When those in social science discuss the basic needs for human existence, the list usually starts with material things: air, water, food and shelter. These are things that no one can survive without, at least not for long.

But those who have thought seriously about what it means to be a human being rarely stop there. The list of basic needs, it is widely acknowledged, includes a number of much more "intangible" items. Among them are love, friendship, esteem, and purpose.

Because we have material bodies, the hierarchy of these needs usually starts with those things that sustain physical life. And, certainly, for the starving person, food becomes the highest priority. For the homeless, a search for shelter dominates.

Yet, for those whose basic material needs are satisfied, as is the case with the great majority of people in the West, the quest to satisfy the second set of intangible needs is a major preoccupation.

The search for love, esteem, companionship, and purpose is reflected in pursuits ranging from participation in sporting events to watching the cinema, from the reading of romance novels to weekly worship services.

In times of turmoil, the relative value of some of these pursuits is sometimes called into question. Whether in the form of global calamity, such as war, pandemic, or terrorism, or in the form of personal trauma, such as divorce, economic loss, or ill health, tumult and disorder often force a reevaluation of priorities.

One of the curious features of the modern mindset is that, in the search for satisfaction of intangible needs, many people start with the assumption that their best hope for success lies with material means.

In the West, especially, if you ask people what will make them happy, they will quite often give a list of material possessions: a nice home, a better car, a more exciting vacation, a higher paying job. The underlying assumption is that the possession of higher value externals will somehow also lead to deeper love, more esteem from friends, and a greater sense of fulfillment.

Yet it takes little reflection to recognize that more and better material goods do not automatically translate into a more satisfying life. Frequently, the reality is just the opposite. Opulence often breeds dissatisfaction. The rates of suicide, depression, and the like in developed countries are just one indicator of this fact.

This conundrum can be answered by understanding that our intangible needs are, in fact, spiritual needs -- and realizing that such needs can only be satisfied by spiritual means.
What do we mean by spiritual means?

It is important to understand that human nature has two sides: the material side referred to above and a spiritual side. This notion is common to all of the world's religions and is increasingly supported by scientific research into the nature of consciousness.

The spiritual side of human nature -- commonly referred to as the soul -- is that part of our being that continually seeks to know and to love, that is touched by awe and splendor, and that holds to that which is eternal and good.

"It is the first among all created things to declare the excellence of its Creator, the first to recognize His glory, to cleave to His truth, and to bow down in adoration before Him," said Bahá'u'lláh.

Yet spiritual reality is intangible and cannot be directly observed. "Know, verily, that the soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel," said Bahá'u'lláh.

Yet we can perceive its existence by the signs it leaves and by the indirect observation of its effects -- much as the existence of subatomic particles cannot be directly observed but are divined by the traces they leave.

Among the traces of the spiritual side of human nature are the willingness of people to sacrifice immediate self-interest in the pursuit of higher goals, whether for family, neighborhood, country, or planet; the feelings of transcendence that are felt by all men and women at various moments of their lives; and the great power of human imagination and hope, which are among the real means for human progress and advancement.

The fact of intangible human needs likewise offers evidence of our spiritual nature. Take the quality of love. It cannot be detected or directly observed. Yet the power of its existence is manifestly clear to every human being who has ever loved or been loved.

And the fact that the great majority of people around the world identify themselves with religious belief offers still more evidence. That the majority choose to follow one of the great world religions, all of which set high standards of morality, demanding a certain level of personal sacrifice, runs counter to what we know about materialistic self-interest.

This proof can be put another way: throughout history there have been sects and cults that have demanded very little of their followers, or that have taught that heaven or paradise can be obtained through hedonism or devil worship or other essentially materialistic means. Yet none of these "religions" has ever gained a significant foothold in our collective consciousness. The soul is, indeed, the first to "recognize" its Creator.

Yet despite all of the evidence of a spiritual reality, our modern world is ruled by a materialistic approach to life. People evaluate the course of their lives with a materialistic expectation of outcomes. Do I have a larger house than my neighbor? Is my corporation growing faster than the competition? Will this little pill cure my illness?

Why not ask: is my family happier than my neighbor's? Or, better yet, how can I make our entire neighborhood happier?

Why not ask: is my corporation serving its customers well? Or, better yet, is my corporation contributing to the well-being of the world at large?
Why not ask: with what we now know about the body's capacity to heal, might not exercise, diet, or meditation provide an alternative cure? Or, better yet, how can I contribute to the health of those around me, given our essential interdependence?

This is not to say that material means are not important -- or that they are not sometimes the most effective route to a goal. Sometimes, indeed, a particular pill or vaccine is the best cure.

Yet in our modern world, the balance has in many ways been given over almost wholly to the materialistic approach to life -- and that has had severe consequences.

On a personal level, this imbalance can be seen in the seemingly endless pursuit of "false" forms of love, esteem, and transcendence in objects ranging from pornography to gaudy clothing to mind-altering drugs.

On a social level, this imbalance manifests itself in approaches to commerce, education, medicine, and justice that stress immediate material results over long-term human satisfaction. Whether in the form of a flashy marketing plan, a new quick-fix pill, or a contentious lawsuit, such approaches flow from a belief in material efficacy rather than spiritual insight.

And on a global level, this imbalance can be seen most significantly in the failure of peoples and nations to recognize their essential interdependence and oneness. It is a failure that can be characterized as a "survival of the fittest" approach, versus a worldview that emphasizes cooperation and consultation -- and which stresses unity of thought and action above all else.

"That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race," said Bahá'u'lláh. "The Great Being saith: Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth."

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