

Dr. Michael Penn



When you're feeling worried, what gives you hope? As a kid, when Michael Penn faced tough times, his mother encouraged him to trust in God and to keep praying. For a while, his family lived in an old school bus that was made into a house. Then they moved from North Carolina to New York in the U.S., where they faced poverty and violence, but were able to cope with help from a close-knit community.

In his early twenties, Michael got very sick and almost died. Afterward, he was inspired to explore many religions. He soon realized, "I am a Bahá'í." Michael says that the Bahá'í Faith has taught him the beauty of helping others.

He put that virtue into practice, earning a doctorate in clinical psychology from Temple University. He now teaches at Franklin & Marshall College in Pennsylvania and has traveled to about 50 countries, speaking on topics like hope, resilience, and equality. He and his wife, Kathy, live in Pennsylvania.

Q: What's your favorite childhood memory?

A: Going to the Coney Island amusement park . . . we had hot dogs, we had the great ocean, we had the sea breeze, we had sand to play in, and we had rides of all kinds . . .

Q: What was the most challenging experience for you as a kid?

A: [It] was the embarrassment, the shame that I felt at being poor . . . To get food from the city, I had to wait on a line that sometimes went many blocks. And because we had to help carry the food home, I would have to wait on line while my classmates passed, going to school . . . I was humiliated by that . . . I sort of . . . hid from myself and others.



At about age 10, Michael enjoyed all the activity in his neighborhood in New York, including games of stickball.

Q: What got you interested in psychology?

A: In college . . . I went to a lecture . . . by a psychologist . . . That lecture was so electrifying, was so profound that when he finished . . . in a hall of about 300 people, no one breathed a word, no one moved . . . I said to myself, this is astounding. Whatever this person does, that's what I want to do . . . I didn't even know what a clinical psychologist was, but I said . . . that's what I would like to become, because I liked the kinds of things he was talking about. I liked the ways that he was saying them. I loved the breadth of his knowledge.

Questions and
Answers with an
Inspirational Bahá'í



Above: In 2017, the United Nations invited Michael to speak to UN program directors about how to be more effective leaders.

Left: Michael and his wife, Kathy, were married in 1985, a few months after meeting at a Bahá'í gathering.



Q: What are some important things for a happy family life?

A: Families [should] talk to one another with kindness . . . use their words carefully . . . The human heart is very delicate, very sensitive—it's strong, but it's also delicate . . . I have learned in my own family, it's really, really valuable if the family has quiet time together . . . It might start with saying a few words of prayer together and then . . . sitting quietly and talking in a calm way about how everyone is doing . . . We're not on our electronic devices . . . We're really paying attention to one another . . .

Q: What should a kid do if they or someone they know is dealing with conflict or violence in their family?

A: Lots of families experience periods where there is conflict. So just because there is conflict doesn't mean that children should be too worried . . . But if the conflict becomes violent . . . so intense that it's frightening or it's dangerous or that it's all the time, then the child should share that with someone, should let someone know that in my house, I am a little bit worried about people hurting one another . . . They could share that with an adult who they trust . . . Because when there's violence in a family, the effects of that violence can last a long time and hurt the mind and . . . the body . . . So we should not be quiet about that kind of problem.

Q: If you had one wish for *Brilliant Star's* readers, what would it be?

A: My wish would be that all the *Brilliant Star* readers develop a true love for people of every race and every religion and every culture and every class and every city and every nation on the Earth.

Q: This issue of *Brilliant Star* is about family unity. What are three things kids can do to help build unity in their families?

A: Kids can . . . be as courteous as they can be to their parents. It's really difficult being a parent . . . When they speak to their parents with respect . . . their parents feel encouraged . . . [Kids] can . . . try to be helpful in the house . . . And the third thing is not to pout or be angry for too long. There are lots of things that can make us upset in a family. But we should not hold on to those things too tightly . . . We should be forgiving, both to ourselves and to others.