

Creating A New Mind



*Reflections
on the Individual
the Institutions
& the Community*

Paul Lample

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Contents

Introduction

- 1 Consciousness as the Basis of Mature Action 3

The Individual

- 2 The Promoter of Human Honor 11
3 The Seeker of Wisdom 17
4 The Champion of Justice 23
5 The Selfless Giver 27
6 The Pure Channel 33
7 The Faithful Lover 39
8 The Initiator of Systematic Action 45
9 The Quickener of Humanity 51

The Institutions

- 10 The Channel of the Spirit 59
11 The Trustees of Individual Freedom and
of the Common Good 67
12 The Mobilizers of Human Resources 73
13 The Executors of Systematic Plans of Action 79
14 The Nucleus and Pattern of a New Civilization 85
15 The Instruments of Effective Administration 91

The Community

- 16 The Organic Pattern of Community Life 99
17 A Community of Unified Thought and Action 105
18 A Community of Devotion and Service 113
19 A Community of Fellowship and Support 119
20 A Community of Excellence and Distinction 125
21 A Community of Conquerors 131

Conclusion

- 22 Learning in the Light of Divine Guidance 139

References 145

Bibliography 157

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Introduction

1

Consciousness as the Basis of Mature Action

The power of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation has engendered a metamorphosis in humanity's collective life—vast, steady, and irresistible. Shoghi Effendi explains that the creative spirit of the Revelation has generated mysterious processes whose operation “has provoked a tumult in human society such as no mind can fathom.” “Through the emergence of its slowly-crystallizing system,” he adds, the Faith has “induced a fermentation in the general life of mankind designed to shake the very foundations of a disordered society, to purify its life-blood, to reorientate and reconstruct its institutions, and shape its final destiny.”¹ This unfolding historical drama calls for ceaseless effort on our part to reach ever-higher levels of understanding and action.

The challenges have intensified in the decades leading to the close of the twentieth century. In 1983, the Universal House of Justice observed that humanity has entered a “period when the forces of history are moving to a climax,”² a period characterized by the “observable acceleration” of the twin processes of “the disintegration of the old order and the progress and consolidation of the new World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.”³ “The stage is set,” the Supreme Body proclaimed in 1987, “for universal, rapid and massive growth of the Cause of God.”⁴ And at the start of the Four Year Plan in 1996, a critical moment both in the “scheme of Bahá'í and world history,”⁵ the House of Justice called upon the individual, the community, and the institutions to achieve an advancement in the process of entry by troops in every part of the globe. “That an advance in this process depends on the progress of all three of these intimately connected participants is abundantly clear.”⁶

If the Bahá'í world is to fulfill its obligations in this critical period, the nature of each of the three protagonists must be carefully examined. What are the attributes of this individual, this community, and this institution that are to play so crucial a role in the destiny of the human race? What capabilities must they develop in order to advance the process of entry by troops? What characteristics will enable them to extend their exertions toward the building of a new civilization? Surely, we must not look to the individuals, the communities, or the institutions that we are today, but rather seek within Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation the depiction of what we ought to be.

Human reality is bounded by the limits set in the mind. When the Manifestation of God appears, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "human intellects themselves must change." The "antiquated forms of belief and ancestral imitations which are at variance with the foundations of divine reality" must "pass away and be reformed."⁷ The Universal House of Justice states that the Manifestation "is of a higher realm and has a perception far above that of any human being. He has the task of raising humankind to a new level of knowledge and behavior."⁸ Change in mind becomes change in deed and change in the world.

When consciousness is expanded, so is the potentiality for action. A simple example illustrates the point. One group of believers may envision the local community as a congregation, another as a chapter of a progressive social movement. Each perception gives rise to a specific pattern of activity. Each community evolves differently, manifesting distinct powers and exerting particular influences. Yet, inevitably, each reaches the limitations inherent in its perspective, since both fail to fully reflect what it means to be a Bahá'í community. Certainly Bahá'u'lláh has not appeared and suffered innumerable afflictions in order to secure the same limited results already realized by countless religious communities and social organizations. It is only natural in the early stages of the evolution of the Faith for us to fashion our communities after the models with which we are familiar. Such an approach, however, soon proves to be insufficient. "No man putteth new wine into old bottles," Jesus states, "else the new wine doth burst the bottles."⁹ Our efforts in the current period of history must be framed by "a new state of mind."¹⁰

The first questions of consciousness are: “Who am I?”, “Where am I?”, “Where am I going?”, and “What should I do?” So we must continually ask ourselves: “Who are we Bahá’ís?”, “What are the Faith’s present powers and challenges?”, “What is our mission?”, “How do we achieve it?” For example, as Bahá’ís we know that unity is important. At one level, we can simply value unity and learn to work in an environment where unity already exists. But is this adequate? At a higher level of consciousness we learn to build unity and to transform situations of discord and conflict into those of harmony and loving fellowship. We are also aware that justice is imperative. But is it enough to only deal fairly with others? At a higher level of consciousness we are to become champions of justice and help create a just social order. Questions such as these abound. Do our communities act merely as a spiritual refuge for a handful of believers, or are they set out on a mission to spiritualize the planet? Are the institutions nothing more than stewards of a small religious community, or are they the channels of God’s grace for the entire region they serve?

The effort to create a new mind confronts a number of obstacles. First, attempts to reach higher levels of understanding and action are often perceived as a criticism of present conditions. If a more effective way to teach is proposed, it does not mean that current methods are wrong. If it is suggested that there is more to know about the Revelation, it does not mean that we are ignorant. We must be comfortable asking how we can rise without such an inquiry being dismissed as dissonant criticism or autocratic condemnation. A fundamental characteristic of our new mind, then, is to be free from polemics and rancor, from summary judgments of success or failure, from fear of mistakes. We must appreciate the dynamics of evolution and maturation. The infant who takes a first step and falls, has not failed. While learning to avoid judgmental attitudes, however, we need to recognize that such attitudes exist, and, therefore, exercise wisdom in our endeavors to lift the community to new levels of consciousness. “An enlightened man of wisdom should primarily speak with words as mild as milk,” Bahá’u’lláh states, “that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain

the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility.”¹¹

A second obstacle is created when, in the course of our conversation about how to progress, our words degenerate into slogans or clichés. Bahá’u’lláh has endowed words with new meaning. Yet, our diverse interpretations of reality can usurp the meaning of these words, depriving them of their power to uplift. For example, teaching the Faith, the Bahá’í writings explain, is “exalting the Word of God.”¹² It is the manifestation of the “quickenings power of the spirit”¹³ and the cause of “rebirth and regeneration.”¹⁴ Circular debate, countless calls to action and exhaustive analysis can dull our understanding of the subject until, finally, teaching is addressed merely in terms of sales techniques. So too, is education a force for the advancement of the community and the empowerment of new generations; it may be reduced to an instrument of conformity or a battleground for competing theories and pet projects. Bahá’í community life is a distinctive pattern of action transforming spiritual, social, and administrative affairs; disassociated from its mission, it may deteriorate into frustrating meetings and consultations on trivial concerns.

A third obstacle to reaching higher levels of consciousness and action is the result of forces that resist progress. In the physical world, the effort to move is countered by the opposing force of friction. Similarly, resistance appears when attempting to rise to greater heights of service in the Faith. Increased consciousness calls for greater responsibility, and thus, greater sacrifice. Effort is required along a path that is to be traced from comfort, ego, control, and license to exertion, humility, cooperation, and servitude. Some may not wish to relinquish current patterns of behavior to meet the more formidable challenges implied by change. The individual, Shoghi Effendi urges, must “struggle against the natural inertia that weighs him down in his effort to arise, shed, heroically and irrevocably, the trivial and superfluous attachments which hold him back, [and] empty himself of every thought that may tend to obstruct his path.”¹⁵

The aggregate result of these and other obstacles is the development in the community of a culture that imperceptibly resists efforts to rise. Although we are created to fly, our first reaction is to remain

inert, avoiding the difficulties this exertion implies. Trapped in such a culture, the community becomes like a population of birds, left to flutter about under a canopy of wire. The canopy, in this case, is woven from the limitations imposed by our consciousness.

Such obstacles, however, are not insurmountable. Since the birth of the dispensation, the believers have found the wisdom, love, and consecration necessary to meet the challenges confronting the Cause and to open the way to further progress. A new culture, vivified by a new state of mind, gives rise to a framework for advancing the process of entry by troops and, beyond, for the building of a new civilization. We should be aware that, in the words of the Universal House of Justice, “those of us who are alive to the vision of the Faith are particularly privileged to be consciously engaged in efforts intended to stimulate and eventually enhance such processes.”¹⁶

A new mind is shaped through the study of the writings in search of a more profound understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's will and purpose for the individual, the institutions, and the community. It also develops as we learn to translate this deeper understanding into action, and then reflect on and refine that action. This pattern of study, action, and reflection governs the behavior of generation after generation as each moves closer to that “pre-eminent purpose,” that “grand design”¹⁷ which is inherent in His Revelation.

In the following pages, an attempt is made to explore and correlate some of the salient features of the individual, the institutions, and the community to which we aspire. The sequence of chapters does not present a narrative, nor does it offer a single unfolding argument. Rather, each chapter presents a distinct topic for reflection—a modest effort to capture a single capability and examine its various facets. In its totality, the book gives glimpses of a complex whole that is the Bahá'í community. As the object of study is approached from different angles, certain themes—such as organic growth, systematization and learning—recur. It is hoped that each chapter will be viewed as an initial contribution towards an exploration into the attributes being addressed.

The Individual

2

The Promoter of Human Honor

During His travels to America in 1912, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offered, in a Tablet to an early believer, the following assessment of meetings He addressed:

I visited Philadelphia, for a few days, at the invitation of two ministers and at the request of the friends of God. Two large congregations gathered in the two churches, and I spoke within the measure of my incapacity. But the confirmations of the Abhá Kingdom, as evident as the sun, descended and enfolded us. Although we are powerless He is Mighty. Although we are poor He is All-Sufficient.¹

Thus, with such extreme humility did ‘Abdu’l-Bahá—the Master, the Interpreter of the Word of God, the Center of the Covenant—refer to His own service to His Lord.

Throughout the ages, humanity has been afflicted by struggles among individuals, families, groups and nations. Driven by the demands of the animal nature, self-seeking individuals strive to exalt themselves over their neighbors. Impelled by prejudice and a sense of superiority, competing groups attempt to serve their own selfish interests and endeavor to impose their will on others. Aggression and conflict characterize the daily interactions of a humanity trapped in an endless struggle for dominance. Bahá’u’lláh states:

Ever since the seeking of preference and distinction came into play, the world hath been laid waste. It has become desolate. . . .²

He admonishes His followers in these unequivocal terms:

O Son of Dust! Verily I say unto thee: Of all men the most negligent is he that disputeth idly and seeketh to advance himself over his brother.³

It behoveth not, therefore, him who was created from dust, who will return unto it, and will again be brought forth out of it, to swell with pride before God, and before His loved ones, to proudly scorn them, and be filled with disdainful arrogance.⁴

The desire to advance oneself over others as a motivating force in one's life is a defect of human character that, unfortunately, is being promoted by certain social theories as a praiseworthy trait. Aggression and unbridled competition are considered inherent to the human condition. It is even believed that society is best served if each individual pursues his or her own self-interest; the euphemism "enlightened self-interest" is used to cover up the inadequacies of social relationships built on competition. 'Abdu'l-Bahá observes:

Glory be to God! What an extraordinary situation now obtains, when no one, hearing a claim advanced, asks himself what the speaker's real motive might be, and what selfish purpose he might not have hidden behind the mask of words. You find, for example, that an individual seeking to further his own petty and personal concerns, will block the advancement of an entire people. To turn his own water mill, he will let the farms and fields of all the others parch and wither. To maintain his own leadership, he will everlastingly direct the masses toward that prejudice and fanaticism which subvert the very base of civilization.⁵

Through the divine teachings, the urge to indulge the self through dominance over others is subdued by spiritual competition to serve the well-being of all. It is only in the acquisition of divine virtues⁶ and in service to God and His Cause⁷ that individuals vie with one another. "Happy the soul that shall forget his own good, and like the chosen ones of God, vie with his fellows in service to the good of all. . . ." ⁸ Honor lies not in ephemeral positions of power, but in one's efforts to promote the welfare of humanity. The individual who wishes to contribute to the progress of the Cause and the advancement of

civilization must strive to be free from arrogance and preoccupation with self. “Humility exalteth man to the heaven of glory and power,” Bahá’u’lláh proclaims, “while pride abaseth him to the depths of wretchedness and degradation.”⁹ And He exhorts humanity:

Beseech ye the one true God to grant that ye may taste the savor of such deeds as are performed in His path, and partake of the sweetness of such humility and submissiveness as are shown for His sake. Forget your own selves, and turn your eyes towards your neighbor. Bend your energies to whatever may foster the education of men. Nothing is, or can ever be, hidden from God. If ye follow in His way, His incalculable and imperishable blessings will be showered upon you.¹⁰

The humility that Bahá’u’lláh requires of us is not a sense of inferiority before others who are deemed more competent. It is not feigned modesty that is akin to hypocrisy. Rather, true humility arises from the recognition that God is the All-Powerful and Self-Subsisting, while all others are weak and in need of perfecting. The glorification of self, the exaltation of one’s limited knowledge, the lust for power, and the compulsion to force matters in the direction of one’s personal choosing, are exposed for what they truly are: expressions of a child’s whims and desires.

Acquiring humility calls for the rejection of both guilt—the paralyzing, harsh judgment of the failure to live up to the standard—and complacency—the reinterpretation of the standard, lowering it to suit personal comfort and preferences. The statement written on behalf of the Guardian that “our past is not the thing that matters so much in this world as what we intend to do with our future”¹¹ help us to overcome feelings of guilt. And we can avoid complacency by always acknowledging the truth of the divine standard raised by Bahá’u’lláh, upholding it under all circumstances, and refusing to compromise it with the commonly accepted standards of our time.¹²

The seed of humility is planted in the act of recognition of God: “I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth.”¹³ It germinates in the effort to adhere to divine teachings, since “that which beseemeth man is submission

unto such restraints as will protect him from his own ignorance, and guard him against the harm of the mischief-maker.”¹⁴ It grows through the belief that “In the estimation of God all men are equal” and that “there is no distinction or preferment for any soul, in the realm of His justice and equity.”¹⁵ It is cultivated by an honest appraisal of one’s own faults and tolerance for the shortcomings of others: “Let your thoughts dwell on your own spiritual development, and close your eyes to the deficiencies of other souls.”¹⁶ It matures in action as one “preferreth his brother before himself.”¹⁷ It bears fruit as one becomes weary of self.

Do all ye can to become wholly weary of self, and bind yourselves to that Countenance of Splendors; and once ye have reached such heights of servitude, ye will find, gathered within your shadow, all created things.¹⁸

The individual who arises to promote human honor needs to be capable of establishing proper relationships with others, with the community, and with the legitimate institutions of society. One must begin with humility before God, become aware of the divine will and purpose and, discovering in others a reflection of the Divine Essence, stand humbly before them. The soul that walks humbly with God, Bahá’u’lláh explains, will be invested with the honor and glory of all goodly names and stations.¹⁹ It is instructive that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Whom Shoghi Effendi described as the embodiment of every Bahá’í ideal, chose for Himself the title “Servant of Bahá.” Servitude is the highest station to achieve and through it one becomes the promoter of human honor. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

Is there any greater blessing conceivable for a man, than that he should become the cause of the education, the development, the prosperity and honor of his fellow-creatures? No, by the Lord God! The highest righteousness of all is for blessed souls to take hold of the hands of the helpless and deliver them out of their ignorance and abasement and poverty, and with pure motives, and only for the sake of God, to arise and energetically devote themselves to the service of the masses, forgetting their own worldly advantage and working only to serve the general good.²⁰

When individuals who have chosen the path of servitude come together in a community for the sake of the Cause, they can readily assume a posture of learning that is indispensable for collective endeavor. A systematic process is set in motion within the community “in which the friends review their successes and difficulties, adjust and improve their methods accordingly, and learn, and move forward unhesitatingly.”²¹ Cooperation becomes the norm, and service the motivating force that impels progress.

3

The Seeker of Wisdom

The Bahá'í writings extol the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom. So critical is knowledge to the advancement of society that, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "whatever people has ventured deeper into this shoreless sea, has come to excel the rest,"¹ while "the principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples is ignorance."² Bahá'u'lláh states:

Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone. The knowledge of such sciences, however, should be acquired as can profit the peoples of the earth. . . . In truth, knowledge is a veritable treasure for man, and a source of glory, of bounty, of joy, of exaltation, of cheer and gladness unto him.³

Knowledge of the fields of human learning and knowledge of the teachings of God are both stressed in the Bahá'í writings:

Let the loved ones of God, whether young or old, whether male or female, each according to his capabilities, bestir themselves and spare no efforts to acquire the various current branches of knowledge, both spiritual and secular, and of the arts.⁴

Two sources of knowledge make the progress of civilization possible: science and religion. Together they enable us to understand ourselves, our environment, our powers and our purpose. Science, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, unlocks the secrets of the universe. It is "the governor of nature and its mysteries" and the one agency by which humanity explores the physical world.⁵ Through its powers, material and social problems are resolved; it is the very foundation

of all individual and national development.⁶ Bahá'ís are to acquire knowledge and skills in those fields that benefit humanity and contribute to an ever-advancing civilization.

At the same time, the Bahá'í writings state that knowledge comes from the teachings of God. The Word of God is “collective wisdom, absolute knowledge and eternal truth.”⁷ Religion provides understanding of humanity’s spiritual nature and its implications for personal and collective progress. Bahá'u'lláh urges the believers to immerse themselves in the ocean of His words, unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hidden therein.⁸ The benefits derived by each person, He explains, are in direct proportion to the eagerness of the search and the efforts exerted.⁹

Beyond the acquisition of knowledge, however, wisdom is needed. Bahá'u'lláh describes wisdom as “the greatest gift,” as humanity’s “unfailing protector,” and as the “foremost teacher in the school of existence.”¹⁰ The individual who desires to contribute to the progress of the Cause and the advancement of civilization, then, must be a seeker of wisdom.

Wisdom unites knowledge and action; it involves the application of knowledge according to the exigencies of each situation.

Follow thou the way of thy Lord and say not that which the ears cannot bear to hear, for such speech is like luscious food given to small children. However palatable, rare and rich the food may be, it cannot be assimilated by the digestive organs of a suckling child. Therefore unto everyone who hath a right, let his settled measure be given. . . . First diagnose the disease and identify the malady, then prescribe the remedy, for such is the perfect method of the skillful physician.¹¹

“The essence of wisdom,” Bahá'u'lláh states, “is the fear of God, the dread of His scourge and punishment, and the apprehension of His justice and decree.”¹² “The beginning of Wisdom and the origin thereof,” He adds, “is to acknowledge whatsoever God hath clearly set forth. . . .”¹³ The embodiment of wisdom is the Manifestation of God—the “Divine Physician” whose “task is to foster the well-being of the world and its peoples.”¹⁴ Through the teachings of the

Manifestation, humanity is enabled to understand reality and to choose the right course of action. "He that riseth to serve My Cause should manifest My wisdom," Bahá'u'lláh explains, "and bend every effort to banish ignorance from the earth."¹⁵

Implicit in the very concept of wisdom is the proper use of knowledge. Wisdom is not a self-serving expediency. To be wise is not to be cunning. There is no such thing as "bad" wisdom. The individual who aspires to wisdom is continually seeking orientation from the twin knowledge systems of religion and science. Throughout history, humanity has repeatedly fallen into the pitfalls of superstition and fanaticism on one hand, and materialism and moral relativism on the other. The complementary truths of these two systems make it possible to avoid these dangers.

In order to understand how science and religion contribute to wisdom, it is important for us to differentiate Divine Revelation from religious beliefs, true religion from religious traditions, and true science from biased materialism.

Divine Revelation is the repository of the pure teachings of God. It is the supreme standard for understanding all things, since it is the expression of divine wisdom which encompasses the knowledge of all reality. Human beings cannot judge the descriptive or prescriptive truths of Revelation. Bahá'u'lláh warns:

Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men. In this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it.¹⁶

When religion as a knowledge system is in conformity with Revelation, and not tainted by vain imaginings, then it is true religion. It protects the believer from arrogance and conceit that turn knowledge into a grievous veil between the individual and God. "We are quit of those ignorant ones who fondly imagine that Wisdom is to give vent to one's idle imaginings and to repudiate God, the Lord of all men; even as We hear some of the heedless voicing such

assertions today.”¹⁷ True religion illuminates human understanding, helping to separate science from dogmatic materialism.

The teachings of Bahá’u’lláh throw light on so many aspects of human life and knowledge that a Bahá’í must learn, earlier than most, to weigh the information that is given to him rather than to accept it blindly. A Bahá’í has the advantage of the Divine Revelation for this age, which shines like a searchlight on so many problems that baffle modern thinkers; he must therefore develop the ability to learn everything from those around him, showing proper humility before his teachers, but always relating what he hears to the Bahá’í teachings, for they will enable him to sort out the gold from the dross of human error.¹⁸

Human understanding of the divine standard, however, is subject to limitations. Religion can degenerate into superstition. Therefore, religious beliefs about the meaning of Revelation—as opposed to Revelation itself—must be weighed in the light of scientific truth and reason. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has explained that “religion must be reasonable,” and that “every religion which is not in accordance with established science is superstition.”¹⁹ Bahá’u’lláh has warned that learning about religion should not result in ignorant fanaticism and bigotry;²⁰ that the literal interpretation of divine texts when a spiritual meaning is intended leads to “false imaginings” that result in straying from “the infinite mercy of Providence;”²¹ and that the masses, far from assuming an anti-intellectual posture, should respect the divines and learned whose “judgments are in conformity with His behests as revealed in His Book” for they are “the lamps of guidance unto them that are in the heavens and on the earth.”²²

Acquiring knowledge and wisdom through the study of sciences and the divine teachings is an endeavor in which all Bahá’ís can engage to the best of their ability. Those who advance significantly in learning, however, have the added task of infusing their fields with the light of the new Revelation.

As the Bahá’í community grows it will acquire experts in numerous fields—both by Bahá’ís becoming experts and by experts becoming Bahá’ís. As these experts bring their knowledge and

skill to the service of the community and, even more, as they transform their various disciplines by bringing to bear upon them the light of the Divine Teachings, problem after problem now disrupting society will be answered.²³

The qualities and responsibilities of the seeker of wisdom are summarized in the restatement by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá of an Islamic tradition about the learned: “he must guard himself, defend his faith, oppose his passions and obey the commandments of his Lord.”²⁴ To guard oneself, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, is to acquire the attributes of spiritual and material perfection, to consider the welfare of the community as one’s own, and to arise with complete sincerity and purity of purpose to educate the masses.²⁵ To defend the Faith is to protect the whole population in every way and to serve the Cause of God so that “every effort should be exerted to adopt a combination of all possible measures to raise up the Word of God, increase the number of believers, promote the Faith of God and exalt it.”²⁶ To oppose one’s passions is the foundation of every laudable human quality and the means of keeping all good qualities in equilibrium. “How often has it happened that an individual who was graced with every attribute of humanity and wore the jewel of true understanding, nevertheless followed after his passions until his excellent qualities passed beyond moderation and he was forced into excess.”²⁷ As to obedience, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that the glory, rank and honor of an individual depend on the close observance of the Divine commands, for “religion is the light of the world, and the progress, achievement, and happiness of man result from obedience to the laws set down in the holy Books.”²⁸

In manifesting these qualities and fulfilling these responsibilities, those who seek knowledge and wisdom contribute to their own transformation and to the transformation of society. As members of the Bahá’í community, they bring a profound level of understanding that is conducive to its growth and progress.

4

The Champion of Justice

Those who arise to serve the Cause in this critical period of human history endeavor ceaselessly to uphold truth and champion justice. Their dealings with others, in every instance, are characterized by a rectitude of conduct that Shoghi Effendi defined as “an abiding sense of undeviating justice, unobscured by the demoralizing influences which a corruption-ridden political life so strikingly manifests.”

This rectitude of conduct, with its implications of justice, equity, truthfulness, honesty, fair-mindedness, reliability, and trustworthiness, must distinguish every phase of the life of the Bahá'í community. “The companions of God,” Bahá'u'lláh Himself has declared, “are, in this day, the lump that must leaven the peoples of the world. They must show forth such trustworthiness, such truthfulness and perseverance, such deeds and character that all mankind may profit by their example.” “I swear by Him Who is the Most Great Ocean!” He again affirms, “Within the very breath of such souls as are pure and sanctified far-reaching potentialities are hidden. So great are these potentialities that they exercise their influence upon all created things.” “He is the true servant of God,” He, in another passage has written, “who, in this day, were he to pass through cities of silver and gold, would not deign to look upon them, and whose heart would remain pure and undefiled from whatever things can be seen in this world, be they its goods or its treasures. I swear by the Sun of Truth! The breath of such a man is endowed with potency, and his words with attraction.”¹

The Bahá'í writings repeatedly call upon us to seek truth and investigate reality and explain that by seeking truth, humanity will become united, for reality is one and not divisible.²

The first teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is the duty incumbent upon all to investigate reality. What does it mean to investigate reality? It means that man must forget all hearsay and examine truth himself, for he does not know whether statements he hears are in accordance with reality or not. Wherever he finds truth or reality, he must hold to it, forsaking, discarding all else; for outside of reality there is naught but superstition and imagination.³

The capacity which makes possible the impartial investigation of truth is justice. With its aid, Bahá'u'lláh affirms in His familiar passage from the Hidden Words, we will see with our own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and will know of our own knowledge and not through the knowledge of our neighbor.⁴ “Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation. He discerneth the truth in all things, through the guidance of Him Who is the All-Seeing.”⁵

Justice finds expression on both the individual and societal levels. On the individual level, as a faculty of the human soul, it is associated with a wide range of attitudes and qualities, including honesty, truthfulness, and freedom from prejudice and from blind adherence to tradition. In the collective life of humanity, justice creates order and stability. Bahá'u'lláh explains that justice is a powerful force that conquers the hearts and souls of men and raises the standard of love and bounty.⁶ Its purpose is the appearance of unity.⁷ “No man can attain his true station except through his justice,” He states. “No power can exist except through unity.”⁸

The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh help us to protect justice from becoming distorted either by self-righteousness or by intolerance. He exhorts the peoples of the world to observe tolerance and righteousness, which are “two lights amidst the darkness of the world and two educators for the edification of mankind.”⁹

The heaven of true understanding shineth resplendent with the light of two luminaries: tolerance and righteousness. O my friend! Vast oceans lie enshrined within this brief saying. Blessed are they who appreciate its value, drink deep therefrom and grasp its meaning, and woe betide the heedless.¹⁰

Regarding tolerance, Bahá'u'lláh states that we should not be too critical of “the sayings and writings of men,” but should approach them in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy.¹¹ Shoghi Effendi indicates that tolerance should be manifested among individuals and toward the institutions of the Faith.

The friends must be patient with each other and must realize that the Cause is still in its infancy and its institutions are not yet functioning perfectly. The greater the patience, the loving understanding and the forbearance the believers show towards each other and their shortcomings, the greater will be the progress of the whole Bahá'í Community at large.¹²

The tolerance that one shows towards others is to go hand in hand with the standard of righteousness to which one holds oneself.

Be pure, O people of God, be pure; be righteous, be righteous. . . . Say: O people of God! That which can ensure the victory of Him Who is the Eternal Truth, His hosts and helpers on earth, have been set down in the sacred Books and Scriptures, and are as clear and manifest as the sun. These hosts are such righteous deeds, such conduct and character, as are acceptable in His sight.¹³

Righteousness requires us to scrupulously examine ourselves in the light of the divine teachings. Bahá'ís are to set before their eyes the unerring Balance of God and, as if standing in His presence, weigh their actions in that Balance every moment of their lives.¹⁴ As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

It is my hope that you may consider this matter, that you may search out your own imperfections and not think of the imperfections of anybody else. Strive with all your power to be free from imperfections. Heedless souls are always seeking

faults in others. What can the hypocrite know of others' faults when he is blind to his own? This is the meaning of the words in the Seven Valleys. It is a guide for human conduct. As long as a man does not find his own faults, he can never become perfect. Nothing is more fruitful for man than the knowledge of his own shortcomings. The Blessed Perfection says, "I wonder at the man who does not find his own imperfections."¹⁵

It is worth noting, however, that tolerance should even occasionally be extended to oneself, since, as the Guardian observes, "even the Prophets of God sometimes got tired and cried out in despair!"¹⁶

For a Bahá'í, being an upholder of truth and a champion of justice implies adhering to practices radically different from those commonly accepted in society at large. Strife and contention are not the proper means for achieving justice, nor is justice the fruit of an adversarial process. To work for justice does not entail parroting support for popular issues or the causes of the moment. Justice is not an excuse for the promotion of self-interest. It is not obtained by righteous indignation and loud demands made from a distance on behalf of the oppressed when one is cushioned by the comforts of privileged circumstances. It is promoted, instead, by patience and long-suffering, through persistent action and loving education. One endures injustice in the process of building justice. Bahá'u'lláh's life is eloquent testimony to this truth. "Because He bore injustice, justice hath appeared on earth, and because He accepted abasement, the majesty of God hath shone forth amidst mankind."¹⁷

A community of individuals who uphold truth and champion justice faces challenges, hardship, and even persecution with composure and equanimity as it labors to establish Bahá'u'lláh's system of justice for all humanity.

5

The Selfless Giver

Justice must be complemented by generosity, forgiveness, and loving-kindness, and those who are determined to contribute to the advancement of the Cause and of society will do their utmost to manifest these qualities. Generosity and giving are characteristics of God Himself, of His Manifestation, and of the Exemplar in Whose path we follow. “To give and to be generous are attributes of Mine,” Bahá’u’lláh states in the Hidden Words, “well is it with him that adorneth himself with My virtues.”¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that Bahá’u’lláh

was most generous, giving abundantly to the poor. None who came to Him were turned away. The doors of His house were open to all. . . . In commenting upon this His friends said He would become impoverished, for His expenses were many and His wealth becoming more and more limited. . . . In truth, the Blessed Perfection was a refuge for every weak one, a shelter for every fearing one, kind to every indigent one, lenient and loving to all creatures.²

‘Abdu’l-Bahá was renowned for these selfsame characteristics. Shoghi Effendi notes among the Master’s attributes “a generosity, a love, at once disinterested and indiscriminating,”³ “To the needy thronging His doors and filling the courtyard of His house every Friday morning . . . He would distribute alms with His own hands, with a regularity and generosity that won Him the title of ‘Father of the Poor.’” Even in the face of the life-threatening assaults directed toward ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Holy Land, “nothing would be allowed to interfere with His ministrations to the destitute, the orphan, the

sick, and the down-trodden, nothing could prevent Him from calling in person upon those who were either incapacitated, or ashamed to solicit His aid.”⁴

In innumerable soul-stirring passages, the believers are encouraged to be the trustees of God and the emblems of His generosity among His people.⁵

O ye lovers of God! Be kind to all peoples; care for every person; do all ye can to purify the hearts and minds of men; strive ye to gladden every soul. To every meadow be a shower of grace, to every tree the water of life; be as sweet musk to the sense of humankind, and to the ailing be a fresh, restoring breeze. Be pleasing waters to all those who thirst, a careful guide to all who have lost their way; be father and mother to the orphan, be loving sons and daughters to the old, be an abundant treasure to the poor.⁶

Generosity, as described in the Bahá’í writings, should not be confused with giving away a small portion of one’s abundance to mollify feelings of pity for the poor—a mere compromise with injustice. The generosity to which the believers are called is an essential aspect of the relationships that unite the human family, weaving the fabric of community and social order. It is the giving of the sun to the earth, the outpouring of bountiful rain on parched fields and meadows. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that giving is bound up in the very nature of reality:

Were one to observe with an eye that discovereth the realities of all things, it would become clear that the greatest relationship that bindeth the world of being together lieth in the range of created things themselves, and that cooperation, mutual aid and reciprocity are essential characteristics in the unified body of the world of being, inasmuch as all created things are closely related together and each is influenced by the other or deriveth benefit therefrom, either directly or indirectly. . . .

And thus when contemplating the human world thou beholdest this wondrous phenomenon shining resplendent from all sides with the utmost perfection, inasmuch as in this station acts of cooperation, mutual assistance and reciprocity are not

confined to the body and to things that pertain to the material world, but for all conditions, whether physical or spiritual... The more this interrelationship is strengthened and expanded, the more will human society advance in progress and prosperity. Indeed without these vital ties it would be wholly impossible for the world of humanity to attain true felicity and success. . . .

This is the basic principle on which the institution of *Ḥuqúqu'lláh* is established, inasmuch as its proceeds are dedicated to the furtherance of these ends. . . . The wisdom of this command is that the act of giving is well-pleasing in the sight of God. Consider how well-pleasing must this mighty act be in His estimation that He hath ascribed it unto His Own Self. Rejoice ye then, O people of generosity!⁷

How pleasing it is to God for His servants to follow His example of generosity and expend their wealth for the well-being of others and the prosperity of the entire human race. "Ye are the trees of My garden," Bahá'u'lláh states, "ye must give forth goodly and wondrous fruits, that ye yourselves and others may profit therefrom." "The best of men are they that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds."⁸

Refusal to be generous and giving is an invitation to corrosive habits and practices, among which are impatience with the mistakes of others and a desire to control their actions. Ungenerous souls in positions of authority deny others the opportunity to serve, demonstrating interest and appreciation only for enterprises in which they directly participate. They are, instead, to be free "from every word and deed that may savor of partiality, self-centeredness and prejudice."⁹ As community members, souls who lack generosity constantly criticize their leaders and institutions.

If the Bahá'ís undermine the very leaders which are, however immaturely, seeking to coordinate Bahá'í activities and administer Bahá'í affairs, if they continually criticize their acts and challenge or belittle their decisions, they not only prevent any real rapid progress in the Faith's development from taking place, but they repel outsiders who quite rightly may ask how

we ever expect to unite the whole world when we are so dis-united among ourselves!¹⁰

One of the first manifestations of generosity that comes to mind is giving to the Bahá'í Funds. Contributing to the Fund constitutes, according to Shoghi Effendi, “a practical and effective way whereby every believer can test the measure and character of his faith, and prove in deeds the intensity of his devotion and attachment to the Cause.”¹¹ Contributions, selflessly offered, reveal a fundamental truth underlying the attribute of generosity: that the giver is also the receiver of bounty. Shoghi Effendi illustrates the workings of this principle by comparing it to a fountain:

We must be like the fountain or spring that is continually emptying itself of all that it has and is continually being refilled from an invisible source. To be continually giving out for the good of our fellows undeterred by the fear of poverty and reliant on the unfailing bounty of the Source of all wealth and all good—this is the secret of right living.¹²

Hospitality—“with all its implications of friendliness, courtesy, service, generosity and conviviality”—is another way in which individuals give to others and to the community. So important is this quality that Bahá'u'lláh has made it an essential characteristic of the Nineteen Day Feast, which is the cornerstone of His New World Order.

The very idea of hospitality as the sustaining spirit of so significant an institution introduces a revolutionary new attitude to the conduct of human affairs at all levels, an attitude which is critical to that world unity which the Central Figures of our Faith labored so long and suffered so much cruelty to bring into being. It is in this divine festival that the foundation is laid for the realization of so unprecedented a reality.¹³

But to be generous does not involve only the giving of material things. Generosity is also expressed in attitudes toward others. It is demonstrated in respect, free from any trace of envy, for their rank and achievements.¹⁴ In the same way that we take pride in our own accomplishments must we learn to find joy and pleasure in the success of others, even when we have no part in their attainments.

The capacity to forgive and to return good for evil is yet another characteristic of the generous soul.

Should any come to blows with you, seek to be friends with him; should any stab you to the heart, be ye a healing salve unto his sores; should any taunt and mock at you, meet him with love. Should any heap his blame upon you, praise ye him; should he offer you a deadly poison, give him the choicest honey in exchange; and should he threaten your life, grant him a remedy that will heal him evermore. Should he be pain itself, be ye his medicine; should he be thorns, be ye his roses and sweet herbs.¹⁵

The most noteworthy expression of generosity is, of course, teaching, for one shares with others the greatest bounty of all—the knowledge of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. By giving to others in teaching, the generous soul contributes continually to the growth of the community and becomes a fountain of joy to the world.

Be unrestrained as the wind, while carrying the Message of Him Who hath caused the Dawn of Divine Guidance to break. Consider, how the wind, faithful to that which God hath ordained, bloweth upon all regions of the earth, be they inhabited or desolate. Neither the sight of desolation, nor the evidences of prosperity, can either pain or please it. It bloweth in every direction, as bidden by its Creator.¹⁶

6

The Pure Channel

The challenges confronting those who arise to serve the world cannot be met through human effort alone. Divine power is required to counter the process of disintegration destroying the social order. This power flows in proportion to the hollowness of the reed and the purity of the channel.

First in a human being's way of life must be purity, then freshness, cleanliness, and independence of spirit. First must the stream bed be cleansed, then may the sweet river waters be led into it.¹

"Be swift in the path of holiness," is Bahá'u'lláh's call, "and enter the heaven of communion with Me. Cleanse thy heart with the burnish of the spirit, and hasten to the court of the Most High."² "Whoso ariseth, in this Day, to aid Our Cause, and summoneth to his assistance the hosts of a praiseworthy character and upright conduct," He promises, "the influence flowing from such an action will, most certainly, be diffused throughout the whole world."³ He further establishes that the "betterment of the world" is achieved through "pure and goodly deeds;"⁴ that such deeds "ascend unto the heaven of celestial glory;" and that "ere long the assayers of mankind shall . . . accept naught but absolute virtue and deeds of stainless purity."⁵ And He exclaims:

We verily behold your actions. If We perceive from them the sweet smelling savor of purity and holiness, We will most certainly bless you. Then will the tongues of the inmates of Paradise utter your praise and magnify your names amidst them who have drawn nigh unto God.⁶

Among the highest aspirations of all people is freedom. It is their dream, their expressed ideal, the object of their constant struggle. Yet, few in modern society recognize that purity is the door to freedom, since it is purity that releases a soul from earthly bondage and oppression. Bahá'u'lláh admonishes:

Ye are even as the bird which soareth, with the full force of its mighty wings and with complete and joyous confidence, through the immensity of the heavens, until, impelled to satisfy its hunger, it turneth longingly to the water and clay of the earth below it, and, having been entrapped in the mesh of its desire, findeth itself impotent to resume its flight to the realms whence it came. Powerless to shake off the burden weighing on its sullied wings, that bird, hitherto an inmate of the heavens, is now forced to seek a dwelling-place upon the dust.⁷

Purity should not be confused with Puritanism. It is not a superficial state of “being good” accompanied by self-righteousness. It is a divine attribute that touches on every aspect of life, an influence on every other quality of the soul. “In every aspect of life, purity and holiness, cleanliness and refinement, exalt the human condition and further the development of man’s inner reality.”⁸

In relation to the material world, purity is manifested in cleanliness. Bahá'u'lláh exhorts His followers to be the very essence of cleanliness among humankind,⁹ and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that even in the physical realm, cleanliness will conduce to spirituality. For, He explains, just as music acts as wings for the spirit, bringing joy to the soul, so, too, does physical cleanliness exert an effect upon it.¹⁰

Purity is also manifested in daily living. Both in their “social relations with the members of their own community, and in their contact with the world at large,” Shoghi Effendi calls for a chaste and holy life which “must be made the controlling principle in the behavior and conduct of all Bahá’ís.”¹¹

Such a chaste and holy life, with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness, involves no less than the exercise of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations.

It demands daily vigilance in the control of one's carnal desires and corrupt inclinations. It calls for the abandonment of a frivolous conduct, with its excessive attachment to trivial and often misdirected pleasures. It requires total abstinence from all alcoholic drinks, from opium, and from similar habit-forming drugs. It condemns the prostitution of art and of literature, the practices of nudism and of companionate marriage, infidelity in marital relationships, and all manner of promiscuity, of easy familiarity, and of sexual vices. It can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age. Nay rather it seeks to demonstrate, through the dynamic force of its example, the pernicious character of such theories, the falsity of such standards, the hollowness of such claims, the perversity of such habits, and the sacrilegious character of such excesses.¹²

Intention and attitude are another facet of the individual's life in which purity is manifested. Shoghi Effendi warns the believers to beware lest "partiality, ambition, and worldliness . . . becloud the radiance, stain the purity, and impair the effectiveness of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh."¹³ An individual whose motives are shaped by ambition or thirst for power can easily become an impediment to the progress of the Cause. Political behavior and manipulation, so common in the world, are impure and alien to its unifying aims. Shoghi Effendi explains that there is no room in the Faith for political maneuvering; that full, unprejudiced consultation is our standard; and that anything less is not only unworthy of a Bahá'í, but in direct disobedience to the Master's instructions and a sign of lack of faith.¹⁴ "Pure detachment and selfless service, these should be the sole motives of every true believer."¹⁵

Above all else, purity is a prerequisite for a proper relationship with God—to perceive the spiritual realm and enter into His presence.

Chaste eyes enjoy the beatific vision of the Lord and know what this encounter meaneth; a pure sense inhaleth the fragrances that blow from the rose gardens of His grace; a burnished heart will mirror forth the comely face of truth.¹⁶

From this description, it is clear that purity is neither an unattainable ideal, nor easily achieved. Purification is an ongoing process, won by degrees—a struggle which lasts throughout a lifetime. Each time some frontier is conquered, a challenging new horizon appears.

The burnish that cleanses the heart is the love of God. Through such love, ignited by the Word of God and fanned by daily prayer, the individual is enkindled. Bahá'u'lláh states:

O Friends! You must all be so ablaze in this day with the fire of the love of God that the heat thereof may be manifest in all your veins, your limbs and members of your body, and the peoples of the world may be ignited by this heat and turn to the horizon of the Beloved.¹⁷

The fire of the love of God, Shoghi Effendi explains, will warm and heal,¹⁸ and will, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes, make the heart dance for joy and fill the soul with the ecstasy of rapture.¹⁹ “There is nothing greater or more blessed than the Love of God! It gives healing to the sick, balm to the wounded, joy and consolation to the whole world, and through it alone can man attain Life Everlasting.”²⁰

Purification is not achieved through an ascetic withdrawal from life, nor are divine attributes acquired through idle contemplation. Goodness is not the absence of evil; rather, the reverse is true. The acquisition of spiritual qualities requires constant and diligent effort to strengthen the bonds which unite us with our Creator. It calls for the discipline of systematically cultivating the good and weeding out negative habits and attitudes. It proceeds as one devotes oneself to the service of humanity and to the advancement of the Cause of God. “One thing and only one thing will unfailingly and alone secure the undoubted triumph of this sacred Cause,” Shoghi Effendi states, “namely, the extent to which our own inner life and private character mirror forth in their manifold aspects the splendor of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh.” But to “mirror forth” the “eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh,”²¹ surely means to act to teach, to act to serve, to act to build unity and establish justice, and to act to breathe a new life into the world. The greater the effort to purify oneself, the greater the manifestation of spiritual

power. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words about sacrifice are particularly instructive in this respect:

. . . man must sacrifice the qualities and attributes of the world of nature for the qualities and attributes of the world of God. For instance, consider the substance we call iron. Observe its qualities; it is solid, black, cold. . . . When the same iron absorbs heat from the fire, it sacrifices its attribute of solidity for the attribute of fluidity. It sacrifices its attribute of darkness for the attribute of light, which is a quality of the fire. . . . It becomes illumined and transformed, having sacrificed its qualities to the qualities and attributes of the fire.

Likewise, man, when separated and severed from the attributes of the world of nature, sacrifices the qualities and exigencies of that mortal realm and manifests the perfections of the Kingdom, just as the qualities of the iron disappeared and the qualities of the fire appeared in their place.²²

As the storms of passion beat down on a despairing humanity, undermining its moral integrity, the community whose members are the embodiments of purity becomes a fortress of strength for the world, the refuge of a tottering civilization.

7

The Faithful Lover

Through His Revelation, the Manifestation makes known to humanity God's will and purpose. "Whatsoever hath been revealed in His Tablets is but a reflection of His Will."¹ But the capacity of humanity to understand and respond to the Revelation is limited. The power that enables the individual to follow the teachings in spite of this inherent limitation is the power of the Covenant. Were it not for the power of the Covenant, humanity would lose its bearings; it would no longer be possible to know God's will in order to achieve His purpose. The Covenant is the wellspring of faith and love.

In this Dispensation, the individual receives the bounties of the Covenant in two ways: through the greater Covenant, the Covenant between God and humanity, and through the lesser Covenant, which is established between Bahá'u'lláh and His followers. With respect to the greater Covenant, Bahá'u'lláh describes, in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the twin duties enjoined by God on His servants. The first duty is "the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws." Those who have attained to the recognition of the Manifestation are also "observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world." "These twin duties," Bahá'u'lláh explains, "are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other."²

Those who arise to serve the Cause and contribute to the progress of humanity strive to fulfill these duties with faithfulness and firmness, manifesting "such steadfastness that were all the peoples of the world to attempt to prevent [them] from turning to the Source of Revelation, they would be powerless to do so."³

Follow not, therefore, your earthly desires, and violate not the Covenant of God, nor break your pledge to Him. With firm determination, with the whole affection of your heart, and with the full force of your words, turn ye unto Him, and walk not in the ways of the foolish. . . . Break not the bond that uniteth you with your Creator, and be not of those that have erred and strayed from His ways.⁴

The purpose of the lesser Covenant is “to perpetuate the influence of [the] Faith, insure its integrity, safeguard it from schism, and stimulate its world-wide expansion.”⁵ “The essence of the Covenant is the continuation of divine guidance after the Ascension of the Prophet through the presence in this world of an institution to which all the friends turn and which can indisputably state what is the will of God.”⁶

‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the Center of the Covenant and, after Him, the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice are the Centers to which all must turn. The interpretations of the Guardian are statements of truth about the meaning of the Book that cannot be altered.⁷ The Universal House of Justice has “been invested by Bahá’u’lláh with the authority to legislate whatsoever has not been explicitly and outwardly recorded in His holy Writ,” and has “the right and power to abrogate, according to the changes and requirements of the time, whatever has been already enacted and enforced by a preceding House of Justice.”⁸ While its members are “not omniscient” and want to “be provided with facts when called upon to render a decision,”⁹ yet, “whatsoever they decide is of God”¹⁰ and “has the same effect as the Text itself.”¹¹

To be firm in the Covenant, then, a believer turns, with fidelity and unshakable resolve, to the Text and to the Center of Authority in the Faith, thereby clinging to the will and purpose of God as revealed by Bahá’u’lláh. To “accept Bahá’u’lláh is to accept His Covenant; to reject His Covenant is to reject Him.”¹² Firmness in the Covenant requires trust—trust that God will fulfill His promise to keep open the channel of divine guidance. This means that the believers should have confidence that God will guide the Universal House of Justice to do whatever is necessary for the welfare of the Cause at the propitious moment. Without such confidence, service to the Cause rests upon a foundation of sand.

The Hand of Omnipotence hath established His Revelation upon an unassailable, an enduring foundation. Storms of human strife are powerless to undermine its basis, nor will men's fanciful theories succeed in damaging its structure.¹³

Let it not be imagined that the House of Justice will take any decision according to its own concepts and opinions. God forbid! The Supreme House of Justice will take decisions and establish laws through the inspiration and confirmation of the Holy Spirit, because it is in the safekeeping and under the shelter and protection of the Ancient Beauty, and obedience to its decisions is a bounden and essential duty and an absolute obligation, and there is no escape for anyone.¹⁴

Service to the Cause of God requires absolute fidelity and integrity and unwavering faith in Him. No good but only evil can come from taking the responsibility for the future of God's Cause into our own hands and trying to force it into ways that we wish it to go regardless of the clear texts and our own limitations. It is His Cause. He has promised that its light will not fail. Our part is to cling tenaciously to the revealed Word and to the institutions that He has created to preserve His Covenant.¹⁵

The Covenant is not simply about the appearance of a new Manifestation and the succession of authority after His passing. It addresses relationships: the relationship between God and the individual, between the individual and the Manifestation, between the individual and the Faith, among the believers, and between the individuals and their institutions. The Covenant defines the bond of duty and also the bond of love in each of these relationships. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the spirit of the Covenant is the real center of love that reflects its rays to all parts of the world, resuscitating and regenerating humanity and illuminating the path to the Kingdom.¹⁶ "Love is heaven's kindly light," the "Holy Spirit's eternal breath that vivifieth the human soul," and "the cause of God's revelation unto man."¹⁷ It is through the love of God for man that the Covenant was established; thus, God could reveal Himself, enkindle the spirit of faith, and provide the teachings to educate each human soul. It is the love of the

individual for God that engenders “faith, attraction to the Divine, enkindlement, progress, entrance into the Kingdom of God, receiving the Bounties of God”¹⁸ and from which “stems a desire to submit oneself to His Will, to obey His laws, to heed His exhortations and to promote His Faith.”¹⁹ Bahá’u’lláh’s call to us is to “Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.”²⁰

Touched by the water of love, the seed of recognition grows to become certitude.

Such should be thy certitude that if all mankind were to advance such claims as no man hath ever advanced, or any mind conceived, thou wouldst completely ignore them, wouldst cast them from thee, and would set thy face towards Him Who is the Object of the adoration of all worlds.

By the righteousness of Mine own Self! Great, immeasurably great is this Cause! Mighty, inconceivably mighty is this Day! Blessed indeed is the man that hath forsaken all things, and fastened his eyes upon Him Whose face hath shed illumination upon all who are in the heavens and all who are on the earth.

Sharp must be thy sight . . . and adamant thy soul, and brass-like thy feet, if thou wishest to be unshaken by the assaults of the selfish desires that whisper in men’s breasts.²¹

Touched by the water of love, the seed of obedience grows to become complete surrender to the Will of God.

By self-surrender and perpetual union with God is meant that men should merge their will wholly in the Will of God, and regard their desires as utter nothingness beside His Purpose. Whatsoever the Creator commandeth His creatures to observe, the same must they diligently, and with the utmost joy and eagerness, arise and fulfill. . . . In the Prayer of Fasting We have revealed: “Should Thy Will decree that out of Thy mouth these words proceed and be addressed unto them, ‘Observe, for My Beauty’s sake, the fast, O people, and set no limit to its duration,’ I swear by the majesty of Thy glory, that every one of them will faithfully observe it, will abstain from whatsoever will violate Thy law, and will continue to do so until they yield up their souls unto Thee.” In this consisteth the complete surrender of

one's will to the Will of God. . . . The station of absolute self-surrender transcendeth, and will ever remain exalted above, every other station.²²

The movement from recognition to certitude and from obedience to surrender requires spiritual discipline. The faithful lover embraces the obligations of the law of God with joy and exaltation. "Whoso hath inhaled the sweet fragrance of the All-Merciful, and recognized the Source of this utterance," Bahá'u'lláh affirms, "will welcome with his own eyes the shafts of the enemy, that he may establish the truth of the laws of God amongst men."²³ The faithful lover basks in the bounties of prayer and fasting; drinks deeply of the life-giving water of the Word of God; is enflamed by a passion for teaching; eschews idleness and unseemly diversions; and delights in service for the well-being of all. The faithful lover makes each morn "better than its eve, and each morrow richer than its yesterday."²⁴

A community of faithful souls is confident and patient under trials. It works systematically, marching ever-forward in serried ranks, secure in the promise of ultimate triumph even when the field is assailed by forces of opposition from within and without.

8

The Initiator of Systematic Action

Individual initiative is indispensable for the progress of the Cause. Calling on every believer to respond to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Divine Plan, Shoghi Effendi underscores the privilege to “initiate, promote, and consolidate, within the limits fixed by the administrative principles of the Faith, any activity he or she deems fit to undertake for the furtherance of the Plan.”¹ He also states of the individual:

Without his support, at once whole-hearted, continuous and generous, every measure adopted, and every plan formulated, by the body which acts as the national representative of the community to which he belongs, is foredoomed to failure. The World Center of the Faith itself is paralyzed if such a support on the part of the rank and file of the community is denied it. The Author of the Divine Plan Himself is impeded in His purpose if the proper instruments for the execution of His design are lacking.²

When opportunities for action are seized, individual effort is characterized by courage, creativity, lofty aims, and enthusiasm. Shoghi Effendi notes the “essential qualities of audacity, of consecration, of tenacity, of self-renunciation, and unstinted devotion,” which prompted Bahá’í pioneers to “abandon their homes, and forsake their all, and scatter over the surface of the globe, and hoist in its uttermost corners the triumphant banner of Bahá’u’lláh.”³ Similarly, the Universal House of Justice praises “a boldness, a creativity, and a tenacity that have resonated in the worldwide proclamation of the Faith and the promotion of its vital interests.”⁴ In repeated appeals, the individual believer is exhorted to waste no time and forfeit no further

opportunity.⁵ So important is determined and creative initiative, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, that it should be taught from childhood.

They must be constantly encouraged and made eager to gain all the summits of human accomplishment, so that from their earliest years they will be taught to have high aims, to conduct themselves well, to be chaste, pure, and undefiled, and will learn to be of powerful resolve and firm of purpose in all things. Let them not jest and trifle, but earnestly advance unto their goals, so that in every situation they will be found resolute and firm.⁶

A challenge that faces each believer is to find ways in which to serve the Cause.

Neither the local nor national representatives of the community, no matter how elaborate their plans, or persistent their appeals, or sagacious their counsels, nor even the Guardian himself, however much he may yearn for this consummation, can decide where the duty of the individual lies, or supplant him in the discharge of that task. The individual alone must assess its character, consult his conscience, prayerfully consider all its aspects, [and] manfully struggle against the natural inertia that weighs him down in his effort to arise. . . .⁷

In defining our path of service, however, we need to bear in mind that teaching is a duty enjoined upon all. “For it is the individual who possesses the will to act as a teacher or not. No Spiritual Assembly, no teaching committee, no group of well-intentioned Bahá’ís, however much it exerts itself, may usurp the position occupied by the individual in this fundamental activity.”⁸ We are urged by the Guardian to explore new channels for teaching⁹ and to make it the dominating passion of our lives.¹⁰

When stepping into the field of action, the individual is encouraged to be systematic and avoid freneticism. “Systematization is a necessary mode of functioning animated by the urgency to act,” the Universal House of Justice explains. While allowing for initiative and spontaneity, “it suggests the need to be clear-headed, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced and harmonious.” In responding to the needs of the Cause, the individual

must make a conscious decision as to what he or she will do to serve the Plan, and as to how, where and when to do it. This determination enables the individual to check the progress of his actions and, if necessary, to modify the steps being taken. Becoming accustomed to such a procedure of systematic striving lends meaning and fulfilment to the life of any Bahá'í.¹¹

For the high aims of the Cause to be achieved, the initiative of each individual is to be harmonized and at times blended with the efforts of others in collective action. Shoghi Effendi states that "it is through cooperation and continued exchange of thoughts and views that the Cause can best safeguard and foster its interests. Individual initiative, personal ability and resourcefulness, though indispensable, are, unless supported and enriched by the collective experiences and wisdom of the group, utterly incapable of achieving such a tremendous task."¹² The friends are thus urged "not to dissipate their efforts, but to seek, after frank, mature and continuous deliberation, to arrive at a common conclusion as to the most urgent requirements and needs of the hour, and having unified their views to strive to uphold and enforce them with promptitude, wholeheartedness and understanding."¹³ Personal endeavor provides "energy and resources to upbuild the community, to uphold the authority of its institutions, and to support local and regional plans and teaching projects."¹⁴

The need to harmonize one's initiative with collective action does not imply that the individual is to wait for others to act or be hindered by their doubts and concerns. "Let him not wait for any directions," the Guardian urges, "or expect any special encouragement, from the elected representatives of his community, nor be deterred by any obstacles which his relatives, or fellow-citizens may be inclined to place in his path, nor mind the censure of his critics or enemies."¹⁵ "Be not grieved," is Bahá'u'lláh's own appeal, "if thou performest it thyself alone."¹⁶

Perceived injustice or improper behavior by others is often seized upon as an excuse for inaction. Far from protesting or seeking to separate from the community, the individual should in such instances, according to the guidance of Shoghi Effendi, overcome the impulse to withdraw and, instead, do that which is right. "Now that you see

more clearly what is lacking in your own community, there is nothing to prevent you from arising and showing such an example, such a love and spirit of service, as to enkindle the hearts of your fellow Bahá'ís." Through example, effort and prayer, he concludes, an individual can bring about change.¹⁷

In accepting the responsibility for initiating action, we simultaneously recognize that every "would-be warrior in the service of Bahá'u'lláh" is opposed by a host of forces. Among these, the writings of Shoghi Effendi tell us, are "gross materialism," "the attachment to worldly things that enshrouds the souls of men," "the fears and anxieties that distract their minds," "the pleasure and dissipations that fill their time," "the prejudices and animosities that darken their outlook," and "the apathy and lethargy that paralyze their spiritual faculties."¹⁸ Overcoming such barriers requires perseverance and detachment. In addition, the individual "draws upon his love for Bahá'u'lláh, the power of the Covenant, the dynamics of prayer, the inspiration and education derived from regular reading and study of the Holy Texts, and the transformative forces that operate upon his soul as he strives to behave in accordance with the divine laws and principles."¹⁹

The greatest obstacle to action may be the contemplation of personal limitation and weakness. The Guardian calls upon the believers to cease looking at their own deficiencies, to have confidence in the divine assistance promised to them by Bahá'u'lláh, and, strengthened and revived by such an assurance, to continue to toil till the very end of their lives.²⁰

Perhaps the reason why you have not accomplished so much in the field of teaching, is the extent you looked upon your own weaknesses and inabilities to spread the Message. Bahá'u'lláh and the Master have both urged us repeatedly to disregard our own handicaps and lay our whole reliance upon God. He will come to our help if we only arise and become an active channel for God's grace. . . . The criterion is the extent to which we are ready to have the will of God operate through us.

Stop to be conscious of your frailties, therefore; have a perfect reliance upon God; let your heart burn with the desire to serve

His Mission and proclaim His call; and you will observe how eloquence and the power to change human hearts will come as a matter of course.²¹

Ultimately, it is through the willingness of the individual to sacrifice that initiative is reinforced by divine power. And the greatest sacrifice of all is the sacrifice of self, surrendering personal interests and desires for the things that pertain to God. Self-sacrifice extends even to the point of detachment from personal initiatives, for Shoghi Effendi observes that there is a difference between those who offer a service to the Faith that they choose to provide and others who do whatever needs to be done. Attachment to one's own service devalues that service by placing personal opinions, ambitions, goals, beliefs, or actions ahead of the general welfare. In the Bahá'í community, the will of the individual is subordinated to the common good.²² Initiative, therefore, is not the expression of individualism, but a properly channeled impulse on which social progress depends. In the statement "I serve," the emphasis is increasingly placed on the word "serve," while "I" is forgotten. As the individual arises in this pure spirit to act for the triumph of the Cause and in service to humanity, the community is infused with a power that accelerates its advancement. Initiative is liberated from the anarchy of self-love to become an instrument of God's purpose for humanity.

We should continually be establishing new bases for human happiness and creating and promoting new instrumentalities toward this end. How excellent, how honorable is man if he arises to fulfil his responsibilities; how wretched and contemptible, if he shuts his eyes to the welfare of society and wastes his precious life in pursuing his own selfish interests and personal advantages. Supreme happiness is man's, and he beholds the signs of God in the world and in the human soul, if he urges on the steed of high endeavor in the arena of civilization and justice.²³

9

The Quickener of Humanity

The purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is the creation of a new human being and a new social order. Humanity is dead and the Manifestation of God raises it to life. The earth is a frozen wasteland, and He brings a new spiritual springtime.

When the Sun of Reality returns to quicken the world of mankind, a divine bounty descends from the heaven of generosity. The realm of thoughts and ideals is set in motion and blessed with new life. Minds are developed, hopes brighten, aspirations become spiritual, the virtues of the human world appear with freshened power of growth, and the image and likeness of God become visible in man. It is the springtime of the inner world.¹

Bahá'u'lláh proclaims His purpose to “quicken the world and unite all its peoples.”² God is capable of achieving the victory of the Cause with but a single word, He assures us. But as a sign of His favor, and for the well-being of His servants, He has ordained that we should participate in the process of spiritualization and transformation.³

The Bahá'í writings define various degrees of spirit: mineral, vegetable, animal, human. In relation to the higher degree, the lower degree may be considered as dead. What are the powers of the stone when compared with those of the tree? What are the powers of a tree when compared with those of an eagle? The human being is endowed with the rational mind, the highest form of spirit in the physical realm. However, there is a higher degree open to humanity—the spirit of faith. This is

the spirit His Holiness the Christ refers to when He says, “Those that are born of the flesh are flesh, and those that are born of

the spirit are spirit.” The spirit is the axis round which the eternal life revolves. It is conducive to everlasting glory and is the cause of the exaltation of humanity.⁴

The individual awakens to the spirit of faith through the recognition of the Manifestation of God in His Day.

Every body calleth aloud for a soul. Heavenly souls must needs quicken, with the breath of the Word of God, the dead bodies with a fresh spirit.⁵

Teaching, then, is clearly not the act of pouring water into an empty container, of selling a new product, of winning a debate, or of signing-up new members of an organization. It is a spiritual process concerned with awakening or rebirth. Bahá'u'lláh, by His own testimony, emphasizes this intent: “Teach thou the Cause of God with an utterance which will cause the bushes to be enkindled, and the call ‘Verily, there is no God but Me, the Almighty, the Unconstrained’ to be raised therefrom.”⁶ If God exists, if He has conveyed a fresh Revelation of His will to humanity through Bahá'u'lláh, then every individual has the right to learn of this message and personally decide on its truth. Bahá'ís, then, bear the responsibility to share what they know in a befitting manner.

If ye be aware of a certain truth, if ye possess a jewel, of which others are deprived, share it with them in a language of utmost kindness and good-will. If it be accepted, if it fulfill its purpose, your object is attained. If any one should refuse it, leave him unto himself, and beseech God to guide him.⁷

Teaching is an act of intimate communication between one human being and another. It answers heartfelt needs and aspirations by removing the veils separating a soul from the paradise of the presence of the Lord.⁸ “Most people are helpless,” the Báb explains, “and wert thou to open their hearts and dispel their doubts, they would gain admittance into the Faith of God.”⁹

Teaching is the preeminent act, the greatest gift, the most meritorious deed. It is “the head cornerstone of the foundation itself.”¹⁰ The appeal to teach runs throughout the entire Revelation. “It is

better to guide one soul than to possess all that is on earth,"¹¹ the Báb proclaims. "Teach ye the Cause of God, O people of Bahá," is Bahá'u'lláh's own command, "for God hath prescribed unto every one the duty of proclaiming His Message, and regardeth it as the most meritorious of all deeds."¹² "Of all the gifts of God, the greatest is the gift of Teaching," 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts. "It draweth unto us the Grace of God, and is our first obligation. Of such a gift how can we deprive ourselves? Nay, our lives, our goods, our comforts, our rest, we offer them all as a sacrifice for the Abhá Beauty and teach the Cause of God."¹³

The individual who arises to teach the Cause is to "teach his own self."¹⁴ This includes adorning oneself with "the ornament of an upright and praiseworthy character," so that "his words may attract the hearts of such as are receptive to his call."¹⁵ Every individual can "teach by example" by applying diligently the laws and principles of the Faith to his or her own life and thereby demonstrating the efficacy of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and His power to recreate human beings. Deeds alone are, however, insufficient. Character is but a reinforcement of the act of teaching. Teachers of the Faith "speak out, expound the proofs, set forth clear arguments, draw irrefutable conclusions establishing the truth of the manifestation of the Sun of Reality."¹⁶ They "read the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the Master so thoroughly" as to be able to give the Message to others "in its pure form"¹⁷ and "memorize phrases and passages bearing on various instances, so that in the course of their speech they may recite divine verses whenever the occasion demandeth it."¹⁸ Above all, teachers remember that it is not they who change human hearts or make converts; they are merely the channels through which the spirit of God acts.¹⁹ Wisdom, courage, enkindlement, confidence, audacity, and love are among those qualities conducive to the flow of this transforming power.

Shoghi Effendi describes a number of steps in the process of teaching, which include finding receptive souls, delivering the message with wisdom, assisting individuals to embrace the Cause, and confirming new believers until they can stand on their own. "Let him not be content until he has infused into his spiritual child so deep a

longing as to impel him to arise independently, in his turn, and devote his energies to the quickening of other souls, and the upholding of the laws and principles laid down by his newly adopted Faith.”²⁰

While the believers recognize the sacred obligation to teach and are generally conscious of its vital importance, many lack confidence, the Universal House of Justice explains, and feel that they do not know what course of action to follow.²¹ Teaching is an art. It is the sign of an effective teacher to adapt the presentation of the Faith to the needs and capacity of the hearer,²² and channel the spiritual powers that stir and influence souls. The individual who desires to become a quickener of humanity commits himself or herself to gradually but systematically acquiring the qualities, knowledge, and skills necessary for effective teaching. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “the awakening of the people, the diffusion of the divine teachings and the education of mankind” all depend upon “instructing the friends in the teaching work.”²³ Noting that it is “imperative to acquire the knowledge of divine proofs and evidences,” He praised the formation of a study group for training teachers, calling for effort, perseverance and constancy, since “this matter is highly important” and “is binding on every one and must be regarded as an obligation.”²⁴ Beyond study classes for teachers, Shoghi Effendi observes that

. . . the best way to develop capacity in teaching the Faith, is to teach. As one teaches, he gains more knowledge himself, he relies more on the guidance of the spirit, and expands his own character. This is why Bahá’u’lláh made it incumbent on all to teach the Faith.²⁵

While teaching is central to the quickening of humanity, it is, in itself, only one part in a larger process. Bahá’u’lláh explains that He has provided “the key for unlocking the doors of sciences, of arts, of knowledge, of well-being, of prosperity and wealth.”²⁶ The quickener of humanity enters into diverse fields of service, raising the awareness of the poor and the rich, the oppressed and the oppressor, the unlettered and the learned, by introducing them to a new dimension of reality, helping them to develop their latent potentialities and enabling them to construct a new social order. Thus, writing beneficial articles and

books clarifying problems and presenting potential solutions, engaging in activities of social and economic development, and participating in projects to influence leaders of thought with Bahá'í concepts are all avenues for the quickening of humanity. So, too, is participation in worthy endeavors outside the Faith, infusing them with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. The believers should be assured, the Universal House of Justice states, "that this is, in and of itself, a tremendous service to the Cause and [should] not feel that they are serving the Faith only if they dedicate themselves directly to Bahá'í projects."²⁷

"We must now highly resolve to arise and lay hold of all those instrumentalities that promote the peace and well-being and happiness, the knowledge, culture and industry, the dignity, value and station, of the entire human race," 'Abdu'l-Bahá urges. "Thus, through the restoring waters of pure intention and unselfish effort, the earth of human potentialities will blossom with its own latent excellence and flower into praiseworthy qualities. . . ." ²⁸ It is clear, then, that no matter how noble an individual becomes, no matter how excellent his achievements, or how high his stature in the eyes of the world, a commitment to the quickening of humankind remains an essential obligation. For personal salvation is not the sole purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation:

Verily, He (Jesus) said: "Come ye after Me, and I will make you to become fishers of men." In this day, however, We say: "Come ye after Me, that We may make you to become quickeners of mankind."²⁹

The heights to which a soul can rise are inextricably bound with the social environment. What does it mean for a single person to be just, when the social order oppresses the multitudes? Can material prosperity be a symbol of success, when one third of the human race survives on a mere pittance? Of what use is it to the victims of racism that one soul is free of prejudice, while the very structures of society proclaim and guarantee their inferiority? Shoghi Effendi explains that "the inward life of man as well as his outward environment have to be reshaped if human salvation is to be secured."

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life molds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.³⁰

In this perspective, the purposes of life described in the Bahá'í writings—to know and worship God,³¹ to acquire attributes,³² and to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization³³—can be seen as parts of a seamless whole. The quickener of humanity is an effective teacher and a community builder, working incessantly to awaken others and to transform the social order.

The Institutions

10

The Channel of the Spirit

Shoghi Effendi emphasizes that Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is intimately associated with structural change in the social order.

Few will fail to recognize that the Spirit breathed by Bahá'u'lláh upon the world, and which is manifesting itself with varying degrees of intensity through the efforts consciously displayed by His avowed supporters and indirectly through certain humanitarian organizations, can never permeate and exercise an abiding influence upon mankind unless and until it incarnates itself in a visible Order, which would bear His name, wholly identify itself with His principles, and function in conformity with His laws....

For Bahá'u'lláh, we should readily recognize, has not only imbued mankind with a new and regenerating Spirit. He has not merely enunciated certain universal principles, or propounded a particular philosophy, however potent, sound and universal these may be. In addition to these He, as well as 'Abdu'l-Bahá after Him, has, unlike the Dispensations of the past, clearly and specifically laid down a set of Laws, established definite institutions, and provided for the essentials of a Divine Economy. These are destined to be a pattern for future society, a supreme instrument for the establishment of the Most Great Peace, and the one agency for the unification of the world, and the proclamation of the reign of righteousness and justice upon the earth.¹

The distinctive feature of Bahá'í administration is that it was created by the Manifestation Himself. Bahá'u'lláh has, Shoghi Effendi affirms, "revealed its principles, established its institutions, appointed the person to interpret His Word and conferred the necessary authority

on the body designed to supplement and apply His legislative ordinances.”² He placed the affairs of the Cause in the hands of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá; thereafter, the channel of divine guidance remained open through the establishment of the twin institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice. They are “destined to apply the principles, promulgate the laws, protect the institutions, adapt loyally and intelligently the Faith to the requirements of progressive society, and consummate the incorruptible inheritance which the Founders of the Faith have bequeathed to the world.”³

While certain statements in the writings imply that these twin institutions might have operated simultaneously, there are no limitations set on their independent action. For thirty-six years, Shoghi Effendi, acting as Head of the Faith and the Interpreter of the Book, guided the spread of the Bahá’í community throughout the planet, enhanced the understanding of the believers, and forged the basis of the Administrative Order. He left for posterity a body of interpretation that clarifies the meaning of the Text. Today, although it acts without a living Guardian, the Universal House of Justice is cloaked in the mantle of infallibility described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Will and Testament. Recognizing the possible need for the formation of the Universal House of Justice at a time when Shoghi Effendi was too young to assume the station of the Guardian, the Master wrote: “That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the Truth and the Purpose of God Himself.”⁴ And Shoghi Effendi assures us that “the institution of Guardianship does not under any circumstances abrogate, or even in the slightest degree detract from, the powers granted to the Universal House of Justice by Bahá’u’lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, and repeatedly and solemnly confirmed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Will.”⁵

The Universal House of Justice is now the Head of the Faith, the Center of Authority to which all are to turn. It is empowered to “pronounce upon and deliver the final judgment on such laws and ordinances as Bahá’u’lláh has not expressly revealed”⁶ and to “deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book.”⁷ It

carries forward the functions, also exercised by the Guardian, to “insure the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority which flows from the Source of our Faith, to safeguard the unity of its followers, and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its teachings.”⁸ In sum, although it does not interpret the Text, “the House of Justice is in a position to do everything necessary to establish the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh on this earth.”⁹

Bahá’í administration includes two complementary branches. The first consists of elected institutions with their appointed committees and agencies “which function corporately with vested legislative, executive, and judicial powers.” The second branch is composed of “appointed, eminent and devoted believers” who “function primarily as individuals for the specific purpose of protecting and propagating the Faith under the guidance of the Head of the Faith.”¹⁰ This order, “the Child of the Covenant,”¹¹ designed to “canalize the forces of a new civilization,”¹² carries the spirit of the Faith to all parts of the globe and opens the “channels of divine guidance”¹³ to every nation and to every city, town and village.

The ordination of elected bodies in Bahá’u’lláh’s divine system marks a revolutionary departure from previous religious practice. Although this system is not identical with a democratic form of governance, nevertheless, responsibility for religious affairs is placed in the hands of the people. The freedom of individuals and the authority of institutions are simultaneously upheld, while such disunifying elements as distrust of authority, unbounded individualism, partisanship, and electioneering are muted or suppressed. The Local Assembly has the responsibility to “guide, direct and decide on community affairs and the right to be obeyed and supported by members of the community.”¹⁴ It focuses the spirit of enterprise and the initiative of individuals. It sets the pattern of community life. It also guides the involvement of the Bahá’í community in the life of society and influences the course of human affairs by its interaction with the wider community. A National Assembly has similar functions, with exclusive jurisdiction over the affairs of the Cause in a country.¹⁵ Consolidation of the local level provides support and strength in the conduct of

national activities; the National Assembly and its agencies, in turn, coordinate and stimulate local endeavors.

While historically the network of Assemblies and subordinate agencies emerged before the other arm of the administrative order, the latter plays no less a distinctive and crucial part in the advancement of the Cause. “The existence of institutions of such exalted rank, comprising individuals who play such a vital role, who yet have no legislative, administrative or judicial authority, and are entirely devoid of priestly functions or the right to make authoritative interpretations,” the Universal House of Justice explains, “is a feature of Bahá’í administration unparalleled in the religions of the past.”¹⁶ The development of this arm of the Administrative Order began with the appointment of the Hands of the Cause of God, whose functions are “to diffuse the Divine Fragrances, to edify the souls of men, to promote learning, to improve the character of all men and to be, at all times and under all conditions, sanctified and detached from earthly things.”¹⁷ The Continental Boards of Counselors were established to extend into the future the duties assigned to the Hands for the propagation and protection of the Faith. Through the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, the benefits of the institution of the Counselors reach the entire worldwide community at the grassroots. Members of the Protection Board concentrate on deepening the believers, nurturing the depth and strength of their faith, and promoting their unity. The Propagation Board directs the friends’ attention to the goals of the plans, encourages contributions to the funds, and stimulates and leads teaching work.¹⁸ Together, the two Boards serve as companions and tutors to the individuals, the Assemblies and the communities, helping them to build their capacity to apply the teachings. This institution knits and bolsters the fabric of the community—broadening its base, fostering its strength, and ensuring its security.¹⁹ The work of the Counselors is coordinated by the International Teaching Centre, an exalted body which functions under the direct guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

It is particularly in the interactions of the two branches of the Administrative Order that the uniqueness of Bahá’u’lláh’s system is

apparent. Although they share responsibilities in such areas as teaching, education, planning, community development and protection, they approach these duties in complementary ways. With regard to plans for the growth of the community, for example, the Assemblies and their agencies hold decision-making and executive authority. The Counselors and their auxiliaries rally the believers, working with them to translate decisions into action. At the same time, they have the necessary rank to be heard by the Assemblies, providing an independent source of counsel based on direct experience of challenges and opportunities in the field. In this way, the community enjoys the benefits of elected bodies to govern it, but also outstanding individuals to lead it. And the Assembly has advocates and champions in the community, as well as advisors that protect it from the all too common fate of elected bodies: becoming aloof from those they serve, making decisions based only on the cloistered views of their members. Thus, it is the complementary effect of the two institutions, rather than either acting in isolation from the other, that galvanizes the spirit of the friends.

... Only as the Bahá'í Community grows and the believers are increasingly able to contemplate its administrative structure uninfluenced by concepts from past ages, will the vital interdependence of the "rulers" and the "learned" in the Faith be properly understood, and the inestimable value of their interaction be fully recognized.²⁰

The spiritual reality of Bahá'í institutions transcends those individuals who are called to their membership. As the Universal House of Justice states:

There needs to be a recognition on their part of the Assembly's spiritual character and a feeling in their hearts of respect for the institution based upon a perception of it as something beyond or apart from themselves, as a sacred entity whose powers they have the privilege to engage and canalize by coming together in harmony and acting in accordance with divinely revealed principles. With such a perspective the members will be able better

to acquire an appropriate posture in relation to the Assembly itself, to appreciate their role as Trustees of the Merciful. . . .²¹

Nevertheless, the members recognize that their personal conduct and moral character are intimately connected to the effectiveness and proper functioning of the institutions.²² If the channels of the spirit are obstructed, how can the divine blessings flow? “In these days when the forces of irreligion are weakening the moral fiber, and undermining the foundations of individual morality, the obligation of chastity and holiness must claim an increasing share of the attention of the . . . believers,” Shoghi Effendi states, “both in their individual capacities and as the responsible custodians of the interests of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh.”

It is worth noting that for Bahá’ís, membership on an institution is not a goal to which one aspires but a service to which one is called. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that rank is an essential feature of human society for “Equality is a chimeral!” and “Degrees are absolutely necessary to ensure an orderly organization.”²³ Yet, positions of rank in society have repeatedly been used for self-gratification and for the oppression of others. Condemning such abuses, Bahá’u’lláh exhorts His followers to regard themselves as being on the same level and in the same station.²⁴ Indeed, the Guardian explains that “differentials of rank, functions or procedures between agencies of the Bahá’í administration are meant to canalize, not obstruct, the work of the Cause,” and that these aspects of the administration should “properly be viewed in the context of humble service to the Blessed Perfection, which is the loftiest objective of all who gather under the banner of the Most Great Name.”²⁵

Service is the essence of Bahá’í administration. As the Universal House of Justice states:

. . . the importance of the Bahá’í administration is its value in serving as a facilitator of the emergence and maintenance of community life in a wholly new mode, and in catering to the requirements of the spiritual relationships which flow from love and unity among the friends. This touches upon a distinguishing characteristic of Bahá’í life which such spiritual relationships foster, namely, the spirit of servitude to God, expressed in

service to the Cause, to the friends and to humanity as a whole. The attitude of the individual as a servant, an attitude pre-eminently exemplified in the life and person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is a dynamic that permeates the activities of the Faith; it acquires collective, transformative force in the normal functioning of a community. In this regard, the institutions of the Faith stand as channels for the promotion of this salient characteristic. It is in this framework that the concepts of rulership and leadership, authority and power are properly understood and actualized.²⁶

When the institutions act as effective channels of the spirit, the powers of individuals are stirred and oriented, and the community is afforded the guidance essential for its progress.

11

The Trustees of Individual Freedom and of the Common Good

Throughout history, the interests of the individual have clashed with those of institutions. Political philosophies and ideologies rise and fall, each expressing a distinct perspective on this relationship. Does the individual exist to serve the aims of the state? Does the state exist to guarantee maximum individual freedom? Tension arises because the needs and objectives of the individual and institutions are perceived to stand in opposition to one another. The system created by Bahá'u'lláh resolves this dilemma. In His Order, their aims and aspirations become one. Both compromise their unrestricted latitude of action to ensure the well-being of the other. Individual needs are subordinated to those of society, while the institutions are confined to a leadership that finds expression, not in control, but in servitude.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to instantaneously have mature institutions that create a perfect environment for individual progress, nor do perfect individuals suddenly appear who will patiently nurture embryonic institutions. Both struggle to fulfill their responsibilities; the progress of one influences the progress of the other. If individuals strive to acquire the capabilities described in the first section of this book, the community will have an invaluable, ever-maturing 'natural resource': humble, wise, truth-seeking, just, pure, faithful, sacrificial and effective servants ready to do whatever is necessary to provide for the common good. Institutions draw their membership from such believers, and thus, to the same degree, reflect these attributes and capacities. Further, one of the functions of the institutions is to create an environment conducive to raising up capable souls,

ensuring that each person has a part to play, harmonizing the initiative of many individuals, and directing the collective effort toward the mission of the Cause. This depends upon cultivating a relationship with the community members characterized by love, unity, and cooperation. As the Universal House of Justice explains, “the guarantee of well-being and success in all your endeavors to serve the Cause of God can be stated in one word: unity. It is the alpha and omega of all Bahá’í objectives.”¹

The appearance of a united, firmly based and self-sustaining community must be a major goal of a Spiritual Assembly. Composed of a membership reflecting a diversity of personalities, talents, abilities and interests, such a community requires a level of internal interaction between the Assembly and the body of the believers based on a commonly recognized commitment to service, and in which a sense of partnership based on appreciation of each other’s distinctive sphere of action is fully recognized and unfailingly upheld, and no semblance of a dichotomy between the two appears. In such a community leadership is that expression of service by which the Spiritual Assembly invites and encourages the use of the manifold talents and abilities with which the community is endowed, and stimulates and guides the diverse elements of the community towards goals and strategies by which the effects of a coherent force for progress can be realized.

The maintenance of a climate of love and unity depends largely upon the feeling among the individuals composing the community that the Assembly is a part of themselves, that their cooperative interactions with that divinely ordained body allow them a fair latitude for initiative and that the quality of their relationships with both the institution and their fellow believers encourages a spirit of enterprise invigorated by an awareness of the revolutionizing purpose of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation, by a consciousness of the high privilege of their being associated with efforts to realize that purpose, and by a consequent, ever-present sense of joy.²

In the writings of Shoghi Effendi, the attention of Bahá'í administrators—elected and appointed—is drawn to those actions and qualities that guarantee loving and harmonious relations. One requirement is for the institutions “to win not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they should serve, but also their esteem and real affection.” To this end, their members “approach their task with extreme humility” and demonstrate “their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candor, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity.”³ They “resolve to remove all traces of estrangement and sectarian tendencies from their midst”⁴ and manifest a rectitude of conduct in every verdict they pronounce.⁵ For indeed, as Bahá'u'lláh explains, the very “purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men.”⁶

Yet another requirement stressed by the Guardian is free and loving consultation—among the members of an institution, with other agencies and institutions, and with the believers—on all matters of importance to the community. Outlining basic principles applicable to every Bahá'í institution, Shoghi Effendi explains that, “within the limits of wise discretion,” the members of a National Assembly strive to “take the friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel.”⁷ They “purge once for all their deliberations and the general conduct of their affairs from that air of self-contained aloofness” and from “the suspicion of secrecy.” Indeed, they “expose their motives, set forth their plans, justify their actions, revise if necessary their verdict, foster the sense of interdependence and co-partnership, of understanding and mutual confidence between them on one hand and all local Assemblies and individual believers on the other.”⁸

A third requirement is for the institutions to shun any semblance of authoritarianism. The friends offer unqualified and whole-hearted obedience to an institution, which in turn enforces its decisions “in such a way as to avoid giving the impression that it is animated by

dictatorial motives.” For “the spirit of the Cause is one of mutual cooperation.”⁹ Through the improper functioning of an institution or the unwisdom of its members, partisan views or personal projects may be imposed on the community, thereby obstructing the participation of the believers. The Faith, however, does not belong to the members of administrative bodies. They are never to suppose that they are “central ornaments of the Cause,” the “sole promoters of its teachings,”¹⁰ and are to avoid giving the impression that they have “assumed ownership and control of the institution in the manner of major stockholders of a business enterprise.”¹¹

Freedom of expression, including criticism, is yet another requirement of a harmonious relationship between individuals and institutions. Shoghi Effendi explains that it is “not only the right, but the vital responsibility of every loyal and intelligent member of the community to offer fully and frankly, but with due respect and consideration to the authority of the Assembly, any suggestion, recommendation or criticism he conscientiously feels he should in order to improve and remedy certain existing conditions or trends in his local community.” And it is “the duty of the assembly also to give careful consideration to any such views submitted to them by any one of the believers.”¹²

The statements of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice on criticism weave a delicate tapestry that portrays a dimension of the beauty and distinctiveness of Bahá’u’lláh’s system. This system is not one of brutish checks and balances of a people who distrust one another and the institutions they create. It is an association of lovers, the members of one family in which the “injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each, the comfort of all; the honor of one, the honor of all.”¹³ While the individual is guaranteed the freedom to address criticisms to the Assemblies, including views about policy or even about individual members of institutions,¹⁴ this right is inextricably bound to the responsibility to exercise it appropriately.¹⁵ Criticism is offered in a manner that ensures that the authority of the institutions is not undermined,¹⁶ and those who give it are careful to avoid forcing the Faith along a partisan path by promoting a particular agenda or interpretation of

the texts.¹⁷ The individual exercises restraint as the institutions mature¹⁸ and channels any appeal of a decision through the institution that made the decision to a higher body.¹⁹ Conversely, because the means for legitimate expressions of criticism are tightly structured, the institutions fearlessly protect this right, aware that closing, perverting, or obstructing the appropriate channels for criticism—directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously—will eventually foster an atmosphere of backbiting and disaffection in the community. How, for example, would an individual feel free to express his or her views if, after making a critical but fairly stated comment at a Feast or Convention, the members of the institutions arise, one after the other, to repudiate the remark?

In addition to supporting the right of the individual to offer critical views, the embryonic institutions of the Faith learn to properly utilize their authority to correct or even to sanction the inappropriate actions of the believers. They do not “react automatically to every mistake, but distinguish between those that are self-correcting with the passage of time and do no particular harm to the community and those which require Assembly intervention.”²⁰ Otherwise, out of fear of doing the wrong thing, the individual believer will become passive and lose the spirit of initiative. The Assembly acts “like a loving parent, watching over and helping its children, and not like a stern judge, waiting for an opportunity to display his judicial powers.”²¹ If an individual believes an injustice has been done, the Assembly will reconsider and, if convinced, reverse its decision without hesitation. And if the matter is pressed further, it will “lovingly collaborate” and “join with the appellant in submitting all relevant information to the higher body for decision.”²² Even in the cases where firm or drastic action is required, Assemblies “have always to be mindful that the authority they wield must in general be expressed with love, humility and a genuine respect for others,” thus striking “a natural note” that “accords with that which is acceptable to spiritually attuned and fairminded souls.”²³

Many of the references cited above were written in relation to the duties of Assemblies. Yet the principles apply equally to the Counselors and their auxiliaries. They have, for example, been exhorted to “build

up a warm and loving relationship between themselves and the believers”²⁴ that they serve, to promote within the community “an atmosphere of tolerance for the views of others,”²⁵ and to encourage the believers “to participate in Bahá’í activities and be unified under all circumstances.”²⁶ In fact, the existence of this unique institution, exerting influence but exercising no authority, gives rise to a compensating force that helps overcome the historical conflict between individuals and institutions in society. In the council chambers of authority, it gives voice to the sentiments of individuals. Its primary duty is to release initiative. And it has a “freedom for independent action,”²⁷ to decide how to support the Assemblies’ plans for collective action or “satisfy a need not being met by any national or local program.”²⁸

The spirit of true partnership in a Bahá’í community can never be achieved by a legalistic approach to principles of justice, freedom, and order. “The individuals and assemblies must learn to cooperate, and to cooperate intelligently, if they desire to adequately discharge their duties and obligations towards the Faith,” the Guardian states. “And no such cooperation is possible without mutual confidence and trust.”²⁹ In this way, an environment is created in which the believers and their institutions are united in a common purpose, and in which free expression, adorned with wisdom and love, contributes to a never-ending process of investigation of reality and service to the common good. In the Bahá’í community, the rights of the individual are assured, not because the individual continually fights for them, but because the institutions are their champion. So, too, the authority and station of the Assemblies are guaranteed, for they are cherished and supported by individual believers and by the Counselors and their auxiliaries. And the rank of the institution of the Counsellors is upheld by the Assemblies and individuals, who acknowledge and appreciate its contribution. Each achieves honor and ultimate fulfillment by working for the others, for the efficacy of the entire system, and for that which Bahá’u’lláh has proposed.

The intricate relationship between the individuals and their institutions endows the community with the strength to resist the excesses of a social order in transition.

12

The Mobilizers of Human Resources

The purpose of the Bahá'í community is not achieved simply by establishing and maintaining relationships of unity and support. Bahá'ís have a mission to fulfill. And it is the institutions which integrate the diversity of aspirations, talents, and activities of the believers into one forward movement. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "We need an army to attain victory in the spiritual world; mere plans are not sufficient; ideas and principles are helpless without a divine power to put them into effect."¹

There are at least two ways in which the institutions contribute to the mobilization of the believers. One is by building their capacity through education and training. Another is by releasing and canalizing the power of action latent within them. In one passage that sheds light upon this dual obligation, Shoghi Effendi states:

Above all, the utmost endeavor should be exerted by your Assembly to familiarize the newly enrolled believers with the fundamental and spiritual verities of the Faith, and with the origins, the aims and purposes, as well as the processes of a divinely appointed Administrative Order, to acquaint them more fully with the history of the Faith, to instill in them a deeper understanding of the Covenants of both Bahá'u'lláh and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to enrich their spiritual life, to rouse them to a greater effort and a closer participation in both the teaching of the Faith and the administration of its activities, and to inspire them to make the necessary sacrifices for the furtherance of its vital interests.²

It is the “principal task” of the Auxiliary Boards, the Universal House of Justice states, “to assist in arousing and releasing” the powers of the individual.³ Similarly, the Guardian explains that “the best Assembly is the one that capitalizes on the talents of all the members of the group and keeps them busy in some form of active participation in serving the Cause and spreading the Message.”⁴ In another instance his secretary writes on his behalf:

The first quality for leadership, both among individuals and Assemblies, is the capacity to use the energy and competence that exists in the rank and file of its followers. Otherwise the more competent members of the group will go at a tangent and try to find elsewhere a field of work where they could use their energy. Shoghi Effendi hopes that the Assemblies will do their utmost in planning such teaching activities that every single soul will be kept busy.⁵

In describing the efforts of National Assemblies “to enable both individual believers and Local Assemblies to fulfil their respective tasks,” the Guardian offers an overview of qualities and conditions that are to be manifested by the members of all institutions:

Through their repeated appeals, through their readiness to dispel all misunderstandings and remove all obstacles, through the example of their lives, their unrelaxing vigilance, their high sense of justice, their humility, consecration and courage, they must demonstrate to those whom they represent their capacity to play their part in the progress of the Plan in which they, no less than the rest of the community, are involved.⁶

Encouragement and inspiration, however, no matter how effectively conveyed, are alone insufficient to stimulate sustained efforts within the community. Indeed, appeals for urgent or sacrificial action can even degenerate into a formalistic procedure devoid of love and sincerity, producing only guilt, disillusionment, or frustration among the believers. Encouragement needs to be complemented by education. For ultimately, it is the Word of God that is endowed with the supreme power for galvanizing the believers and effecting lasting change.

“The corrosion of ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society; what else but the Elixir of His potent Revelation can cleanse and revive it?” Bahá’u’lláh asks. “The Word of God, alone, can claim the distinction of being endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change.”⁷ “The principles of the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh should be carefully studied, one by one,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “until they are realized and understood by mind and heart—so will you become strong followers of the light, truly spiritual, heavenly soldiers of God, acquiring and spreading the true civilization in Persia, in Europe, and in the whole world.”⁸ Through study of the Creative Word in a manner suited to the capacity of the believers, individual consciousness grows, and the community becomes an environment for learning to apply the teachings. The friends are enabled to participate in the generation and application of knowledge necessary for personal and collective transformation.

A wide variety of initiatives have been undertaken by Bahá’í institutions to promote learning. These include deepening programs, study classes, conferences, seminars, summer schools, and classes for children and youth. The educational process in the Bahá’í community took a dramatic leap forward in the Four Year Plan, when the Universal House of Justice called for the systematic development of human resources and the adoption of formal approaches to training:

To effect the possibilities of expansion and consolidation implied by entry by troops, a determined, worldwide effort to develop human resources must be made. The endeavor of individuals to conduct study classes in their homes, the sponsorship by the institutions of occasional courses of instruction, and the informal activities of the community, though important, are not adequate for the education and training of a rapidly expanding community. It is therefore of paramount importance that systematic attention be given to devising methods for educating large numbers of believers in the fundamental verities of the Faith and for training and assisting them to serve the Cause as their God-given talents allow. There should be no delay in establishing permanent institutes designed to provide

well-organized, formally conducted programs of training on a regular schedule. . . .⁹

The training institute, “an agency of the National Spiritual Assembly,” has the responsibility for “developing human resources in all or part of a country.”¹⁰ The Counselors and Auxiliary Board members are “intimately involved” in its work.¹¹ The institute provides a means to train a percentage of the believers who can in turn deepen others, teach, and make an increasing contribution to the building of local communities. The Universal House of Justice has described the features of this agency in the Four Year Plan messages and in subsequent correspondence, much of which has been summarized in a document prepared for and approved by it in April 1998 entitled “Training Institutes.”

For decades, the Bahá’í world struggled to sustain a systematic process of large-scale expansion and consolidation. Rapid acceleration of enrollments in a wide range of settings inevitably ceased when the thrust in expansion could not be matched by an equally potent thrust in the consolidation of new believers. In the Four Year Plan a practical vision has emerged of how, through the vehicle of the training institute, this process of large-scale growth can become self-sustaining.

An example will help to illustrate the point. In the institute program of a country, the sequence of courses is designed to begin simply, then to introduce, gradually, deeper knowledge, higher level skills, and greater spiritual insights. An initial course may focus on spiritual fundamentals, a second may address simple acts of service. Each subsequent course enhances specific capabilities for service, thereby contributing to the raising up of children’s class teachers, participants in systematic teaching endeavors, or tutors of the basic institute courses.

After a teaching campaign in one region of the country, some 5000 fresh recruits are brought into the Faith. The system established for the delivery of institute courses ensures that the first course can immediately be offered to anywhere between 500 to 1000 believers. These friends become confirmed in the Faith, and although some may not continue to study, others move to higher courses. As they progress

through the series of courses, these trained human resources gradually learn how to interact with the other 4000 to 4500 new believers, deepening them and involving them in activities that constitute the foundation of Bahá'í community life such as devotional meetings, the Nineteen Day Feast, children's classes, or teaching endeavors. The Universal House of Justice explains:

The development of human resources . . . may be likened to the building of an ever-expanding pyramid, whose base must be constantly broadened. An increasing number of friends are recruited to enter the first basic course, and relatively significant percentages are then helped to reach higher and higher courses, acquiring thereby the needed capabilities of service.¹²

Further, as more and more of the friends complete the higher level courses, the number of effective teachers of the Faith in the region increases, making it possible for large-scale enrollments to continue. A significant percentage of these new believers are, in turn, trained by those who have been prepared to facilitate the courses of the institute. Thus, the process of entry by troops, once initiated, can be sustained.

The numbers used here are simply suggestive. The example, however, illustrates the way in which the central challenge of sustaining the process of entry by troops can be met: finding a balance between expansion and consolidation; increasing not just numbers, but the capacity of those who can carry out the work of the Cause.

It would be mistake to expect dramatic changes in the dynamics of community life after some of the believers in a region have attended the first few basic courses of the institute—to expect, for example, that the efficiency of the Local Assemblies will be raised to a new level because of a course offered on prayer. Nevertheless, to systematically increase the number of those who identify themselves as confirmed believers, who step forward to do simple acts of service, who teach the Faith, and who train others—represents unprecedented progress when compared with previous experiences with large-scale expansion. Indeed, the Universal House of Justice emphasizes that for many countries “the very act of training a few thousand believers, and thus increasing the number who have a strong Bahá'í identity and

a commitment to teaching the Cause, would in itself constitute an advance in the process of entry by troops.”¹³

Developing the human recourses needed to carry out the expansion and consolidation work is only one of the vital areas the training institute can address to advance the aims of the Faith. The Universal House of Justice explains that these centers of learning may evolve in complexity to offer training for social and economic development and even run development projects.

It is understood that the institute will be an agency for the development of human resources for activities of expansion and consolidation, as well as for projects of social and economic development. . . . In this latter context, it could also gradually take on the administration of the development projects in both areas [of the country]. The institute can establish a clear-cut organizational structure that has various departments and sections, each of which is dedicated to one of its programs—a health program, a literacy program, and so on—as well as those for training human resources for expansion and consolidation.¹⁴

The institute is to train human resources even if they are not immediately utilized by the institutions. Yet, training, complemented by encouragement, finds its full effect when the believers receive specific guidance in specific situations from the institutions. Vision, enthusiasm, understanding, and practical skills can be channeled within systematic plans to sustain the progress of the community.

13

The Executors of Systematic Plans of Action

In the Tablets of the Divine Plan, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sets forth a vision of the spread of the Faith throughout the world. This Plan, the Universal House of Justice states, is “‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s grand design for the spiritual conquest of the planet.”¹ It is “the mightiest Plan ever generated through the creative power of the Most Great Name,”² is “impelled by forces beyond our power to predict or appraise,”³ and holds within it “the seeds of the world’s spiritual revival and ultimate redemption.”⁴ Unfolding under the guidance of the Guardian and, now, the Universal House of Justice, through a series of national, international, and global plans that mark its distinct stages, the Divine Plan will continue through “the course of numerous crusades and of successive epochs”⁵ that will reach “as far as the fringes” of the Golden Age.⁶ At that time, Shoghi Effendi explains, the

final and crowning stage in the evolution of the Plan wrought by God Himself for humanity will, in turn, prove to be the signal for the birth of a world civilization, incomparable in its range, its character and potency, in the history of mankind—a civilization which posterity will, with one voice, acclaim as the fairest fruit of the Golden Age of the Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh.⁷

When Shoghi Effendi began his ministry in 1921, the Bahá’í world did not have the institutional capacity necessary to systematically execute the provisions of the Divine Plan. Initially, therefore, he concentrated on the establishment of local and national institutions. By 1937, he encouraged the Bahá’ís of North America to undertake the first Seven Year Plan, which aimed at spreading the Faith and raising Assemblies throughout unopened states and provinces, then

in Central and South America. The Guardian observed that the adoption of a plan represented the coming of age of a maturing national community.⁸ Other countries soon followed with their own national plans to spread the Faith within and outside their borders. This period reached its zenith with the first global plan, the Ten Year Crusade (1953-63), in which the twelve existing National Assemblies joined efforts to open the remaining territories of the planet.

The unfoldment of the Divine Plan continued after the passing of the Guardian with a series of global plans conducted under the auspices of the Universal House of Justice. Each plan has built on the objectives and achievements of the previous ones, demanding increasing maturity and new levels of capacity for complex action. The first plans launched under the House of Justice brought into focus specific elements related to growth and development. The Nine Year Plan (1964-73), the Five Year Plan (1974-79), and the Seven Year Plan (1979-86) incorporated such objectives as vast expansion, universal participation, regular observance of Feasts and Holy Days, activities for women, the education of youth and children, the strengthening of Local Assemblies, and a greater involvement in the life of society. A period of increased complexity began with the Six Year Plan (1986-92), when the responsibility for creating national plans, which until then had been formulated at the Bahá'í World Center, devolved onto the National Spiritual Assemblies and the Counselors. The Three Year Plan (1993-96) introduced a triple-theme—enhancing the vitality of the faith of individual believers, developing human resources, and fostering the proper functioning of institutions—while the Four Year Plan (1996-2000) integrated all the previous objectives into a single aim: the advancement of the process of entry by troops.

In the Four Year Plan, the attention of the Bahá'í world has been focused, more than ever before, on the systematization of endeavors. The Universal House of Justice explains:

Systematization ensures consistency of lines of action based on well-conceived plans. In a general sense, it implies an orderliness of approach in all that pertains to Bahá'í service, whether in teaching or administration, in individual or collective endeavor. While allowing for individual initiative and spontaneity,

it suggests the need to be clear-headed, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced, and harmonious. Systematization is a necessary mode of functioning animated by the urgency to act.⁹

Systematic progress of the Bahá'í community may be seen as a process of learning with the institutions at its heart. "Step by step," Shoghi Effendi explains, "the community may make good the various deficiencies that beset it and run its affairs on a planned and orderly basis."¹⁰ A national or local plan, undertaken within the framework of a global plan, is not a wish-list of meritorious events or admirable accomplishments. It includes not only goals, but strategies for winning them based on an assessment of the capacities of the believers and an understanding of the conditions of the wider community. These strategies take into account the necessity to awaken initiative and galvanize the community members to action. In creating a plan, the members of the institutions "disregard utterly their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and inclinations, and concentrate their minds upon those measures that will conduce to the welfare and happiness of the Bahá'í Community and promote the common weal."¹¹ The nature of the relationships among all of the participants in the execution of a plan is dynamic, and the illumination of divine guidance is found not only in study of the Texts and in consultation, but also in reflection on experience arising from action.

Consider the example of a local Bahá'í community brought into existence as a result of a large-scale teaching project. Under such conditions, the community would consist of a sizable number of individuals, usually with little knowledge of the Faith. Even before the Local Spiritual Assembly can be formed and activated, the institutions begin to serve the area through the activities of the assistants to the Auxiliary Board members and the endeavors of traveling teachers directed by a Regional Council or regional committee—all according to a plan for the long-term development of the region. The aim of the visiting believers is to help the local friends increase their love for Bahá'u'lláh and their understanding of His Cause, and to establish the basic pattern of community life. Fundamental to this pattern is the habit of immersing oneself in the Word of God, a habit which is increasingly taking root in the Bahá'í world as participants in a growing number

of study circles progress through the sequences of courses of training institutes. As the human resources of the community are gradually developed, the local believers are helped to undertake simple acts of service. For example, after some of the new believers have studied a course on prayer and spiritual fundamentals, a devotional meeting might be established in the community. Once the new believers learn through a training course to talk with their neighbors about the Faith or to teach children's classes, then the plan of the supporting institutions provide for simple teaching activities or organized children's classes as elements of community life. Parallel to this, the Nineteen Day Feast is nurtured and the Local Assembly is assisted to develop, over time, the capacity to assume responsibility for every activity and for the growth of the community.

Consider another example, that of a local community with a functioning Assembly moving toward maturity by striving for continuous growth and development. The Assembly and its teaching committee consult with the assistants to the Auxiliary Board members and then with the community to prepare a plan of action. In this instance, because of the longing for spiritual sustenance widespread in the population, a vision for the expansion of the Faith emerges that is centered on regular devotional meetings. A gathering infused with prayer, music and the Creative Word, it is believed, will captivate receptive souls through the power of the spirit and move them to embrace the Cause. The assistants, as standard bearers, lead the community members in the teaching field by personal example; in their informal interactions with the Bahá'ís, they encourage them to participate in the meetings and to invite non-Bahá'í friends. After some time, the progress of the plan is reviewed at the Nineteen Day Feast. It is noted that an increasing number of seekers are attending the devotional meetings, and that, indeed, their interest is stimulated. There is, however, little growth. The Assembly then decides that greater emphasis should be placed on individual firesides. Through its consultations with the Board member, the Assembly is reminded of the important contribution to be made by the national training institute, and a study circle is established in the locality to acquaint the believers with the knowledge, skills, and spiritual insights associated

with effective teaching. The assistants decide to build on the effects of the institute courses by working with a few believers who want to become better teachers and helping them to establish firesides in their homes. Steadily, enrollments increase, and the strategy for growth gradually becomes more complex as the Assembly extends the range of the community's activities to meet the needs and utilize the talents of the new believers.

In both of these illustrations of systematic action, planning and doing are parts of one whole. Time and energy are not wasted in trying to determine from the beginning all of the necessary elements and steps required for success. Nor does the community wander, frenetically shifting from one program or activity to another. Shoghi Effendi calls for "systematic, carefully conceived, and well-established" plans that are "rigorously pursued and continuously extended."¹² Thus, the execution of plans by the institutions is carried out in a context of learning that includes ongoing consultation, reflection on action, tolerance for mistakes, and adjustment of activities to ensure greater effectiveness—all in the light of the guidance provided by the Text and by the Universal House of Justice. One plan is not an end in itself; rather each gives rise to the next through a cohesiveness of action that manifests itself in persistent progress on long-range objectives, in the emergence of new powers and capacities, and in continual growth and development. The overly generalized view that "the assembly decides, the Auxiliary Board supports, and the individuals act" gives way to an appreciation of a more complex and dynamic process in which responsibilities are overlapping, interactive, and complementary.

Without the strategic planning, encouragement, support, and responsiveness of Assemblies, individual action is diffused or misdirected; without the example, advice, and education offered by the Auxiliary Boards, the power of the individual is untapped and the hopes of the Assembly unrealized. In guiding the community through systematic plans, the institutions establish a vision of spiritual conquest for an area and set in motion a process of learning through action that sustains progress.

14

The Nucleus and Pattern of a New Civilization

The ultimate aim of Bahá'ú'lláh's Revelation is the establishment of a new civilization. "The progress of the world, the development of nations, the tranquillity of peoples, and the peace of all who dwell on earth," Baha'ú'lláh proclaims, "are among the principles and ordinances of God."¹ "Such means as lead to the elevation, the advancement, the education, the protection and the regeneration of the peoples of the earth," He further asserts, "have been clearly set forth by Us and are revealed in the Holy Books and Tablets by the Pen of Glory."² Shoghi Effendi assures us that

in the course of the Golden Age, destined to consummate the Dispensation itself, the banner of the Most Great Peace, promised by its Author, will have been unfurled, the World Bahá'í Commonwealth will have emerged in the plenitude of its power and splendor, and the birth and efflorescence of a world civilization, the child of that Peace, will have conferred its inestimable blessings upon all mankind.³

This civilization, "divinely inspired, unique in its features, world-embracing in its scope, and fundamentally spiritual in its character," receives its "initial impulse from the spirit animating the very institutions which, in their embryonic state, are now stirring in the womb of the present Formative Age of the Faith."⁴ The Administrative Order "will come to be regarded, as it recedes farther and farther from our eyes, as the chief agency empowered to usher in the concluding phase, the consummation of this glorious Dispensation."⁵

The emergence of a new civilization will take centuries of effort and will involve forces and processes working both within and outside

the Bahá'í community. So far-reaching are the implications of this vision that it is not possible, at this time, to even dimly perceive the full extent of the changes which the future holds. "Consider the days of Christ, when none but a small band followed Him," 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains. "Then observe what a mighty tree that seed became, behold ye its fruitage. And now shall come to pass even greater things than these, for this is the summons of the Lord of Hosts."⁶ If we reflect upon the transformation that has occurred since that the time of Christ or the time of Muhammad—in the sciences, economics, political affairs, education, and all other systems of social order—we may catch a glimpse of the magnitude of the change which the coming of Bahá'u'lláh will effect.

In *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that the process of reform and reconstruction of society is gradual and organic.

The world of politics is like the world of man; he is seed at first, and then passes by degrees to the condition of embryo and foetus, acquiring a bone structure, being clothed with flesh, taking on his own special form, until at last he reaches the plane where he can befittingly fulfill the words: "the most excellent of Makers." Just as this is a requirement of creation and is based on the universal Wisdom, the political world in the same way cannot instantaneously evolve from the nadir of defectiveness to the zenith of rightness and perfection. Rather, qualified individuals must strive by day and by night, using all those means which will conduce to progress, until the government and the people develop along every line from day to day and even from moment to moment.⁷

Bahá'ís do not have an exact blueprint for the creation of this new civilization. In describing the development of Bahá'í economics⁸ or Bahá'í education,⁹ Shoghi Effendi notes that the teachings "offer certain basic principles" and "set forth a number of . . . ideals," but that the solutions to be offered by these fields will require the work of generations to come. There is, he further explains, a vast difference between "sounding a great general principle and finding its application to actual prevailing conditions."¹⁰ The Revelation provides

the community with principles, insights, institutions, a center for collective action, certain methods, a vision of the future, warnings and safeguards against harmful beliefs and practices, encouragement, and direction for its efforts. It must then learn—by doing—how to translate that guidance into action to contribute to the construction of a world civilization.

Although the process of raising a new civilization will span centuries, nevertheless, the institutions of the Faith in every age set in motion initiatives appropriate to the current conditions and opportunities facing local and national communities. Shoghi Effendi explains that “the machinery of the Cause has been so fashioned, that whatever is deemed necessary to incorporate into it in order to keep it in the forefront of all progressive movements, can, according to the provisions made by Bahá’u’lláh, be safely embodied therein.”¹¹ The Universal House of Justice states:

Intimations in the non-Bahá’í world of a rapidly growing realization that mankind is indeed entering a new stage in its evolution present us with unprecedented opportunities to show that the Bahá’í world community is “not only the nucleus but the very pattern” of that world society which it is the purpose of Bahá’u’lláh to establish and towards which a harassed humanity, albeit largely unconsciously, is striving.

The time has come for the Bahá’í community to become more involved in the life of the society around it, without in the least supporting any of the world’s moribund and divisive concepts, or slackening its direct teaching efforts, but rather, by association, exerting its influence towards unity, demonstrating its ability to settle differences by consultation rather than by confrontation, violence or schism, and declaring its faith in the divine purpose of human existence.¹²

Three closely interrelated areas of action on the part of the institutions are directly associated with a greater involvement with society.

First, there is the strengthening of Bahá’í communities so that they will reflect a distinctive pattern of life that “will be a credit to the Faith and will, as a welcome consequence, rekindle hope among the increasingly disillusioned members of society.”¹³ This includes

development of Bahá'í administration in order to demonstrate the efficacy of Bahá'u'lláh's system to minister to the crying needs of humanity, and to offer it as a "viable alternative" to the crumbling old world order.¹⁴ Beyond the many elements of community life discussed in the third part of this book, contributing to the raising of a new civilization involves the "promotion of Bahá'í scholarship, so that an increasing number of believers will be able to analyze the problems of mankind in every field and to show how the Teachings solve them."¹⁵

Second, efforts to raise up strong communities take place simultaneously with and in the context of activities for Bahá'í social and economic development—which may be defined as building the capacity of people to apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to transform their material and social conditions. Work in this area of action begins at the grassroots as individuals and groups strive to address social problems as part of the organic pattern of community life. The institutions monitor the capacity of the community and ensure that it is engaged in development initiatives at a level in keeping with its present resources and maturity. These efforts, however, are not carried out as ends in themselves; they are to evolve until they have an observable impact on the believers and society.

When development endeavors actually do evolve to higher levels of complexity, the institutions of the Faith need to become concerned with the creation of institutional capacity and the launching of organized campaigns. Institutional capacity for development is provided through the global network of training institutes being raised in the Four Year Plan and through the establishment of Bahá'í-inspired agencies by individuals. The Universal House of Justice looks with "keen interest" as an "increasing number of believers around the world" are taking advantage of the latter possibility to create organizations dedicated to analyzing and resolving social and economic problems in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings.¹⁶ The launching of organized campaigns involves mobilizing the friends and their resources to address specific issues such as health, education and literacy, and the equality of women and men, often at a continental or global level. Through an organized campaign, the practice, materials, and methods proven effective in one community can be shared with others to greatly

increase the depth and range of action. Agencies for development in each country provide channels for learning, while organized campaigns systematize the knowledge that flows through these channels.

Third, greater involvement with society includes the efforts of Bahá'í institutions, particularly at the local and national levels, to collaborate with "the forces leading towards the establishment of order in the world"¹⁷ and to influence leaders of thought "so that those who hold the direction of peoples in their hands will learn accurately about the nature and tenets of the Faith and will grow to respect it and implement its principles."¹⁸ At the international level the endeavors of the offices of the Bahá'í International Community—with its focus on global prosperity, the status of women, moral education, and human rights—are exemplary in this respect. As national and local communities evolve, they move, one after the other, beyond isolation and concern with internal matters to address the needs of the society surrounding them. Without imagining that the real problems of their villages, towns, and nations are, in any way, easy to overcome, they gradually learn to work with government, community leaders, and like-minded organizations to tackle pressing social issues with increasing sophistication. In the process they correlate their beliefs "with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world"¹⁹ and bring to the attention of their fellow citizens those spiritual principles "by which solutions can be found for every social problem."²⁰

In relation to the challenge of offering the Bahá'í teachings to humanity, it is sometimes assumed that the individual must first accept Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God, and then receive the ocean of His wisdom for the healing of social ills and the reordering of human affairs. What is important to realize is that that portion of the Revelation which pertains to matters of belief and recognition is but one part of His gift to humanity. The recognition of the Manifestation is, of course, the first duty enjoined on every human being. However, if some are not yet ready to enter the Tabernacle of the Covenant, why withhold from them those teachings that they may readily accept and eagerly apply to the challenges they currently face? Greater involvement in the life of society entails offering the

people of the world access to Bahá'u'lláh's principles and insights through association, dialogue and collaboration.

Such interaction will, in turn, have a reciprocal effect on Bahá'í communities. The world has already been influenced by the Revelation, and, in many cases, may be far ahead of our nascent communities in translating certain principles into action. Exposure to the thoughts, problems, and experiences of humanity and its leaders deepens the believers' understanding and appreciation of the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. The outcome of Bahá'í involvement in society is not a particular model or a technical prescription that will cure such ills as the unjust distribution of wealth and widespread oppression. Its fruits are an ever-growing number of those—Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís—who struggle, individually and collectively, with the support of the institutions, to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to social problems.

15

The Instruments of Effective Administration

“Let us take heed,” Shoghi Effendi urged the believers from the earliest days of his ministry, “lest in our great concern for the perfection of the administrative machinery of the Cause, we lose sight of the Divine Purpose for which it has been created.”¹ He emphasizes that Bahá’í administration is not “an end in itself” but “merely the instrument of the spirit of the Faith” which “is designed to benefit the entire human race” by reforming “the community life of mankind, as well as seeking to regenerate the individual.”² He also states that “the whole machinery of assemblies, of committees and conventions is to be regarded as a means” and that they “will rise or fall according to their capacity to further the interests, to coordinate the activities, to apply the principles, to embody the ideals and execute the purpose of the Bahá’í Faith.”³

The Universal House of Justice, too, reminds Assemblies that the efficiency of administrative procedures, while important, is not the ultimate goal:

In sum, the maturity of the Spiritual Assembly must be measured not only by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning, but also by the continuity of the growth of Bahá’í membership, the effectiveness of the interaction between the Assembly and the members of its community, the quality of the spiritual and social life of the community, and the overall sense of vitality of a community in the process of dynamic, ever-advancing development.⁴

It is clear, then, that we must guard against over-administration. Yet the fear of bureaucracy should not cause us to ignore the

exigencies of effective and wise management. "High aims and pure motives, however laudable in themselves," the Guardian stresses, "will surely not suffice if unsupported by measures that are practicable and methods that are sound."⁵ When the institutions are properly oriented to their purpose, then efficiency and effectiveness in administrative procedures can be the determining factors in whether or not that purpose is achieved.

Consider once again a local community with a functioning Assembly striving to achieve continuous growth through a systematic plan of action. Clearly, the successful implementation of the plan, whatever its particular strategies and lines of action may be, will require of the Assembly certain effective internal operations. Among these are the establishment of office routines and record keeping, the prompt handling of issues, and attention to detail. The Assembly needs to hold regular meetings and ensure "that all its members are currently informed" of its activities and that "its secretary carries out his duties, and its treasurer holds and disburses the funds of the Faith to its satisfaction, keeping proper accounts and issuing receipts for all contributions."⁶ It has to carefully supervise the expenditures associated with the implementation of the plan, realizing that it is only through "a wise economy, the elimination of non-essentials," and "concentration on essentials" that all the necessary work will be accomplished. Even in the process of decision-making the implementation of proper procedures proves essential. Consultation by the Assembly, while characterized by absolute love and harmony and a scrupulous adherence to principle, is to be conducted through a conscientious gathering of relevant facts, effective chairmanship, a focus on the topic, and a precise recording of background information and conclusions in order to ensure efficiency in reaching and executing decisions. Further, if particular problems arise that go beyond the expertise of the members, the Assembly needs to seek and carefully weigh "expert advice" which, the Guardian tells us, is "absolutely necessary for good administration."⁷

The effective discharge of the various tasks associated with the community's systematic plan of action calls also for the establishment by the Assembly of committees, initially only a few, but growing in

number as the work increases in complexity. The diligent efforts of its committees free the Assembly from much of the details of implementation, constituting, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, “a convincing evidence and inspiring example” of the “efficient spiritual administration of the affairs of the Bahá’í world.”⁸ The successful observance of the Nineteen Day Feast depends, for instance, on the practical steps involved in its preparation, such as “the proper selection of readings, the assignment, in advance, of good readers, and a sense of decorum both in the presentation and the reception of the devotional program.” So, too, attention to the environment in which the Feast is to be held, cleanliness, punctuality, and arrangement of the space in practical and decorative ways all play a significant part. When the Feast Committee is mindful of such details, the gathering is better able to serve its intended purpose as “an arena of democracy at the very root of society” where the Assembly and community members meet on common ground⁹ and views are exchanged. Perhaps the most critical component of the Assembly’s network of committees is an “efficient teaching structure,” the guarantor of growth. It ensures that the tasks related to expansion and consolidation “are carried out with dispatch and in accordance with the administrative principles of our Faith.”¹⁰

Of course, the ability of the Assembly to maintain a proper balance in the relationship with its committees is crucial to effective administration and, ultimately, to efforts to sustain growth. The Assembly, rather than exercising complete control over all activity, provides an appropriate degree of autonomy to its agencies. Shoghi Effendi explains that finding this proper balance is essential if, on the one hand, “the evils of over-centralization which clog, confuse and in the long run depreciate the value” of Bahá’í services are to be avoided and, on the other, “the perils of utter decentralization with the consequent lapse of governing authority”¹¹ be averted.

Mobilizing the believers to play their part in the execution of the plan of action, a subject already discussed in an earlier section, is not without essential administrative procedures as well. Obviously, the Assembly needs to put in place effective channels of communication, and regular newsletters and bulletins will help keep the friends

“well-informed about the events and developments”¹² in the community. Moreover, certain parameters will have to be set to guide their participation in the community’s plans. In this, the Assembly must exercise care that procedures actually serve to open the way for the individual believer to take part in collective endeavors, avoiding excessive “rules and regulations” that “impede the work through unnecessary red tape.”¹³

Although the Local Spiritual Assembly is invested with authority, it must be remembered, it is not the sole institution that operates at the local level. The application of effective administrative instruments, particular to their functions, is also required, then, of the Auxiliary Board members. The procedures followed by each institution have to be such that they facilitate the interaction between them. For only if the proper interaction between the two exists, in a way that is natural and free of bureaucratic impediments, will the community enjoy the kind of leadership that the institutions of the Administrative Order are meant to offer.

Finally, it is important to realize that the efficiency and effectiveness of the institutions increase gradually in accordance with the capacity of the community as it grows. Too much emphasis on perfecting the machinery of Bahá’í administration at too early a stage in a community’s development is counterproductive. The refinement of the administrative machinery should be commensurate with the tasks to be accomplished. Patience and support by the body of the believers are necessary if the institutions are to mature. Those who become impatient with the functioning of the institutions may themselves derail the progress of the community by sacrificing unity and long-term development for perceived short-term efficiencies. Problems with the institutions, when they arise, should not be seen as flaws in the nature or structure of the system itself,¹⁴ but rather as the result of individual imperfections and institutional immaturity, to be expected in the current embryonic stage of development. Both Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice draw the attention of the believers to the possibility of “human limitations and imperfections”¹⁵ affecting the workings of the administrative machinery. These limitations are overcome as the members of the institutions “deepen themselves in

the fundamental verities of the Faith and in the proper application of the principles”¹⁶ that govern Bahá’í administration. It should also be mentioned that, at this early stage in the evolution of the Faith, the worldwide Bahá’í community is simply not large enough for the true capabilities of the institutions to be made manifest. “The Order brought by Bahá’u’lláh is intended to guide the progress and resolve the problems of society,” the Universal House of Justice states. “Our numbers are as yet too small to effect an adequate demonstration of the potentialities inherent in the administrative system we are building, and the efficacy of this system will not be fully appreciated without a vast expansion of our membership.”¹⁷

The authority of the institutions, the Universal House of Justice points out, is an “art to be mastered.”¹⁸ As the institutions grow in their capacity to manage their affairs with efficiency and effectiveness, they reinforce their efforts to become the channel of the spirit, the trustees of individual freedom and the common good, the mobilizers of human resources, the executors of systematic action, and the nucleus and pattern of a new civilization.

The Community

16

The Organic Pattern of Community Life

The Bahá'í teachings do not envision society in terms of a mere set of interactions among individuals and institutions. Another entity, subtle in its constitution, plays an important role in the progress of the Cause and the building of civilization. This entity is the community, which, the Universal House of Justice indicates, is more than the sum of its component parts.

. . . it is a comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both within and beyond its own borders; it is a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress.¹

The various elements of the community work together in an organic whole in a manner comparable to the functioning of the human body.

In the human body, every cell, every organ, every nerve has its part to play. When all do so the body is healthy, vigorous, radiant, ready for every call made upon it. No cell, however humble, lives apart from the body, whether in serving it or receiving from it. This is true of the body of mankind in which God “hast endowed each and all with talents and facilities,” and is supremely true of the body of the Bahá'í World Community, for this body is already an organism, united in its aspirations, unified in its methods, seeking assistance and confirmation from the same Source, and illumined with the conscious knowledge

of its unity. . . . The Bahá'í World Community, growing like a healthy new body, develops new cells, new organs, new functions and powers as it presses on to its maturity, when every soul, living for the Cause of God, will receive from that Cause, health, assurance, and the overflowing bounties of Bahá'u'lláh which are diffused through His divinely ordained order.²

To say that the community is an organic whole means that, as an entity, it manifests the characteristics of a living organism. This understanding offers valuable insight into how the community can progress and how its constituent individuals and institutions can foster its development.

Foremost among these characteristics is growth. A fundamental challenge faced by every community, local and national, is to carry the healing message of Bahá'u'lláh to humanity and continually enlist fresh recruits. While it is true that receptivity varies in different parts of the world,³ and that significant growth occurs in surges rather than at a uniform rate,⁴ yet a community that does not grow is lacking in one of the most basic requirements of organic life. Every mature community is to achieve a continuity of growth⁵ and ultimately sustain the process of entry by troops.⁶

Another significant characteristic of organic life is differentiation. A single function does not serve all the needs of a complex organism. Just as the cells of the human body differentiate to form organs that serve specialized functions, collective action in the Bahá'í community differentiates as the community grows and becomes more complex. The Universal House of Justice explains:

As the Bahá'í community has moved from one stage to the next, the range of activities that it has been able to undertake has increased. Its growth has been organic in nature and has implied gradual differentiation in functions. When the Bahá'í community was small in size, all of its interactions with society at large easily fitted together under the designation of direct and indirect teaching. But, over time, new dimensions of work appeared—involvement in civil society, highly organized diplomatic work, social action, and so on—each with its own aims, methods and resources. In a certain sense, it is possible

to refer to all of these activities as teaching, since their ultimate purpose is the diffusion of the divine fragrances, the offering of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to humankind, and service to society. But, in practice, it seems more fruitful to treat them as distinct but complementary lines of action.⁷

Involvement in Bahá'í social and economic development is a particularly worthy illustration of the need for differentiation. In 1983, the Universal House of Justice explained that "after all the years of constant teaching activity, the community of the Greatest Name has grown to the stage at which the processes of this development must be incorporated into its regular pursuits."⁸ While always an aspect of the Faith described in the Sacred Writings, yet, it took nearly one hundred and forty years of growth and evolution before Bahá'í social and economic development emerged as a distinct dimension of consolidation.⁹

Another characteristic of organic life is the integration of the differentiated processes within an organism. Collective action in the Bahá'í community is not a series of disconnected events selected from an arbitrary list of things to do. It is an interconnected pattern of behavior expressed in "a unity in diversity of actions," a "condition in which different individuals will concentrate on different activities, appreciating the salutary effect of the aggregate on the growth and development of the Faith, because each person cannot do everything and all persons cannot do the same thing."¹⁰ The areas of action that are integrated to make up the pattern of community life include "spiritual, social, educational and administrative activities" and "engagement in local plans of teaching and development."¹¹ Each of the processes in the pattern of a Bahá'í community's life has a part to play in achieving its aim and purpose. Each reinforces and complements the others, while the removal of any of them from a fully developed community would leave it without an essential capacity for its progress.

Maturation accompanied by an expanding capacity to deal with complex matters is yet another characteristic of organic development. Not infrequently, a fledgling local community struggles to function independently and requires a great deal of support from the outside. With such assistance, it begins to undertake activities, at first

often of a simple nature, gradually establishing the pattern of Bahá'í community life, which is increasingly carried forward by the local believers themselves. The development of the community eventually reaches the point where the Local Spiritual Assembly formulates its own plans of action within the context of the national plan. With time, such local plans become more and more complex and address a growing number of issues.

Still another characteristic of organic entities is the dynamic spirit of movement. In the exertions of individuals, groups and institutions to advance the Cause, the Universal House of Justice observes an “organic vitality of the Faith” manifested in the “perpetual movement, like the ceaseless surge of the sea, within the Bahá'í community, which is the real cause of its growth”:

National and local spiritual assemblies facing difficult problems, devising new plans, shouldering responsibility for a community growing in numbers and consciousness, committees striving to accomplish objectives, Bahá'í youth in eager and dedicated activity, individual Bahá'ís and families making efforts for the Cause, to give the Message, or hold a fireside, these constant services attract the confirmation of Bahá'u'lláh, and the more they are supported by prayers and intense dedication and the more extensive they become, the more they release into the world a spiritual charge which no force on earth can resist, and which must eventually bring about the complete triumph of the Cause.¹²

In designing and creating a physical structure, a builder is free, within certain limits, to follow his imagination and take any direction; an architectural plan is created from the start, then implemented step by step. Fostering an organic process differs significantly, however. The growth of a plant is influenced by a combination of internal genetic factors and the vagaries of the external environment. Its unfoldment is characterized by continuous activity and evolution. While a general pattern of shoots, leaves and fruits is expected, it is impossible to predict or control a specific outcome. The more the farmer understands the needs of the plant, and serves it, the better it grows.

“The Kingdom of God is like unto a farmer who comes into possession of a piece of pure and virgin soil,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá informs us. “Heavenly seeds are scattered therein, the clouds of divine providence pour down and the rays of the Sun of Reality shine forth.” “Now the believers of God and the maid-servants of the Merciful must irrigate these fields,” He further explains, “and with the utmost power engage themselves in the cultivation of these heavenly plantations so that the seeds may grow and develop, prosperity and blessing be realized and many rich and great harvests be gathered in.”¹³ The results are in direct proportion to the quality of our labors.

And if, as thou passest by fields and plantations, thou observest that the plants, flowers and sweet-smelling herbs are growing luxuriantly together, forming a pattern of unity, this is an evidence of the fact that that plantation and garden is flourishing under the care of a skilful gardener. But when thou seest it in a state of disorder and irregularity thou inferrest that it hath lacked the training of an efficient farmer and thus hath produced weeds and tares.¹⁴

The conscious efforts of individuals and institutions to develop within the Bahá’í community the characteristics of organic life make it a rich environment that cultivates appropriate relationships, creates opportunities for fellowship and worship, guides individuals and families in the practice of Bahá’í ideals, and addresses social and material problems. Such efforts expand and consolidate the community and channel the forces of collective transformation that will yield, in due course, the fruits of a new civilization.

17

A Community of Unified Thought and Action

The Bahá'í community has been brought into being through the power of Bahá'u'lláh for the achievement of a particular mission. It is a community pledged to a covenant, "united in one Divine purpose:"¹ that the love of God may be spread, that the oneness of humanity may be realized, that a new civilization may be raised, and that the "era of blissful felicity which is to incarnate God's ultimate purpose for all mankind" may be inaugurated.²

'Abdu'l-Bahá urges the believers to rally themselves and unite around this purpose. "It behoveth all the beloved of God to become as one," He affirms, "to gather together under the protection of a single flag, to stand for a uniform body of opinion, to follow one and the same pathway, to hold fast to a single resolve. Let them forget their divergent theories and put aside their conflicting views since, God be praised, our purpose is one, our goal is one."³ He indicates that the "first condition is firmness in the Covenant of God," for "it is evident that the axis of the oneness of the world of humanity is the power of the Covenant and nothing else," and that "had the Covenant not come to pass" then "the forces of the Cause of God would have been utterly scattered."⁴ "The Bahá'ís are commanded to establish the oneness of mankind," the Master explains, "if they cannot unite around one point how will they be able to bring about the unity of mankind?"⁵

Bahá'ís have thus entered into a covenant with Bahá'u'lláh promising that they will do His will in order to achieve His purpose. Yet, it is impossible for the Bahá'í community to move instantly into the divinely promised Golden Age; we have to collectively learn how to

put the teachings into practice step by step in a manner that corresponds to what Bahá'u'lláh intends. To work systematically to achieve the transformation implied in His teachings, the community must be unified in its thought and action.

One cannot obtain the full force of the sunlight when it is cast on a flat mirror, but once the sun shineth upon a concave mirror, or on a lens that is convex, all its heat will be concentrated on a single point, and that one point will burn the hottest. Thus is it necessary to focus one's thinking on a single point so that it will become an effective force.⁶

Bahá'u'lláh calls upon the believers to be “united in counsel” and “one in thought.”⁷ At the beginning of their meetings, the members of a Local Assembly pray: “We have gathered in this spiritual assembly, united in our views and thoughts, with our purposes harmonized to exalt Thy word amidst mankind.”⁸ “Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be nonexistent” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught.”⁹ “What the Cause greatly needs,” states the Guardian, “is unity, both of thought and action.”¹⁰

Unity of thought and action represents a proper balance between oneness and diversity in matters related to the collective concerns of the Bahá'í community. “It is clear,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, acknowledging the differences in human minds, “that the reality of mankind is diverse, that opinions are various and sentiments different; and this difference of opinions, of thoughts, of intelligence, of sentiments among the human species arises from essential necessity.”¹¹ Yet, He further explains, “the diversity in the human family should be the cause of love and harmony as it is in music where many different notes blend together in the making of a perfect chord.”¹² Building unity of thought and endeavor is a process of constantly refining collective understanding and behavior to move them progressively closer to truth and effective action. Clearly, if the Bahá'í world is to advance toward achieving Bahá'u'lláh's purpose, the views of a few cannot be imposed on the whole, nor is every idea equal and every individual free to pursue a separate agenda. Without unity of thought

and action, no forward progress is possible. The community lacks a compass—condemned to interminable wrangling and stagnation and a hostage to freneticism and arrogance. In the investigation of truth and the creation of a new civilization, building unity of thought and action occurs in a broad middle way between the extremes of uniformity and relativism. “It is not uniformity which we should seek in the formation of any national or local assembly,” Shoghi Effendi makes clear. “For the bedrock of the Bahá’í administrative order is the principle of unity in diversity, which has been so strongly and so repeatedly emphasized in the writings of the Cause.”¹³ At the same time, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá rejects relativism, explaining that “reality is not divisible; it does not admit multiplicity. All the holy Manifestations of God have proclaimed and promulgated the same reality. They have summoned mankind to reality itself, and reality is one.”¹⁴

How is it possible to proceed along this middle way of unity of thought and action? Through simultaneous efforts to weigh views in the balance of the Revelation, to consult, and to learn in united action, diverse points of view are harmonized so as to contribute to the discovery of truth.

Unity of thought and action begins with the effort of each person to respond to the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. “Investigation of the one fundamental reality and allegiance to the essential unchanging principles of the Word of God,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “can alone establish unity and love in human hearts.”¹⁵ And He adds:

Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas, and convictions of the children of men.¹⁶

The individual efforts of believers to conform their personal views and behavior to the standard of the divine will, as expressed in the revealed Word of God and in the authoritative statements of the Center of the Cause, draw them into closer harmony with one another.

Referring to the texts purifies and shapes opinion. Individual interpretation is the fruit of our rational power and contributes to a better understanding of the teachings.¹⁷ We all have a right to our

opinions and we are bound to think differently.¹⁸ Yet reality is vast; no single mind can fully grasp all its dimensions. Individuals must of necessity hold subjective, partial views—personal opinions about reality and truth that can be shared and contrasted with the views and opinions of others in the quest for greater understanding. “As believers with various insights into the Teachings converse—with patience, tolerance and open and unbiased minds—a deepening of comprehension should take place.”¹⁹ The right to individual opinions is upheld in the writings and its value affirmed. However, two opinions may equally represent different perspectives on the truth, or one opinion may be closer to the truth than the other. Opinions can also be wrong. Shoghi Effendi explains that the “more we read the Writings, the more truths we can find in them, the more we will see that our previous notions were erroneous.”²⁰ It is a sign of progress and maturity to be capable of weeding out incorrect or inferior views to attain a greater comprehension of truth.

Consider an example from the teaching work. In observing efforts to bring about large-scale expansion over a number of years, a Bahá’í teacher may conclude that the process simply does not work and that teaching should be restricted to firesides and other methods for sharing the Message during the course of one’s daily life. But upon reading statements such as “It is imperative, therefore, that the process of teaching the masses be not only maintained but accelerated”²¹ and “All should recognize that entry by troops is an inevitable stage in the development of the Cause,”²² the teacher should acknowledge that the process of large-scale expansion is valid and that the previous belief was in error. A diversity of opinions may still legitimately exist, of course, with regard to the most effective methods for achieving such expansion.

Where the teachings of the Book are not explicit, where personal interpretations differ, or where views about alternative applications of the teachings vary, consultation provides a means for the believers to unify their thoughts and actions. “In all things it is necessary to consult,” Bahá’u’lláh states, for “it is and will always be a cause of awareness and of awakening and a source of good and well-being.”²³

Consultation is the searching for the truth of a matter in order to determine appropriate action in a given circumstance.

Consultation is guided by a number of clearly expressed principles. Individuals are to be free to put forward their views and should not be offended by the views of others.²⁴ Opinions are presented without passion or rancor; conflict and contention are strictly forbidden,²⁵ and, if they arise, discussion should cease until unity is restored.²⁶ The clash of differing opinions brings forth the spark of truth,²⁷ and all are to listen for the truth as differing opinions are shared, for “the light of reality becomes apparent when two opinions coincide.”²⁸ For this reason, stubbornly clinging to one’s opinion ensures that the truth will remain hidden.²⁹ Above all, “true consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love. Members must love each other in the spirit of fellowship in order that good results may be forthcoming.”³⁰

If unanimity is not achieved by a consultative body, a decision is reached by vote, and all are urged to “abide by the voice of the majority, which we are told by our Master to be the voice of truth, never to be challenged, and always to be whole-heartedly enforced.”³¹ Members of the authoritative body who have different views are not to dispute or undermine the decision but rather, enthusiastically uphold it.³² In this way, even if the decision is wrong, the foundation of unity is preserved during implementation and the community can more quickly learn the way that is right.³³ Thus comes into play a third element along with study of the writings and consultation, namely, learning through united action. For unity of thought without unity of action is meaningless.

Mistakes—whether deriving from individual initiative or collective action—are an inevitable part of the learning process. “A wide latitude for action must be allowed them, which means that a large margin for mistakes must also be allowed. . . . The Cause is not so fragile that a degree of mistakes cannot be tolerated.”³⁴ Through reflection on action, based on further study and consultation, plans can be revised and more constructive strategies for action undertaken.

Even after careful study, sound consultation, and united action, there will remain differences in the subjective beliefs of individuals.

Given the vast nature of reality, how could it be otherwise, since human beings will ever fall short of an ultimate understanding of truth? Rather than taking sides and arguing about matters, the friends need to be comfortable with uncertainty, content to allow others room to express a diversity of outlooks and actions. "Living with ambiguities" the Universal House of Justice explains, is "a natural and inescapable feature of the process of exploring reality."³⁵ The believers are encouraged to "learn to listen to the views of others without being overawed or allowing their faith to be shaken, and to express their own views without pressing them on their fellow Bahá'ís."³⁶ If beliefs or actions are erroneous, they will, presumably, yield to continued learning; no harm can come unless these perspectives are advanced in such a way as to contend with authoritative interpretations or to undermine the legitimate authority of the institutions. Similarly, irreparable harm is done by belittling the opinions of one's fellow believers through judgmental categorizations, assigning people to camps that do not exist in the Faith:

He urges you to exert your utmost to get the . . . Bahá'ís to put aside such obnoxious terms as "radical", "conservative", "progressive", "enemies of the Cause", "squenching the teachings", etc. If they paused for one moment to think for what purpose the Báb and the Martyrs gave their lives, and Bahá'u'lláh and the Master accepted so much suffering, they would never let such definitions and accusations cross their lips when speaking of each other.³⁷

The gray area of ambiguity is the frontier of learning, the field of inquiry where more accurate and insightful understandings of reality germinate and grow. Two knowledge systems, science and religion, shed light on that gray area; it must be preserved for independent investigation by protecting it from the distortions of truth imposed by intractable personal views. The Covenant maintains proper relationships of love and unity among the believers and preserves the integrity of the teachings even when strong differences of opinion are held. The Guardian explains that it is "premature and presumptuous on our part" to imagine that we can adequately assess the full value of Bahá'u'lláh's new World Order. As we work collectively to

raise it in every corner of the globe, “we must trust to time, and the guidance of God’s Universal House of Justice, to obtain a clearer and fuller understanding of its provisions and implications.”³⁸

Unity of thought does not narrow, but widens the scope of action within the community. It safeguards individual initiative and clarifies arrangements for a diversity of actions. By understanding the nature of the Cause and the full range of endeavor necessary for its progress, all can be engaged constructively in the simultaneous study, consultation, action and reflection that are the essential practice of one’s faith in working toward God’s purpose for humanity. By following the means offered by the teachings to harmonize thoughts and actions, Bahá’í communities will mature and make a marked impact on the society around them.

18

A Community of Devotion and Service

The pattern of Bahá'í community life includes the “distinct, yet inseparable” elements of devotion and service.¹ “Success and prosperity depend upon service to and worship of God,”² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá observes, while Shoghi Effendi states that the very purpose of the Bahá'í community “is regulated by the twin directing principles of the worship of God and of service to one’s fellow-men.”³

The worship of God is the essence of religion. “Occupy thyself in remembrance of the Beauty of Him Who is the Unconstrained, at early morn and seek communion with Him at the hour of dawn,” Bahá'u'lláh urges, for “remembrance of Me is a healing medicine to the souls and a light to the hearts of men.”⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that the state of prayer is the best of conditions, for prayer bestows life.⁵ “Remembrance of God is like the rain and dew,” He adds, “which bestow freshness and grace on flowers and hyacinths, revive them and cause them to acquire fragrance, redolence and renewed charm.”⁶ And Shoghi Effendi states:

. . . The core of religious faith is that mystic feeling which unites man with God. This state of spiritual communion can be brought about and maintained by means of meditation and prayer. And this is the reason why Bahá'u'lláh has so much stressed the importance of worship. . . .

For prayer is absolutely indispensable to their [the believers] inner spiritual development, and this, as already stated, is the very foundation and purpose of the Religion of God.⁷

Personal devotions are, therefore, essential, yet alone are insufficient. Everything in creation worships God, and the community,

as an entity in itself, must certainly do so as well. “It behooveth the friends in whatever land they be, to gather together in meetings,” Bahá’u’lláh states, “and therein to speak wisely and with eloquence, and to read the verses of God; for it is God’s Words that kindle love’s fire and set it ablaze.”⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that the wisdom of raising places of worship is so that the people will gather together at a certain time and engage in prayer, so that unity and affection will grow in their hearts.⁹

At the current stage of development, the Nineteen Day Feast is the central focus of Bahá’í community worship. “Here,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “the holy verses, the heavenly odes and laudations are intoned, and the heart is quickened, and carried away from itself.”¹⁰ In practice, however, most communities struggle to make the Feast a gathering that achieves such high aims. The Universal House of Justice has encouraged the friends to understand the concept of the Feast and to explore various means to enhance its efficacy.¹¹

But the Nineteen Day Feast is not the only collective expression of Bahá’í worship. And because it is a meeting intended for Bahá’ís only, communities which do not explore other opportunities for devotional gatherings are left without a means to invite friends and seekers to participate in Bahá’í worship. Holy Days represent one such opportunity. In addition, the Universal House of Justice explains that “it is essential to the spiritual life of the community that the friends hold regular devotional meetings in local Bahá’í centers, where available, or elsewhere, including the homes of believers.”¹² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá suggests the hosting of spiritual meetings, even up to once a week,¹³ in which the divine verses would be recited and music incorporated in order to uplift and attract the hearts. These meetings, drawing both believers and others,¹⁴ are powerful tools for teaching; they attract the power of the Holy Spirit and can influence the entire city.¹⁵

It befitteth the friends to hold a gathering, a meeting, where they shall glorify God and fix their hearts upon Him, and read and recite the holy writings of the Blessed Beauty—may my soul be the ransom of His lovers! The lights of the All-Glorious Realm, the rays of the Supreme Horizon, will be cast upon such bright assemblages. . . . These spiritual gatherings must be held

with the utmost purity and consecration, so that from the site itself, and its earth and the air about it, one will inhale the fragrant breathings of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶

Worship of God takes different forms in different cultures. Shoghi Effendi calls upon the believers to avoid fixed forms and rituals in devotional practice. This is crucial in those communities that must evolve to integrate minorities. Openness to spiritual meetings of various kinds, suited to the cultural tastes of different populations, contributes to an environment in which all peoples can feel the true spirit of the Faith. This should not, however, lead to exotic experiments in order to accommodate the whims of every member of the community.

Dignity and reverence befitting the occasion should obviously characterize observances of Bahá'í Holy Days by the friends, but this does not mean that cultural traditions which do not contravene Bahá'í principles may not, and cannot, find expression in the local observances and meetings of the friends.¹⁷

In the Bahá'í community, devotion must find expression in action. Bahá'u'lláh has exalted work performed in the spirit of service to worship,¹⁸ and 'Abdu'l-Bahá equates service to humanity with service to God.¹⁹ Such work draws us nearer to God and enables us to better grasp His purpose for us in this world.²⁰ "In His elevation of art and of work performed in the service of humanity to acts of worship," the Universal House of Justice states, "can be discerned enormous prospects for a new birth of expression in the civilization anticipated by His World Order."²¹

Service to humanity, whether through humanitarian acts or social and economic development projects, is a sacred and obligatory element²² in the pattern of life of every Bahá'í community. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that in past dispensations, with the exception of acts of charity, concern for the common good was largely confined to the religious community itself. In the dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, however, efforts to improve material and social conditions are conducted for the benefit of all humanity.²³ The emphasis of the Bahá'í community is not on delivering charity, which so often debilitates the recipient,

but on cultivating the capacity in individuals and their institutions to participate in their own development. In promoting the general welfare, the Bahá'í community should, according to the Guardian, attract the favorable attention of all and lead the rest.²⁴ The purpose is to build both material and spiritual civilization.

From the beginning of His stupendous mission, Bahá'u'lláh urged upon the attention of nations the necessity of ordering human affairs in such a way as to bring into being a world unified in all the essential aspects of its life. In unnumbered verses and tablets He repeatedly and variously declared the “progress of the world” and the “development of nations” as being among the ordinances of God for this day. The oneness of mankind, which is at once the operating principle and ultimate goal of His Revelation, implies the achievement of a dynamic coherence between the spiritual and practical requirements of life on earth.²⁵

Development efforts may begin in a Bahá'í community with the believers addressing challenges within the community itself, but soon these grow to extend their beneficent influence to the entire city or village. The focus is always on some dimension of the social or material challenges facing the population of which the Bahá'í community is a part and on the application of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to resolve the ills of humanity. The resources for these efforts are not merely funds, but comprehension of the teachings, dedicated individuals and institutions, united community action, and a vision of a better world. As the worldwide Bahá'í community grows in size, its capacity to address human problems and influence society will correspondingly increase, eventually reaching the point where it will be possible for “great humanitarian projects” to be launched under the aegis of the Universal House of Justice.²⁶

Devotion and service are most clearly united in the Bahá'í community in the institution of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*, the Dawning Place of the Mention of God, which gives them concrete expression.

. . . it is assuredly upon the consciousness of the efficacy of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, reinforced on one hand by spiritual

communion with His Spirit, and on the other by the intelligent application and the faithful execution of the principles and laws He revealed, that the salvation of a world in travail must ultimately depend. And of all the institutions that stand associated with His Holy Name, surely none save the institution of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* can most adequately provide the essentials of Bahá'í worship and service, both so vital to the regeneration of the world.²⁷

In each community of the future, the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* and its dependencies, operating under the direction of the local House of Justice, will be the central point of collective worship and will “afford relief to the suffering, sustenance to the poor, shelter to the wayfarer, solace to the bereaved, and education to the ignorant.”²⁸ It is not necessary to await the building of these structures, however, for either devotion or service to be tightly woven into the pattern of community life. For “this process begins in an embryonic way long before a Bahá'í community reaches the stage of building its own *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*.”²⁹ It is interesting to note, in this regard, that the Universal House of Justice drew upon the model of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* in its decision to incorporate social and economic development efforts in the regular pursuits of Bahá'í communities.³⁰ As a local community grows, the Assembly will oversee the purchase of a center and ultimately a *Ḥazíratu'l-Quds*, and agencies with various degrees of autonomy to administer sustained activities for development will emerge.

The energies inherent in the association of devotion and service contribute to the transforming power of the community. Universal participation of the believers in acts of devotion and service endows the Bahá'í community “with such strength that it can overcome the forces of spiritual disintegration which are engulfing the non-Bahá'í world, and can become an ocean of oneness that will cover the face of the planet.”³¹

19

A Community of Fellowship and Support

Love, as described in the Bahá'í writings, is not merely a praiseworthy emotion or an ephemeral inclination of the human heart, but a force of attraction on which depends the very existence of creation.¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the greatest gift to humanity is universal love. It is, He explains, a power that renders life eternal and fills it with infinite joy. When this love penetrates the human heart, all the forces of the universe are realized therein. Love is a power that ignites the spirit of faith, raising the individual to a divine station. No spiritual advancement occurs until the soul is illumined by the light of love. "Strive to increase the love-power of reality," He urges, "to make your hearts greater centers of attraction and to create new ideals and relationships."

Create relationships that nothing can shake; form an assembly that nothing can break up; have a mind that never ceases acquiring riches that nothing can destroy. If love did not exist, what of reality would remain? It is the fire of the love of God which renders man superior to the animal. Strengthen this superior force through which is attained all the progress in the world.²

The Bahá'í community is an environment in which love is cultivated and expressed in such a way that individuals both receive and contribute to fellowship, unity, nurturing, and support. These are not the characteristics of a passive state—the mere absence of discord and self-interest—rather, they are the result of a dynamic similar to that of the human organism in which the cells, organs and systems contribute to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. The emergence of a community of fellowship and support requires conscious,

systematic, and sacrificial effort so that the believers may become as one soul in many bodies.

This day is the day of union, the day of the ingathering of all mankind. “Verily God loveth those who, as though they were a solid wall, do battle for His Cause in serried lines!” Note that He saith “in serried lines”—meaning crowded and pressed together, one locked to the next, each supporting his fellows. . . .

Whensoever holy souls, drawing on the powers of heaven, shall arise with such qualities of the spirit, and march in unison, rank on rank, every one of those souls will be even as one thousand, and the surging waves of that mighty ocean will be even as the battalions of the Concourse on high. What a blessing that will be—when all shall come together, even as once separate torrents, rivers and streams, running brooks and single drops, when collected together in one place will form a mighty sea.³

Consider, for example, a community of one hundred believers. Each faces personal problems—the pressures of earning a livelihood and supporting a family, the difficulties of guiding and protecting children, the challenges of loving and reciprocal interactions, and a host of other concerns. It may seem as if individuals and families that are struggling to address their own needs in a disintegrating social order have no time for community building. Yet, it is precisely in the context of the community that they will find the means to solve their problems. If each contributes just one act of service to the common good, every person would be the recipient of ninety-nine acts of service. When each member of the community seeks to address the well-being of the others, the powers of the community are multiplied and all receive blessings and assistance in a way that attending to one’s own problems can never achieve. The Universal House of Justice notes

the Master’s oft-expressed wish that the friends should love each other, constantly encourage each other, work together, be as one soul in one body, and in so doing become a true, organic, healthy body animated and illumined by the spirit. In such a body all will receive spiritual health and vitality from

the organism itself, and the most perfect flowers and fruits will be brought forth.⁴

The love that exists in the Bahá'í community is born of the love of God. "Each sees in the other the Beauty of God reflected in the soul," 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "and finding this point of similarity, they are attracted to one another in love."⁵ From this point of attraction, the believers build an impregnable stronghold of unity, in which each is willing to serve every other member. "Do not be satisfied until each one with whom you are concerned is to you as a member of your family," 'Abdu'l-Bahá urges. "Regard each one either as a father, or as a brother, or as a sister, or as a mother, or as a child. If you can attain to this, your difficulties will vanish, you will know what to do."⁶ And He also explains:

Your utmost desire must be to confer happiness upon each other. Each one must be the servant of the others, thoughtful of their comfort and welfare. In the path of God one must forget himself entirely. He must not consider his own pleasure but seek the pleasure of others. He must not desire glory nor gifts of bounty for himself but seek these gifts and blessings for his brothers and sisters. It is my hope that you may become like this, that you may attain to the supreme bestowal and be imbued with such spiritual qualities as to forget yourselves entirely and with heart and soul offer yourselves as sacrifices for the Blessed Perfection.⁷

One aspect of Bahá'í community life consists of activities and interpersonal relationships that contribute to the upliftment of its membership. Among the arrangements the community makes for these interactions are gatherings for meditation and prayer, deepenings, children's classes, training courses, social events, the Nineteen Day Feast, and Bahá'í summer school.

Just as a healthy body sustains its cells and organs, the community of fellowship and support empowers its constituent elements—men, women, youth, and children—to realize their full potential in contributing to the divine purpose. Since "every child is potentially the light of the world,"⁸ they are brought up to work and strive, to

be accustomed to hardship, and to dedicate their lives to matters of great import.⁹ Thus children become equipped to play their future role in achieving God's purpose for humanity. Youth, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, are "apprentices of God."¹⁰ They are to be supported in their deep study of the writings so that they may effectively teach the Cause, prepare for future service, and learn to apply the teachings to the problems of society. Youth can be the "spearhead of any enterprise and the driving force of any undertaking"¹¹ and can "contribute significantly to shaping the societies of the coming century."¹² Since the equality of women and men is not universally realized, we must painstakingly put into practice this principle. Therefore, the Universal House of Justice adds, "Bahá'í women and girls must be encouraged to take part in the social, spiritual and administrative activities of their communities."¹³ Marriage, in the Bahá'í community, is conceived as the very foundation of social order.¹⁴ According to the House of Justice, "as soon as a Bahá'í family unit emerges, the members should feel responsible for making the collective life of the family a spiritual reality, animated by divine love and inspired by the ennobling principles of the Faith. . . . In this way the friends could make of their families strong healthy units, bright candles for the diffusion of the light of the Kingdom, and powerful centers to attract the heavenly confirmations."¹⁵

A particular challenge to any Bahá'í community is to reach out beyond the people who are the majority in its jurisdiction and build a unity in diversity that encompasses the entire population. All humanity has a part to play in contributing to the emergence of a new culture which is distinctly Bahá'í. The Word of God is endowed with the power to attract people of every race and nationality to the Cause, but they will drift away from the community if the pattern of life appears to them set in a format that is cold and distant. Shoghi Effendi states that "every organized community enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it."¹⁶

The fellowship and support that are characteristic of the life of the community serve the needs not only of the believers, but of the entire population. The Bahá'í community does not see strangers; it embraces and unites all. Everyone is to find in this community their home, and in the believers, their true family. When you meet a stranger, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "speak to him as to a friend; if he seems to be lonely try to help him, give him of your willing service; if he be sad console him, if poor succor him, if oppressed rescue him, if in misery comfort him. In so doing you will manifest that not in words only, but in deed and in truth, you think of all men as your brothers."¹⁷

The spirit of fellowship and support which every Bahá'í community strives to manifest is captured in a description by Nabíl of the early believers who were in the company of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdád:

So intoxicated were those who had quaffed from the cup of Bahá'u'lláh's presence, that in their eyes the palaces of kings appeared more ephemeral than a spider's web . . . The celebrations and festivities that were theirs were such as the kings of the earth had never dreamt of. . . .

Many a night, no less than ten persons subsisted on no more than a pennyworth of dates. No one knew to whom actually belonged the shoes, the cloaks, or the robes that were to be found in their houses. Whoever went to the bazaar could claim that the shoes upon his feet were his own, and each one who entered the presence of Bahá'u'lláh could affirm that the cloak and robe he then wore belonged to him. Their own names they had forgotten, their hearts were emptied of aught else except adoration for their Beloved . . . O, for the joy of those days, and the gladness and wonder of those hours!¹⁸

When such a spirit exists within a Bahá'í community, it becomes a magnet that attracts humanity. Shoghi Effendi longed to see the spirit of unity and love among the believers animate their community life, for "unless and until the believers really come to realize they are one spiritual family, knit together by a bond more lasting than mere physical ties can ever be, they will not be able to create that warm community atmosphere which alone can attract the hearts of

humanity, frozen for lack of real love and feeling.”¹⁹ It was his hope that the “tiny nucleus of the Bahá’í Commonwealth of the future” would so exemplify the spirit of universal love and fellowship as to evoke in the minds of their fellows the “vision of that future City of God which the almighty arm of Bahá’u’lláh can alone establish.”²⁰

20

A Community of Excellence and Distinction

The Bahá'í writings call upon the believers to become distinguished among all the peoples of the earth.

Wherever a Bahá'í community exists, whether large or small, let it be distinguished for its abiding sense of security and faith, its high standard of rectitude, its complete freedom from all forms of prejudice, the spirit of love among its members and for the closely knit fabric of its social life. The acute distinction between this and present-day society will inevitably arouse the interest of the more enlightened, and as the world's gloom deepens the light of Bahá'í life will shine brighter and brighter until its brilliance must eventually attract the disillusioned masses and cause them to enter the haven of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, Who alone can bring them peace and justice and an ordered life.¹

“In these very days,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “the Abhá Paradise must pitch its pavilions on the plains of the world.”² Humanity, Shoghi Effendi observes, desperately needs to see the love that is engendered in the hearts of the believers, and to partake of the atmosphere of tolerance, understanding, forbearance and active kindness that should be the hallmark of a Bahá'í community.³ The believers are to distinguish themselves through the manifestation of spiritual qualities and through service to humanity. It is, in the words of the Guardian to one national community, a “double crusade,” both to “regenerate the inward life” of the believers and to “assail the long-standing evils that have entrenched themselves” in the society.⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

I desire distinction for you. The Bahá'ís must be distinguished from others of humanity. But this distinction must not depend

upon wealth—that they should become more affluent than other people. I do not desire for you financial distinction. It is not an ordinary distinction I desire; not scientific, commercial, industrial distinction. For you I desire spiritual distinction—that is, you must become eminent and distinguished in morals. In the love of God you must become distinguished from all else. You must become distinguished for loving humanity; for unity and accord, for love and justice. In brief, you must become distinguished in all the virtues of the human world—for faithfulness and steadfastness, for philanthropic deeds and service to the human world, for love toward every human being, for unity and accord with all people, for removing prejudices and promoting international peace. Finally, you must become distinguished for heavenly illumination and acquiring the bestowals of God. I desire this distinction for you.⁵

In no way does the call to distinction represent an appeal for the believers to demonstrate superiority to others or to vaunt themselves over the members of other religious communities. The Bahá'í teachings are not exclusive or sectarian; they reject any conception of “us” versus “them.” Bahá'ís are exhorted to associate with all people and, by their rectitude of conduct and disinterested service, win their respect and esteem. “Show ye an endeavor,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá urges, “that all nations and communities of the world, even the enemies, put their trust, assurance, and hope in you.”⁶ The summons to excellence and distinction should be regarded as no less than an obligation on the Bahá'í community to transform itself so as to become the means for influencing others. “This is the magnet which will attract the masses to the Cause of God,” the Universal House of Justice explains, “and the leaven that will transform human society.”⁷

The Bahá'í community's struggle for distinction takes place within the context of the disintegration of an outdated social order. Bahá'ís are not simply to move to the forefront of the existing order, but are to work with the forces of integration to contribute to the creation of a new one. In today's world, while a desire for transformation is widely proclaimed in many circles, there is little agreement on the nature of the changes to be implemented. Some believe that with the

addition of a few structural adjustments and the infusion of spiritual qualities in the individual the existing economic, political, and social systems will function perfectly well. Bahá'ís disagree with this position. The only alternative for true change is for the rules, laws, habits, systems, and institutions of an old order to pass away so a new one can be established in its stead.⁸ Consider the profound and widespread changes that moved Europe from the Middle Ages to modernity. Assuredly Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation will evoke changes no less dramatic and far-reaching given that it is to usher in the stage of maturity in human affairs. As Bahá'u'lláh asks: "Is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?"⁹

It is in the local Bahá'í communities that the power of Bahá'u'lláh to reorganize human affairs on a basis of spiritual unity can be most apparent.¹⁰ The Universal House of Justice explains that "Souls must be transformed, communities thereby consolidated, new models of life thus attained."¹¹ The pattern of Bahá'í community life must necessarily change the believers and the world simultaneously.

To realize the necessary degree of internal transformation, each community of believers weighs its own cultural beliefs in the balance of the Revelation—eliminating those aspects which contradict the standard and polishing those characteristics which conform to it. In doing so it takes part in the building of a global civilization. "Abandon the things current amongst you," Bahá'u'lláh states, "and adopt that which the faithful Counsellor biddeth you."¹² Shoghi Effendi made such an appeal to the Bahá'í community of North America, urging its members "to weed out, by every means in their power, those faults, habits, and tendencies which they have inherited from their own nation, and to cultivate, patiently and prayerfully, those distinctive qualities and characteristics that are so indispensable to their effective participation in the great redemptive work of their Faith."¹³ Similarly, the Universal House of Justice wrote to the friends in Africa:

Since change is inevitable if progress is to be made by any African society, a primary challenge to Bahá'ís is to preserve and

improve those wholesome aspects of tribal and family custom that are in accord with the Bahá'í Teachings and to dispense with those that are not. Such a challenge must be embraced with the understanding that the Book of God is the standard by which to weigh all forms of behavior. While unwavering action is necessary, wisdom and tact and patience must, of course, be exercised. Let it be understood, too, that Africans are not alone in the struggle to change certain age-old practices. People everywhere have customs which must be abandoned so as to clear the path along which their societies must evolve towards that glorious, new civilization which is to be the fruit of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation. Indeed, in no society on earth can there be found practices which adequately mirror the standards of His Cause.¹⁴

At the forefront of the efforts of the Bahá'í community to distinguish itself through its character and actions are Bahá'í youth. The youth of every generation represent the future of the Cause. The Guardian indicated that it is they "who can contribute so decisively to the virility, the purity, and the driving force of the life of the Bahá'í community, and upon whom must depend the future orientation of its destiny, and the complete unfoldment of the potentialities with which God has endowed it."¹⁵ Youth are justifiably unimpressed by a vision that translates the potent and revolutionary Bahá'í Message into a trite formula for living: be good, stay out of trouble, get a good education and enter a well-paying job. Of course, it is the responsibility of the Bahá'í community to ensure that youth do receive a proper education and prepare themselves for responsible positions in society, but this is accomplished in the context of liberating, inspiring, and empowering them to become the saints, heroes, teachers and martyrs of a new "race of men."¹⁶ "Youth," the Universal House of Justice emphatically asserts, "can move the world."¹⁷

The standard of excellence and distinction to which the Bahá'í community is called can never be won by theoretical exercises or by fretting about personal or collective shortcomings in programs that are essentially passive and inward looking. It is to be achieved by action in the world—with its attendant requirements of pain, sacrifice,

and perseverance—and reflection on that action in the light of the writings as the community continually reviews and revises its efforts.

As the community increasingly attains higher standards of excellence and distinction it becomes an attractive entity, and sets in motion forces for the building of a new civilization. It portrays to the world a community united in its mission, confident in its methods, and assured of the truth of its teachings.

. . . The eyes of the people of the world are beginning to be focused on us; and, as humanity's plight goes from bad to worse, we will be watched ever more intently by non-Bahá'ís, to see whether we do uphold our own institutions wholeheartedly; whether we are the people of the new creation or not; whether we live up to our beliefs, principles and laws in deed as well as word. We cannot be too careful. We cannot be too exemplary.¹⁸

The marked contrast between the vigor, unity, and discipline of the Bahá'í community and the increasing confusion, despair, and feverish tempo of society will draw humanity to the sanctuary of Bahá'u'lláh's world-redeeming Faith.¹⁹

21

A Community of Conquerors

Bahá'u'lláh did not proclaim His Cause simply so that several million people would be attracted to and accept His religious teachings. He did not suffer forty years of imprisonment and exile so that a new church could take its place among a host of competing sects and denominations. Bahá'u'lláh came for nothing less than the spiritual conquest and transformation of the entire planet. His aim is the realization in practice of the oneness of humanity.

The principle of the Oneness of Mankind—the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve—is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious cooperation among individual peoples and nations. Its implications are deeper, its claims greater than any which the Prophets of old were allowed to advance. Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. . . . It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced. . . . It represents the consummation of human evolution. . . .

The principle of the Oneness of Mankind, as proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh, carries with it no more and no less than a solemn assertion that attainment to this final stage in this stupendous evolution is not only necessary but inevitable, that its realization is fast approaching, and that nothing short of a power that is born of God can succeed in establishing it.¹

It is in this context that Bahá'ís receive their mission of spiritual conquest. The Universal House of Justice has referred to the “pitiful plight of masses of humanity, suffering and in turmoil, hungering after righteousness”² and the “soul-crushing difficulties and the shadow of despair” which weigh upon the peoples of the world at this time in history.³ In response, “the community must become imbued with a sense of mission and the Assembly grow in awareness of its role as a channel of God’s grace not only for the Bahá'ís but for the entire village, town or city in which it serves.”⁴ In addition, “there must be revived among the individual believers a sense of mission, a feeling of empowerment to minister to the urgent need of humanity for guidance and thus to win victories for the Faith in their own sphere of life.”⁵

Bahá'u'lláh has explained that He has no desire for the things of this world, but that He has claimed for Himself the cities of human hearts. The believers are to conquer those hearts through their utterance and their good character. “O people of Bahá!” is His appeal. “Subdue the citadels of men’s hearts with the swords of wisdom and of utterance.”⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá compares the believers to a divine army operating under the Lord of Hosts.⁷ The “ever-victorious Commander” of the “valiant combatants on earth” is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself.⁸ The plan of conquest is the Divine Plan. The “conquest” is, in actuality, the liberation of the human race. Its methods eschew force and coercion and opts for service, wisdom and love.

To do battle, as stated in the sacred verse, doth not, in this greatest of all dispensations, mean to go forth with sword and spear, with lance and piercing arrow—but rather weaponed with pure intent, with righteous motives, with counsels helpful and effective, with godly attributes, with deeds pleasing to the Almighty, with the qualities of heaven. It signifieth education for all mankind, guidance for all men, the spreading far and wide of the sweet savors of the spirit, the promulgation of God’s proofs, the setting forth of arguments conclusive and divine, the doing of charitable deeds.⁹

The Bahá'í writings envision that humanity will ultimately embrace Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. This will be achieved by allowing each individual to freely investigate truth. To teach is to act as if offering a gift to a king; if an individual shows no receptivity, the teacher is to leave him to himself. Bahá'ís are enjoined to avoid contention—we yield rather than impose:

O ye loved ones of God! In this, the Bahá'í dispensation, God's Cause is spirit unalloyed. His Cause belongeth not to the material world. It cometh neither for strife nor war, nor for acts of mischief or of shame; it is neither for quarreling with other Faiths, nor for conflicts with the nations. Its only army is the love of God, its only joy the clear wine of His knowledge, its only battle the expounding of the Truth; its one crusade is against the insistent self, the evil promptings of the human heart. Its victory is to submit and yield, and to be selfless is its everlasting glory. In brief, it is spirit upon spirit. . . .¹⁰

While cognizant of their mission and confident in the ultimate victory of the Faith, Bahá'ís must exercise care to avoid conveying a sense of triumphalism in their interactions with the members of other communities. The battle between light and darkness engulfing the world challenges all humanity. The forces of darkness arise from those characteristics of the animal nature and materialistic instincts that have ruled humanity throughout countless centuries and have taken on a unique, insidious form in this day. The forces of light emanate from those qualities that all religions and moral philosophies have sought to cultivate and which have been revitalized through Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Nevertheless, “nothing short of a power that is born of God” can ultimately succeed in liberating humanity. The Divine Physician has prescribed His remedy, and Bahá'ís know that remedy.

Only if the Faith grows and develops to a significant size will it be able to fulfill its life-giving mission. In describing the growth of the Cause, Shoghi Effendi envisions a “steady flow” of “fresh recruits to the slowly yet steadily advancing army of the Lord of Hosts.” This, he explains, would

presage and hasten the advent of the day which, as prophesied by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, will witness the entry by troops of peoples of divers nations and races into the Bahá’í world—a day which, viewed in its proper perspective, will be the prelude to that long-awaited hour when a mass conversion on the part of these same nations and races, and as a direct result of a chain of events, momentous and possibly catastrophic in nature . . . , will suddenly revolutionize the fortunes of the Faith, derange the equilibrium of the world, and reinforce a thousandfold the numerical strength as well as the material power and the spiritual authority of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh.¹¹

A steady flow of fresh recruits, entry by troops, and mass conversion are, therefore, three distinct phases of a single organic pattern of growth. From statements of the Universal House of Justice to national communities that have achieved some degree of entry by troops, it is clear that the rapid acceleration of enrollments with which it is associated involves far more than an increase in the tempo of individual teaching.¹² In addition, entry by troops, we are assured, is “not merely a stage of the progress of the Cause destined to occur in its own good time,” rather, “it is a phenomenon which the Bahá’í communities, by their own activities, can prepare for and help to bring about,” and which, “once started, can be sustained.”

By a wise allocation of resources and the energetic pursuit of simultaneous plans of expansion, deepening and consolidation, the process of entry by troops should bring about a rapidly increasing supply of active believers, soundly based local communities, and steadily evolving local and national Bahá’í institutions.¹³

Confidence; unity of vision; systematic, realistic, but audacious planning; acceptance of the fact that mistakes will be made, and willingness to learn from these mistakes; and, above all, reliance on the guidance and sustaining confirmations of Bahá’u’lláh will advance this process.¹⁴

The organic pattern of community life, involving devotion and service, fellowship and support, excellence and distinction, and teaching,

creates a milieu in which the peoples of the world are exposed to the Faith, embrace it, and contribute to its purpose for humanity. "Until the public sees in the Bahá'í community a true pattern, in action, of something better than it already has, it will not respond to the Faith in large numbers."¹⁵

In a Bahá'í community oriented toward spiritual conquest, the members are dedicated to refining their understanding of the nature of teaching and learning how to work together in ways that will both accelerate and sustain the processes of expansion and consolidation. Individuals are not mere receivers of love and attention, but are aided to turn away from self and dedicate their energies to the well-being of all. Such a community, "the leaven that must leaven the lump," is "alert, clear-visioned, and resolute" and pursues its destiny "undeflected in its course, undimmed in its serenity, unyielding in its resolve, unshaken in its convictions."¹⁶ It endeavors to "establish greater stability in the patterns of its development," through "sound, systematic planning and execution of its work." It is "consistent in its fundamental life-giving, life-sustaining activities," is "serene and confident" and resonates with "spiritual dynamism." It exerts an "irresistible influence" and sets "a new course in social evolution."¹⁷ As Shoghi Effendi explains:

In a world the structure of whose political and social institutions is impaired, whose vision is befogged, whose conscience is bewildered, whose religious systems have become anemic and lost their virtue, this healing Agency, this leavening Power, this cementing Force, intensely alive and all-pervasive, has been taking shape, is crystallizing into institutions, is mobilizing its forces, and is preparing for the spiritual conquest and the complete redemption of mankind.

The potentialities with which the Faith has been endowed, and through which it is destined to regenerate the individual and to rebuild a broken world are, the Guardian assures us, incalculable.¹⁸

Conclusion

22

Learning in the Light of Divine Guidance

In one of his first messages to the believers, Shoghi Effendi explained that it is our duty “to strive to obtain as clear a view as possible of the manner in which to conduct the affairs of the Cause, and then arise with single-mindedness and determination to adopt and maintain it in all our activities and labors.”¹ Each chapter of the book has attempted to provide a piece of a mosaic. In this concluding chapter, we step back to examine the entire panorama.

The practice of the Faith is akin to walking a path, from the dawn of the Revelation into the Golden Age. The birth of the dispensation came at a time of corruption, when humanity was bereft of discernment to know God and His will. Its fruition is the Kingdom of God, a new civilization, when His will is done “on earth as it is in heaven.” While this path is not mapped in every detail, it is illuminated from beginning to end by the light of divine guidance. The believers, directed by the Text and the Universal House of Justice, participate in an ongoing endeavor as they seek truth and “strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.”² This endeavor integrates a diversity of actions in localities throughout the world. From a wide range of explorations, some prove to be effective, and these can be adopted by an increasing number of communities, allowing them to chart their course step by step. The rate of progress depends upon the degree to which the individuals, institutions, and communities understand, internalize, and act upon Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings.

The effectiveness of these three participants in promoting entry by troops—and, more generally, in building a prosperous world

civilization—is contingent upon their ability to engage in an ongoing process of learning, which has been defined in this book as consultation, action and reflection, all in the light of the guidance inherent in the teachings. But how does this learning process find practical expression in the work of the Bahá'í community? Two images help to clarify some of the characteristics of learning as described here.

The first is the image of traveling in a car. One day, we leave our home, drive and drive, thrilled by the fact that we are moving. Late at night, overwhelmed by fatigue, we stop and rest. The next day, eager to renew our efforts, we are shocked to find that we are parked in front of our house—the very point where we began! With renewed determination, we return to the road, driving day and night; our exertion has never been greater. But when we pause to get our bearings, to our dismay, we find ourselves once again at our starting point. It is not traveling itself that is important, we now understand, but whether we move closer to a desired destination. We have traveled extensively, with diligent effort, and gone nowhere. Progress requires more than activity. We have to have a destination in mind and then chart our progress against that intended goal.

A second image is that of sailing a ship. A complex combination of largely uncontrollable factors—weather, wind, waves—in addition to skill, affects the journey, requiring a continual series of approximations and adjustments in order to arrive at the correct destination. The actual course of the ship, therefore, results not in a straight line, but a zigzag pattern. Progress is charted, essentially, by a series of points of reflection where questions are asked about current position, environmental conditions, and the location of the final goal, before correcting the course and setting out on the next leg of the journey. A similar process of consultation, action and reflection is to characterize the progress of the Bahá'í community in all of its endeavors. The Universal House of Justice explains, for example, that “the periodic reevaluation of the effectiveness of the teaching work is an essential factor in promoting the growth of every community,” since through this process “a community would reassess its teaching program with

a view to introducing improvements where necessary.”³ In a message to the Continental Counsellors the Supreme Body writes:

We also urge you to consult with National Spiritual Assemblies on the experience of past endeavors to assist such communities. Arrangements can then be made for the lessons learned from this experience to be discussed with the active supporters of the Faith in each region, helping them to identify the approaches and methods applicable to their specific conditions and to set in motion a systematic process of community development. This process should be one in which the friends review their successes and difficulties, adjust and improve their methods accordingly, and learn, and move forward unhesitatingly.⁴

The collective experience of the Bahá'ís from the dawn of the Revelation to the present point on the path they are treading makes up the tradition, or culture, of the global community. Accumulated beliefs, methods, knowledge, systems, habits, stories, and patterns of behavior are contained in this tradition, which shapes the understanding and practice of the believers at any given moment in their journey. Because the Kingdom is not yet built, each generation must add to and continually modify some aspects of the tradition through systematic action and learning. Not every problem can be solved, or even properly understood at a given juncture; it may have to wait for a later age, and only harm can come from trying to impose a premature resolution. In looking ahead, the community holds a vision of the future that directs its steps. This vision is clarified continually through ongoing study of the writings and the accumulation of experience.

The path on which the Bahá'í community advances is wide—very wide. It is not necessary that everyone walk along the same line, believing and doing the same thing. There are, however, extreme perspectives on each side of the path that represent a danger to unity and progress. Such extremes views have afflicted religious dispensations of the past, driving their followers from the path of guidance into the wilderness of confusion ruled by human passions. “It is our primary task to keep the most vigilant eye on the manner and character of its growth,” Shoghi Effendi advises us about the Faith, “lest extreme orthodoxy on one hand, and irresponsible freedom on the

other, cause it to deviate from that Straight Path which alone can lead it to success.”⁵ Extreme orthodoxy involves an exaggerated conviction of the validity of one’s grasp of truth, literalism in interpreting the meaning of the teachings and a rigidity of practice. “Irresponsible freedom” implies a relativistic perspective that causes disintegration of the community as individuals choose what they will or will not believe, or what they will or will not do. In between these extremes is a balanced perspective that recognizes the existence of truth and, at the same time, acknowledges human limitations to comprehend and act on it. The Bahá’í world, therefore, transcends the false dichotomy of fundamentalism and relativism, conservatism and liberalism. Truth exists, we can take hold of it and do not need to be subject to the imprecise understanding of every believer. Yet, in time, through learning grounded in action, the understanding of truth evolves and is deepened, allowing for a greater expression in action.

The discourse, the systematic action, and the learning needed to progress on the path depend upon proper relationships that are to characterize the believers—with God, with the institutions, with each other. Bahá’u’lláh has provided His Covenant in order to preserve these relationships, thereby safeguarding the ability of the community to continually progress. Thus, the Covenant is the “vehicle” for the “practical fulfillment” of the believers’ duties, the “potent instrument by which individual belief in Him is translated into constructive deeds,” the “divinely conceived arrangements necessary to preserve the organic unity of the Cause.”⁶

It is in this light that we can appreciate the wondrous blessing bestowed on the Bahá’í world through the gift of the Universal House of Justice. For this body is specifically designed by Bahá’u’lláh with the powers to infallibly guide the believers in their journey into the Golden Age: to decide all matters which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book; to resolve problems which have caused difference; to prevent individuals from imposing their views; to ensure that no body or institution within the Cause abuses its privileges; to serve as the final arbiter on disagreements concerning the translation of the teachings into practice; to protect the unity of the believers; to establish plans for growth and development; to broaden the scope of

the influence of the Faith on society. The guidance that constantly flows from the Universal House of Justice is indispensable; yet it does not eliminate the need for learning. It provides the framework within which the understanding and practice of the community advance. “God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth,” is Bahá’u’lláh’s incontrovertible assurance.” They are “the recipients of the divine guidance which is at once the life-blood and ultimate safeguard of this Revelation.”⁷

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 9 The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* 133
 10 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 10
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 12 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* 278
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 17 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The Importance of Deepening* 28
 18 Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 200
 19 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The Individual and Teaching* 20
 20 Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* 52
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 30 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The Conservation of the Earth's Resources* 15
 31 Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í Prayers* 4
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 33 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* 215

10. The Channel of the Spirit

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- ⁹ The Universal House of Justice, *Messages of the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986* 56
- ¹⁰ The Universal House of Justice, *Rights and Responsibilities* 30
- ¹¹ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 243
- ¹² The Universal House of Justice, *The Four Year Plan* 33
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- ¹⁴ The Universal House of Justice, *Rights and Responsibilities* 10
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- ¹⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 13
- ¹⁸ The Universal House of Justice, *Crisis and Victory* 54
- ¹⁹ The Universal House of Justice, *Rights and Responsibilities* 31
- ²⁰ The Universal House of Justice, *Messages of the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986* 217
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- ²⁵ on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance* 326
- ²⁶ The Universal House of Justice, *Rights and Responsibilities* 39

11. The Trustees of Individual Freedom and the Common Good

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- ² The Universal House of Justice, *Rights and Responsibilities* 40
- ³ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 64
- ⁴ The Universal House of Justice, Ridván 1993, *Promoting Entry By Troops* 47
- ⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* 26
- ⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 67
- ⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 64
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- ⁹ on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance* 78
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- ¹² on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance* 82
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- ¹⁴ Shoghi Effendi, in *Rights and Responsibilities* 54
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- ²¹ on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance* 34
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- ²⁵ The Universal House of Justice, *Scholarship* 34
- ²⁶ The Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance* 41
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- ²⁸ The Universal House of Justice, *Rights and Responsibilities* 33
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12. The Mobilizers of Human Resources

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- ² Shoghi Effendi, *The Importance of Deepening* 26
- ³ The Universal House of Justice, *Messages of the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986* 150
- ⁴ on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance* 37
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- ⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America* 12
- ⁷ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* 200
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- ¹⁰ The Universal House of Justice, *The Four Year Plan* 7
- ¹¹ The Universal House of Justice, *The Four Year Plan* 19
- ¹² on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Training Institutes* 32
- ¹³ on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Training Institutes* 35
- ¹⁴ on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, letter to a National Assembly dated 24 September 1996

13. The Executors of Systematic Plans of Action

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- ² Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith* 62
- ³ Shoghi Effendi, *Message to America* 101
- ⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith* 62
- ⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Bahá’í World* 155
- ⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith* 21
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- ⁹ The Universal House of Justice, *Riđván* 1998
- ¹⁰ on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Trustworthiness* 25
- ¹¹ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Administration* 41
- ¹² Shoghi Effendi, *Message to America* 7

14. The Nucleus and Pattern of a New Civilization

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- 9 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance* 212
- 10 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Directives of the Guardian* 21
- 11 Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 22-23
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- 14 The Universal House of Justice, *Promoting Entry By Troops* 14
- 15 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Peace* 44
- 16 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, in "The Evolution of Institutional Capacity for Social and Economic Development"
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- 18 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Peace* 44
- 19 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Scholarship* 6
- 20 The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace* 28

15. Effective Administrators

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- 2 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Rights and Responsibilities* 39
- 3 Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 9
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- 10 The Universal House of Justice, *Messages of the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986* 72
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- 12 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The National Spiritual Assembly* 32
- 13 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The National Spiritual Assembly* 52-53
- 14 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The National Spiritual Assembly* 41
- 15 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The National Spiritual Assembly* 34
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- 18 The Universal House of Justice, *Rights and Responsibilities* 41

16. The Organic Pattern of Community Life

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- 2 The Universal House of Justice, *Messages of the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986* 43
- 3 The Universal House of Justice, *Messages of the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986* 402-03
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- 6 The Universal House of Justice, *The Four Year Plan* 58

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- 9 The Universal House of Justice, *A Wider Horizon* 9
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- 14 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 290

17. A Community of Unified Thought and Action

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- 4 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan* 51
- 5 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 209
- 6 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 111
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- 8 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Prayers* 155
- 9 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 88
- 10 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The Light of Divine Guidance*, vol. 2, 29
- 11 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 301
- 12 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 53
- 13 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Dawn of a New Day* 48
- 14 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 96
- 15 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 145
- 16 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 292
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- 18 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Consultation: A Compilation* 18
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- 22 The Universal House of Justice, *The Four Year Plan* 58
- 23 Bahá'u'lláh, *Consultation: A Compilation* 3
- 24 The Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance* 179-80
- 25 Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 88
- 26 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Consultation: A Compilation* 9
- 27 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Consultation: A Compilation* 5
- 28 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 72
- 29 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Bahá'í Administration* 22
- 30 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 72-73
- 31 Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 64
- 32 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Consultation: A Compilation* 19
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³⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 62

18. A Community of Devotion and Service

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² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Education* 27

³ Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America* 24

⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Spiritual Foundations: Prayer, Meditation, and the Devotional Attitude* 4

⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 202

⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Spiritual Foundations: Prayer, Meditation, and the Devotional Attitude* 4

⁷ on behalf of Shoghi Effendi *Spiritual Foundations: Prayer, Meditation, and the Devotional Attitude* 14

⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í Meetings/Nineteen Day Feast* 3

⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 94-95

¹⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 90

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¹² The Universal House of Justice, *The Four Year Plan* 35

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¹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Meetings/Nineteen Day Feast* 5

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¹⁷ on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Stirring of the Spirit* 39

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¹⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 8

²⁰ note 56, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 192

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²² on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny* 123

²³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Social and Economic Development* 25

²⁴ on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Education* 50

²⁵ The Universal House of Justice, *A Wider Horizon* 7

²⁶ on behalf of The Universal House of Justice, *Peace* 44

²⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 186

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19. A Community of Fellowship and Support

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² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy* 110

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- 16 Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* 35
- 17 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 16
- 18 Nabil, in *God Passes By* 137
- 19 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny* 439
- 20 Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 132

20. A Community of Excellence and Distinction

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- 2 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 232
- 3 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance* 404
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- 5 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 190
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- 9 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* 240-41
- 10 The Universal House of Justice, *A Wider Horizon* 36
- 11 The Universal House of Justice, *A Wider Horizon* 64
- 12 Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 71
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- 18 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny* 350
- 19 The Universal House of Justice, *Messages of the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986* 82

21. A Community of Conquerors

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- 3 The Universal House of Justice, *Right and Responsibilities* 46
- 4 The Universal House of Justice, *The Four Year Plan* 10
- 5 The Universal House of Justice, *Right and Responsibilities* 46
- 6 Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 55
- 7 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan* 49
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- 10 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 256
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22. Learning in the Light of Divine Guidance

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³ on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, letter dated 30 July 1987 to a National Assembly
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