

A LETTER TO BETTY

Dear Betty,

I have thought a great deal about you since meeting you less than a week ago at John and Giselle's home.

You are a warm, loving person. I have so enjoyed seeing you with little Heather: you almost glow with affection for her.

I wish you could let your qualities blossom into the person you really are: the Betty who can give and receive love, the Betty who can love herself and others.

What follows is an essay about you, for you. I thought of writing it in the second person — to You — but decided that you might like to see yourself as if you were another person: to see yourself through my eyes and decide whether you like what I see in you.

I wish you well.

Love,

Mich

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She was wearing a long robe of muted gray-brown, with a surplice of darker brown over that like an apron. Her face peeped out from a severe kerchief which concealed most of her head. She looked out at the world with an expression of faint puzzlement. This was Betty, who would take care of little Heather while John, Giselle, Frank and I were in Lethbridge that evening.

I had been warned that she would not shake hands with me or touch me in any other way. "I can't have relationships," she had told John and Giselle.

"What do you think you're having right now, an elephant?" had returned John.

"Why won't she have 'relationships'?", I had asked.

"Because CEDRIC says she mustn't," answered John. The world, according to Cedric, is corrupt, and therefore everyone in the world —

everything they stand for — is corrupt. Contact with these miserable sinners would itself be corrupting.

Cedric was a charismatic religious person living in Prince Edward Island who has a following of four believers, one of which was Betty. Betty wore a religious habit, ate once a day as part of a program of mortification of the flesh, and eschewed "relationships" with anyone outside the order. Unfortunately, mortification of the flesh, a very personal matter, was extended into restrictions on even more important a realm of endeavor: normal, close, loving interactions with other people.

Having been warned not to expect warmth from Betty, I did not engage in the conventional introductory interactions which help people feel more comfortable with each other when they meet.

Instead, I asked her if she had read John's Ph.D. thesis. "No," she answered sadly, "I'm sure I wouldn't understand it."

Questioned about that, she said she was worried about her growing inability to concentrate on what she was reading. "I just can't seem to focus mentally on the subject matter," she said, "I'm not registering the ideas."

At this point, I told her a bit about SQ3R, the systematic method for learning through reading, and suggested she might want to try reading/studying in the morning, before having to slave at house-cleaning and becoming hypoglycemic because she eats only at 5 pm every day. She said that was a good idea and she'd try it.

That evening, when the gang of us returned to Pincher Creek, Betty was standing at the door. She surprised me by looking me straight in the eye and saying very directly, "Mich, could you do me a favor?"

"Perhaps," I replied, "depending on what it is. What can I do for you?"

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“You can help me pound steel stakes into the ground for a fence around my garden,” she answered. Did she have a twinkle in her eyes?

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The next morning, John drove me to her little house out towards the mountains. The sky was puffs of high cirrus clouds swirling like cotton candy in an enormous dome. The mountains smiled on the horizon like huge gray teeth with obvious dental caps. Betty was out in her weedy patch of last year’s garden in her winter habit. I thought, even nuns get to wear cooler, more modern clothes these days, don’t they?

Betty showed me the posts, rusty frozen snakes seven feet long, scattered every seven paces around the perimeter of the garden. She was using a kitchen chair to stand on while she pounded the stakes into the ground with a big old sledgehammer. I tried it, but it was clear that unless we got the hammer higher over the posts, it would be very heavy, slow work indeed to pound the metal into the earth. We therefore moved some concrete blocks and a wooden platform over to the next post to raise the hammer another foot above the top of the metal; that worked fine.

At the corner post, Betty said, “You know, I consider this a God-send, your being here to pound posts.”

“No it isn’t,” I countered, “it’s a Mich-send. I’m the one who decided to help you.”

“Don’t you believe God could have something to do with it?” she asked.

“Well, if I were a Supreme Being, I’m pretty sure I’d have more important and interesting issues than whether you get your posts stuck in the ground faster or slower. You must admit that on the cosmic scale of things, it doesn’t seem likely to be of overwhelming importance.”

She thought about that silently.

After half the fence posts were placed, Betty and I sat in the shade of her hovel and drank fruit juice. I felt very sorry that she should be wearing such hot clothes for this kind of work, and after

thinking about whether I would hurt her feelings by referring to it, I decided to plunge into the topic anyway.

“Why do you wear winter clothes while working in a summer garden?”

“Penance,” she said shortly, looking intently at the garden. “Penance for my sins.”

“You must have done some pretty awful things.”

“Yes,” she answered fervently, shaking her head slowly, in a ‘no’ motion, “oh yes.”

“And will this have to go on for long?”

“For the rest of my life,” she said — sadly, it seemed to me. “It’s punishment — you don’t think I want to be wearing these, do you? I’d much rather be sitting out in the sun in a bathing suit. But I can’t.”

We continued our conversation. She told me about her restrictive eating habits: no solid food except at about 5 pm every day. Fruit juices or mushed-up stuff at other times. She said her brother, a doctor, had examined her nutritional status, expecting gross deficiencies, but she was fine now. She showed me her rabbits; she used a few for food and sold or gave the rest away. She supplied one old lady in town with free food.

Now this, I thought, is more like it. This is involvement with other human beings: living a humble, devotional life but reaching out to other people in their need. So why does she feel that reaching out to people in adult, loving relations would be bad? If having parent-child interactions (caring for dependent people) is OK, then how come normal human contacts aren’t? Why this much and no further? Or why this far at all?

“Betty,” I began, “sometimes, where I work, one of the managers who report to me will propose a raise for one of the people who report to them. So I ask, ‘If they’re so good, why don’t you give them more?’ And when they finish that, I ask, ‘Well, if they’re only worth this much raise in pay, why not offer less?’”

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Betty nodded encouragingly.

“Now, according to many thinkers, including Christians, I believe, the body is the ‘House of the Lord’ and is to be treated with respect. We aren’t allowed to kill ourselves, for example, because we are merely custodians of our bodies.” More nods.

“So in your case, I understand you have to mortify your flesh. For instance, instead of being sensitive to your body’s comfort and need for proper heat dissipation in hot weather, you wear hot clothes in summer.”

Betty said definitely, “That’s right.”

“But Betty, if this much, why not more? Why not put safety pins through your nose, or chop off a finger now and then?”

“Or, for that matter, why not less? If being ravenous until 5 p.m. is enough mortification, why not be hungry until merely 4 p.m.? Or if eating mushed up fruit is OK but not mashing it with your own teeth, then why not add that no yellow objects are to be eaten between 8:30 and 11:30 in the morning on alternate Tuesdays if the moon is in the second quarter?”

Betty grew silent and pensive before this onslaught. Finally, she gazed off into the distance and said, “It’s a mystery.”

She paused. She seemed somehow dissatisfied with her answer. She added reluctantly, “I guess.”

“Oh, well then,” I replied, dismissing the issue airily, “if it’s a mystery, there’s nothing more to be said.”

And so we pounded the rest of the rods into the earth. Somehow the near side of the garden seemed more receptive to our efforts, and the metal slid easily into the dark ground. Then Betty very kindly drove me back to John and Giselle’s home and thanked me once again for my help.

* * *

Two days later, Betty popped in cheerily and gave John, Heather and me an agreeable

surprise: coconut macaroons. She astonished us by asking boldly for an orange. We offered her salad or spaghetti, but she stuck to her orange. Nonetheless, it felt good to be able to give her something, and I thought as I watched her what a likable woman she was. Seeing her personality shining through the dingy overlay of fanaticism was like seeing a flash of sun on a cloudy day.

Betty then asked to know exactly when she should be at the Renslers’ house on Saturday morning to take Heather with her while Edward and I went fishing. Should she come at 9:00? 10:00?

“It doesn’t matter,” we said, “we’ll just wait for you and leave once you arrive.” This answer she reluctantly seemed to accept. However, a few minutes later, she once again asked, “So when do you want me to come get Heather?”

We repeated that we would just wait for her, so she was welcome to come when it suited her.

“No, really, should I come at 09:00?” she insisted.

“Well, try around 10:00,” we answered, capitulating to her evident need for a definite time. It really seemed important that the time be absolutely clear.

Later, the Renslers told me that Betty had shown a parallel insistence on definite rules. At one point, Edward was supposed to spend an hour on homework, or, if he had no homework, the same time practicing his piano playing. But Betty had interpreted this to mean that exactly sixty minutes should be spent on one or other of these activities regardless of circumstances. For example, if Edward had only forty minutes of homework, he would have to spend twenty minutes at the piano. If he arrived home at 10:00 at night, he would have to go to bed at 11:00 because of the ‘rules.’

One evening, Betty had complained that Edward was not following the rules because he had refused her orders. John had exploded, “If we wanted rigid rules, we’d have hired a robot.

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You're supposed to think, not apply rules blindly." But Betty had been unconvinced.

* * *

So what is going on here? What do I think Betty see when she views the world?

For Betty, the world is a threatening place full of danger and temptation into dan ger. Uncertainty about anything is deeply worrying. Issues must be resolved. If a doubt assails her about any precept, any instruction, any idea, the doubt is itself grounds for wholesale rejection of the precept-instruction-idea. For example, if there is a question in her own mind about whether wearing hot clothes in summer makes sense, the question must be denied — "It's a mystery" — lest the 'dangerous' doubts weaken her entire view of the world. The solution to doubt is to banish it, to cling fervently to revealed truth, to deny the possibility of change. If wearing hot clothes were found to be less than a perfect way, then, for Betty, perhaps everything else she believes would be thrown into disarray.

For Betty, if something is true or good, it is true/good eternally, universally, immutably. Thus, if an ice-pack is good for a patient with a fever, then it must be good for any sick person, even someone with chills. It is not possible that an action be useful and liberating for one person or at one stage of personal development and harmful and stultifying for a different person or at a later stage of development. Thus, if abstinence from sensual pleasure was once a useful discipline for Betty — after years of dissolute living, for example — then it must be good forever, even though she is now a good, honest, hardworking, wholesome, and likable person.

For Betty, truth has no context; truth/goodness is an attribute of the concept, not an expression of the relation between the concept and reality. Thus, if something is false or bad, it is in all ways false/bad and cannot even be thought about without danger. No intermediate course is available. The world is two-valued : good is good and bad is bad and everything falls into

one category or the other. For example, if wearing revealing clothes was once a provocative act designed to elicit strong reactions from men, then wearing comfortable clothes — or a bikini swim suit — while working in a hot garden must also be bad.

For Betty, in rules lie comfort and safety. What her past is I do not know, but she seems to me to feel that her life was once rootless, drifting, devoid of a framework to which she could cling. There were no rules, no standards; the abominable dictum of Alistair Crowley might have been her only guide: DO WHAT THOU WILLST; AND THAT SHALL BE THE WHOLE OF THE LAW. No wonder, then, that she should react. "Let there be rules, she cries. "Let there be a fount of wisdom, a source of goodness. Let me not now have to think about context, about complexity: therein was my downfall."

Betty does not now distinguish between a lawless life and a life ruled not by prescriptive rigidity but rather by a set of guiding principles. The difference between a rule and a principle is that a rule cannot take into account the personal circumstances of the human being trying to apply it. The principle is explicitly part of a wider moral context, a view of the world that encompasses variation, flux, growth. Laws are for machines; they determine unambiguous modes of behavior which must not be modified regardless of context.

The law seems to Betty to be an end in itself: eat only once a day; do not touch other human beings; wear the same hot clothes regardless of weather. In contrast, a principle cannot dictate, only guide: do not eat more often than is needful for good health; do not exploit other human beings by objectifying them into mechanisms for sensual pleasures; wear clothes appropriate for your work and circumstances.

A related issue is a flawed self-image. I imagine that Betty sees herself as a corrupt vessel, unworthy of the grace of her God. John once said that if she kept on as she was, she would die soon. She is said to have muttered, "Good."

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Betty may be obsessed with her own past. Ironically, given the nun-like devotion to penance and humility, she circles again and again around a past she wants to repudiate. The very concentration on abnegation, mortification, expiation is a form of narcissism — an unbounded focusing on the very aspects of one's personality or past behavior that one ostensibly wishes to banish. Does Betty not derive some secret, sublimated, repressed satisfaction from her repugnant past? Else why dwell on it to such an extent?

Why focus to such an extent on the negative? Can it be that Betty cannot express her warmth because of her doubts about her own worth? Does she wish, secretly, and maybe without knowing it, that her life had a richer emotional color? In a colorless world, maybe even a horrid picture — but one nonetheless full of color — looks more interesting than the blank wall of prison.

How do I myself approach the sins I have committed (“sins” in my own personal moral structure)? Certainly not by denying them, nor by focusing my current existence around expiation. I think about my past with a fundamental sympathy for myself. As I suggested to Betty, one of my guidelines when thinking about how to treat myself is, “Would I do this to another human being? Would I demand this from another person?” I must approach myself with the same respect I give to other people. What would be thoughtless, inconsiderate, disrespectful towards another person must be eschewed in my own intra-personal life.

Betty is not gaining, not becoming a better person by her self-loathing. On the contrary, she is letting negativity rule her life. And if she cannot love herself, see her own ego with compassion, how then can she love other human beings? And without love, how then will she endure existence? I thought that the Judeo-Christian faiths were based on love for others — “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

(Lev 19:18) It doesn't say, “Love thy neighbour and despise yourself.”

Paul, in discussing how people can help the work of their Lord, writes that beyond all the skills of language and miracle-working, there is a “still more excellent way:”

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

I Cor 13:1- 3

Finally, Betty shows susceptibility to strong authority figures. Presumably, Cedric has a magnetic force of character that has captured Betty's imagination. I wonder, what kind of relationship did Betty have to her own father? Does she seek an exaggeratedly masculine style to make up for something she missed in her childhood? The problem is that a distant figure cannot live life for her. Cedric is not here and now, in Betty's body and mind, in Betty's world, with Betty 's potential friends. His rigid rules are a hollow shell that she struggles to fit into; every suspicion that his edicts may not fit reality as she lives it worries her and increases her sense of worthlessness. The authority figure substitutes for a mature, self-actualizing relation with the world; she is a perpetual child, free of responsibility but thereby prevented from pursuing her potential for growth.

Cedric surely has a vision of rightness, of goodness. But it is his vision, not Linda's. Depending exclusively on his spiritual vision for her personal salvation is spiritual voyeurism — a passive receptivity to someone else's actions. Betty must adapt the principles she holds dear to the world as she sees it, as she lives it. She is not a child. Paul said to the Corinthians, “Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; be babes in

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evil, but in thinking be mature.” (I Cor. 14:20)
He also wrote, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways.” (I Cor. 13 : 11)

Worse still, the emotional attraction to the figure of authority has no basis in a moral framework. Who knows which bizarre cult will wander across Betty’s narrow view? Perhaps in a few years, she will have repudiated Cedric and found another absolutely wonderful path to truth-and-beauty. This experience is the theme of Doris Lessing’s Massey Lectures for 1985, *Prisons We Choose To Live Inside* (CBC Publications, Toronto, 1986). Lessing says that over and over, people — especially young, intelligent people — have found ideologies to accept without question. The experience is intense: it feels as if the Truth has been found; it even seems that probably it’s the first time ever that human beings have found Truth. What an exhilarating feeling to be on the cutting edge of history!

Alas, the thrill has its less attractive side. The joy in working with fellow-believers all too easily becomes satisfaction at the woeful stupidity or evil of everyone outside the Chosen Few. All who are not in the ingroup are reviled; those who have found the Truth are the elect. Repeated reinforcement by group members of their own superiority to the common herd can lead to thought-control. In a group led by a charismatic, authoritarian leader, doubts are interpreted as a sign of weakness; only total adherence to the rules of the group will satisfy this new monster of certitude. Any counter-arguments are dismissed in advance as not worth listening to — the mouthings of fools or devils.

The strength of the leader plays on the desire for clarity and certainty. Members of the cult forget their responsibility to think for themselves; they discount their own views and thus make their own poor opinion of themselves worse. Any examples from personal experiences by group-members are either denied by the processes of psychological repression or ignored

by the process called “re-fencing.” For example, suppose a group enforces the belief that a particular group of people are all bad in some way. Let’s invent ‘Draverians.’ Are not all Draverians dirty? Why yes, of course; we all know that and tell each other so every day. But is not Robert the Draverian quite clean? Well, yes, but that’s because he’s not ‘really’ a Draverian. He’s different from all the rest of the Draverians. That is, he’s different because he doesn’t fit the model the Group wants to hold.

And then, a few years later, the very same people are startled to remember that they could have been so deluded as to believe what they believed ‘back then.’ What? Draverians are dirty? What nonsense. How *could* we have been so foolish. Everyone knows that Draverians are wonderful and clean. And so the game goes.

Doris Lessing herself experienced this phenomenon during the second World War. For a time, before Germany attacked Russia, the Soviets were The Enemy, the repository of all the vile crimes humanity could conceive. Then suddenly, overnight, when the Russians joined the Allied cause, old ‘Papa Joe’ Stalin became the darling of the British press. The Russians were heroes; Britain would support their gallant efforts to free the world. Fine — but when the War ended, the Dirty Russkies were out to Get Us once again, and people who had been cheering the Soviet brigades a month earlier were now cursing them.

The pity, says Lessing, is that it is so easy to abandon one dogma and adopt a new one without ever focusing on the process of dogmatism itself. The problem is not that we choose a set of wrong beliefs, but the idea that any set of beliefs is absolute. We must be more humble and more practical: we have to remember that any model of the world is ‘merely’ a way of looking at the world. The model is not the world. As Korzybski’s *General Semantics* puts it, the map is not the terrain.

We become fully human — fully adult — when we recognize that certainty is unreachable. Absolute truth is an illusion; we do best by

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recognizing that we can be wrong — because that implies we can grow by learning. People are complex; problems are manifold; moral issues have more than one possible correct view; assumptions can vary; rules of thought and perception vary.

Recognizing that we will always change our views — that we can expect to be “wrong” on issues — means that we can still respect ourselves even when we do change our view. Everyone has to change as they grow: we are not defective just because we see things from a different perspective. It’s OK to change our minds.

People are complex: we act not merely because of rational, articulated decisions but also because of feelings, appetites and aversions. Those opinions, feelings, and drives are themselves the result of our personal history, family relationships, love affairs, school teachers, religious experiences, and what we just ate.

Problems are manifold: solving alcoholism in a community involves getting in touch with personal feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness, reaching out to each other for support, learning about one’s cultural roots, studying the history of exploitation and economic power, and forming an image of what can be accomplished in the present and in the future.

Moral issues have more than one possible correct view: telling an old lady that you think she wears ugly clothes may be the rigid interpretation of the rule ‘Tell the Truth,’ but it is a hateful and ugly act that conflicts with the principle ‘Love your neighbor.’

Assumptions vary: some people assume that human beings have a God-given right to eat other animals. Others assume that other animals have a right to live on the planet without being harassed by human beings. Some people assume that their own culture’s view of the world is ‘true;’ others assume that each culture has its own view of the world.

Rules of thought vary: some people assume that intellectual processes are the only method of understanding the world. Some assume that that only feelings are a guide to action. Others assume that multiple sources of understanding can be combined for an integrated view of our universe.

Rules of perception vary: a forest-dweller in Africa was taken into the great plains, where he saw a valley stretching before him for the first time in his life. He had never experienced a field of view longer than a few meters in front of him. So when he saw cattle on a slope a few kilometers away, he asked his guide in puzzlement, “How come those cattle are so small?” And when Europeans learned the language of the northern Inuit, they were astonished to discover dozens of words for snow — words taking for granted that a person would ‘naturally’ distinguish among dozens of very different forms of frozen water. And finally, when non-Chinese speakers hear Chinese, it can be very difficult to tell the difference between words because the way the

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How fervently I wish Betty the strength to grow into the person I can see beyond the habits. Let her reach out to other people, not withdraw. Let her love life; let her love other creatures, other people, not shut herself away in endless contemplation of the past. Let her use her past to help others: share insights that others have not experienced. Let her work with people who are lost because she also has been lost and is finding herself. Let her learn to be wrong and yet love herself; to fail and yet to persevere; to see wrong-doing and yet not hate the doer.

Although I am not a Baha’i, this passage is on the wall in my kitchen at home:

Be generous in prosperity, and thankful in adversity. Be worthy of the trust of thy neighbor, and look upon him with a bright and friendly face. Be a treasure to the poor, an admonisher to the rich, an answerer to the cry of the needy, a

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preserver of the sanctity of thy pledge. Be fair in judgement, and guarded in thy speech. Be unjust to no man, and show all meekness to all men. Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a joy to the sorrowful, a sea for the thirsty, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression. Let integrity and uprightness distinguish all thine acts. Be a home for the stranger, a balm to the suffering, a tower of strength for the fugitive. Be eyes to the blind, and a guiding light unto the feet of the erring. Be an ornament to the countenance of truth, a crown to the brow of fidelity, a pillar of

the temple of righteousness, a breath of life to the body of mankind, an ensign of the hosts of justice, a luminary above the horizon of virtue, a dew to the soil of the human heart, an ark on the ocean of knowledge, a sun in the heaven of bounty, a gem on the diadem of wisdom, a shining light in the firmament of thy generation, a fruit upon the tree of humility.

Gleanings from *The Writings of Baba 'u'llah* (Shoghi Effendi, tr.; Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1939) p. 285.

