hearts and souls have been given a healthy spiritual education, they seek, by their very nature, to develop and manifest divine attributes such as compassion, generosity, joy, humility, faithfulness,

fair-mindedness, understanding, detachment, helpfulness, patience, courtesy, acceptance, loving-kindness, curiosity, thoughtfulness, and a sense of justice. However, in materialistic cultures, spiritual potential can be subverted and energies diverted toward the acquisition of worldly attributes, material objects, and temporal power and influence. For example, the soul's inherent desire to acquire spiritual perfections is pushed aside by advertisers and other cultural forces seeking to provoke a desire for material or temporal things that will supposedly bring us fulfillment, respect, and attention. For example, a person who wins the lottery or acquires a luxury vehicle will be depicted by the media as having achieved ultimate joy and fulfillment. In addition, materialistic cultures teach us to look for quick, expedient fixes when we are feeling spiritually, physically, or emotionally uncomfortable, rather than going through the hard, but spiritually rewarding, work of seeking spiritual reality. For example, a feeling of spiritual emptiness might be addressed by consuming food, or using anesthetizing medicines or mind-altering drugs. Or a conflictual situation might be defined and addressed in adversarial terms leaving the parties angry and judgmental rather than enlightened by deeper awareness and understanding.

All of us absorb at least some of these cultural dictates that surround us. Some of what we learn from our families of origin, our schools, our other institutions and organizations, and our communities and cultures about what constitutes success and fulfillment is neither truth nor reality from a spiritual standpoint. *But the spiritual growth lab of life continues to call us toward spiritual reality.* Regardless of how much material wealth and worldly power we acquire, the spiritual longings of our hearts and souls are not stilled. The longings may be experienced as pangs of conscience, depression, a sense of emptiness, addictive behaviors, or a compulsive desire to acquire still more, accompanied by the nagging thought, "Is that all there is?" The spiritual growth lab of life summons us repeatedly to listen to and honor our spiritual longings. The lover in the parable is confronted by watchman after watchman until he awakens to spiritual reality.

Material Happiness Is Only Temporary Alleviation

The Holy Writings comment repeatedly about the relationship between material things and spiritual things. Guidance from Judaism says:

Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.³

Guidance from Buddhism conveys:

The impulse “I want” and the impulse “I’ll have”—lose them! That is where people get stuck; without those, you can use your eyes to guide you through this suffering state.⁴

In Christianity, we find additional perspective.

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.⁵

In Islam, we gain further insight.

When they see merchandise or diversion they scatter off to it, and they leave you standing. Say, “What is with God is better than diversion and merchandise. God is the best of providers.”⁶

The problem with material acquisitions and remedies is that they provide only brief, temporary relief from our deeper longings and the rigors of life. Beverages can alleviate thirst, food can alleviate hunger, a big house or a professional title may make us feel powerful, plastic surgery may make us feel more attractive—but all only for a very limited span of time. Alleviations are not joys in themselves. The Bahá’í Writings say:

When a man is thirsty he drinks water. When he is hungry he eats food. But if a man be not thirsty,

water gives him no pleasure and if his hunger be already satisfied, food is distasteful to him.

This is not so with spiritual enjoyments. Spiritual enjoyments bring always joy. The love of God brings endless happiness. These are joys in themselves and not alleviations....Consider the nature of material happiness. It is something which but slightly removes one's afflictions; yet the people imagine it to be joy, delight, exultation and blessing. All the material blessings, including food, drink, etc., tend only to allay thirst, hunger, and fatigue. They bestow no delight on the mind nor pleasure on the soul...

As to spiritual happiness, this is the true basis of the life of man, for life is created for happiness, not for sorrow; for pleasure, not for grief. Happiness is life; sorrow is death. Spiritual happiness is life eternal. This is a light which is not followed by darkness. This is an honor which is not followed by shame... This great blessing and precious gift is obtained by man only through the guidance of God...⁷

Spiritual Oppression, the Watchman Parable, and Seeking Spiritual Reality

Living according to the conditioned learning we receive from our culture can lead to *spiritual oppression*, a state in which we cannot find an authentic source of spiritual sustenance. When this happens, we feel weighed down in body, mind, and spirit by the authority and influence the purely materialistic interpretation of life exercises over our spiritual being.

Spiritual oppression is characterized by depression, lack of energy, and even hopelessness. It undermines the drive to seek spiritual reality by sapping mental acuity and physical strength. This seems

to be another lesson of the Watchman Parable. When the parable begins, the lover has struggled and suffered greatly in his longing for the beloved, but seems to have exhausted the conventional remedies propounded by his culture to enhance well-being. We are told that “the doctors knew no cure for him, and companions avoided his company.” Neither medicine nor social interaction has provided him solace—his heart is still in pain. Consequently, he sinks into spiritual oppression—weighed down and growing hopeless from living his days without any authentic progress toward true peace, meaning, and fulfillment (the beloved).

But even in this increasingly hopeless state, the lover’s longing cannot be stilled, and it calls him to forward movement. The intensification of his misery and the promptings of his heart make him go “out of his house” into uncomfortable and untried territory. He struggles both to find the beloved and a way out of his misery but is thwarted by the watchmen at every turn. His defensive and suspicious reactions to the watchmen reflect the limitations of his culturally-driven, materialistic world-view. Yet the lover struggles on and discovers that the dynamic forces God has built into the spiritual growth lab of life enable him to transcend his world view, scale the wall separating him from his beloved, and see his Creator, the watchmen, and the beloved with spiritual eyes. He moves from dependence on a purely material perspective to recognition of spiritual truth and reality. Ultimately, the lover recognizes the value of becoming a *wall-seeker* rather than a *wall-avoider* in order to use the spiritual growth lab of life optimally.

Becoming a Wall-Seeker

Continued reflection on the Watchman Parable and attempts to apply its lessons, led us to create the term “Wall-Seeker” and arrive at some preliminary definitions:

wall, n 1: an obstacle, impediment or boundary; **2:** a structure, force, or dynamic that separates one from objects or conditions existing on the other side.

seeker, n **1**: one who is in a state of active search, discovery, or inquiry; **2**: one searching for something more or different; **3**: one who strives to go beyond.

wall-seeker, n **1**: one who views walls as indicators of the existence of something precious waiting unseen, nearby; **2**: one who welcomes walls as mileposts to be scaled on the journey toward growth and greater spiritual awareness; **3**: one who views opposing or challenging forces as divine emissaries and guides; **4**: one who makes decisions and takes action accordingly.

So, Wall-Seekers are people who investigate reality by seeing with a spiritual eye and hearing with a spiritual ear. Their approach to the spiritual growth lab of life is embodied in the following passage from the Bahá'í Writings:

God has given man the eye of investigation by which he may see and recognize truth. He has endowed man with ears that he may hear the message of reality and conferred upon him the gift of reason by which he may discover things for himself. This is his endowment and equipment for the investigation of reality. 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; otherwise you will be utterly submerged in the sea of ignorance and deprived of all the bounties of God. Turn to God, supplicate humbly at His threshold, seeking assistance and confirmation, that God may rend asunder the veils that obscure your vision.⁸

As they navigate the spiritual growth lab of life and strive to achieve the three purposes of life, Wall-Seekers are also attentive to a number of additional principles drawn from the Watchman Parable that will be enumerated and further illustrated in this and the following chapters.

WALL-SEEKER PRINCIPLE:

*Suffering & Loss Are Inherent in the Process
of Change & Spiritual Growth*

The Watchman Parable is a story of suffering and loss leading to insight and the knowledge of spiritual reality. The lover experiences intense suffering and loss prior to going over the wall and gaining his heart's desire. Such words as "sighed," "separation," "wasted," "empty of patience," "weary," "consumed," "longing," "pain," "worn to a sigh," or "a cry of sorrow" convey the intensity of this suffering. The parable seems to suggest that our dissatisfaction with the present situation may need to increase to the level of real pain and suffering before we are moved to make a change. Further, the parable suggests that moving away from the limited nature of material reality toward a greater focus on spiritual reality will require that we navigate through tests and difficulties tailored specifically for our own growth needs. This is evident in the fact that the watchmen in the parable block the lover's path, but not the path of others.

The inseparability of spiritual growth from suffering, loss, tests, and difficulties is confirmed by other Holy Writings as well. In the Hindu Writings, spiritual knowledge and wisdom are seen as the product of suffering.

As the heat of the fire reduces wood to ashes, the fire of knowledge burns to ashes all karma. Nothing in this world purifies like spiritual wisdom.⁹