



The Community Model of Consciousness

— *by Justice St. Rain*

The maturation of the human race implies more than simply the “evolution of spiritual civilization” or the “awakening of global consciousness.” It promises the transformation of consciousness itself. The nature and mechanism of this transformation is best understood using community as a model for individual consciousness. We can visualize individual identity as a community of thoughts, ideas, experiences, memories and feelings that exist only in relationship to one another.

Mental health is the result of a spiritually unified “inner community” and is achieved through the same Bahá’í principles that will guide the evolution of society as a whole.

The reality of man is his thought...¹

—‘Abdu’l-Bahá

The Nature of Consciousness

A Letter to a Friend:

August 21, 1999

Dear Walter,

Twenty years ago last spring, I wrote a paper on the nature of consciousness for a philosophy of art class that my professor called “groundbreaking” and encouraged me to follow up on with additional research and writing. Now that I have presented a paper at the Wilmette Institute, though, I have opened myself up to the possibility that my thoughts might have some value to others. At that conference two weeks ago, Patricia Romano gave a talk about new models of reality. Among the notes I took and insights I gained were “Consciousness is Causal,” “reality is made up of nested systems – it is an integrated web of life,” and “process creates structure.” She mentioned the idea that when you get down to the smallest sub-atomic level, “things” cease to exist. There is no matter, or energy, only relationships between vibrating relationships. I was struck by the idea of nested systems - the concept that small systems join together to form larger systems that reflect many of the same qualities of the smaller systems of which they are composed.

In my talk that weekend, I had spoken about the idea that we carry around layers and layers of conflicting beliefs based on our interpretations of different experiences throughout our lives. I said that an individual’s mind is not a single point of consciousness, but is, rather, a range of awareness that includes many ideas, beliefs and feelings that influence our decisions and actions.

Experiences that we don’t like may be shoved into the background of our awareness, but they never really disappear until they are integrated into our current understanding.

I talked about individual memories and how they can generate several different beliefs and emotions, and that these individual memories, if not integrated, can almost have a life of their own, just under the surface of our awareness. When Patricia talked about nested systems, I made a connection and realized that individuals in society that we don’t accept (due to prejudice or shame) can become isolated in the same way as our individual memories can exist outside of our main flow of awareness. I made a note that “individuals are like individual memories.” Described in this way, it seems very strange to me that it would take me two weeks to turn the metaphor around and realize that individual memories are like individuals.

In other words, our consciousness is not modeled after clocks, libraries, software programs or holograms, but rather, after the most complex system possible. I am a community. I am a community of thoughts, memories, experiences, emotions and beliefs. I organize myself based on the pattern of organization I experience in life. Because I live in a hierarchical community, I organize my thoughts and experiences accordingly. I have important, leading, controlling thoughts, which I

experience as my “focused conscious mind” and then I have “middle class” thoughts, that I try to keep accessible in case they have information I might need, then I have the “unwashed masses” of thoughts that I would just as soon pretend did not exist.

In a standard model of consciousness, there is the “I” and then there is a library of facts, figures, memories, emotions, experiences, etc. that “I” rummage through until I find the one that I want to use. Each piece of information in my “memory library” is considered dead. It is a fossil. It may inform “ME” about something I need to know or consider, but it certainly cannot exert any power over me. It has no autonomy or volition. Or does it?

Perhaps memories are not dead. Maybe “I” am not a single perspective, but rather a “conversation” between all of the “me’s” I’ve ever been.

The fascinating thing about using Community as a model for the soul is that it has so many profound ramifications for both psychology and sociology. All of the Bahá’í quotations that refer to loving one another, building community, overcoming prejudice, developing consultation, eliminating clergy and decentralizing leadership now have implications for how we organize our thinking process and how we integrate “unwanted” thoughts and feelings into the “community” of our being.

It also throws a fascinating light upon the Universal House of Justice’s statement that consultation is not just a tool for arriving at decisions, but is, rather, an evolutionary new way of thinking as a group. If *groups* are being taught how to think as a group, then why can’t *individuals* learn how to integrate multiple perspectives into their thought processes?

I think many people will find this idea somewhat disconcerting – or even frightening. People don’t like the idea of turning decision making over to a group. They would rather have a single individual, like a president or a clergyman in charge of their community lives. Imagine how frightened they would be by the idea that their *internal* lives are also run by a group and that they, themselves, are not really an individual!

I suspect that many will resist this model simply because of the loss of control that it may imply. But moving to a community model does not mean we lose control of our lives.

What is true of the life of the individual has its parallels in human society. The human species is an organic whole, the leading edge of the evolutionary process. That human consciousness necessarily operates through an infinite diversity of individual minds and motivations detracts in no way from its essential unity.

*Bahá’í International Community,
1995 Mar 03,
The Prosperity of Humankind*

We have maintained the illusion of a single point of control by using a dictator model as our form of “community organization” within our own heads. We have bought into Freud’s superego model and have forced ourselves to do “what is right” through discipline, and by rejecting, shaming and locking away any thoughts, beliefs, memories and actions that do not obey our expectations. But in a maturing world, that model is no longer effective. In the global community, we talk about spreading democracy, sharing visions, promoting cooperation, and accepting diversity. What would it feel like to apply this approach to our inner lives?

Can we even imagine how glorious a person would be if every one of their experiences, thoughts, beliefs and emotions were not immediately labeled as either good or bad, right or wrong, but rather welcomed, understood and integrated into a cooperative “community” effort? This is not about making everyone’s experience wonderful. It is about making a place for every experience, learning from it, and putting it to work in support of the whole.

In a dictatorship, people who do not “fit” go underground. They are not recognized, acknowledged or remembered, but they periodically pop up just long enough to launch a grenade or grease a stairway. How many of us find ourselves suddenly tripping over ourselves or putting out fires that we set for ourselves “by accident?” There is a lot of self-sabotage going on in most people’s lives, and yet we have not had an effective model for identifying the motivations of the “saboteurs” or reintegrating them into a healthy inner community.

There are many other implications to this model. For example, if “I” am really a relationship between internal thoughts, then people who are good at fostering relationships should be better at keeping multiple lines of thought going simultaneously. Women tend to be better at both of these things than men.

I also realized that Freud was really offering the world a family model for identity. Ego, Superego and Id are really fancy words for self, parent and child. Transactional Analysis uses this same model more explicitly. But we have outgrown the family model. It was developed during humanity’s collective adolescence, and it reflects the inherent conflict that the adolescent mind experiences when it tries to mediate between childish desires and adult expectations. Freud’s model glorifies this conflict as the essential quality of human existence.

As humanity matures, however, a model based on this transitional conflict is no longer appropriate. A therapeutic approach focused on highlighting conflicts and identifying repression and suppression does not serve the higher goals of a mature and integrated human soul. Yes, it worked, and we might even say it was “true” for the time it was developed. But if consciousness evolves in response to Revelation, then our model for consciousness must evolve as well.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote, “*In this sacred Dispensation, conflict and contention are in no wise permitted.*”³ If conflict and contention are not allowed *between* people, then we must be capable of imagining a model for human consciousness that does weave tension and conflict into its very structure. If we wish to imagine a unified world, we must begin by creating a model for a unified soul.

In the Prosperity statement it says: “Because the relationship between the individual and society is a reciprocal one, the transformation now required must occur simultaneously within human consciousness and the structure of social institutions.” Isn’t this suggesting that there is a similarity between the structure of individual consciousness and the structure of our social community?

Our souls interact with and therefore model our external culture. But the reciprocal is also true. As our “inner lives and private character” become more in-

tegrated and harmonious, they will, of necessity, have a positive influence on the greater community. As Patricia Romano reminded me, “Process creates structure” and “Consciousness is Causal.” Perhaps by creating a new model for what goes on inside the human psyche, we can speed the process of manifesting that model in the outside world.

— Justice

On the following page I outline some of the many questions that this model raises. These are questions that I have already developed my own answers to, but I welcome comments, suggestions, observations and additions. I would love to open up a dialogue on this topic.



“A family is a nation in miniature. Simply enlarge the circle of the household and you have the nation. Enlarge the circle of nations and you have all humanity.”

—‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Humanity is composed of a series of nested systems radiating outward from the family to humanity.

Consciousness is composed of a series of nested systems radiating inward from the individual to God.

¹ Paris Talks, pg. 17

² Promulgation of Universal Peace pg.156

³ Will and Testament pg. 13

Structural Questions:

- Why do we care about how we think?
- What good does it do to have a model of something as ephemeral as thought?
- What is the difference between a model of the structure of our consciousness and an understanding of the nature of awareness itself?
- Does this model of the structure of consciousness lend itself to an understanding of awareness as a spotlight? A microphone? A flame? None of the above?
- Could awareness simply be a habitual orientation towards a previously dominant venue in the community structure?
“Process creates structure”...and structure guides process.
- What is the relationship between experiences, emotions, thoughts and beliefs?
- Do memories, beliefs, ideas and experiences organize themselves into sub-communities based on some common element?
- If so, how are they organized? By chronology, emotional charge, belief, setting, content?
- Do these sub-communities behave like individuals within a person’s mind?
- How does this additional level of nested systems affect our perception of the complexity of our inner community?
- How does it affect our ability to retrieve information from within a sub-community?
- How does it affect our ability to become fully integrated human beings?
- Can one memory be a member of more than one sub-community?
- Can we have more than one version of a single memory?
- Not all memories, or parts of memories, are equally important. Why?
- What happens to all of the boring memories? Do they merge into one memory, and if so, can they ever be separated again?
- What gives an experience the power of expression?
- What is the energy that animates our inner dialogue?
- Does our inner dialogue “seek to exert its influence” upon us the way “human utterance” does?

Psychological Questions:

- How does this relate to Freud’s model?
- How did Freud address the question of awareness?
- What other models are out there?
- Does it matter what model we use?
- Are there any models not built around inherent conflict and repression?
- How would a therapist use this model in a therapeutic setting?
- Does it have any relationship to “inner child” work?
- How does this relate to multiple personality disorders and other forms of psychosis?
- If we practice listening to other people, will it help us listen to the different parts of ourselves? And what about the other way around? Is our relationship with others an accurate reflection of our relationship with ourselves?

Bahá’í Questions:

- Our experiences generate beliefs, and it is the beliefs we hold that are most often responsible for internal discord and division. The Bahá’í Faith is a unified and integrated system of beliefs. How can we more effectively infuse the Bahá’í system of beliefs into our internal communities, and what will be the long-term effect of this process?
- How do the Bahá’í Writings define a healthy community?
- How does Bahá’u’lláh tell us to create healthy communities?
- What Bahá’í principles can be borrowed from our social model and applied to an internal model? i.e. consultation, independent investigation of truth and elimination of clergy.
- How do the Bahá’í Writings support the idea of nested systems?
- What spiritual principles and practices might have an impact on our internal community structure and unity?
Prayer? Meditation?
- Since our internal structure is modeled after our external experience, might the structure of the Bahá’í Writings themselves have an influence on the way we structure our thoughts?
- If we model our internal communities after our external experience of community, does this mean that people from different cultures and different times organize their thoughts differently?
- How does this change our understanding of the term “diversity of thought?”

Evolution of Consciousness:

- Does Bahá’u’lláh’s promise that the world will become united tell us anything about the evolution of our internal thought processes?
- Does the idea that we are communities of thought imagining ourselves to be a single individual tell us anything about the future state of unity that humanity is capable of?
- Can we learn anything about where we are going from the process of consultation?
- As we practice consultation, will we become better able to hear the many voices in our own heads without becoming confused or disoriented?
- Can we learn anything about what we are capable of from the evolution of harmony in music or improvisational Jazz?
- Can we even imagine the levels of creativity available to us if we were able to access both our own wisdom and that of everyone around us in a seamless flow of spiritual conversation?
- If right now we use a linear and hierarchical structure for our thoughts, and in the future we use a networked, consultative and democratic structure for our thoughts, won’t this expand our potential a thousand fold?

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