

Gambling: To Wager or to Work

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“Hey, somebody’s gotta win, right? Why not me?”

The billion dollar Powerball lottery recently had odds of 292.2 million to one. But, somebody won, didn’t they? The thought, hope, fantasy, wish and desire to be independently wealthy can strike us all—as if one lucky, million-to-one occurrence will suddenly make our own and our family’s lives instantly better.



That allure explains why gambling establishments, once the purview of only a few places, abound all over the world today. California currently has 191 casinos and Nevada 363, leading the way in the United States, and other states and countries now scramble to catch up.

Governments often rely on gambling revenue like they used to rely on taxation, counting on those common hopes and fantasies of sudden wealth, while relying on the fact that a few people win and millions of people lose.

Sure, we all hear the stories of the big winners. But life doesn't work like that very often, does it? No, most of everything we accomplish and acquire we achieve through our own efforts. That's part of the reason why the Baha'i teachings discourage gambling. Asked whether the Baha'i view of gambling applies to games of every description, Abdu'l-Baha replied:

No, some games are innocent, and if pursued for pastime there is no harm. But there is danger that pastime may degenerate into waste of time. Waste of time is not acceptable in the Cause of God. But recreation which may improve the bodily powers, as exercise, is desirable. – A Heavenly Vista: The Pilgrimage of Louis G. Gregory, Baha'i Library Online, p. 9.

If you've ever spent time in the world's gambling capitals—places like Las Vegas, Atlantic City, Monaco—you've seen the huge palaces that legalized gaming built. Of course, they built those palaces with the proceeds of millions of bets placed by hopeful gamblers—most of whom lost. According to the 2006 Gross Annual Wager Report, “Americans lost nearly \$91 billion on all forms of gambling combined.” The National Gambling Impact Study Commission (NGISC) noted that Americans spend more on gambling than on recorded music, theme parks, video games, spectator sports and movie tickets combined.”

That means, for many people, that a pastime has become an addiction. “Problem gambling” and gambling addiction treatment programs and centers have now proliferated. In the U.S. we have National Problem Gambling Helpline 1-800-522-4700, and many states have their own helplines. Because our cultures give people the constant opportunity to risk—and lose—just about everything. Precious societal resources are provided for help with legal addictions like gambling, drinking and smoking. Long before the term “gambling addiction” came into general usage, the Baha'i teachings defined some forms of gambling as a disease:

Betting on horse racing is a pernicious disease. It hath been seen in Europe what distress this hath caused. Thousands have become afflicted and distraught. The friends of God must engage in work which is lawful and attracted blessings, so that God's aid and bounty may always surround them. – Abdu'l-Baha, from a tablet to an individual Baha'i, Lights of Guidance, p. 357.

Of course, you rarely hear about the consequences of problem gambling—the loss of people's livelihoods, family unity, entire life savings. The media loves the excited, promotional stories profiling the few winners, but you'll never read or see stories about the millions of losers. That's because those fantasy-fulfillment stories keep gambling's lucrative profitability going.

So instead of counting on random luck to make your life successful, the Baha'i teachings encourage everyone to work. Opportunities to earn a decent living abound in life, for teens, men and women. We all need productive work to help fulfill our untapped potential as human beings in this contingent world, and most people, if they apply themselves, can find productive work that will sustain them.

As the working person gradually earns wealth, so does the state and the nation. It's an effective, timeless model that ensures prosperity and self-esteem. From a Baha'i perspective, work is more than an absolute necessity—it actually qualifies as worship:

It is enjoined upon every one of you to engage in some form of occupation, such as crafts, trades and the like. We have graciously exalted your engagement in such work to the rank of worship unto God, the True One. Ponder ye in your hearts the grace and the blessings of God and render thanks unto Him at eventide and at dawn. Waste not your time in idleness and sloth. Occupy yourselves with that which profiteth yourselves and others. Thus hath it been decreed in this Tablet from whose horizon the day-star of wisdom and utterance shineth resplendent.

The most despised of men in the sight of God are those who sit idly and beg. Hold ye fast unto the cord of material means, placing your whole trust in God, the Provider of all means. When anyone occupieth himself in a craft or trade, such occupation itself is regarded in the estimation of God as an act of worship; and this is naught but a token of His infinite and all-pervasive bounty. – Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 26.

So the next time you think about placing a wager or playing a game of chance, remember how hard you worked to obtain your livelihood, and count on the power of your own labor rather than Dame Fortune—she'll let you down just about every time.