

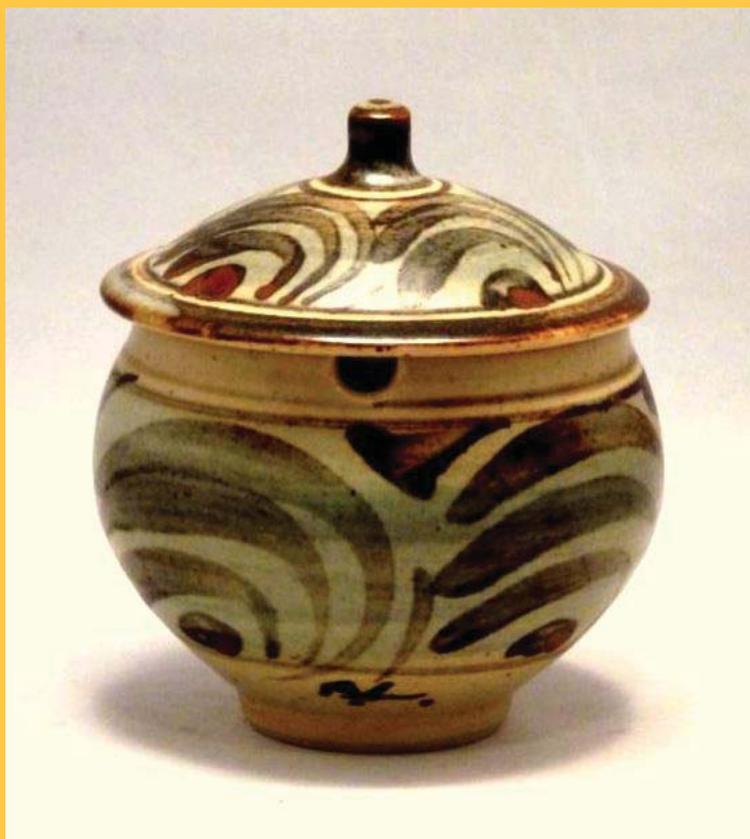
# THE JOURNAL OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

*La Revue des études bahá'ies/La Revista de estudios bahá'ís*

---

**Volume 27, number 4**

**Winter 2017**



*A Publication of the Association for Bahá'í Studies—North America*

# THE JOURNAL OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

LA REVUE DES ÉTUDES BAHÁ'ÍES/LA REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS BAHÁ'ÍS

Volume 27 Number 4 Winter 2017

Publications Mail  
Registration No. 09448

EDITOR John S. Hatcher

POETRY EDITOR Peter E. Murphy

EDITORIAL COORDINATOR Nilufar Gordon

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE Roshan Danesh, Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, Mehran Kiai,  
Pierre-Yves Mocuais, Mary Sobhani, Bahhaj Taherzadeh

*The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* (USPS #013-468) is published by the Association for Bahá'í Studies–North America. The views expressed in this Journal are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Editorial Board or Executive Committee of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, or authoritative explications of Bahá'í teachings.

Periodicals postage paid at Champlain, NY, and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Address changes should be sent to IMS of NY, 100 Walnut St. #3, P.O. Box 1518, Champlain, NY, USA 12919-1518. For details call IMS at 1(800) 428-3003.

Articles in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* are available on EBSCO Publishing's aggregated database. This journal is abstracted in *Science of Religion Abstracts*, *Religion Index One: Periodicals*, *Index Islamicus*, and *Index to Book Reviews in Religion*, and catalogued at the Institut de L'Information Scientifique et Technique.

Annual subscription fees (in Canadian funds):

Individual subscriptions: Canada \$50; United States: \$70; International: \$80.

Institutional subscriptions: \$90.

Single copies: \$20/issue.

Details available at <<http://bahai-studies.ca/subscription/>>

Correspondence regarding subscriptions should be addressed to Association for Bahá'í Studies, 34 Copernicus Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7K4 Canada. E-mail: <[abs-na \[at\] bahai-studies.ca](mailto:abs-na@bahai-studies.ca)>. Tel.: 613-233-1903. Address editorial correspondence to <[editor \[at\] bahai-studies.ca](mailto:editor@bahai-studies.ca)>.

Printed in Canada on recycled paper.

ISSN 0838-0430

© Association for Bahá'í Studies 2017. All rights reserved.

French translation: Louise Mailhot and Juliette Goudreau

Spanish translation: Nurieh McLaren

Many articles published in the Journal of Bahá'í Studies allude to the institutions and central figures of the Bahá'í Faith; as an aid for those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, we include here a succinct summary excerpted from <http://www.bahai.org/beliefs/bahaullah-covenant/>. The reader may also find it helpful to visit the official web site for the worldwide Bahá'í community ([www.bahai.org](http://www.bahai.org)) available in several languages. For article submission guidelines, please visit <http://bahai-studies.ca/the-journal-of-bahai-studies-submission-guidelines/>.

## ABOUT THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

The Bahá'í Faith, its followers believe, is “divine in origin, all-embracing in scope, broad in its outlook, scientific in its method, humanitarian in its principles and dynamic in the influence it exerts on the hearts and minds of men.” The mission of the Bahá'í Faith is “to proclaim that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is continuous and progressive, that the Founders of all past religions, though different in the non-essential aspects of their teachings, “abide in the same Tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech and proclaim the same Faith” (Shoghi Effendi).

The Bahá'í Faith began with the mission entrusted by God to two Divine Messengers—the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Today, the distinctive unity of the Faith They founded stems from explicit instructions given by Bahá'u'lláh that have assured the continuity of guidance following His passing. This line of succession, referred to as the Covenant, went from Bahá'u'lláh to His Son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and then from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, ordained by Bahá'u'lláh. A Bahá'í accepts the divine authority of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and of these appointed successors.

The Báb (1819-1850) is the Herald of the Bahá'í Faith. In the middle of the 19th century, He announced that He was the bearer of a message destined to transform humanity's spiritual life. His mission was to prepare the way for the coming of a second Messenger from God, greater than Himself, who would usher in an age of peace and justice.

Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892)—the “Glory of God”—is the Promised One foretold by the Báb and all of the Divine Messengers of the past. Bahá'u'lláh delivered a new Revelation from God to humanity. Thousands of verses, letters and books flowed from His pen. In His Writings, He outlined a framework for the development of a global civilization which takes into account both the spiritual and material dimensions of human life. For this, He endured 40 years of imprisonment, torture and exile.

In His will, Bahá'u'lláh appointed His oldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), as the authorized interpreter of His teachings and Head of the Faith. Throughout the East and West, 'Abdu'l-Bahá became known as an ambassador of peace, an exemplary human being, and the leading exponent of a new Faith.

Appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, His eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), spent 36 years systematically nurturing the development, deepening the understanding, and strengthening the unity of the Bahá'í community, as it increasingly grew to reflect the diversity of the entire human race.

The development of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide is today guided by the Universal House of Justice (established in 1963). In His book of laws, Bahá'u'lláh instructed the Universal House of Justice to exert a positive influence on the welfare of humankind, promote education, peace and global prosperity, and safeguard human honor and the position of religion.

# THE JOURNAL OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

LA REVUE DES ÉTUDES BAHÁ'ÍES/LA REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS BAHÁ'ÍS

Volume 27 Number 4 Winter 2017

## Contents

- 3 JOHN S. HATCHER From the Editor's Desk  
The Anecdote of the Jar
- 7 ROSHAN DANESH Themes in the Study of Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Aqdas:  
Emerging Approaches to Scholarship on Bahá'í Law
- 29 RICK JOHNSON The Active Force and That Which Is Its Recipient:  
A Bahá'í View of Creativity
- 61 ELENA MUSTAKOVA Becoming Hospitable and Uplifting Holding  
Environments for Humanity's Grievs:  
Depression and the Bahá'í Community

### *Poems*

- 27 YAHIA LABABIDI Aphorisms on Art, Morality, and Spirit: A Selection
- 55 SHOLEH WOLPÉ Translation of excerpts from Attar's  
*The Conference of the Birds*

87 *Biographical Notes*

Cover: BERNARD LEACH Marmalade Pot

# From the Editor's Desk

JOHN S. HATCHER

## THE ANECDOTE OF THE JAR

Sometimes a work of art is sufficient unto itself—we see it, experience it, and understand it. We need not, or cannot, articulate exactly what the art, whether a painting, a symphony, a dance, or in this case, what might appear to some as a simple jar, has led us to know or feel or become.

Except the jar on our cover is not simple. It is fashioned by someone steeped in the knowledge of how much the potter's art can convey. The speaker in John Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" describes his own philosophical musings as he ponders the designs on a piece of ancient Grecian pottery. We wonder if the ode is about the urn or if, in fact, the ode is the Dionysian scene frozen in time by the artist.

The final two lines are the most challenging part of this poem: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (49–50).<sup>1</sup> Is this Keats's observation or that of the persona he has created? Or, is he reading an inscription that the potter imprinted on the

urn? Ultimately, it doesn't matter, I suppose. The axiom is valid (at least in a Platonic sense) whether the idea originates with Keats or with the artist whose work inspired the young poet to pen these lines.

But the jar before us on the cover, fashioned by world-renowned potter Bernard Leach (1887–1979), is equally evocative in the subtlety of what it might say to us. Leach was born in Hong Kong, attended the Slade School of Fine Art and the London School of Art, studied ceramics in Japan under Urano Shigekichi, and later returned to England, where he established Leach Pottery, which promoted pottery as a combination of Western and Eastern arts and philosophies and became a place for apprenticeship for potters from all over the world. It is still open today.

Leach learned about the Bahá'í Faith from friend and renowned abstract expressionist painter Mark Tobey, and he officially joined the Faith in 1940. Though already far advanced in and famous for his synthesis of Eastern and Western influences, when he went on pilgrimage to the Bahá'í Shrines in Haifa in 1954 he decided to dedicate himself more ardently to uniting the East and West by returning to the Orient "to try more honestly to do my work there as a Bahá'í and as an artist" (21).<sup>2</sup>

So, why so much information about and attention to a jar? After all, the elegant beauty of Leach's pot speaks for

1 Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn." *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. D, Norton, 2005, p. 905–6.

2 Quoted in Robert Weinberg, *Spinning the Clay into Stars: Bernard Leach and the Bahá'í Faith*. George Ronald, 1999.

itself. Either you like it or you don't. And I suppose that's true of most art. I have chosen this as our cover piece for precisely that reason—because I think the same verity applies to the articles and poems in this issue. They require something of us. They have—individually and collectively—a capacity to uplift and educate us, but only if we are sufficiently attentive to what these scholars and poets are trying to convey.

I believe it is in this sense that these pieces become intermediaries between the world of thought and ourselves by translating personal insights from the metaphysical realm of pure forms into the physical medium of sensually perceptible words and images. It is an idea I find well expressed in another work about a pot, Wallace Stevens's poem "Anecdote of the Jar." In this piece, Stevens can be read as commenting on how profoundly our tangible expression of the ephemeral in art can organize and inform our view of reality:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer  
wild.  
The jar was round upon the  
ground  
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.  
The jar was gray and bare.

It did not give of bird or bush,  
Like nothing else in Tennessee.<sup>3</sup>

Here the persona—possibly the poet or possibly a character he has created—employs art to demonstrate that when we interact with nature, especially as artists, we may experience a sort of reciprocity, but only if we allow ourselves to employ those creative skills instilled within us as emanations from the Creator Himself.

It is my sincere feeling that the articles and poems we have selected for this issue have the following in common: they approach subjects with which we are familiar, but they do so from a specialized or creative perspective. By sharing with us the creative thought they have invested in crafting these pieces, the authors provide us with a new way of seeing, a lens through which we can re-examine our own thinking about several different subjects.

The first piece, "Themes in the Study of Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Emerging Approaches to Scholarship on Bahá'í Law" by Roshan Danesh, is both a review of what creative scholarship has thus far accomplished by way of studying the Most Holy Book of the Bahá'í Dispensation, Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Danesh has written on the Aqdas several times before, and for good reason. As a Bahá'í and a graduate of Harvard Law School,

---

3 Stevens, "The Anecdote of the Jar." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., Norton, 2005, p. 1260.

he is keenly interested in this repository of Bahá'í law, especially as it portends the administration of future society. Of equal importance to him, I suspect, is how, as the "Mother Book" of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, this foremost work gives birth to a vision of refinement and comportment that characterizes what it means to be a Bahá'í. His review of studies completed thus far is helpful in our own reflection about this challenging work, and his view of what themes and scholarly approaches future studies might undertake challenges us to invest our own considered speculation about the offspring to which this book will give birth.

The second piece is a thoroughly engaging poem, or list of poems—aphorisms by Egyptian-American Yahia Lababidi, the author of six critically acclaimed books of poetry and prose. We probably think of aphorisms as folk art, as the assemblage of wisdom derived from tribal peoples—the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, for example—but Lababidi's modern use of this form provides incredibly rich, if succinct, bits of wisdom. To me, they have the same sort of compressed surprise as good haiku.

The next piece, "The Active Force and That Which Is Its Recipient: A Bahá'í View of Creativity" by Rick Johnson, is one of the most thought-provoking and original articles we have published in quite some time. The subtitle is the core objective—the exploration of creativity and the pervasive nature of this concept in

Bahá'í thought—and the title hints at the underlying premise that Johnson explores as one extremely useful way of understanding how "the universe is coded to be creative." Integrated with his exploration into the roots of creativity are ample citations from both the Bahá'í texts and from a panoply of helpful scholarly resources that assist the reader in navigating this philosophical journey.

Following this article is a second poem, or sequence of poems, taken from *The Conference of the Birds* by famed Persian poet Faríd ud-Dín 'Attár (1145–1221), translated here by Sholeh Wolpé. Prefiguring Bahá'u'lláh's own *Seven Valleys*, this portion of the work contains the description by the hoopoe of the seven valleys that the thirty birds must traverse if they are to discover their leader—the mythical Simorgh, which in Persian actually means "thirty birds." In short, they come to realize that the majesty of the Beloved can be comprehended by seeing their own reflection after they have gone through the arduous tests that spiritual development necessarily requires of us. Needless to say, the parallel between the seven valleys in *The Conference of the Birds* and those in Bahá'u'lláh's work is very helpful to students of Bahá'u'lláh's extremely popular text, which was written for a judge who was a student of Súfí mystical philosophy.

The final article, by Elena Mustakova, "Becoming Hospitable and Uplifting Holding Environments for Humanity's Grievs: Depression and

the Bahá'í Community," is another examination for the journal of the affective disorder of depression, what has become such a pervasive problem in contemporary society for reasons all too apparent, as the social order seems to become increasingly dysfunctional with each successive tragedy we confront. But Mustakova's study is hopeful and uplifting in its examination of how "community" in general, and the Bahá'í concept of community building in particular, can help respond to the needs of those who are having to endure emotional pain, whether from grief, deprivation, or the sheer demands that daily survival requires of us in this period of transition and waywardness. Through research and practice in the field of psychology, Mustakova has developed a keen sense of how healing the inner self is an art as much as it is a science, and her discourse provides helpful insight into how we can become participants in creating a "holding environment" that fosters emotional and spiritual cohesiveness in and beyond our community.

Finally, I would like to conclude this introduction with an appeal to our readers/scholars to respond to what I feel has been lacking for quite some time in the way of submissions to the journal, as well as in books being published—creative studies of the authoritative texts, particularly the works of Bahá'u'lláh and Shoghi Effendi. For while there is great value in applying Bahá'í concepts and citing passages from the sacred texts in articles demonstrating the relation of

the Bahá'í Faith to particular fields of endeavor, I think we could all benefit from more studies dedicated to investigating the limitless supply of pearls of wisdom enshrined within the ocean of a Revelation to which we are privileged to have direct access and in which we have the freedom to swim about and bring to the surface and share what we have discovered.

# Themes in the Study of Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Emerging Approaches to Scholarship on Bahá'í Law

ROSHAN DANESH

## *Abstract*

A quarter century has passed since the publication of the authorized translation of Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Aqdas from Arabic to English. In that time, English language scholarship on the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, especially its legal content, has grown. This essay reviews the emerging body of scholarship surrounding the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and Bahá'í law, identifies core themes and approaches, and suggests directions which future study of this topic might encompass.

## *Resumé*

Un quart de siècle s'est écoulé depuis la publication de la traduction autorisée (de l'arabe à l'anglais) du Kitáb-i-Aqdas de Bahá'u'lláh. Les travaux universitaires en langue anglaise sur le Kitáb i Aqdas, en particulier sur son contenu juridique, ont alors commencé à se multiplier. Dans cet essai, l'auteur passe en revue le corpus émergent de savoir entourant le Kitáb i Aqdas et la loi bahá'íe, en souligne les principaux thèmes et approches et propose

des orientations pour les études à venir sur le sujet.

## *Resumen*

Un cuarto de siglo ha pasado desde la publicación de la traducción autorizada del Kitáb-i-Aqdas de Bahá'u'lláh del idioma Árabe al Inglés. Durante ese tiempo, erudición en inglés sobre el Kitáb -i-Aqdas, especialmente su contenido legal, ha crecido. Este ensayo revisa el cuerpo emergente de erudición rodeando el Kitáb-i-Aqdas y la ley Bahá'í, identificando temas y enfoques céntricos, y sugiere direcciones que un futuro estudio de este tema pudiera envolver.

## INTRODUCTION

The year 2017 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of the authorized translation from Arabic into English—and subsequently into other languages—of the full text of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (The Most Holy Book), the central book of scripture of the Bahá'í Faith.<sup>1</sup> Prior to 1992, the full text was accessible only to those who read Arabic or through a few translations of questionable quality that were generally not used by members of the Bahá'í community.<sup>2</sup>

1 Bahá'u'lláh wrote in Persian and Arabic. Bahá'ís consider His writings to be the revealed word of God. The practice of the Bahá'í community is to translate Bahá'u'lláh's writings from their original language into English and then from English into other languages.

2 For discussion of the reasons for the delay in the translation and dissemination of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas see my article "The

Written while Bahá'u'lláh was in exile in Palestine in 1873, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is a relatively short work comprised of 190 paragraphs in its English translation. Known as the “Mother Book” of the Bahá'í Faith, it is also routinely referred to as Bahá'u'lláh's “book of laws” because it discusses the nature and concept of law and provides some of the foundational laws of the Bahá'í Faith.<sup>3</sup>

The release of the authorized translation in 1992 was a marked shift in access and availability of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* to adherents of the Bahá'í Faith, as well as to scholars and the general public. While portions of the work had been the subject of authorized translation by Shoghi Effendi and a synopsis and codification of the work had been available since 1973, studying excerpts and summaries is significantly different than studying a work of scripture as a whole.

It is worth reflecting on how the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* has been studied and commented on over the past twenty-five years, what trends have emerged in scholarship, and what patterns might occur in the future study of the

work. In this paper, an examination of the English-language emerging scholarship on the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* provides a window into contemporary approaches to the academic study of the Bahá'í Faith, as well as into the first wave of scholarly writing on a tradition of religious legal scholarship. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a predominant observation is how dependent this nascent English-language scholarship is on importing constructs from the study of other religious systems—in particular Islam—as well as making relatively unexamined assumptions about the meaning of law in the Bahá'í context that may actually be in tension with indigenous elements of primary Bahá'í legal texts.

#### THEMES IN THE STUDY OF THE *KITÁB-I-AQDAS*

The publication of the translation of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* in 1992 was accompanied by a significant sense of anticipation within the Bahá'í community. The central Bahá'í governing institution, the Universal House of Justice, drew a direct correlation between the accessibility of the text and the evolution of the Bahá'í community itself:

---

Politics of Delay: Social Meanings and the Historical Treatment of Bahá'í Law.”

3 There is not a large number of laws in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. While numbers may vary depending on what one considers a “law” to be, it is reasonable to conclude that there are fewer than a hundred of them in the book. Further, as is noted later, it has been argued that the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* presents a very distinct concept of law.

The accessibility to Western readers of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* in full authorized text, for the first time in one of their major languages, enormously extends the sphere of its influence, opening wider the door to a vast process of individual and community

development which must certainly exert an increasingly powerful, transformative effect on peoples and nations as the Book is translated further into other languages. (Letter dated 5 March 1993)

The Universal House of Justice also emphasized the unique status of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas within the canon of Bahá'u'lláh's writings:

A Book of such indescribable holiness is itself a symbol of the incomparable greatness of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and is, indeed, a potent reminder of the high respect which is due to all that has flowed from His prodigious, truth-bearing pen. May the friends of God ever be mindful of its exalted rank among the sacred texts of the Faith; treasure it as the bread of life; regard possession of it as a sacred honor, as a priceless legacy from the Pen of the Most High, as a source of God's greatest bounty to His creatures; place their whole trust in its provisions; recite its verses; study its contents; adhere to its exhortations; and thus transform their lives in accordance with the divine standard. (Letter dated 5 March 1993)

At various levels within the Bahá'í community, the release of the translation was accompanied by dialogue and study. In some local communities, study sessions took place both before

and after the release of the text so that members could explore together the significance and meaning of the book. In various countries, Bahá'í schools held special study sessions on the text. During its conference in Montreal in 1993, the Association for Bahá'í Studies held a special one-day symposium at McGill University on the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.<sup>4</sup> Parallel to these opportunities for study and dialogue, some initial commentaries on the work were made accessible to the broader Bahá'í population. For example, in 1993 the Bahá'í World Centre produced and distributed the monograph "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: its place in Bahá'í Literature," which placed the book in a broader social and historical context while commenting on main themes of justice, government, law, liberty, belief, learning, family, and the advancement of civilization. Importantly, the release of the translation and these early commentaries was accompanied by reminders to the Bahá'í community of the critical fact that the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas were explicitly written by Bahá'u'lláh to envision a social order for the future and were not, in many instances, designed for immediate use and application.

Around this time, the growth of scholarship on the Kitáb-i-Aqdas

---

<sup>4</sup> See Martha L. Schweitz's "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Bahá'í Law, Legitimacy, and World Order" and John S. Hatcher's "Unsealing the Choice Wine at the Family Reunion," both of which proceeded from this symposium.

began to accelerate. While there had been some scholarly work prior to 1992—particularly in Persian, but also in other languages—one sees an increase and a broader diversity of works appear following the English translation and publication. To give but a few examples, in addition to broad commentaries<sup>5</sup> and descriptions or explanations of rules,<sup>6</sup> works have been published on the style of language,<sup>7</sup> on organizing themes and key concepts,<sup>8</sup> on the Bahá'í concept of law,<sup>9</sup> and on its associated philosophical themes.<sup>10</sup> As well, there have been a growing number of commentaries on the book in academic journals other than those focused on Bahá'í, Islamic, or Middle Eastern studies.<sup>11</sup>

---

5 See John Walbridge's *Sacred Acts, Sacred Space, Sacred Time*.

6 See Baharieh Rouhani Ma'ani and Sovaida Ma'ani Ewing's *Larvs of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*.

7 See Suheil Bushrui's *The Style of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Aspects of the Sublime*.

8 See Nader Saiedi's *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*.

9 See Martha Schweitz's "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Bahá'í Law, Legitimacy, and World Order" and my essay "Some Reflections on the Concept of Law in the Bahá'í Faith."

10 See John S. Hatcher and William S. Hatcher's *The Law of Love Enshrined: Selected Essays*.

11 For example, the *Journal of Law and Religion* has published three articles on Bahá'í law: Udo Schaefer's "An Introduction to Bahá'í Law: Doctrinal Foundations,

Six emerging trends may be identified based on a review of the secondary literature on the Kitáb-i-Aqdas since 1992: (1) the Kitáb-i-Aqdas has primarily, though not exclusively, been considered for its legal content; (2) the legal content of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas has been approached in a multiplicity of ways reflecting different perspectives on the nature of Bahá'í law; (3) analogies between the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and the Qur'an or shari'a law have been common; (4) there has been very limited consideration of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas from scholars who are not members of the Bahá'í community; (5) there are challenging issues with some of the legal content of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas with which scholars have not yet widely grappled but which will likely become an increasing area of study; (6) and reflecting the priorities of the Bahá'í community, the relationship between law and social change from a Bahá'í perspective will become an increasing area of focus in analyses of the text.

THE KITÁB-I-AQDAS HAS PRIMARILY, THOUGH NOT EXCLUSIVELY, BEEN CONSIDERED FOR ITS LEGAL CONTENT

As one would expect, a particular focus of the study of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas to date has been its legal content. In this regard, secondary literature mirrors

---

Principles, and Structures" and my articles "Internationalism and Divine Law" and "Church and State in the Bahá'í Faith: An Epistemic Approach."

the emphasis on the legal dimensions of the work made explicit in Bahá'í primary literature. For example, as the Universal House of Justice describes:

The Law of God for this Dispensation addresses the needs of the entire human family. There are laws in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas which are directed primarily to the members of a specific section of humanity and can be immediately understood by them but which, at first reading, may be obscure to people of a different culture. Such, for example, is the law prohibiting the confession of sins to a fellow human being which, though understandable by those of Christian background, may puzzle others. Many laws relate to those of past Dispensations, especially the two most recent ones, those of Muḥammad and the Báb embodied in the Qur'án and the Bayán. Nevertheless, although certain ordinances of the Aqdas have such a focused reference, they also have universal implications. Through His Law, Bahá'u'lláh gradually unveils the significance of the new levels of knowledge and behaviour to which the peoples of the world are being called. He embeds His precepts in a setting of spiritual commentary, keeping ever before the mind of the reader the principle that these laws, no matter the subject with which they deal, serve the manifold purposes of

bringing tranquility to human society, raising the standard of human behaviour, increasing the range of human understanding, and spiritualizing the life of each and all. Throughout, it is the relationship of the individual soul to God and the fulfilment of its spiritual destiny that is the ultimate aim of the laws of religion. “*Think not*”, is Bahá'u'lláh's own assertion, “*that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power.*” His Book of Laws is His “*weightiest testimony unto all people, and the proof of the All-Merciful unto all who are in heaven and all who are on earth.*” (Introduction 2–3)

This focus follows a long tradition in the Bahá'í Faith of associating the Kitáb-i-Aqdas with its legal content, while another book of Bahá'u'lláh—the Kitáb-i-Iqan (The Book of Certitude), written in 1861—is viewed as His central doctrinal work.

Within this context, the secondary literature presents a mix of both descriptive and analytical works. Most of the full monographs examining the Kitáb-i-Aqdas have concentrated on descriptions of the legal content of the book, sometimes comparing it to other religious texts.<sup>12</sup> Shorter pieces

---

12 See, for example, Walbridge's *Sacred Acts, Sacred Space, Sacred Time* and Ma'ani and Ma'ani Ewing's *Laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*.

have also tended to offer a range of analytical and critical perspectives on legal aspects of the work including, for example, its treatment of equality.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is not merely a book of laws but reveals a complex spiritual universe. As the term “Mother Book” suggests, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* may be thought of as encapsulating core concepts and themes that run throughout Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. From this perspective, it contains fundamental teachings on theological, epistemological, and social themes. Some of these themes are expressed through legal statements, and others are communicated through spiritual exhortation, ethical precepts, messages to rulers and leaders, and descriptions of the nature of God, the Manifestation, and human reality. For example, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* opens with five short paragraphs discussing the nature of God, the station of the Manifestation of

God, the spiritual nature of human beings, and the relationship between human beings and the Divine. This is immediately followed in paragraphs 6 to 19 by a discussion of how to live the spiritual life—which includes the laws regarding prayer, meditation, and fasting—as well as the foundations for social relations, such as the importance of not speaking or acting in ways that are harmful to others.

It is worth highlighting this broad content of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* because the focus placed on the legal dimensions of the book necessarily results in a concentration on the place of law within the Bahá'í revelation that may limit the scope of its analysis. Certainly, as in past scriptures, law does have a central role. But the role of law in the Bahá'í Faith has distinct elements as well. These include (1) the sharp break from the legal traditions in Islam that emphasized the primacy of rules covering all aspects of life and the necessity for blind obedience (*taqlid*); (2) the historical pattern of application of law, which in the case of the Bahá'í Faith involves the conscious and purposeful delay in the application of the law; (3) the role of individual knowledge and love in relation to obedience to the law; and (4) the emphasis on law in practice as a dynamic and contextual phenomenon (Danesh, “Some Reflections” 29–35, 39–44; Danesh, “Imagining Bahá'í Law” 97–105).

It should be expected that broader approaches to the study and consideration of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* will be encouraged and continue to emerge.

---

13 Examples of studies of gender equality in Bahá'í law include the following: Linda Walbridge and John Walbridge's “Bahá'í Laws and the Status of Men”; Susan Stiles Maneck et al.'s “A Question of Gender: A Forum on the Status of Men in Bahá'í Law”; John S. Hatcher's “The Equality of Women: The Bahá'í Principle of Complementarity”; Schweitz's “Of Webs and Ladders: Gender Equality in Bahá'í Law”; Bahiyih Nakhjavani's “Exemption”; Seena Fazel's “Inheritance”; and Sen McGlinn's “Some Considerations Relating to Inheritance Laws.”

Indeed, such a broadening of perspective would aid in the understanding of the book as a legal text because it would deepen our knowledge of the distinct nature of the Bahá'í concept of law itself. Too often a legal orientation to the text translates into a narrow focus on rules and a discourse about the book as being a set of rules. As has been discussed in some secondary literature, appropriate consideration given to the social and political theory elements, in addition to the theological and ontological ones, helps inform a more nuanced understanding of the concept of law itself in the Bahá'í Faith, highlighting some of its distinctive elements while correcting the tendency to be overly focused on rules.<sup>14</sup>

THE LEGAL CONTENT OF  
THE KITÁB-I-AQDAS HAS BEEN  
APPROACHED IN A MULTIPLICITY  
OF WAYS, REFLECTING DIFFERENT  
PERSPECTIVES ON THE NATURE  
OF BAHÁ'Í LAW

The approach to the translation and dissemination of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* has created significant space for diverse discourses about Bahá'í law to

---

<sup>14</sup> Examples of connections to social and political theory can be seen in my article "Imagining Bahá'í Law." For an example of the connection between ontology and law as a form of analysis, see William S. Hatcher's "The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: The Causality Principle in the World of Being."

emerge organically and begin to develop in terms of their sophistication and complexity. This, in turn, has encouraged a dynamic in the Bahá'í community where there does not appear to be overly rigid or fixed notions of the law, its meaning, and its application. Generally, Bahá'í community life has not adopted a particularly rigid and legalistic focus.

When the Universal House of Justice released the translation of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* in 1992 it was made clear that the release did not indicate a change in the applicability of the laws (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 7). As well, the release of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* was not accompanied by an increase in legislative activity by Bahá'í institutions (Universal House of Justice, Introduction 7). The Universal House of Justice has authority to determine if or when laws in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* may come into force and to devise and enact new laws to supplement them. There has been no demonstrable or measureable increase in the use of that authority over the past quarter century. Similarly, there has not been any significant change in the roles and responsibilities of other Bahá'í institutions regarding their legal functions. For example, the range of laws and the scope of the role of Bahá'í institutions currently remains somewhat limited.<sup>15</sup> At the same time,

---

<sup>15</sup> An example of an area of law where Bahá'í institutions currently play an active role is the application of Bahá'í laws regarding marriage and divorce, such as the consent of parents for marriage and

guidance on how these roles are to be fulfilled has maintained a focus on flexibility and the importance of context.<sup>16</sup>

As a result, a number of distinct narratives and approaches to understanding and using Bahá'í law have emerged in the scholarly literature on the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. This, in some ways, reflects Bahá'u'lláh's own encouragement for individuals to seek out their own study and understanding of the text:

In such a manner hath the Kitáb-i-Aqdas been revealed that it attracteth and embraceth all the divinely appointed Dispensations. Blessed those who peruse it! Blessed those who apprehend it! Blessed those who meditate upon it! Blessed those who ponder its

---

the need for a year of patience prior to divorce.

16 For instance, the Universal House of Justice recently gave the following guidance on how Bahá'í institutions might apply Bahá'í laws regarding sexual ethics:

They [Bahá'í institutions] do not pry into the personal lives of individuals. Nor are they vindictive and judgmental, eager to punish those who fall short of the Bahá'í standard. Except in extreme cases of blatant and flagrant disregard for the law that could potentially harm the Cause and may require them to administer sanctions, their attention is focused on encouragement, assistance, counsel, and education. (Letter dated April 19, 2013)

meaning! So vast is its range that it hath encompassed all men ere their recognition of it. Ere long will its sovereign power, its pervasive influence and the greatness of its might be manifested on earth. (Kitáb-i-Aqdas 16)

In terms of the various discourses that have developed (though all are in their relative infancy), Bahá'í law has been analyzed from the following perspectives:

- as a religious law building upon previous scriptures;<sup>17</sup>
- as a set of rules for individual conduct and social organization that are critical for human salvation;<sup>18</sup>
- as a distinct concept of law that challenges predominant religious and secular concepts of law;<sup>19</sup>
- and as having a particular role in social change.<sup>20</sup>

This focus on the legal dimensions of the text and the diversity of

---

17 See Ma'ani and Ma'ani Ewing's *Laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and Brian D. Lepard's *Hope for a Global Ethic*.

18 See John S. Hatcher's "Unsealing the Choice Wine at the Family Reunion."

19 See my essay entitled "Some Reflections on the Concept of Law in the Bahá'í Faith," especially pages 39–44.

20 For varying perspectives on this subject see Schaefer's "An Introduction to Bahá'í Law: Doctrinal Foundations, Principles, and Structures" and my article "Imagining Bahá'í Law."

approaches is not without some tensions. For example, some of the scholarly discourse reflects the differences between textualist approaches that emphasize how the Kitáb-i-Aqdas establishes new sets of rules and other approaches that, instead, underscore the importance of how Bahá'í law has been used in practice and the implications of this for our understanding of law, legal processes, and legal structures. In some respects, this debate mirrors elements of the next trend regarding analogies between Bahá'í and Islamic law.

#### ANALOGIES BETWEEN THE KITÁB-I-AQDAS AND THE QUR'AN OR SHARI'A LAW HAVE BEEN COMMON

It is worth highlighting the particular insistence of much of the secondary literature on drawing analogies between the Quran or shari'a law and the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. There are some foundations in the primary literature for drawing such a comparison. For example, in regard to the nature of divine revelation generally, Shoghi Effendi states:

the Qur'an should be to some extent studied by the Bahá'ís but they certainly need not seek to acquire a mastery over it, which would take years, unless they really want to. All Divine Revelation seems to have been thrown out in flashes. The Prophets never composed treatises. That is why in the Qur'an and our own Writings

different subjects are so often included in one Tablet. It pulsates, so to speak. That is why it is "Revelation." (*Unfolding Destiny* 453–54)

A number of works discuss how the structure of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is apparently similar to that of the Qur'an and how the articulation of laws is analogous to the way shari'a law is expressed. For example, John Walbridge writes:

In style and content the Aqdas is to be compared to the Qur'an, a work in which legislation is often alluded to rather than expounded and in which disparate topics are placed together without obvious logic. In the case of the Qur'an, this might be because it is pieced together from many distinct relations, some very short. The Aqdas follows the stylistic conventions of the Qur'an, and thus is not bound to a rigid outline, but it may also have been shaped by similar factors....It seems possible that the text grew gradually from a nucleus of the initial section....According to this theory, Baha'u'llah would gradually have added material, probably often in answer to specific questions asked by believers. ("Kitáb-i-Aqdas")

Other studies observe stylistic analogies between the Qur'an and the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. For example, Bushrui comments on these similarities and the

fact that they are perhaps more pronounced in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* than in some of Bahá'u'lláh's other writings.<sup>21</sup>

Another example of using the Qur'an as a reference point is the effort to understand the laws of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* through comparisons to shari'a law or, more broadly, Islamic legal traditions.<sup>22</sup> In some respects this is a necessary part of uncovering some of the meanings and implications of the work, as Bahá'u'lláh makes both explicit and implicit references to the Islamic context in which He lived and in which the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* was revealed. For example, Bahá'u'lláh uses Quranic allusions and metaphors from the outset of the text—from the story of Joseph to the meaning of “wine” (23). Moreover, a number of the laws are specifically expressed in contrast to Islamic traditions, such as His statement that He has “relieved” the faithful from the more onerous obligatory prayer requirements that existed in previous dispensations (23). Thus, explanations of this context are vital to understanding aspects of this work. This is reflected in Shoghi Effendi's

---

21 Bushrui has written and spoken much on this topic. Notes regarding his perspectives can be found at [http://bahai-library.com/wilmette\\_kitab\\_aqdas\\_style](http://bahai-library.com/wilmette_kitab_aqdas_style). A fuller treatment of the subject is found in his book *The Style of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*.

22 This is seen in a wide range of works. One example is Schaefer's “An Introduction to Bahá'í Law: Doctrinal Foundations, Principles, and Structures.”

injunction that the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* be heavily annotated when translated and published (viii), thus resulting in the “notes” that accompany the text, many of which concern Quranic or Islamic context.

Concurrent to this Quranic line of focus in the secondary literature is the emergence of some scholarship that points to the significant limitations of using Quranic and Islamic touchstones for the study of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. For example, I have argued elsewhere that the Bahá'í concept of law represents a fundamental deviation from the Islamic one and, indeed, a radical rejection of predominant Islamic legal traditions.<sup>23</sup> This includes an explicit rejection of the tradition of development of law by scholars (*usul al-fiqh*), a new emphasis on conscious knowledge and love as the rationale for adherence to the law, and a contextual imperative for the application of divine laws in human lives and communities. From this perspective, rather than relying upon an Islamic analog, Bahá'u'lláh's intent is to transform conceptions of law. He does this both by speaking explicitly to His most immediate audience familiar with the Qur'an and by addressing more broadly and generally—through religious, philosophical, social, and historical references—humanity's understanding, use, and experience of law. This line of reasoning suggests

---

23 See my article entitled “Some Reflections on the Concept of Law in the Bahá'í Faith.”

that, perhaps inadvertently, elements of the legalistic orientation found in predominant Islamic traditions are being imported into the study and analysis of Bahá'í law, a tendency that should be challenged.

THERE HAS BEEN VERY LIMITED  
CONSIDERATION OF THE  
KITÁB-I-AQDAS FROM SCHOLARS  
WHO ARE NOT MEMBERS OF THE  
BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

The scholarship produced on the Kitáb-i-Aqdas has almost exclusively been the fruit of work by members of the Bahá'í community, and, as such, much of it has the tenor of apologetics. There are some references to aspects of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in literature by non-Bahá'í scholars—particularly from the disciplines of Iranian, Middle Eastern, and Islamic studies—but there has been little in-depth analysis or commentary.<sup>24</sup>

---

24 In some respects, the more extensive commentary appears in works that are openly adversarial to the Bahá'í Faith, such as Francesco Ficicchia's *Der Bahá'ismus: Weltreligion der Zukunft? Geschichte, Lehre und Organisation in kritischer Anfrage* (Bahá'ism: World Religion of the Future? A Critical Inquiry into Its History, Teachings, and Organization), which drew highly critical conclusions about the dissemination of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the functioning of the Bahá'í administrative order, Bahá'í laws, and other topics. Ficicchia's assertions were soundly rebutted by Udo Schaefer, Nicola Towfigh, and Ulrich

It is perhaps surprising that in a quarter century the central written work of the Bahá'í religious system has not garnered broader scholarly attention outside the Bahá'í community. From one perspective this lack of attention might be considered symptomatic of the fact that the study of the Bahá'í Faith generally remains in its infancy. It reflects a range of demographic and contextual factors, including the fact that the Bahá'í community is relatively small and generally does not attract significant attention from, nor is a source of public conflict with, the state—outside of its Iranian homeland, where the Bahá'í community is subject to ongoing persecution—since its teachings enjoin adherence to domestic laws and pose serious limitations to seeking political roles and power.

From another perspective, this lack of attention could also be partially accounted for by the general pattern of backgrounding, or giving limited attention to, the application of Bahá'í law within the Bahá'í community, which has been evident since the founding of the religion and is a reflection of the Bahá'í concept of law, among other things. As has been documented in detail elsewhere, the rationale for this backgrounding includes the commitment to the establishment of certain social contexts and forms of both individual and shared

---

Gollmer in their volume *Desinformation als Methode* (published in English as *Making the Crooked Straight*).

knowledge and understanding before the coercive force of law becomes applicable.<sup>25</sup> For example, there are laws (such as those related to dowry and length of engagement before marriage) that currently apply to Bahá'ís of Iranian heritage—the majority of whose families have been part of the Bahá'í community for multiple generations—but not to Bahá'ís of non-Iranian heritage. Further, Bahá'u'lláh Himself raised caution about how the laws are used and advised that they must be observed with “tact and wisdom” so that “nothing might happen that could cause disturbance and disension” (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, Introduction 6).

The delay in making the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* widely accessible, as well as the delay in the application of the laws, are reflections of this pattern of back-grounding. With such a pattern in place, it is no surprise that the small amount of secondary literature by scholars outside the Bahá'í community would focus on matters other than Bahá'í law.

One might expect that, at some point, the study of the central text of the Bahá'í religion will attract more scholarly interest as the study of the Bahá'í Faith continues to grow and evolve. Specific to Bahá'í law, we might anticipate that the growth of scholarly attention to Islamic societies and the increasing interest in the political,

religious, and social trends that have led to contemporary realities may eventually engender some interest in the Bahá'í Faith and its particular legal tradition. Setting aside the specifics of theological claims, the Bahá'í Faith historically, culturally, and socially represents a distinct religious movement that emerged from within an Islamic society at a time of great significance to the understanding of geopolitical trends and currents today. The Bahá'í Faith's commitment to democratization and globalism, rejection of religious fanaticism and clerical power, and system of grassroots governance focused on empowerment of local communities further adds to its contemporary relevance. The shift one sees in the Bahá'í legal imagination from the predominant strands of thought and practice within Islamic legal orthodoxy is a central element and expression of the distinctive Bahá'í response to political, social, and cultural challenges of the day. It can be said that the study of the Bahá'í Faith, and the place of law within the Bahá'í order, will increasingly provide a unique perspective that is valuable for understanding current realities, challenges, and opportunities.

However, there are, as suggested in the next section, issues that may give rise to tensions with public and legal discourses. Also, it remains uncertain when the study of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* will broaden into a subject matter of scholarly interest beyond the Bahá'í community itself.

---

<sup>25</sup> See my article entitled “The Politics of Delay: Social Meanings and the Historical Treatment of Bahá'í Law.”

THERE ARE CHALLENGING ISSUES WITH SOME OF THE LEGAL CONTENT OF THE KITÁB-I-AQDAS WITH WHICH SCHOLARS HAVE NOT YET WIDELY GRAPPLED, BUT WHICH WILL BECOME AN INCREASING AREA OF STUDY

One result of the lack of an extensive culture of study of and inquiry into the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is that significant potential challenges and flashpoints with the content of the book have not yet been explored, analyzed, or understood in much depth. The most well-known of these issues involve Bahá'í standards of sexual morality (in particular, though not solely, related to homosexuality),<sup>26</sup> gender equality (especially concerns that some elements of the text might be interpreted as reinforcing male dominance),<sup>27</sup> and harsh

---

26 Bahá'í laws on sexuality, which are applicable only to members of the Bahá'í community, emphasize that sexual relations should be between members of the opposite sex and within the institution of marriage.

27 While gender equality is a cardinal principle of the Bahá'í Faith, and one for which it is quite well known, there are some apparent deviations from it, including, most notably, the limitation of service in the Universal House of Justice to men. At the same time, however, gender equality is expressed at multiple levels and ways in both institutional and community life and has been advocated for, including in some groundbreaking ways in nineteenth-century Iran, since the earliest days of the Bahá'í Faith.

punishments (such as the potential for the death penalty for crimes such as murder).<sup>28</sup> More generally, to the contemporary reader in many parts of the world, the text can be quite disorienting, with implicit and explicit allusions to a vast range of other scriptures primarily from Islamic and Bábí traditions. One aspect of these references is that the text appears to spend significant time (for a very short work) on seemingly obscure and insignificant matters. This combination of covering vast terrain—including many high-profile issues for both individuals and society—in a condensed style, one that uses an economy of diction within the span of a short book, creates an extremely challenging text to use and understand, particularly with respect to subject matter that is potentially controversial in the contemporary world.

Certainly these and other challenging issues are matters of interest to the broader public discourse within Bahá'í community life and to those who are inquiring about the Bahá'í Faith. Most commonly, they are debated and discussed through the lens of contemporary standards, modes of discourse, and mores.

Having said that, some of the challenging or controversial issues raised in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas have been approached in the secondary literature. For example, the issue of gender

---

28 The Kitáb-i-Aqdas contemplates capital punishment and lifetime incarceration as valid punishments for murder.

equality in the Bahá'í Faith has received scholarly attention—some of which is on the specific dimensions of gender equality in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas—producing many distinct understandings of the Bahá'í concept of equality and its relationship to contemporary ideas and practices. It is not clear, at this point, whether there is a predominant approach to defining or conceptualizing the Bahá'í understanding of gender equality and how that incontrovertible aspect of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings may be squared with apparent gender preferences in Bahá'í law (such as in the context of Bahá'í inheritance law). At the same time, particularly helpful analyses have been developed about the general approach to equality—such as the vision of complementarity described by John S. Hatcher or the focus on changing legal and institutional structures presented by Schweitz—and about how specific laws might be understood in ways that challenge assumptions that they reflect a form of gender inequality, such as various commentaries on inheritance laws. Bahá'í sexual ethics, including teachings about homosexuality, have received limited scholarly attention, and the majority of the studies remain somewhat descriptive of the teachings instead of being analytical and conceptual in nature.<sup>29</sup> Bahá'í concepts

---

29 While there is substantial discussion on the Internet about the Bahá'í teachings on homosexuality, there are very few works published that look at the subject matter from a primarily theological

of criminal punishment, including the death penalty, have been the subject of only a few commentaries.<sup>30</sup>

The literature on these challenging topics is minimal, and it is also fair to observe that the modes of inquiry they represent are somewhat limited. As would be expected, there is some focus on how Bahá'u'lláh's writings on these subjects relate to, reflect, or deviate from, norms of the nineteenth-century Islamic context in which the Bahá'í Faith was born, as well as contemporary norms in various societies. Needless to say, there is a need for more analysis of these topics in a way that interprets and locates these issues within the framework of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings as a whole, considering them in relation to His concept of law, how Bahá'í law operates and is understood, and, more broadly, His vision of the future, among other things.

Bahá'u'lláh explicitly envisions many of His laws for a future society that has the understanding and the capacity to apply them and a social

---

and community practice perspective. See, for example, Hanna A. Langer's *I Don't Want to be Táhirih*. There are some discussions of the topic in general works about Bahá'í law, but, with a few exceptions, detailed analyses of the legal aspects of Bahá'í teachings on the subject are still emerging.

30 See, for instance, Roger Le Lievre's "The Death Penalty: Australian Legal Institutions vs. the Baha'í Faith?" and Schaefer's "Crime and Punishment: Bahá'í Perspectives for a Future Criminal Law."

context that is receptive and conducive to their use. For this reason, He also mandates that the laws contained in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* do not apply unless the Universal House of Justice explicitly states that they do.

In-depth analysis may reveal very different perspectives on how these issues can be coherently located within the overarching and unyielding commitment of the Bahá'í Faith to advancing conditions of social justice, equality, and peace for all citizens of the world, as part of an expression of the central and overarching teaching of the oneness of humanity. Regardless of the specific topic, we can expect that greater attention will be paid by the emerging scholarship to these and other significant and far-reaching issues contained in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. We can also foresee how some of these topics may lead to conflicts with contemporary perspectives and norms—for example, in societies that recognize full equality for same-sex marriage, provide legal protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation, and safeguard freedom of religion. To better understand these potential areas of tension, there is a need to expand the diversity of approaches to the analysis of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* with respect to these issues, including grounding analysis in the particular and distinct Bahá'í concept of law and its approach to operation and implementation. As noted earlier, this includes considering the implications of having a divine model of law that is contingent on certain social contexts

and environments for its application, as well as the requirement that law be followed out of conscious knowledge and active love. Such a focus may well provide a different understanding of the nature of these teachings, their implications for the daily lives of individuals and communities, and their coherence with other Bahá'í writings and teachings.

REFLECTING THE PRIORITIES  
OF THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY,  
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAW  
AND SOCIAL CHANGE FROM A BAHÁ'Í  
PERSPECTIVE WILL BECOME AN  
AREA OF INCREASING FOCUS IN  
UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

The ways in which law is a force for advancing or inhibiting social change is one common lens through which law is thought about and analyzed. This is true historically in religious contexts—where we see the implementation of new laws as a foundation for engendering religious norms in individuals and societies—and in liberal democracies today where the enactment, implementation, and interpretation of law can be significant factors in struggles around matters of equality, fairness, and justice. Law can be used to shape and bind the actions of individuals, groups, organizations, corporations, and governments, and in various ways it can be a source for reinforcing or changing existing patterns.

While there will always be a relationship between law and social

change, the way law plays this role, and the degree to which law is utilized in this regard, is a matter of choice and design. Law may be the leading driver in ensuring a particular social reality, or it may be a late actor, following the emergence of a particular context or set of understandings. As well, the degree to which we explicitly and consciously consider how laws may shape, impact, or change social realities may vary. Sometimes we may focus quite explicitly on how a particular law may be used to form a specific social condition. At the same time, however, our decision to enact laws may be motivated by a whole host of other interests unconnected to their capacity to shape a particular social reality, from particular and special interests, to otherworldly considerations, to desired collateral objectives.

As noted earlier, in the Bahá'í community, the historic pattern of backgrounding Bahá'í law relates to a particular conception of the relationship between law and social change. In particular, it suggests—unlike, for example, the Islamic legal context—a de-emphasis of the role of law in shaping a spiritualized society. Rather, Bahá'ís focus on systems of knowledge and understanding and systems of social awareness and cohesion, ensuring they are in place before Bahá'í laws have an extensive role to play.

This pattern reflects a broader and increasingly popular orientation in the Bahá'í community to creating the epistemic infrastructure that leads to the emergence of particular social

patterns. This is distinct from the development of sets of laws and the imposition of those laws. For example, a major thrust of Bahá'í activity today is in engagement in social action and participation in influencing and deepening people's understanding of how the principles of unity, equality, and justice may be applied to various public discourses on matters of key interest to the welfare of humanity:

Effective social action serves to enrich participation in the discourses of society, just as the insights gained from engaging in certain discourses can help to clarify the concepts that shape social action. . . . [I]nvolvement in public discourse can range from an act as simple as introducing Bahá'í ideas into everyday conversation to more formal activities such as the preparation of articles and attendance at gatherings, dedicated to themes of social concern—climate change and the environment, governance and human rights, to mention a few. It entails, as well, meaningful interactions with civic groups and local organizations in villages and neighbourhoods. (Universal House of Justice, 2010 *Riḍván Message*)

The Bahá'í focus on influencing and participating in discourses as a mechanism for social change is quite different, for example, than having a religious community advocate for

particular changes in laws that might reflect its social teachings. It is also different from engaging in the world at large for the purpose of achieving converts:

It will be important for all to recognize that the value of engaging in social action and public discourse is not to be judged by the ability to bring enrolments. Though endeavours in these two areas of activity may well effect an increase in the size of the Bahá'í community, they are not undertaken for this purpose. Sincerity in this respect is an imperative. (Universal House of Justice, 2010 Ridván Message)

This particular construction of the relationship between law and social change in the Bahá'í Faith suggests an approach to the study of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that is largely unexplored. In some respects, the fact that much of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is aimed at a social order that is in the distant future has perhaps limited exploration into what the text, particularly in its treatment of Bahá'í law, has to say about how change toward new patterns of social order may emerge, including implications for contemporary social debates and how law and its coercive power are employed or withheld on the path of progress.

#### CONCLUSION

To students of law and religion, a topic of great importance is how a

religious community interacts with its laws, develops modes of legal interpretation and practice, and evolves its understandings of the role of law in religious life.

In the case of the Bahá'í Faith, we are seeing the earliest stages of those processes, with the last quarter century being the first period of time when the Bahá'í community and scholarly attention in the West have turned to the question of Bahá'í law in any demonstrable way. What has emerged to date is an eclectic and diverse set of understandings and approaches to the study of Bahá'í law that reflects a community in which law is still only a gradually emerging preoccupation. At the same time, the upcoming decades will probably see an acceleration of legally focused dialogue and development and the emergence of approaches to understanding Bahá'í law that are more indigenous in character and that uniquely address and contribute to the prevailing, but highly varied, public and legal discourses about the needs of human societies.

## WORKS CITED

- Bahá'u'lláh. *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Bahá'í World Centre, 1992.
- . *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*. Translated by Shoghi Effendi, US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974.
- Bushrui, Suheil. *The Style of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Aspects of the Sublime*. Maryland UP, 1995.
- Danesh, Roshan. "Church and State in the Bahá'í Faith: An Epistemic Approach." *Journal of Law and Religion*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2008, pp. 21–63.
- . "Imagining Bahá'í Law." *Bahá'í Studies Review*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2007, pp. 97–105.
- . "Internationalism and Divine Law." *Journal of Law and Religion*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2003–04, pp. 209–42.
- . "The Politics of Delay: Social Meanings and the Historical Treatment of Bahá'í Law." *World Order*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2004, pp. 33–45.
- . "Some Reflections on the Concept of Law in the Bahá'í Faith." *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1–2, 2014, pp. 24–46.
- Fazel, Seena. "Inheritance." *Bahá'í Studies Review*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1994, pp. 76–82.
- Ficichia, Francesco. *Der Bahá'ismus: Weltreligion der Zukunft? Geschichte, Lehre und Organisation in kritischer Anfrage*. Quell, 1981.
- Hatcher, John S. "The Equality of Women: The Bahá'í Principle of Complementarity." *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1990, pp. 55–66.
- . "Unsealing the Choice Wine at the Family Reunion." *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1994, pp. 27–38.
- Hatcher, John S., and William S. Hatcher. *The Law of Love Enshrined: Selected Essays by John Hatcher and William Hatcher*. George Ronald, 1995.
- Hatcher, William S. "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Causality Principle in the World of Being." *Bahá'í World 1993–1994*, 1994, pp. 189–236.
- "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: its place in Bahá'í literature." *Bahá'í World 1992–1993*, 1993, pp. 105–17.
- Langer, Hanna A. *I Don't Want to be Táhirih: Homosexuality in the Bahá'í Religion in Theology and Practice*. Tredition, 2014.
- Le Lievre, Roger. "The Death Penalty: Australian Legal Institutions vs. the Bahá'í Faith?" *75 Years of the Bahá'í Faith in Australasia*. Association for Bahá'í Studies Australia, 1996.
- Lepard, Brian D. *Hope for a Global Ethic: Shared Principles in Religious Scriptures*. Bahá'í Publishing, 2005.
- Ma'ani, Baharieh Rouhani, and Sovaida Ma'ani Ewing. *Laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. George Ronald, 2004.
- McGlinn, Sen. "Some Considerations Relating to the Inheritance Laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas." *Bahá'í Studies Review*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1995, pp. 37–50.

- Nakhjavani, Bahiyyih. "Exemption." *Bahá'í Studies Review*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1993, pp. 75–78.
- Saiedi, Nader. *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Association for Bahá'í Studies and Maryland UP, 2000.
- Schaefer, Udo. "Crime and Punishment: Bahá'í Perspectives for a Future Criminal Law." *Law and International Order. Proceedings of the First European Bahá'í Conference on Law and International Order*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996, pp. 8–11.
- . "An Introduction to Bahá'í Law: Doctrinal Foundations, Principles, and Structures." *Journal of Law and Religion*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2003, pp. 308–69.
- Schaefer, Udo, Nicola Towfigh and Ulrich Gollmer. *Making the Crooked Straight: A Contribution to Bahá'í Apologetics*. George Ronald, 2006.
- Schweitz, Martha L. "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Bahá'í Law, Legitimacy, and World Order." *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1994, pp. 35–59.
- . "Of Webs and Ladders: Gender Equality in Bahá'í Law." *World Order*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1995, pp. 21–39.
- Shoghi Effendi. *Unfolding Destiny: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'ís of the British Isles*. UK Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981.
- Stiles Maneck, Susan, et al. "A Question of Gender: A Forum on the Status of Men in Bahá'í Law." *dialogue*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1987, pp. 14–34.
- Universal House of Justice. 2010 Ridván Message to the Bahá'ís of the World.
- . Introduction. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Bahá'í World Centre, 1992.
- . Letter to Some Individual Bahá'ís in Europe, 19 April 2013.
- . Letter to the Bahá'ís of the World, 5 March 1993.
- Walbridge, John. "Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Most Holy Book." *Bahai-library.com*, 1999, [www.bahai-library.com/walbridge\\_encyclopedia\\_kitab\\_aqdas](http://www.bahai-library.com/walbridge_encyclopedia_kitab_aqdas).
- . *Sacred Acts, Sacred Space, Sacred Time*. George Ronald, 1996.
- Walbridge, Linda, and John Walbridge. "Bahá'í Laws and the Status of Men." *World Order*, vol. 19, no. 1–2, 1984–85, pp. 25–36.

# Aphorisms on Art, Morality, and Spirit: A Selection

YAHIA LABABIDI

A POEM arrives like a hand in the dark.

A POEM should be flesh-warm, scented Spirit.

ALL LANGUAGES are rough translations of our native tongue: the Spirit.

AS WE MAKE PEACE with ourselves, we become more tolerant of our faults — in others.

THE ONLY REAL BORDERS are those of our compassion.

WARS are only possible when people are united by what they hate rather than what they love: Peace.

BETWEEN COMEDY AND TRAGEDY, a hairline — the depth of an abyss.

TRUE ARTISTS disturb the false peace, also known as complacency.

THE PATH TO PEACE is littered with dead selves.

SELF-PEACE: our first step towards world peace.

THE DIVIDED SELF is spiritually immature. Divine union begins with self unity.

THE INSPIRATION for all our art? Mortality.

A CLUTTERED MIND makes for a poor mirror.

40's: when our bodies begin to prepare us for dying.

TURNING 40: When the fruit that is our body starts to spoil, and the rose tree of our soul begins to bloom.

TURNING 40: When we begin to repeat ourselves and, hopefully, to hear ourselves, as well.

GETTING OLDER is realizing that we've been repeating ourselves all along.

CERTAIN SILENCES are more damning than words; they are actions.

CERTAIN SILENCES are hard to take back.

SPIRITUAL FAST FOOD leads to spiritual indigestion.

APHORISMS respect the wisdom of silence by disturbing it, briefly.

TALK IS CHEAP, because it is the language of the body; silence golden, since it's the native tongue of the spirit.

AS PROTECTION from your lower soul, surround yourself with reminders of your higher soul.

SAID A POEM TO A POET: can I trust you? Is your heart pure to carry me; are your hands clean to pass can lessen suffering and also save lives.

NUMBNESS is a spiritual malady, true detachment its opposite.

THE PURSUIT of Art and Spirituality is not a refuge from the world. We return from such exalted regions of the soul revitalized, with renewed care for one another.

WHEN WE behave unbeautifully, we give others permission to do so.

UNLIKE PROSE, poetry can keep its secrets.

APHORISMS are the marriage of heaven and hell: poetry and philosophy.

WHILE THE NUMBER of celebrities mounts, that of saints remains constant throughout the ages.

KNOW YOUR MUSE, and its diet.

ATTENTION: a tension.

THE HIGHEST FUNCTION of literature is transformational.

ONE never becomes a poet, except when they are writing a poem.

WHAT WE LOVE in the next world, we begin by loving here, first.

IF RELIGIONS are understood as organized Love then, by definition, hate is heresy.

AN ANGRY PRAYER is a contradiction in terms.

FIRST, seek to become a luminous example — lastly, you may speak of religion and G\_d.

BEFORE YOU BLASPHEME, declaring yourself an agent of light acting in His Name, make sure that you stand clear of your own shadow.

CONTRADICTION: the cloak preferred by profound truths.

PARADOX: where truth hides in plain view. The paradox of enlightenment: to see our reflection in everything, and not to see our reflection in everything.

# The Active Force and That Which Is Its Recipient: A Bahá'í View of Creativity

RICK JOHNSON

We often think, naively, that missing data are the primary impediments to intellectual progress—just find the right facts and all problems will dissipate. But barriers are often deeper and more abstract in thought. We must have access to the right metaphor, not only to the requisite information. Revolutionary thinkers are not, primarily, gatherers of facts, but weavers of new intellectual structures.

—Stephen Jay Gould,  
*The Flamingo's Smile*

## *Abstract*

Applying a framework for understanding the creative process generally, this essay explores the notion that the universe is coded to be creative. The view is offered that the universal system exists in a perpetually poised, generative, dynamic state and that creativity is the fundamental reality of the universe. Utilizing the concept of “covenant” as a metaphor for the governance structure of the universal generative dynamic, the author investigates the unique role of consciousness in the creative process.

## *Resumé*

À l'aide d'un cadre permettant de comprendre le processus de création en général, l'auteur explore dans cet essai la notion que l'univers est codé pour être créatif. Il offre une perspective selon laquelle le système universel existe dans un état d'équilibre perpétuel, générateur et dynamique, et que la créativité est la réalité fondamentale de l'univers. Utilisant le concept de l'« alliance » comme métaphore pour illustrer la structure de gouvernance de la dynamique génératrice universelle, l'auteur explore le rôle particulier que joue la conscience dans le processus de créativité.

## *Resumen*

Aplicando un marco para comprender el proceso creativo de manera general, este ensayo explora la noción de que el universo está codificado para ser creativo. Se ofrece la visión que el sistema universal existe en un estado perpetuamente listo, generador y dinámico y que la creatividad es la realidad fundamental del universo. Utilizando el concepto de “alianza” como una metáfora para la estructura gobernadora de la dinámica generadora universal, el autor investiga el rol único de la consciencia en el proceso creativo.

## LAWFUL ORDER, UNCERTAINTY, AND THE DYNAMICS OF CREATION

This exploration of creativity begins with a perspective on fundamental reality derived from study of the Bahá'í Writings. At first, the Bahá'í view seems somewhat paradoxical. Reality has both a quality of “sameness” and a quality of “relativity,” which means things can look very different depending on how one is looking:

earthly and heavenly, material and spiritual, accidental and essential, particular and universal, foundation and structure, appearance and reality and the essence of all things, both inwardly and outwardly—all of these are connected one with another and are inter-related in such a manner that we find that drops are patterned after seas, and that atoms are structured after suns in proportion to their capacities and potentialities. For particulars in relation to what is below them are universals, and what are great universals...are in fact particulars in relation to the realities and beings which are superior to them. Universal and particular are in reality incidental and relative considerations. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, "Tablet of the Universe")

All elements of reality are similar and radically different according to how they are perceived and connected to one another. Scientists believe that the causal laws that govern the universal system are really quite simple. However, the dynamics involved in the operation of these laws may be quite complicated, even for relatively simple situations. Dynamics that are easily understood and predicted when two objects interact—such as one planet orbiting one star—become excruciatingly difficult when more objects are introduced. The world we observe is full of variability, which arises out of the operation of simple invariable laws (Stewart).

The variability of things is due to the vast array of contingent events which interact many times with slightly different initial conditions, resulting in outcomes which differ, at least slightly, each time (Gleick; Briggs and Peat; Buchanan). It is the interaction of myriad elements and forces within a universal, ordered association that defines life and human beings, not a particular planetary matrix or physical prototype. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá suggests:

every single thing has an effect and influence upon every other, either independently or through a causal chain. In sum, the completeness of each and every thing—that is, the completeness which you now see in man, or in other beings, with regard to their parts, members, and powers—arises from their component elements, their quantities and measures, the manner of their combination, and their mutual action, interaction, and influence. When all these are brought together, then man comes into existence.

As the completeness of man stems entirely from the component elements, their measure, their manner of combination, and the mutual action and interaction of other beings—and since man was produced ten or a hundred thousand years ago from the same earthly elements, with the same measures and quantities, the same manner of composition and combination, and the same

interactions with other beings—it follows that man was exactly the same then as exists now. (*Some Answered Questions* 46:6–7)

A more interesting question is what grounding laws and organizational principles govern the dynamics of these interacting forces. As a material entity, the universal system is defined by three primary characteristics: the composition of elements, motion, and causality. The reality of composition and motion has the inevitable consequence that all material entities are phenomenal, that is, temporary. “Absolute repose does not exist in nature” and “the whole physical creation is perishable” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 88, 90). The reality of causality has the inevitable consequence that some form of inherently necessary relationships exist within the universal system. As Bahá’u’lláh makes clear: “All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause.” (*Gleanings* 82:10). Even at the subatomic level, where quantum events are often said to be spontaneous and apparently acausal, statistical methods are used very successfully to predict outcomes. This suggests that at all levels of subatomic physics, inherently necessary relationships exist, although the causal mechanisms may not be obvious.<sup>1</sup> In other words, all of

phenomenal reality is temporary and constantly subject to change, and anything can happen within well-defined statistical laws.

From this basic understanding, let’s consider the possibility that the universal system is essentially coded to be creative. We can imagine a universal system awash with untold numbers of interactions, subject to a similarly vast array of changing conditions, acting within an overall causal framework that is coded to maintain a dynamic equilibrium among all these factors. Wave behavior is perhaps a useful metaphor. Consider a mostly calm ocean, with only ripples of wave action. This expresses one state of such equilibrium. A larger, slowly rolling swell wave expresses another state. The towering waves favored by surfers manifest yet another state of evolving equilibrium. Hurricane-driven waves and tsunamis express other, catastrophic states of evolving equilibrium. The “center of balance” for a particular wave is at a very different physical point in each case, and each expresses dramatically different energy levels. Yet all of these wave forms, although completely unpredictable, are restrained within ranges of lawful possibilities, and the general patterns of wave behavior can be described within knowable patterns of statistical probability distributions. Thus, every system is in some state of evolving equilibrium, ranging from states that are internally very stable and change only through intrusive external forces to those that are much more dynamic.

---

1 I am grateful for some stimulating thoughts about causality provided by Ian Kluge on one of his early Bahá’í philosophy webpages, which seems to no longer exist.

The dynamics of this sort of equilibrium represent a multitude of individual elements all following their own simple rules of obedience to underlying laws of causality. A wave, in whatever manifestation, is essentially a statistically describable set of evolving local interactions within a global framework. A wave is always in a poised state, a constantly evolving state of interpenetrating forces or actions and reactions (Bak). As Per Bak writes:

complex behavior in nature reflects the tendency of large systems with many components to evolve into a poised, “critical” state, way out of balance, where minor disturbances may lead to events, called avalanches, of all sizes. Most of the changes take place through catastrophic events rather than by following a smooth gradual path. The evolution to this very delicate state occurs without design from any outside agent. The state is established solely because of the dynamical interactions among individual elements of the system: the critical state is self-organized. Self-organized criticality is so far the only known general mechanism to generate complexity. (1–2)

Motion, transformation, and change are continual in the world of being, a constantly evolving equilibrium within fixed limits.

This kind of motion is the fundamental characteristic of all phenomena.

For example, physicists now describe electron orbits mathematically as a kind of wave constrained within the force generated by the electric field of the atom (Ranjbar). At the most fundamental quantum levels of existence, the images produced by probability equations to describe these orbits appear wavelike. For example, a one-dimensional motion can be modeled as a guitar string, a two-dimensional motion as the vibrating surface of a drum, and a three-dimensional motion as the surface of a balloon. Each of these models is essentially a wave restrained within certain parameters (Unverricht).

Interestingly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses the metaphor of a “restrained wave” to describe the orbits of heavenly bodies: “these great orbits and circuits fall within subtle, fluid, clear, liquid, undulating and vibrating bodies, and... the heavens are a restrained wave because a void is impossible and inconceivable” (“Tablet of the Universe”). Small ripples in a pond or puddle and monstrous tsunamis speeding across an ocean follow the same laws. The apparent divergence and complexity of types results from the same simple underlying model. The image of wave functions is one useful way to envision a fluid, but restrained, description of what is “real.”

Now let’s consider another metaphor to take the next step in my argument. A single ryegrass plant may have over 10,000 kilometers of roots, with billions of microscopic root hairs (Raven, Evert, and Eichhorn 679). In such

an environment, where does the plant end? At the visual macroscopic level, it is impossible to tell. The webbing of infinitely tiny roots in mature grasses is impossible to resolve and differentiate. At the microscopic level, we have even more difficulty. The flux of gasses and chemical interactions in the vicinity of roots is essentially impossible to define completely. So frenzied are these interactions at the microscopic level that it makes it difficult to say precisely where is the “edge” of the plant. While we may have an “obvious” common sense response to this question, careful thought reveals that the “edge” of the plant is ambiguous, except insofar as we arbitrarily define a boundary.

Ultimately, however, any boundary we define necessarily ignores some aspects of the interrelationship of the plant with its neighbors and the environment. We must recognize that the “singleness” of the plant and its “unity” with the wider system are profoundly interwoven. Depending on how we organize our perception of the reality of the plant, the diversity of single plants provides a substitute for the unity of the system, and vice versa, depending on our perceptual focus. The “edge” of the plant is essentially a matter of the perceptual lens we apply. The grass plant we observe with the naked eye exists as a continuum between its unseen edge in the atmosphere and its unseen edge below ground. This continuum—the plant—reflects the current state of equilibrium among the myriad interactions to which the plant is subject.

With this image in mind, let me suggest that the universal system is characterized by a basic structure of dynamic symmetry, an elegant continuum of relationships uniting seeming opposites. The sort of symmetry I’m suggesting does not describe mirror images but rather a relationship where opposites are transformed into each other. Einstein’s famous insight that energy equals mass is one such symmetry, but other such symmetries are legion. They are, in fact, at the foundation of the universal system.

SYMMETRY, RECIPROCITY, AND A  
“SIMILITUDE OF OPPOSITES”

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 141)

This is perhaps Bahá’u’lláh’s most significant description of the essential nature of things. Clearly, He indicates that there is a basic symmetry—what might be termed a “similitude of opposites”—that defines the most basic creative process and relationships of the universe. This simple, elegant statement captures how diverse phenomena merge into one another, providing the basic engine of creativity.

In the passage cited above, where does the “active force” end and the “recipient” begin? Where is the bifurcation between the two? Simply

put, there is no way to describe such a division. They are essentially one and the same. Just as the plant merges into the environment at the subatomic level, leaving no clear line of bifurcation, the universal system is structured around symmetrical relations where one “pole” of a relationship transforms into another “pole.” Such relationships are infinite, and these webs of relationships have no edges within the universal system.

Let us consider another thought experiment. Imagine a whirlpool vortex swirling within the course of a rapidly flowing stream. Where does the vortex become the stream or the stream become the vortex? Is there a clear point of demarcation, or does it depend on whether one is focusing on the “reality” of the vortex or the “reality” of the stream? Even if one focuses on the reality of the vortex, for instance, one will still be left with a purely arbitrary definition of where the vortex becomes the stream, and vice versa. At the subatomic level, the frenetic interactions are just as difficult to capture as they were when we tried to find the edge of the plant. Both the stream and the vortex might have a relatively consistent autonomy and stability—a seamless order uniting these dissimilar patterns of order. As the whirlpool and the stream transform into one another without a perceptible edge or bifurcation, we may imagine that “[t]hese two are the same, yet they are different” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 141).

This similitude of opposites conserves the essence of each opposite

pole in a relationship. Energy is matter, and vice versa. This conservation of essence describes the fundamental principle of reciprocity upon which the universal system depends. Obviously, we can adopt different perceptual lenses appropriate to different specified purposes that enable us to simplify the universal wholeness and to treat aspects of it, at least momentarily, and for certain limited purposes, as single individuals with a seeming autonomy, stability, and separate existence. Yet we should not fall into the trap of believing that “reality” is therefore fragmentary and made up of “things” that are separate and absolutely distinct from other “things.”

Reciprocity is an immensely powerful yet beautifully simple concept. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that

the greatest relationship that bindeth the world of being together lieth in the range of created things themselves, and that co-operation, 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. (qtd. in *Huqúqu'lláh* 7–9)

I suggest that reciprocity offers a simple and elegant term to describe the fundamental nature of relationships in the universal system. Using another thought experiment, let’s explore

evolutionary change in light of the concept of reciprocity. The concept of reciprocity locates the primary, but not exclusive, mechanism of evolutionary change in the relational transactions among organisms and their environment. Relationships that achieve or sustain a consistent pattern of equilibrium remain as sustainable patterns; those that don't, disappear. Reciprocity is not sufficient by itself, however, to explain all types of evolutionary change because there are other non-reciprocal factors that can also play a role in fostering evolutionary change. The increasingly probable idea that it was a sizeable extraterrestrial object slamming into the earth sixty-five million years that extinguished the dinosaurs is one such non-reciprocal factor.<sup>2</sup>

It is also true that the actual relational transactions that make up the fiber of reciprocity are chaotic and non-linear. The webbing of relationships is intricate and embedded within random and chaotic elements. This means that specific relational interactions are so unique and unrepeatable in encompassing a multitude of unique circumstances as to often make the actual relational transactions impossible to trace. It is the nature of reciprocating transactions that they are essentially local, not global or cosmic.

---

<sup>2</sup> Yet even here we should keep in mind that on time scales that exceed easy comprehension, such asteroid strikes are part of cosmic-scale patterns of thermodynamic and quantum reciprocity.

Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the global or cosmic pattern of reciprocity is extremely dependent on unmeasurable variations in local conditions and individual relational transactions.

The reciprocal dynamism we have been exploring is also found in social manifestations. For example, on the one hand, social anthropologists have observed that the nature of social reciprocity in primates is difficult to attribute to any one factor (Frank and Silk). Yet they also have found that equitable relationships tend to be associated with the strongest and most enduring social bonds, and that these mechanisms enhance longevity in a variety of cultural settings (Silk et al., "Strong and Consistent Social Bonds").

Organisms adapt to, and are constrained within, natural laws and physical principles. It is not surprising that the most successful life-forms of all time are those enmeshed within the most simple and easily sustainable patterns of reciprocity. Simple bacteria are the most successful life-forms of all time (Gould, "Evolution of Life" 87). If the fossil record clearly demonstrates anything, it is that bacterial life has been sustained from the beginning of life to the present, and with little doubt it will endure until Earth is no more. Bacteria have found ways to be nearly perfectly reciprocal within an astonishingly diverse range of environments.

The universal system supplies opportunities for a vast and unknowable

number of relational transactions. 'Abdu'l-Bahá indicates that all the elements of the universal system are involved in relational transactions:

My meaning, instead, is that this endless universe is like the human body, and that all its parts are connected one with another and are linked together in the utmost perfection. That is, in the same way that the parts, members, and organs of the human body are interconnected, and that they mutually assist, reinforce, and influence each other, so too are the parts and members of this endless universe connected with, and spiritually and materially influenced by, one another. (*Some Answered Questions* 69:3)

Thus, each niche of existence potentially has a vast range of possible receptors for what it offers and itself is a possible receptor for untold varieties of activity generated by other units and forces in the creation. According to Bahá'u'lláh, "Every creature hath been endowed with all the potentialities it can carry." (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 169) Further, he affirms that each creature "will be enabled . . . to reveal the potentialities of its pre-ordained station." (*Gleanings* 124:2). This inherent station in the universal system includes the "capacity and limitations" that it is "empowered to manifest" (*Gleanings* 74:1).

This ability to manifest capacity within certain limitations is the

essential "spiritual" essence within all things. Each and every created thing is endowed with the capacity to exercise a particular influence—to express activity within the universal system and to be receptive to the activity of other elements. "The light of the sun becomes apparent in each object according to the capacity of that object. The difference is simply one of degree and receptivity" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 14). In a message to the Swiss scientist August Forel, 'Abdu'l-Bahá further describes this interplay of activities and receptivities that is the essential engine of evolution: "every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences" (*Tablet to August Forel* 18).

Everything in the creation is endowed with distinct capacities and virtues, which form the basis of active-receptive relationships with other elements of the creation. This is the key understanding to explain two quite dissimilar but obvious outcomes of evolution: the persistence and stability of very simple life-forms and the inevitable tendency for increasingly complex life-forms to emerge. The fundamental principle of reciprocity, as the engine of evolution, is well expressed in the reality that some very simple relational transactions can be extremely stable and nearly indestructible. It is also well expressed by the reality that as the number of interactions and possible interactions increases, so does the possible complexity.

The simple mathematics of possible relationships means that complexity will emerge, but it does not necessarily mean that complexity is better in an evolutionary sense. We can think of the universal system as an immense arena of efflorescence, with potentialities flaring out in all directions. It is as if experiments are bursting forth all over the place. In a sense, all this active expression of potential is radically contingent. The experiment may fail. Complexity is no guarantee of success and survival.

Paleontologists point out that configurations of life-forms were actually much more complex at an earlier stage of Earth's history. The Burgess Shale deposits, for instance, provide fossil evidence of an immensely greater variety and creative range of life-form archetypes than anything that has existed since. The maximum diversity of possible anatomical forms was reached very early in life's history (Gould, "Evolution of Life" 87–89). Most of these life-forms became extinct. Thus, one could say that life-form archetype complexity failed. Today we have more species than ever before, and hence, greater species complexity. But these species are restricted to a much smaller number of life-form archetypes. So, while complexity is an inevitable outcome of the evolutionary process, the probability of success is not so much a matter of complexity in and of itself as it is whether the pattern of relational transactions is sustainable. Just for sheer sustainability and evolutionary success as usually defined, simple

and unassuming life-forms like bacteria, insects, and parasites are the best bets. More complex life-forms like tigers, which are dependent on very specialized patterns of reciprocity, are much more vulnerable in an evolutionary sense. Only certain kinds of food and habitats will sustain a tiger, but cockroaches will do quite nicely in a vast array of niches, and bacteria can do even better.

ENGINE OF CREATION:  
WILD EFFLORESCENCE GOVERNED  
WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF LAW

On the basis of the discussion so far, I suggest that relational transactions are sustainable when they are harmonized by a "covenant"—my term for a mechanism that enables dynamic, reciprocal equilibrium between activity and receptivity. What might such a mechanism look like? In the following passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses the human body as a metaphor for how all created things are connected:

It is obvious that all created things are connected one to another by a linkage complete and perfect, even, for example, as are the members of the human body. Note how all the members and component parts of the human body are connected one to another. In the same way, all the members of this endless universe are linked one to another. The foot and the step, for example, are connected to the ear and the eye; the eye must look

ahead before the step is taken. The ear must hear before the eye will carefully observe. And whatever member of the human body is deficient, produceth a deficiency in the other members. The brain is connected with the heart and stomach, the lungs are connected with all the members. So is it with the other members of the body.

And each one of these members hath its own special function. The mind force—whether we call it pre-existent or contingent—doth direct and co-ordinate all the members of the human body, seeing to it that each part or member duly performeth its own special function. If, however, there be some interruption in the power of the mind, all the members will fail to carry out their essential functions, deficiencies will appear in the body and the functioning of its members, and the power will prove ineffective.

Likewise, look into this endless universe: a universal power inevitably existeth, which encompasseth all, directing and regulating all the parts of this infinite creation; and were it not for this Director, this Co-ordinator, the universe would be flawed and deficient. It would be even as a madman; whereas ye can see that this endless creation carrieth out its functions in perfect order, every separate part of it performing its own task with complete reliability, nor is there any flaw to

be found in all its workings. Thus it is clear that a Universal Power existeth, directing and regulating this infinite universe. Every rational mind can grasp this fact. (*Selections 48–49*)

In this passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá attributes the balanced functioning of the universe to a "mind force" built into the very essence of the universal system, which operates in both a "pre-existent" and a "contingent" manner.

With that in mind, let us consider another way that 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes this mechanism:

Know that faith is of two kinds. The first is objective faith that is expressed by the outer man, obedience of the limbs and senses. The other faith is subjective, and unconscious obedience to the will of God. There is no doubt that, in the day of a Manifestation such as Christ, all contingent beings possessed subjective faith and had unconscious obedience to His Holiness Christ.

For all parts of the creational world are of one whole. Christ the Manifestor reflecting the divine Sun represented the whole. All the parts are subordinate and obedient to the whole. The contingent beings are the branches of the tree of life while the Messenger of God is the root of that tree. The branches, leaves and fruit are dependent for their existence upon the root of the tree

of life. This condition of unconscious obedience constitutes subjective faith. But the discerning faith that consists of true knowledge of God and the comprehension of divine words, of such faith there is very little in any age. (qtd. in *Bahá'í World Faith* 364)

I take these passages to mean that the fundamental mechanism of obedience built into the structure of the universe has two dimensions. First, there is a pre-existent spiritual/religious dimension termed objective, or discerning, faith, which is conscious, knowing obedience. Secondly, there is a contingent natural dimension termed subjective faith, which is unconscious, unknowing obedience. For the sake of the argument here, let's consider this as being the two sides of a "covenant"—a religious side (Covenant) and a natural side (covenant). Both serve essentially the same integrative function, but the religious Covenant can apply only to beings with the requisite powers of conscious choice, while the natural covenant binds all the elements of the universe together, knowing or unknowingly. 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses the concepts of both pivot and artery to illustrate this connective, centering framework:

Thus it hath been proven and made evident that these infinite beings in this wondrous universe will discharge their functions properly only when directed and controlled by that Universal

Reality, so that order may be established in the world. For example, interaction and co-operation between the constituent parts of the human body are evident and indisputable, yet this does not suffice; an all-unifying agency is necessary that shall direct and control the component parts, so that these through interaction and co-operation may discharge in perfect order their necessary and respective functions . . . .

All these interactions therefore are connected with that all-embracing power which is their pivot, their centre, their source and their motive power. (*Tablet to August Forel* 22–23)

Although in the body of the universe there are innumerable nerves, yet the main artery, which pulsates, energizes, and invigorates all beings, is the power of the Covenant. All else is secondary to this. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, "Tablet to Mr. and Mrs. A. C. Killius")

The existence of such a timeless covenant, governing both the natural and Divine realms of existence, is explicitly affirmed by both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh:

Bear Thou witness that, through this Book, I have covenanted with all created things concerning the Mission of Him Whom Thou shalt make manifest, ere the covenant concerning Mine own

Mission had been established. (Bahá'u'lláh citing the Words of the Báb, *Epistle* 160)<sup>33</sup>

Through Thee have We gathered together all created things, whether in the heavens or on the earth, and called them to account for that which We had covenanted with them before the foundation of the world. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Summons* 10)

Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "whatsoever passeth beyond the limits of moderation will cease to exert a beneficial influence" suggests the shape of the governance framework (*Proclamation* 113). This, perhaps, is a simple definition of the covenant governing reciprocity. On the human scale, it also alludes to one aspect of justice, namely that "[w]hoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation" (*Gleanings* 164:2). 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the covenant mechanism this way: "A middle course is best, as it is written: 'It is incumbent upon you to do good between the two evils,' this referring to the mean between the two extremes. 'And let not thy hand be tied up to thy neck; nor yet open it with all openness . . . but between these follow a middle way'" (*Secret* 109). Evolutionary success is not just about whether

an individual tiger has sharper claws or can run a little faster after game. This may make him a better hunter and may help his kind to survive in the short term, but it does not guarantee long-term success. Moderation must also be a part of the various relational transactions affecting the tiger: there must be enough game, the tigers must not be overly greedy, and the tiger's predators and fellow species must not ask more from the tigers than they can sustain. If any of these sets of relational transactions are not reciprocal, tigers are ultimately doomed.

Similarly, there is nothing inherent in self-aware consciousness that guarantees evolutionary success. There is not an inherent progress in biological evolution that gives a guarantee of survival to more intelligent species. Like the tiger that can run a little faster, intelligence may help individuals better adapt to local conditions. However, even very successful adaptation to local conditions on a short-term basis may not contribute to the long-term continuation of the species. For instance, one could argue that higher intelligence has enabled industrial-commercial-consumer cultures to vastly expand and grow—an apparently successful adaptation. However, if these cultures violate the covenant principle of moderated reciprocity, this short-term success may collapse over the long run.

There is an innate creative efflorescence in the universal system by which the new continuously emerges and offers itself as a possibility to

---

3 In another place the Báb writes, "Verily We have taken a covenant from every created thing upon its coming into being concerning the Remembrance of God" (*Selections* 91).

other elements of the system. If there is receptivity, the possibility has the opportunity to develop further; if not, it becomes dormant. Even if there is answering receptivity and the possibility begins to flourish, this is not a guarantee that it will succeed over the long term and survive. Circumstances change, and the relational transactions can blaze up and dwindle. Change is omnipresent—new potentialities emerge, and new sustainable relationships are attained or disintegrate. There is no detailed blueprint, only the interplay of immeasurable numbers of random possible relational transactions within an inbuilt architecture of law that guarantees that creativity continues.

Scientists are beginning to suspect that simple cellular life may arise as a fairly predictable outcome of the organic chemistry available in the cosmos. Stephen Jay Gould argued that life emerges wherever planets exist with the right constituents and conditions—undoubtedly a common occurrence in our vast universe (“War of the Worldviews” 22–33). Suppose also that there is no single blueprint but that evolving life can experience a vast range of possibilities, including environmental histories so unpredictable that no single route can be identified ahead of time. There might be substantial variation on some common themes, even if we do not allow for different possible life chemistries. There may be vast amounts of simple life in the universe and some fair amounts of highly complex life-forms also, as

well as some other amounts of conscious life. Conscious beings may, in fact, evolve frequently, but there seems little reason to expect all life to look like it does on Earth. Yet we should expect that all life, wherever it exists, whatever its appearance, and whatever its biological themes, will manifest the basic principle of reciprocity—if it is to remain viable.

Life, as it evolves, manifests a flexibility that yields immense variety. Living things on Earth have set up successful housekeeping in vastly dissimilar environmental niches, and it is possible that across the vastness of the universe we have not seen anything yet! The story of life is probably the story of “great reciprocators,” with the greatest numbers and constancy of life-forms developing around the most stabilized modes of reciprocity.

A stable system is not static, however, because “the universal energy is dynamic” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 140). Dynamic energy underlies even the most apparently quiet and stable system. Each element of the universal order is constantly offering itself and receiving offers for relational interactions. Relationships develop according to each participant’s specialized capacities for receptivity. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá proposes:

the bestowals of God are moving and circulating throughout all created things. This illimitable divine bounty has no beginning and will have no ending. It is moving, circulating and becomes effective

wherever capacity is developed to receive it. In every station there is a specialized capacity. (*Promulgation* 160)

Let's consider what happens when a change is introduced into the system that makes the system unstable. For example, we may imagine a perfectly balanced tire rotating smoothly as a system in equilibrium. Now let's attach a weight to the rim of the wheel. The wheel will wobble, and as it is speeded up, it will begin to vibrate more vigorously. If the speed continues to increase, the unbalanced wheel will vibrate ever more violently until either the tire is destroyed or the weights are adjusted to restore balance.

When a stable system begins to wobble, a new energy pattern is added to the pre-existing pattern. If additional weights are added in different places on the tire, additional energy patterns are created. None of these patterns stop the ones that already exist, but they begin to interact with each other in increasingly complex ways.

Periods of stability can be interrupted by any number of factors, the essential point is that some new or additionally energized player begins to actively offer itself to potential reciprocators. As other units or forces begin to interact with the new or changed player, the balance of the system is changed. Here we find the source of change in any system. Stability is disturbed, and the system begins to wobble and change, possibly going all the

way into chaotic or turbulent behavior but ultimately returning to stability, although perhaps a very different pattern of stability. Catastrophic failure of the system is also one form of return to stability, for example. As a system of reciprocal relationships goes through this sort of change process, we must expand our concepts of order and chaos to include the possibility that both may exist simultaneously during the period of instability.

In large, highly complex systems, when the balance is disrupted, what essentially happens is that long-standing patterns of reciprocal relationships are disturbed and changed. Each old relationship that is broken or disrupted opens the possibility of the old relationship units finding new relationship partners. Even at the level of two bodies (such as planets) being intruded upon by a third, the relationships become highly complicated. Imagine billions of relationships with billions upon billions of possible interactions, and the number of possible creative interactions quickly becomes incalculable.

The place where all these interactions come together, I suggest, can be termed the "covenant." I use the word "covenant" to refer to the unknowable space where all the wildly efflorescent, reciprocal interactions are governed within the bounds of law. In religious terms, the Covenant has been described as "the Universal Balance" (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 239).

In practical terms, the covenant mechanism harmonizes the flow of

relational interactions and channels even the most chaotic processes of change toward new states of equilibrium. Equilibrium can be restored either by the formation or reformation of new mutually reciprocating relationships, allowing organization and development to continue, or through dissolution and extinction, with organization and development ceasing or decaying. The covenant essentially governs these processes of cohesion and dissolution. Relational interactions congruent with the covenant of moderated reciprocity result in further development; those that are not congruent result in decomposition and extinction.

All created things are expressions of the affinity and cohesion of elementary substances, and nonexistence is the absence of their attraction and agreement. Various elements unite harmoniously in composition, but when these elements become discordant, repelling each other, decomposition and nonexistence result.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 123)

If reciprocity is the greatest relationship in the world of being, the covenant is the governance structure through which reciprocity occurs. The covenant as a governance structure provides for a diversity of elements and forces to achieve dynamic balance and to interact harmoniously in a sustained combination or composition. That such an unseen governance

structure seems beyond the grasp of the mind or to fly in the face of common sense does not mean that its effects and reality cannot be discerned. In this light, it is interesting to consider the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

Similarly in the world of being there exist forces unseen of the eye, such as the force of ether previously mentioned, that cannot be sensed, that cannot be seen. However, from the effects it produceth, that is from its waves and vibrations, light, heat, electricity appear and are made evident. In like manner is the power of growth, of feeling, of understanding, of thought, of memory, of imagination and of discernment; all these inner faculties are unseen of the eye and cannot be sensed, yet all are evident by the effects they produce. (*Tablet to August Forel* 9–10).

#### THE MOST COMPLEX INTEGRATED STRUCTURE OF ORDER KNOWN

The degree of complexity expressed in the integrative process is closely related to the degrees of self-awareness, consciousness, and freedom involved. When a highly complex interplay of diverse forces and elements is harmonized, an incredibly rich reality is produced. Human beings are the most highly integrated existent things known. All the diverse interplay of forces present from the subatomic level to the assembly of

spiritual-psychological forces must be balanced and harmonized for there to be a sustainable human "I."

The structure of harmonizing governance—the covenant/Covenant—unites and integrates the great diversities within our mind, symbolized by Beginning and End, Heaven and Earth, Good and Evil, Freedom and Law, and Individual and Community. In a religious sense, the Prophets of God, through revealing the Word of God, provide the integrative vision that unites opposites on a grand cosmic scale.

He Who is both the Beginning and the End, He Who is both Stillness and Motion, is now manifest before your eyes. Behold how, in this Day, the Beginning is reflected in the End, how out of Stillness Motion hath been engendered. This motion hath been generated by the potent energies which the words of the Almighty have released throughout the entire creation. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 85:3)

[T]he holy, divine Manifestations have had a nature in the utmost equilibrium, the health and wholesomeness of their bodies most perfect, their constitutions endowed with physical vigor, their powers functioning in perfect order, and the outward sensations linked with the inward perceptions, working together with extraordinary momentum

and coordination. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan* 70)

To be human is to have the spiritual capacity to manifest this supreme integrative power. Human is not merely a biological species associated with planet Earth; more fundamentally, it is the spiritual manifestation of the Covenant principle in the universal system:

Consider the rational faculty with which God hath endowed the essence of man. Examine thine own self, and behold how thy motion and stillness, thy will and purpose, thy sight and hearing, thy sense of smell and power of speech, and whatever else is related to, or transcendeth, thy physical senses or spiritual perceptions, all proceed from, and owe their existence to, this same faculty. So closely are they related unto it, that if in less than the twinkling of an eye its relationship to the human body be severed, each and every one of these senses will cease immediately to exercise its function, and will be deprived of the power to manifest the evidences of its activity. It is indubitably clear and evident that each of these afore-mentioned instruments has depended, and will ever continue to depend, for its proper functioning on this rational faculty, which should be regarded as a sign of the revelation of Him Who is the sovereign Lord of all. Through

its manifestation all these names and attributes have been revealed, and by the suspension of its action they are all destroyed and perish . . . . These diverse names and revealed attributes have been generated through the agency of this sign of God. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 83:1–3)

[M]an has been man from his very inception and origin, and . . . the essence of his species has existed from eternity . . . human existence—that is, the species of man—is a necessary existence, and . . . without man the perfections of Divinity would not shine forth. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 50:1)

The progression of all created things culminates in perfect man, and no greater being than him exists: Man, having reached the human station, can progress only in perfections and not in station, for there is no higher station to which he can find passage than that of a perfect man. He can progress solely within the human station, as human perfections are infinite. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 64:6)

Man is the sum of Creation, and the Perfect Man is the expression of the complete thought of the Creator—the Word of God. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 39)

At most we can say that there was a time when this earth did not exist, and that at the beginning man was not present upon it.

But from the beginning that has no beginning to the end that has no end, a perfect Manifestation has always existed. This Man of Whom we speak here is not just any man: That which we intend is the Perfect Man. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 50:4–5)

What defines “human” across the ages, and wherever it exists, is the capacity to consciously participate in covenant governance. This participation enables vast diversity to be integrated within the human psyche, which, in turn, is generative of infinitely creative patterns of culture, thought, and construction. A human being is the most complex integrated structure of order in the known universe, combining within itself an astounding range of elements and forces—a diversity of states that Bahá'u'lláh likens to “angels created of snow and of fire” (*Prayers* 158). Bahá'u'lláh further reflects on the reality of this astounding integrative structure in the following way:

Likewise, reflect upon the perfection of man's creation, and that all these planes and states are folded up and hidden away within him.

Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form

When within thee the universe is folded? (*Seven Valleys* 34)

The covenant is the engine of creativity in the universe. Another way to think of this is that the covenant/Covenant is not so much a doctrine as it is the structure for rightly ordered governance. In discussing the religious concept of Covenant, Bahá'u'lláh associates it with “a mighty force, a consummate power [that] lieth concealed in the world of being” and directs attention to “its unifying influence” (*Tablets* 221). In essence, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “If it is considered with insight, it will be seen that all the forces of the universe, in the last analysis serve the Covenant” (*Selections* 228).

Humanity’s significance within the universal system is that unlike the rest of the creation, which is ruled by the covenant without awareness or freedom to choose, “[m]an perceives the hidden law in created things and co-operates with it” (*Abdu’l-Bahá, Abdu’l-Bahá in London* 23). What a person chooses to cooperate with is not so much a set of rules but the principle of moderated reciprocity—a governance structure that harmonizes a highly dynamic reality.

The creative power of the covenant/Covenant, Bahá'u'lláh says, is that forces that seem to be opposites are, in reality, the same but different. It is hard to grasp just how astonishingly generative this “same but different” reality really might be. A description of the power released by this transformative principle is provided by Bahá'u'lláh. It is at one and the same time both Creator and Destroyer, Begetter and Abaser.

Turn, O Lord my God, the darkness of their fancies into the brightness of certitude, and cause them to arise, and to walk steadfastly in Thy straight Path, that haply Thy Book may not hinder them from recognizing Him Who is its Revealer, and Thy names from acknowledging the One Who is their Creator, and their Provider, and their Origin, and their King, and their Begetter, and their Destroyer, and their Glorifier, and their Abaser, and their Governor, and the Sovereign Protector of their Bearers. (*Prayers* 283–84)

Thus, the nature of change and transformation is not necessarily incremental and gradual. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that the generative and creative power associated with the Advent of a Manifestation of God is profoundly dynamic and disruptive:

I testify that no sooner had the First Word proceeded, through the potency of Thy will and purpose, out of His mouth, and the First Call gone forth from His lips than the whole creation was revolutionized, and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths. Through that Word the realities of all created things were shaken, were divided, separated, scattered, combined and reunited, disclosing, in both the contingent world and the heavenly kingdom,

entities of a new creation, and revealing, in the unseen realms, the signs and tokens of Thy unity and oneness. (*Prayers* 295)

The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. (*Gleanings* 70:1)

Scientists are coming to understand, in fact, that systems—both natural and cultural—are hypersensitive and peculiarly unstable (Buchanan). There is constant change, motion, and transformation inherent in the universal system—an inherent vibrating, dividing, separating, and scattering. It is the power of the covenant that combines and reunites, integrates and unifies, disclosing through this structure of governance new creations of unity and reciprocity.

If the world of existence came into being through the dynamic interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient, then existence perhaps is defined more by the synapse where the active and receptive forces interact than by either activity or receptivity. This is, perhaps, one way to define freedom: the synapse where activity and receptivity interact under human agency.

The development of freedom of mind in the human species meant that a lot of things would never be the same again. With the achievement of self-conscious freedom by one species, the universe reached a new level of

complexity and potential. This freedom to discover, reflect, and choose is more than just an intellectual capacity. It is an agent for the creative transformation of the universe itself.

The universal system unfolds more of what it potentially can become through the expression of human mind and spirit. Humanity is the center of the unfolding of integrative consciousness in creation. As we awaken to new possibilities of obedience to the covenant of moderated reciprocity, it is the “spiritual” essence of the universe that achieves an entirely new level of possibilities. The unfolding of the human spiritual potential for integrative thinking—for conscious participation in the balancing governance structure of the covenant—is not an isolated event but one that creatively changes the entire universal system.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that natural selection does occur in an evolutionary sense: “In nature there is the law of the survival of the fittest,” and this is said to be a “natural law” (*Promulgation* 353). The world of nature is characterized by “a ceaseless struggle for existence,” and “evidences of the physical survival of the fittest” are everywhere (*Promulgation* 400). However, the capacity to learn and develop capacities of integrative consciousness and behavior allows for humankind not only to transcend the struggle for existence, but to form nature to another pattern of development. The natural order is developed into something more than it was through human action. As conscious activities

to broaden integrative thinking and behavior are consolidated and expanded, humanity departs more and more from being a purely “natural” species. And with each consolidating step in this direction, future generations are formed to depart ever more systematically from a pure “state of nature.”

Man is endowed with an outer or physical reality. It belongs to the material realm, the animal kingdom, because it has sprung from the material world. This animalistic reality of man he shares in common with the animals.

The human body is like animals subject to nature's laws. But man is endowed with a second reality, the rational or intellectual reality; and the intellectual reality of man predominates over nature. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations* 51)

Throughout the universe, composite materials or complex phenomena are made up of single elements bound together by a power of attraction or association. Animals are susceptible to certain affiliation and fellowship and they exercise natural affinity of kind. This elemental attraction, this admixture and selective affinity is love manifest in the degree of the animal kingdom. Humanity has all the sensibilities of the animal kingdom, but still beyond and above all these lower powers humanity has a capacity for the susceptibilities and affinities

which bind humans together, enabling them to live and associate in friendship and solidarity. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 255–56)

Evolutionary biologists have linked this capacity for affinity and solidarity to the development of conscious intelligence and creative intellect. Nicholas Humphrey, a psychologist at the University of Cambridge, for instance, has argued that the primary purpose of creative intellect is “to keep society together” (Leakey 147). Related research suggests that “in humans, greater social integration is generally associated with reduced mortality and better physical and mental health, particularly for women . . . and the capacity and motivation to establish and nurture close social relationships has been a strong selective pressure in the primate evolution for many millions of years” (Silk et al., “The Benefits of Social Capital”).

The development of human-style consciousness correlates with the high demands for creative, integrative intelligence associated with social life. The network of social alliances, monitoring of others' behavior, and patterns of interaction, even among primates generally, is extremely complex. Learning how to be successful in such complex networks of reciprocal interaction is difficult and places high evolutionary demands on the capacities to think and behave integratively. Developing a capacity for integratively creative intelligence is both a

spontaneous evolutionary benefit and a force that, as it develops in increasingly complex ways, becomes a factor itself in changing the evolutionary context for future generations.

As a case in point, one of the unusual aspects of human development is that offspring are born virtually helpless and remain relatively small and powerless throughout an extended childhood and adolescence. Even other primates progress from infancy to adulthood much more rapidly. It has been suggested that this extended period of adolescent development has to do with the high degree of socially integrative learning that young humans must absorb to be successful among complex rules of culture and social mores (Leakey 43–50).

There is an inherent difficulty in tracing causes and consequences within a chaotic process such as evolutionary change, which occurs over thousands of generations and involves an impenetrable web of interactions. However, it is also true that patterns can be identified amidst the chaos. For instance, young kittens inevitably scratch dirt in the same manner to cover their droppings, and birds build characteristic styles of nests. Similarly, a biologist from another planet would observe some universal patterns in human development that are uniquely characteristic of humanity and can be reasonably assumed to have some evolutionary sources. The capacity for higher-order integrative thinking and behavior has many manifestations. Biological anthropologist

Terrence Deacon points to symbolic thinking that can unify, synthesize, and relate amazingly complex arrays of impressions, perceptions, concepts, and interactions as perhaps the most telling human characteristic of all:

We are all heirs of symbolic forms that were passed from one generation to the next and from one group to another, forming a single unbroken tradition. We derive all our symbolic “traits” from this common pool and contribute to its promulgation. Being a part of this symbolic information lineage is in many respects a more diagnostic trait for “humanness” than any physical trait. (341)

The capacities for playing successful social chess require incredible skill in understanding and integrating the diverse, shifting, and unpredictable behavior of others (Leakey 147–49). In discussing the qualities of a truly learned individual, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that moderating one’s own behavior and attitudes “is the very foundation of every laudable human quality . . . the balance wheel of all behavior, the means of keeping all man’s good qualities in equilibrium” (*Secret* 59).

The human evolutionary process has required skills to integrate and harmonize a plethora of diverse individuals, factors, phenomena, and concepts within a flexible but unified creative intelligence. What uniquely happens in the human case is that

conscious efforts are taken to explore and develop ever more integrative capacities for thinking and behaving, and new generations are educated and trained to carry these capacities to even higher levels of development. This, in turn, creates an evolution-ary environment that is increasingly pro-integrative.

Human beings develop as a unique species through conscious efforts to manifest, test, and confirm integrative skills and capacities. Throughout history, individuals and social groups have undertaken conscious initiatives such as education, training, religious observance, storytelling, myth-making, ritual, prayer, meditation, and many other means of fostering integrative thinking and capacities. Stimulating a transcendent vision allows people to perceive new relationships and connections between such seemingly dissimilar (even opposite) concepts as First and Last, Beginning and End, Good and Evil, Individual and Community, etc. This can promote further development of individual integrative capacities while also increasing group solidarity.

At the same time, because the human integrative capacity functions as a lens through which we survey and interpret the world, it can both enhance and constrain our access to the new diverse sources of input that are the engines of creativity. Sometimes our integrative capacity comes to rest in a fairly rigid configuration for a time, interpreting the world for us in a relatively stable pattern of perception.

This pattern seems to be so normal and offers such a logical picture of the world around us that we sometimes dub it “common sense.” Each of us has our own idiosyncratic bundle of common sense.

However, our unexamined, largely unconscious collection of common sense can become a problem for creativity. Common sense can easily become institutionalized, formally and informally, in processes and circumstances that systematically limit contact with information and ways of looking at the world that lie beyond one’s personal prejudices. As Einstein famously observed: “Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen” (11). It is precisely such unconscious common sense maps of the world that underlie racism, sexism, and other forms of structural prejudice and injustice.

This perhaps is an example of a situation ripe for the world’s equilibrium to be upset—and a new surge of creativity released—by a renewal of covenant governance. In the following passages, one can almost feel the intense creative heat generated by the interaction of “similar but different” forces within the parameters of covenant governance:

And yet, 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? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's universal Manifestations would be apparent. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Iqán* 240–41)

Is it within human power, O Hakim, to effect in the constituent elements of any of the minute and indivisible particles of matter so complete a transformation as to transmute it into purest gold? Perplexing and difficult as this may appear, the still greater task of converting satanic strength into heavenly power is one that We have been empowered to accomplish. The Force capable of such a transformation transcendeth the potency of the Elixir itself. The Word of God, alone, can claim the distinction of being endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 99:1)

In his advice to Hakim, Bahá'u'lláh, in essence, is describing the fundamental creative dynamic of the universal system. When I argue that the universe is coded to be creative, I am suggesting that any particle of matter may transform into its opposite. Even more, that satanic strength may transform into heavenly power. The scales of necessary observation may be too vast or too tiny, too timeless or too fleeting, but such transformations are the creative work of the covenant/Covenant being done.

The application of this understanding may be far more profitable than it might seem. First, non-equilibrium is the natural state of creativity. Searching for a gradual unfolding of history or of social transformation is a misplaced wisp of illusion. Perhaps it is more fruitful to analyze the physical, social, and cultural worlds around us as naturally poised toward dramatic periods of change, in which even the smallest forces—like grains of sand falling onto a pile—can have tremendous transformative effects. What if the world is permanently balanced in a critical state so that even the tiniest acts are amplified and impact the larger system? Perhaps we may find greater power within ourselves by viewing our spiritual development and actions through this lens.

## WORKS CITED

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London*. US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982.
- . *Foundations of World Unity*. US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1971.
- . *Paris Talks*. US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1979.
- . *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982.
- . *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1975.
- . *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. Bahá’í World Centre, 1978.
- . *Some Answered Questions*. Bahá’í World Centre, 2016.
- . “Tablet of the Universe.” *Makátib-i ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, vol. 1, 1997, pp. 13–32, [http://bahai-library.com/abdulbaha\\_lawh\\_aflakiyyih](http://bahai-library.com/abdulbaha_lawh_aflakiyyih).
- . *Tablet to August Forel*. George Ronald, 1978.
- . “Tablet to Mr. and Mrs. A. C. Killius.” *Star of the West*, vol. 11, no. 18, 7 Feb. 1921, p. 308.
- . *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1993.
- Bahá’í World Faith*. US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1971.
- Bahá’u’lláh. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*. US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988.
- . *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*. US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1971.
- . *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*. US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1989.
- . *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá’u’lláh*. US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974.
- . *Proclamation of Bahá’u’lláh*. US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1978.
- . *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*. US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1991.
- . *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Bahá’í World Centre, 1978.
- Bak, Per. *How Nature Works: The Science of Self-Organized Criticality*. Springer-Verlag, 1996.
- Briggs, John, and F. David Peat. *Turbulent Mirror: An Illustrated Guide to Chaos Theory*. HarperCollins Canada, 1989.
- Buchanan, Mark. *Ubiquity: Why Catastrophes Happen*. Three Rivers Press, 2001.
- Deacon, Terrence. *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain*. W. W. Norton, 1998.
- Einstein, Albert. *Einstein’s 1912 Manuscript on the Special Theory of Relativity*. George Braziller, 2003.
- Frank, Rebecca E., and Joan B. Silk. “Impatient traders or contingent reciprocators? Evidence for the extended time-course of grooming exchanges in baboons.” *Behaviour*, vol. 146, no. 8, 2009, pp. 1123–35.
- Gleick, James. *Chaos: Making a New Science*. Penguin, 1988.
- Gould, Stephen Jay. “The Evolution of Life on Earth.” *Scientific American*, vol. 271, no. 4, 1994, pp. 85–91.
- . *The Flamingo’s Smile: Reflections in Natural History*. W. W. Norton, 1987.

- Gould, Stephen Jay. "War of the Worldviews." *Natural History*, vol. 105, no. 12, 1996, pp. 22–33.
- Huqúqu'lláh*. Compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'í World Centre, 2007.
- Leakey, Richard. *The Origin of Humankind*. Basic Books, 2008.
- Nakhjavani, Bahíyyih. *Response*. George Ronald, 1981.
- Ranjbar, Vahid Houston. "One Physicist's First Look at Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet of the Universe." *Medium*, 7 June 2016, <http://medium.com/@vahidhoustonranjbar/one-physicists-first-look-at-abdu-l-baha-s-tablet-of-the-universe-db541a951348>.
- Raven, Peter H., Ray F. Evert, and Susan E. Eichhorn. *Biology of Plants*, 7th Edition. Macmillan, 2005.
- Shoghi Effendi. *God Passes By*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970.
- . *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982.
- Silk, Joan B. et al. "The Benefits of Social Capital: Close Social Bonds among Female Baboons Enhance Offspring Survival." *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, vol. 276, 10 June 2009, pp. 3099–3104.
- Silk, Joan B. et al. "Strong and Consistent Social Bonds Enhance the Longevity of Female Baboons." *Current Biology*, vol. 20, no. 15, 10 August 2010, pp. 1359–61.
- Stewart, Ian. *Does God Play Dice?: The New Mathematics of Chaos*. Wiley, 2002.
- Unverricht, Ed. "Spherical Harmonics and Quantum Numbers." *Animated Physics*, <http://animatedphysics.com/insights/spherical-harmonics-and-quantum-numbers/>.

# “The Seven Valleys”

EXCERPTS FROM ATTAR’S

*THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS*

TRANSLATED BY

SHOLEH WOLPÉ

## VALLEY OF THE QUEST

When you descend into the Valley of the Quest, expect trials and tribulations. They will plague you at every turn.

Here, with each breath you inhale a hundred calamities.

Here, the wandering parrot changes into a common fly.

Here, years of toil and of sweat are needed to stir and transform your senses.

There is no room here for pride, or self-importance, or the things you value and hoard.

Here, one must journey through one’s own blood. Here one must wholly give up all things linked to existence.

Stand empty-handed, and the cleansing of your heart begins.

Purge your heart of its own traits, and the virtues of the Divine will reflect in it.

When light brightens your soul, a single desire of the heart multiplies into a thousand.

If fire flares and blazes the path to the Beloved and a hundred arduous valleys suddenly unfurl, the heart of a true lover flings itself headlong into the flames, like a moth feverish with desire.

That’s when mystery shape-shifts into longing, and the lover begs for a sip of wine from the lip of the Beloved’s cup.

With a single taste of that elixir, the heart forgets everything in this world and the world to come, and drowns—

yet with lips still cracked and parched, the seeker begs the Beloved to unravel the mysteries of itself.

In this valley the lover casts aside all fears, even that of savage dragons, in order to fathom the divine Beloved.

If denial and damnation arrive holding hands, the lover will welcome them both, for they may open a door to the Beloved, and when that door finally opens, there will be neither denial nor damnation on the other side.

## VALLEY OF LOVE

Next comes the Valley of Love.

Walk here and drown in fire, for in this valley only fire lives.

If you are not a lover of fire, then leave, because a true lover is one with fire; a true lover ignites, burns, and flares like fire.

There's no providence in the Valley of Love, not a single grain of thought about infidels or the faithful, about doubts or convictions.

Here, a lover joyfully gathers and throws a hundred worlds into the fire.

Here, right and wrong are mates, because in love two becomes one.

You who stand aloof, this valley is not for you.

You deniers, this place will not appeal to you.

Lovers worthy of being in this valley give away everything and boast of their approaching union with the Beloved.

Others may search for their desires in plans and tomorrows, but true lovers know that everything they desire is right here in the Valley of Love.

If you cannot throw your heart into the fire, then how can you be free from your despair?

If silk does not burn to its innermost core, how can it brighten its own heart with joy?

If a fish flops onto shore from the sea, it flaps and struggles until it slips back.

In this valley, love is fire, mind is smoke.

When love arrives, reason flees.

The mind is not a master in the art of love; love cannot labor in the brain.

When sight is gifted to you by the Invisible, you will finally see the heart of love.

Every leaf exists because of love, bent with the drunkenness of love.

Open those eyes given to you and fuse with the universe. If you open only the mind's eyes, you will never see love in full.

Love is the business of the experienced.

Love is the business of the free.

You who are neither experienced nor in love are lifeless and don't deserve love.

On this thousand-branched road, the joyful in heart must offer up a hundred lives with every breath.

## VALLEY OF KNOWLEDGE

Next, enter the Valley of Knowledge,  
with its boundless myriad roads  
unfurling in every direction.  
Here, no path resembles the next.  
Here, the traveler of the body is  
different from the traveler of the soul.

Here, both body and soul progress,  
regress, decline and rise, each accord-  
ing to its own worth.

In this Abrahamic place, how can a  
sickly spider keep up with an ele-  
phant's pace? Your journey is greased  
by your own measure and maturity.

A fly can flap its wings all it wants,  
but how can it keep up with the wind?  
We each travel our own path; no two  
birds journey the same.

Here, knowledge splits into unnum-  
bered insights.  
One person finds it in a church or a  
mosque, another finds it in a shrine  
for idols.

When the sun of knowledge shim-  
mers in the Beloved's exalted sky,  
each traveler is given sight according  
to his own measure and share; each  
traveler regains her true rank.

The secret of every atom will be  
unveiled, and this ash-pit world will  
sprout into a rose garden.  
Then you will see past the shell  
into the kernel of everything. You  
will see yourself as nothing, become

blind to everything except the  
Friend.

A hundred thousand mysteries will  
be unmasked, and for every hundred  
thousand who lose their way, only  
one will arrive. It takes a stout soul  
of the Way to dive headlong into that  
bottomless sea.

If mysteries excite you, then each  
moment will bloom a new yearning  
in your soul.

Here, unending thirst prevails.  
Here, a hundred thousand sacrifices  
are necessary.

If you reach that Great Throne,  
don't boast, rather ask: Is there more?  
Drown yourself in that ocean of  
knowledge, or else rub the road's dust  
on your head.

If you do not come here a worshipper,  
go away and weep, sleepy one.  
If you are not joyful in your union  
with your Beloved, keep on mourning  
your separation.

If you do not see the Beloved's face,  
get up! What are you waiting for? Go  
look for it! Shame on you, if you don't  
know the taste of desire.  
Don't drift like an idle, aimless ass.

## VALLEY OF DETACHMENT

Next, you come to the Valley of  
Detachment. Here, entitlements and  
meanings are irrelevant.  
From this valley's air of

self-sufficiency surges a storm that ravages whole countries in one blow.

Here, the seven seas are but a puddle, the seven planets are just a spark. The eight pleasures of paradise are as fun as a corpse, and the seven hells are frozen ice.

Here, for no reason an ant has an elephant's superstrength. Here, by the time a greedy crow fills its stomach with seeds, a hundred caravans perish.

Here, a hundred thousand green-clad angels burned in grief until Adam's heart was illuminated. A hundred thousand bodies were emptied of souls until Noah became a sailor.

A hundred thousand gnats formed an army until Abraham found victory. A hundred thousand babes lost their heads until Moses became the Seer of the Lord.

A hundred thousand held fast to old dogmas until Jesus found the divine mysteries.

A hundred thousand endured wretchedness until Mohammad miraculously ascended to Heaven.

Here, neither new nor ancient has any value.

Here it's all the same if you act or if you're idle. If you have suffered a world of hardship, here, it's all a dream.

If a thousand lives perish in the sea, here, a mere dewdrop has slipped into that vastness.

If a hundred thousand heads lie down to sleep, here, it's as if an atom has cast a shadow. If the sky crashes down and the stars fall like rain, here, nothing more than a single leaf has floated from a tree.

If everything is erased, from the moonfish to the moon, here, it's as if an ant has injured its leg in a well. If both worlds perish in a flash, it's as if a grain of sand has gone missing.

If no trace of the devil or humankind remain, give it less thought than you would a drop of rain. If all bodies hit the ground and all animals vanish, so what?

Here, if everything great and small suddenly departs, it's as if a single straw has been drawn and tossed. If all nine spheres of existence vanish in a flash, it's as if a single drop has faded into the seven seas.

#### VALLEY OF UNITY

Arrive in the Valley of Unity and give up everything except the absolute.

All who traverse this valley will leave sharing a single collar. Here, the many and the few will merge and meld into one.

When many are united in the One forever, then all inside the One is a perfection.

This is not a place for uniformity;  
here you find unity in diversity.

Everything here is outside of time,  
outside of measurements, so forget  
about the Beginning, forget about the  
End.

The Beginning is lost; the End  
stretches into eternity.  
Don't bother with them, they're irrel-  
evant. And since all is really nothing,  
then nothing is truly everything.

#### VALLEY OF WONDERMENT

Next comes the Valley of  
Wonderment.  
Here you will meet pain and unending  
remorse.  
Here, every sigh is as sharp as a  
sword.  
Here, every breath brims with sighs.

Though there is no night here, nor  
day, you ache night and day, yearn  
and burn. Though you suffer no cuts,  
blood still drips from the roots of  
your hair and writes: Alas.

Here, there is fire, but it is frozen;  
there is ice, but it sizzles from pain.  
When you arrive here in wonder-  
ment, you arrive already lost and  
will be yet more lost. And if you  
stamp the seal of oneness on your  
soul, you'll drift even further in your  
lostness.

If they ask you: Are you drunk or no?  
Do you exist or no?  
Are you within or without?  
Are you hidden or manifest?

You will respond: I know nothing,  
not even the breadth of my own  
ignorance.

I am in love but don't know with  
whom.

I am neither devout nor faithless.  
I don't know what I am.

Of my own love I am ignorant too.  
My heart is both full and empty of  
love.

#### VALLEY OF POVERTY AND ANNIHILATION

The final valley is of Poverty and  
Annihilation, the ultimate release.  
Words fail to reveal its mystery.

The essence of this valley is obli-  
vion— dumb, deaf, unconscious. Here,  
in the effulgence of the sun, a hun-  
dred thousand shadows vanish.

When the ocean tosses and breaks,  
how can patterns that shimmer on  
the surface endure? Both worlds are  
reflected in those patterns dancing on  
the sea.

Deny it and you're a misguided  
dreamer.

Lose yourself in this ocean. Find so-  
lace in your lost state, and a calming  
oblivion will embrace your heart.

When your soul is absorbed into the Ocean, it is saved from its own oblivion. That's when creativity abounds and the mysteries of life begin to unveil.

You, mature Wayfarer, the brave one, if you've taken the first step into this arena of pain, there is no second, for in that first stride you are lost, transformed.

When a lute and common kindling meet in fire, they both burn for they are made of the same wood.  
But their attributes are not the same.

When you are a polluted soul, the Ocean will not refuse you; you will merely sink to its floor and remain yourself.

But if you come to it as a pure drop, you will lose yourself in the Ocean, becoming one with its vast water. The Ocean's currents will become yours, too— its shining beauty, yours.  
You will be and not be.

How can that be?  
It's beyond mind's comprehension.

# Becoming Hospitable and Uplifting Holding Environments for Humanity's Grievs: Depression and the Bahá'í Community

ELENA MUSTAKOVA

By Thy glory, O Beloved One, Thou giver of light to the world! The flames of separation have consumed me . . . I ask of Thee, by Thy Most Great Name, O Thou the Desire of the world and the Well-Beloved of mankind, to grant that the breeze of Thine inspiration may sustain my soul, that Thy wondrous voice may reach my ear, that my eyes may behold Thy signs and Thy light as revealed in the manifestations of Thy names and Thine attributes, O Thou within Whose grasp are all things! (Bahá'u'lláh qtd. in *Bahá'í Prayers* 146)

## Abstract

As the painstaking unification of the planet unfolds, human suffering is rapidly escalating. The World Health Organization (WHO) now recognizes anxiety and depression-related disorders as the new pan-

demics, debilitating increasingly larger and younger segments of the world's population.<sup>1</sup> People everywhere are searching for solutions; yet, in this time of deep disenchantment, there is also heightened suspicion toward ready answers. As Bahá'ís seek ways to bring Bahá'u'lláh's healing Message to a troubled, disillusioned, and anxious humanity, a question emerges. How can we become beacons of light and encouragement, shed distractions, and build hospitable, healing, and uplifting communities, able to embrace humanity's griefs and point the way forward? This paper focuses on what depression- and anxiety-related conditions can teach us about creating healing spiritual communities.

## Resumé

Au fur et à mesure que l'unification de la planète progresse laborieusement, les souffrances humaines s'intensifient rapidement. L'Organisation mondiale de la santé reconnaît maintenant que les troubles anxieux et dépressifs sont les nouvelles pandémies qui affligent des segments de plus en plus importants et de plus en plus jeunes de la population mondiale. Partout dans le monde, les gens cherchent des solutions; pourtant, en cette période de désenchantement profond, on constate une méfiance accrue envers les réponses toutes faites. Alors que les bahá'ís cherchent des moyens de transmettre le message curatif de Bahá'u'lláh à une humanité troublée, désillusionnée et anxieuse, une question se pose. Comment pouvons-nous devenir tels des phares éclairants et rassurants, faire fi des distractions et bâtir des communautés accueillantes et édifiantes, capables

---

1 See global mental health initiative of the World Health Organization at <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs220/en/>.

d'entendre le désarroi de l'humanité et d'indiquer la voie à suivre? Ce document examine comment les troubles liés à la dépression et à l'anxiété peuvent nous aider à comprendre comment créer des communautés spirituelles qui sont source de guérison.

### *Resumen*

A medida que se desenvuelve la unificación dolorosa del planeta, el sufrimiento humano está escalando rápidamente. La Organización Mundial de la Salud ahora reconoce desórdenes relacionados a la ansiedad y a la depresión como las nuevas pandemias que están debilitando segmentos cada vez más grandes y más jóvenes de la población mundial. Personas por todas partes están buscando soluciones; sin embargo, en este tiempo de profundo desencanto, también hay mayor sospecha hacia contestaciones listas. A medida que los bahá'ís buscan traer el Mensaje curativo de Bahá'u'lláh a una humanidad inquietada, desilusionada y ansiosa, una pregunta emerge. ¿Cómo podemos ser faros de luz y ánimo, despojar distracciones, y construir comunidades hospitalarias, curativas y edificantes, capaces de abrazar los dolores de la humanidad y apuntar al camino que va hacia adelante? Este ensayo se enfoca en lo que las condiciones relacionadas a la depresión y a la ansiedad nos pueden enseñar acerca de crear comunidades espirituales curativas.

### THE POWER OF SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS

Affective disorders have always been part of the human condition. However, in the context of the complex and turbulent processes of globalization, we witness a fraying of the fabric of

social life, which has led to an escalating global burden of mental disorders. According to the WHO *Mental Health Atlas 2011*, one in four people develop some kind of mental illness at some point in their lives (WHO 2013). This reality has led the World Health Organization to announce a decade of mental health (2013–2020).<sup>2</sup>

We are social and relational beings, and the rising burden of affective disorders forces us to reexamine seriously the state of our communities and to consider the power of spiritual communities to function as holding environments for individuals. The construct of the holding environment was first articulated by British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott in the context of the mother-child relationship. Winnicott describes a holding environment as “the continuation of reliable holding in terms of the ever-widening circle of family and school and social life,” which he saw as key to healthy development (238). This concept was further developed by Robert Kegan in the context of relationships among adults, in recognition of the fact that we never cease to need to be emotionally and spiritually held and supported by others (Kegan).

In our current context of vast global shifts, perplexity, and environmental degradation, we experience the emergence of what one theorist

---

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed update of the global mental health initiative of the World Health Organization see <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs220/en/>.

refers to as the “social breakdown syndrome.”<sup>3</sup> The significant increases in violence and social isolation and the proliferation of mental disorders and generalized suffering across culture-specific constructions of mental illness cannot be addressed to scale within a purely biomedical framework without a searching examination of the root causes and dynamics of many of these disorders. As recently noted,

[t]he root causes of many seemingly individual symptoms—loneliness, isolation, alienation, anxiety, anomie, low self-esteem, depression, relationship distress, addictions, violence, attention deficit disorders, eating disorders, and others—have been shown to be at least partly influenced by the beliefs, behaviors, and lifestyles generated by the assumptions and values of global capitalism, and particularly individualism, crude materialism, consumerism, greed, commodification, wealth distribution inequities, and labor exploitation. (Mustakova-Possardt and Woodall 91)

---

3 Adeoye Lambo describes it as a deepening disintegration of the socio-moral fabric of life on the planet, characterized by a rising incidence and prevalence of psychosomatic diseases, mental disorders, anxiety and neurosis, prostitution, crimes, political corruption, and a variety of sexual diseases, including AIDS; the alienation of large segments of society; and the depersonalization of individuals, with large groups of people living precariously on the periphery of society (114).

Complicating the search for viable systemic solutions that reach beyond person-centered models is a cacophony of competing worldview prescriptions, each one offering its own unique diagnosis and putative remedy. On the one hand, a growing number of progressive transcultural social scientists seek to develop culturally responsive approaches to health. On the other hand, a still dominant reductionist scientific approach insists on explaining the full complexity of human life on a presumably neutral behavioral level, allowing art, spirituality, and metaphor only on the fringes of science and marginalizing other ontologies and epistemologies.

In close relationship to this reductionist interpretation of reality, knowledge, and human motivation stands a crudely materialistic economic worldview that promotes consumption as the best indicator of societal progress. Within this well-entrenched paradigm there is also a tendency to interpret spiritually informed analyses as little more than vehicles of superstition and population control. The confluence of strident materialist economics, materialist approaches to science, and literalist and fundamentalist approaches to morality and religion produces massive moral incoherence, a global economy based on ruthless exploitation of human and natural resources, a deepening of inequalities related to wealth and access to opportunities for development, and a proliferation of various forms of political and religious extremism. Against the

backdrop of this collective crisis of value and meaning, the age-old human condition of personal suffering resulting from affective disorders of depression and anxiety has become virtually pandemic and, consequently, of global concern.

Depression—the experience of living beneath a blanket of sadness, meaninglessness, and hopelessness, and in a state of physical fatigue and mental fog—can have psychosocial, genetic, and chemical roots that are difficult to disentangle. Genetic vulnerabilities, for example, may be triggered by psychosocial conditions, while psychosocially conditioned mindsets may become embodied in neurochemical abnormalities that also induce depression. The existential suffering that attends depression, as well as the potential for healing, have profound spiritual dimensions that we are only just beginning to appreciate and understand. Thoughtful examination of this condition may illuminate for us the depths and layers of the human predicament, sensitize our souls to the wisdom of the compassionate recognition of our interdependence, and may empower us to discern beyond narrow and limiting expectations of how people should be.

#### THE NATURE OF CLINICAL DEPRESSION

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5<sup>th</sup> edition), the common feature of depressive disorders is “the presence of sad, empty, or irritable mood,

accompanied by somatic and cognitive changes that significantly affect the individual’s capacity to function” (155). While there are wide differences in duration, timing, and presumed etiology of depressive disorders, the classic condition in this group of disorders, major depressive disorder, “is characterized by discrete episodes of at least 2-weeks’ duration involving clear-cut changes in affect, cognition, and neuro-vegetative functions” (*DSM-5* 155). When the condition continues for at least two years in adults, it is considered chronic.

Recognizable symptoms of depression are insomnia or hypersomnia; diminished ability to think or concentrate; feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt; fatigue and loss of energy; frequently observable psychomotor agitation or restlessness, or psychomotor retardation; diminished interest in, or pleasure from, life activities. In addition, the “chronicity of depressive symptoms substantially increases the likelihood of underlying personality, anxiety and substance use disorders” (*DSM-5* 165). Heritability is approximately 40 percent, especially in first-degree family members.

The onset of depression can be associated with situational factors, or a medical condition, or may be comorbid with other mental, behavioral, or substance-abuse disorders. As a separate condition, it most commonly manifests as either major depression or persistent depressive disorder, previously known as dysthymia. In order to better understand the delicate and

dynamic balance of hereditary and environmental factors, as well as the psychosocial and behavioral factors that are often woven into the complex fabric of depression, let us examine a case study that may prove helpful in elucidating this condition.

Emerson is a kind and caring man in his sixties. He loves and deeply appreciates nature, where he says that he feels his spirit connect to the beauty and diversity of God's creation. In nature, his soul finds peace, energy, and freedom. By contrast, in the realm of human interactions, Emerson is reticent, self-conscious, subdued, and constrained. For much of his life, he has struggled with chronic irritability, mental fog, and a sense of worthlessness, as well as sleep disturbances. He easily becomes mentally scattered and physically agitated. He experiences everyday life as predominantly dull and joyless, and his overall tension escalates periodically into bouts of anxiety. Emerson reports a history of feeling inadequate and complains of being unable to express himself.

In Emerson's case, as in most others, the genetic vulnerability and chemical imbalance associated with clinical depression are typically set into motion by a host of stressful environmental and psychosocial factors. The suffering that results can range from mild or moderate to severe and typically goes undiagnosed and untreated for years.

How can a spiritual community provide a healing environment for people like Emerson that allows them to feel at ease—the way Emerson feels in nature?

To explore this question meaningfully, we need to examine Bahá'í ontology, which offers a clear contemporary articulation of the nature and dynamics of reality.

#### BAHÁ'Í ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

In accordance with all earlier religious Dispensations, Bahá'í ontology recognizes reality as spiritual in essence, limitless and timeless, originating from a personal Creator, and manifested in an infinite diversity of life systems. As such, it acknowledges the interdependence of all beings: "all beings are linked together like a chain; and mutual aid, assistance, and interaction are among their intrinsic properties and are the cause of their formation, development, and growth . . . [E]very single thing has an effect and influence upon every other, either independently or through a causal chain" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 46:6).

If we were to ponder deeply the implications of such interdependence, we would have to conclude that *we are both influencing and being influenced by every human condition in the world, and therefore have to enter into a meaningful and mindful relationship with it*. How is a mindful relationship different from our ordinary ways of relating?

To understand mindful relating, we first have to ponder the nature of the mind. In Bahá'í ontology, the mind is understood as "the power of the human spirit . . . and a necessary attribute thereof" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some*

*Answered Questions* 55:6). Since the Bahá'í Dispensation upholds the oneness and complementarity of science and religion, it is helpful to correlate this understanding with the most recent scientific understanding of mind. In 2010, an interdisciplinary research team studying the nature of mind at the Mindsight Institute described mind as the embodied and interpersonal process of regulating the flow of energy and information (Siegel 52). According to this groundbreaking understanding, the mind is a lot more than the linear analytical processes associated with left brain function or the direct perception processes associated with right brain function. While brain is the matrix of the mind and, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, "reason has its seat in the brain" (*Divine Philosophy* 96), mind is understood as a dynamic process that encompasses the whole human body as well as its interpersonal space. Such understanding is convergent with the Bahá'í ontological and epistemological understanding of the human spirit as expressing the power to encompass all things ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* ch. 36).

From such an understanding follows that relating mindfully to all beings, whom we influence and by whom we are influenced, requires an intentional and fully awakened presence. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us, "character [is] highly communicable" (*Some Answered Questions* 57:8). Much recent research has elucidated this spiritual teaching about the role of cultivating an awakened presence in the dynamics

of individual and collective health.

#### RESEARCH ON THE POWER OF MIND, MINDSETS, AND HEART

By the closing years of the twentieth century, biomedical science had discovered that "our internal chemicals, the neuropeptides and their receptors, are the actual biological underpinnings of our awareness, manifesting themselves as our emotions, beliefs, and expectations" (Pert 9). Western mind-body medicine had begun to discern that the mind, spirit, and emotions are, in fact, unified with the physical body in what Deepak Chopra has called "one intelligent system" (qtd. in Pert 9). An explosion of mindfulness studies started to show that moment by moment, through its powers of thought, imagination, understanding, and memory, the human mind constructs models of reality that have profound implications for biochemical functioning and, therefore, for mood and behavior.<sup>4</sup>

These models of reality contain mostly unexamined, implicit, and impactful beliefs and assumptions about how we establish and express personal power in social contexts and about what constitutes justice as well as

---

4 See, for example, Ruth A. Baer's *Mindfulness-Based Treatment Approaches*, Richard Carlson and Joseph Bailey's *Slowing Down to the Speed of Life*, and Francesco Pagnini and Ellen Langer's "Perceived Control and Mindfulness: Implications for Clinical Practice."

love in human relationships.<sup>5</sup> However faulty or inaccurate such inner models may be, they function as lenses through which we perceive what happens to us. The mind and body experience these mind-created models of life as reality, and we are often unaware of our cognitive distortions.

We do not grow up being deliberately taught how to use the mind in a balanced way and how to avoid cognitive distortions as much as possible. To the contrary, during our formative years, we grow up in mostly imbalanced human contexts where we may well encounter destructive thinking patterns modeled by powerful adults. Through frequent exposure to them, these thinking patterns become mindsets<sup>6</sup> that render us relatively blind to other ways of seeing reality. Such mindsets often generate depression and anxiety, but they can also account for exploitative or guarded and superficial relating to others. Any of these mindsets will compromise our health.

Mindfulness studies have shown that we can reverse these adverse mindsets through the remarkable neuroplasticity of the human brain and the ability of thought to change

the brain's physical wiring. In the case of depression, "[j]ust thinking about depressive thoughts in a new way can dial down activity in one part of the brain that underlies depression and increase it in another, leading to clinical improvement" (Begley qtd. in Masumian 28).

A growing body of research points to the power of cultivating a focus on gratitude to protect us from the impact of negative mindsets: "Gratefulness will push fear and anxiety out of your consciousness. It's a powerful cleansing agent for your psyche, dissolving any resentment" (Sanders qtd. in Masumian 93).<sup>7</sup>

Intentionally established spiritual practices of meditation and contemplative self-reflection correct the cognitive distortions of mindsets and cultivate a clearer perception of reality over time, resulting in a healthier experience of life.<sup>8</sup> Further, studies increasingly recognize that meditation and contemplative spiritual practices are "heart-centered."<sup>9</sup> Because all spiritual traditions associate the heart with a deeper intelligence linked to

---

5 For an in-depth discussion of how we construct these core human concepts, see William Hatcher's *Love, Power, and Justice*.

6 For further discussion of the dynamics of mindsets and unhealthy "normal" mental habits, see George Pransky's *The Relationship Handbook* and Rick Hanson's *Buddha's Brain*.

---

7 See, for example, Robert Emmons' *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*.

8 See, for instance, Baer's *Mindfulness-Based Treatment Approaches*, Herbert Benson's *The Relaxation Response*, Lissa Rankin's *Mind Over Medicine*, and Daniel J. Siegel's *Mindsight*.

9 See John Kabat-Zinn's *Full Catastrophe Living* and Farnaz Masumian's *The Divine Art of Meditation*.

quieting the discursive mind, there have been interesting hypotheses put forth exploring potential connections between the metaphorical spiritual heart, the physical heart, and the brain, as well as the possible significance of such connections for human wellbeing.<sup>10</sup>

In 1991, neurocardiologist J. Andrew Armour theorized that the physical heart possesses its own complex nervous system that perceives, processes, and retains information independently of the brain. Meanwhile, Gary Schwartz, professor of psychology and psychiatry at Yale University, and Linda Russek, Harvard research psychologist, began to publish their own conclusion that the heart stores energy and information that may contribute to one's sense of self (Schwartz and Russek). At about the same time, physicians such as Larry Dossey and Bernie Siegel were beginning to suggest a connection between successful healing and aligning brain processing with the energetic information flow of the heart through a range of spiritual practices.

In convergence with this emergent broader understanding of mind and human energy and information systems, some heart surgeons, psychiatrists, and psychologists began to describe cases where heart transplant patients reported experiencing

memories from the life of the heart donor (Pearsall 7). Also reported were cases where the patient adopted new personality traits akin to characteristics possessed by the heart donor (Bunzel et al.; Pearsall 122–24).

Clinical psychologist Paul Pearsall summarizes the research up to 1998 that points consistently to the presence of two intelligences in the human being—brain intelligence and heart intelligence—and he discusses the importance of the proper alignment of the two (Pearsall 17–18, 172–73). He interprets the findings as suggesting that the physical heart is a powerful energetic center, which communicates energetically with other bodily systems, information that, he concludes, may be stored even at the cellular level in the heart. His hypothesis is explained in the following excerpt:

If information is carried in the energy of the heart and circulates within the cells, and if energy cannot be destroyed, whatever memories of a life experience anyone has ever had may be able to become our own individual memories. Unlike the more individual and personal information stored by your brain, cellular memories may be experienced as representations of universal, archetypal, infinitely shared memories that represent the collective unconscious. (Pearsall 106)

---

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the research on heart-brain communication and degrees of coherence carried out by the HeartMath Institute.

Earlier, pioneer physiologists John and Beatrice Lacey had theorized that

the physical heart communicates extensive information to the brain along different pathways and thus might significantly affect how we perceive and react to the world around us (Lacey and Lacey).

All of this theoretical discourse seemed to suggest that the nervous system controlling the heart might communicate with the brain. It further indicated that when the physical heart enters into highly coherent heart rhythms (described as smooth, harmonious sine waves), there might occur a sort of attunement between heart rate and brain waves.<sup>11</sup> Strikingly, such attunement between heart and brain was observed in people whose spiritual practice focused on cultivating the metaphorical heart (the affective experiences alluded to in scripture in such as striving to possess a “pure heart”) through the practice of developing positive spiritual attitudes and attributes, such as gratitude, love, and caring.

Positive psychology research confirms that practicing positive spiritual attributes broaden and build our ability to appreciate multiple points of view (empathy) and facilitate capacities for problem-solving (creativity), thus possibly enabling us to access a deeper and more comprehensive expression of our intelligence.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> See HeartMath Institute research reported in the documentaries *The Living Matrix* and *Missing Links*.

<sup>12</sup> See Barbara Fredrickson, also Snyder and Lopez

Much of this recent research elucidates the mind/body/spirit connection, discussed in detail in the Bahá'í Writings. Prior to the Bahá'í Writings, as Henry Weil points out, “little was known of the spiritual factors that account for man’s station at the apex of creation” (35). Hindu and Buddhist Scriptures emphasized the need to train the human mind, without articulating explicitly the nature and dynamics of the human spirit and its relationship to Spirit:

The mind is wavering and restless, difficult to guard and restrain; let the wise man straighten his mind. (*Dhammapada* 3:30)

For him who has conquered the mind, the mind is the best of friends; but for one who has failed to do so, his mind will remain the greatest enemy. (*Bhagavad Gita* 6:6)

For the first time in the history of revealed knowledge, in the nineteenth century the Bahá'í Dispensation explained the nature and dynamics of the human spirit and its powers.

#### BAHÁ'Í UNDERSTANDING OF THE POWERS OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

‘Abdu’l-Bahá distinguishes five degrees of spirit. The first three pertain to the realm of creation. They are the vegetable spirit of growth through the combination of elements; the animal spirit, which expresses the power

of senses; and the human spirit, or the rational soul, which is an emanation from the Unknowable Divine. The relationship between the rational soul, the mind, and the body is described in the following way:

For the mind to manifest itself, the human body must be whole; and a sound mind cannot be but in a sound body, whereas the soul dependeth not upon the body. It is through the power of the soul that the mind comprehendeth, imagineth and exerteth its influence, whilst the soul is a power that is free. The mind comprehendeth the abstract by the aid of the concrete, but the soul hath limitless manifestations of its own. The mind is circumscribed, the soul limitless. ("Tablet to August Forel" 8)

In this dialectical understanding of human reality as a dynamic between mind, body, and soul, in which each plays a fundamental role, biochemical sicknesses are understood as "hindrances that interpose themselves between [one's] soul and [one's] body" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 80:2).

Consistent with earlier Hindu and Buddhist traditions, 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasized the role of mind in our perceptions of reality: "All we see around us is the work of mind" (*Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 95). His teachings underscore the importance of cultivating a disciplined mind that reasons well and makes responsible decisions. However,

the Bahá'í Writings identify another power of the human soul in addition to the reasoning mind—that of inner vision:

This is a power that encompasses all created things, comprehends their realities, unravels their hidden mysteries, and brings them under its control. It even understands things that have no outward existence, that is, intelligible, imperceptible, and unseen realities such as the mind, the spirit, human attributes and qualities, love and sorrow—all of which are intelligible realities. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 48:4)

'Abdu'l-Bahá clarifies that when the faculty of inner vision is applied to the physical world, it manifests as intuition and insight, and it discovers creative solutions. When it is applied to the spiritual realm, it manifests as spiritual discernment.<sup>13</sup> In addition, He anticipates much recent psychological research in making clear that the reasoning mind has to quiet down in order for the faculty of inner vision to open up. Psychological studies now confirm that as we quiet our mental chatter, slow down the discursive mind, and drop into what Kabat-Zinn describes as "heart-fullness" and what Tara Brach calls listening to life as "one of the great templates for pure

---

<sup>13</sup> See Henry Weil, *Drops from the Ocean*

wakefulness and awareness,” we relax into the present moment, known in wisdom traditions as the “eternal now,” and thus access our inner vision.<sup>14</sup> This spiritual power of inner vision appears to be what the research quoted earlier attempts to understand in terms of the connections between the metaphorical heart, the physical heart, and the brain, as well as their alignment in meditation and mindfulness practices.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains the process of the full activation of inner vision through what He describes as the fourth degree of spirit—the spirit of faith. The spirit of faith is distinguished from faith. While faith is a loving and trusting relationship of a human being to spiritual reality and to our Creator, the spirit of faith originates with God.<sup>15</sup>

[T]his spirit [of faith] proceeds from the breath of the Holy Spirit, and . . . becomes the cause of everlasting life . . .

The fifth degree of spirit is the Holy Spirit. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 36:6–7)

[T]he human spirit, unless it be assisted by the spirit of faith, cannot become acquainted with the divine mysteries and the heavenly

realities. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 55:5)

Hence, when touched by the spirit of faith, the human spirit draws closer to its full potential to encompass reality. This understanding of the role of faith in enhancing the capacities of soul helps make clear why spiritual communities would be natural holding environments with strong healing potential for people who suffer from affective disorders.

In summary, an abundance of recent research has confirmed Bahá'í understanding that meditation and God-centered practices of prayer and contemplation cultivate in individuals and communities a deeply healing spirit of loving-kindness and compassion (Masumian; Newberg and Waldman). Bahá'í scholar Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl emphasizes the role of concentration in this kind of spiritual growth:

‘Abdu’l-Bahá said that there is in man a power of concentration not fully developed, which power rightly directed can lead him to great heights of knowledge, understanding and illumination. Prayer and supplication are the ladder, He said, “by which the soul ascends and as the power of sustained communion with God develops the capacity to receive the influx of the Holy Spirit and to penetrate, the hidden mystery unfolds.” (qtd. in Masumian 13)

14 See Hanson’s *Buddha’s Brain*, Siegel’s *Mindsight*, and Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Peace Is Every Step*.

15 See Henry Weil, *Drops from the Ocean*

DEPRESSION  
AND THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

Now that we have examined the role of mind, mindsets, heart, and faith in health and healing, we return to the example of Emerson in order to better appreciate both the individual's capacity to heal and the community's capacity to serve as a healing holding environment.

THE EMERSON CASE STUDY

Having grown up in an emotionally and spiritually deprived context of poverty, alcoholism, and silent suffering, Emerson developed many thinking habits that are associated with the cognitive bias of learned helplessness.<sup>16</sup> This cognitive filter paralyzed Emerson's constructive engagement in social contexts, and, at various points in his life, his distorted perceptions may have triggered his genetic predisposition to develop or maintain depression. Over time, Emerson's tendency to become depressed gave rise to seemingly permanent personality characteristics, such as defensiveness and a distrustful attitude toward others. These unattractive personality traits can interfere with his capacity to care for himself and maintain meaningful intimate relationships.

Indeed, Emerson's condition is

---

16 For more on this cognitive bias, see William R. Miller and Martin Seligman's "Depression and Learned Helplessness in Man" and Seligman's *Helplessness*.

more common than we realize. Many people are apt to be on a continuum from minimal to strong predisposition to the "thought storms" that can develop into depression and anxiety disorders. A wide range of different modalities of integrating spirituality into treatment can be understood from the point of view of the above discussion as seeking to engage the powers of the soul to uplift the mind.<sup>17</sup> The physiological dynamics of that appear to be that brain activity aligns with heart activity, and this brain-heart entrainment unlocks a highly intelligent flow of awareness and insight, which facilitates the reconstruction of cognitive distortions and the transformation of suffering into opportunities for growth.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of Emerson, who identifies himself as being Bahá'í, prayer, meditation, mind/body martial arts practices, and the steadfast spiritual commitment and support of his family have gradually strengthened his resilience in spite of clinical depression. He has successfully overcome challenging circumstances and built a constructive life using his talents, even as he remains somewhat closed off in his own world and struggles with issues of faith.

---

17 See, for instance, Miller's *Integrating Spirituality into Treatment* and the National Institute for Healthcare Research's *Scientific Research on Spirituality and Health*.

18 See McCraty, Tiller and Atkinson's *Head-Heart Entrainment: A Preliminary Study*.

Emerson's constant wrestling with depression may make it more difficult for someone like him to connect with Bahá'u'lláh's counsel: "My Calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy" (Arabic Hidden Words no. 51). However, through spiritual self-education and the steady emotional and spiritual support of his family—and, to some extent, the support of his spiritual community—as well as through his psychotherapeutic work, Emerson is gradually beginning to internalize a different model of reality, one based on a belief in a benevolent, spiritually interconnected and dynamic universe whose Creator cares deeply for him, even as social reality may not be benevolent. This allows him to begin to break the intractable barrier between his sensitive soul and his insecure and withdrawn personality. Even if Emerson must struggle with depression throughout his life, he can increasingly find some measure of strength and can develop more enduring relationships with others who accept him in his full humanity. This healing process for both Emerson and his family typically requires not just the efforts of the individual, but also the presence of genuinely "holding" spiritual communities.

#### A SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY AS A HOLDING ENVIRONMENT

The psychological concept of a holding environment, introduced at the beginning of this paper, offers a more

detailed understanding of how a spiritual community can play a critical part in recognizing and nurturing families dealing with affective disorders.

First, it is important to clarify why a spiritual community, relative to many other types of communities, may have a special role as a holding environment.

With the rapid and intense global fraying of social relations discussed in the beginning of this paper, more and more people are recognizing the need for a third type of education in addition to the two widely recognized ones—material and intellectual.<sup>19</sup> As 'Abdu'l-Bahá clarifies, "material education aims at the growth and development of the body," while human education "must so educate human minds and thoughts that they may become capable of substantive progress; that science and knowledge may expand" (*Some Answered Questions* 3:5; 3:10). Spiritual education, however, enables intelligence and comprehension to "apprehend the metaphysical world"; it so educates the human reality that it may become the manifestation of divine blessings" (*Some Answered Questions* 3:11). 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes these "divine blessings" as

heavenly bounties, heartfelt emotions, the love and knowledge of God, the education of the people,

---

<sup>19</sup> For more on this subject, see *Century of Light* and *One Common Faith*, two documents commissioned by the Universal House of Justice.

the perceptions of the mind, and the discoveries of science. They consist in justice and equity, truthfulness and benevolence, inner courage and innate humanity, safeguarding the rights of others and preserving the sanctity of covenants and agreements. They consist in rectitude of conduct under all circumstances, love of truth under all conditions, self-abnegation for the good of all people, kindness and compassion for all nations, obedience to the teachings of God, service to the heavenly Kingdom, guidance for all mankind, and education for all races and nations. This is the felicity of the human world! (*Some Answered Questions* 15:7)

Spiritual communities that seek to cultivate these “divine blessings” have always existed. However, in this “age of anxiety” and “empty self” (Jackson qtd. in Hanley 26–27), there is a growing effort to seek solutions to “the failure of religious institutions to assist humanity in dealing with challenges whose essential nature is spiritual and moral” (Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith* ii). We witness intensifying efforts to free the religious spirit “from the shackles that have so far prevented it from bringing to bear the healing influence of which it is capable” (Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith* iii). We see growing efforts to build spiritual learning communities, referred to in the Buddhist tradition as “sanghas,” as well

as a growing recognition in the social sciences of the need for the systematic cultivation of the above qualities of spirit.<sup>20</sup> As people seek to create spiritual holding environments of a new kind, let us explore the nature and dynamics of an authentically holding spiritual community.

Individuals who struggle with affective disorders often feel they are pushing hard uphill to engage in community life. In confidential therapeutic settings, they may frequently express deep misgivings about their spiritual capabilities. They believe that they either must not know how to pray and meditate or that their prayers are not being answered given that they do not experience significant alleviation of their symptoms. Such thoughts tend to exacerbate the depressed person’s proneness to low self-esteem and discouragement. In that regard, the Universal House of Justice writes to an individual believer: “Your feeling that you are to blame for your depression is itself a challenge that you need to overcome. When we turn to ourselves we can often see nothing but shortcomings and failures which then contribute to dismay and depression” (*Coping with Life’s Trials*).

How can we help our loved ones and community members who struggle with depression to truly discover the regenerative power of prayer, meditation, service to others, and deepening in the Word of God? How can

---

<sup>20</sup> See Snyder and Lopez, *Handbook of Positive Psychology*

we accompany each other and create genuine holding environments that help all of us activate our inner vision without eventually becoming afflicted with what might be termed “compassion fatigue”?

As Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote, all life is a meeting. At any moment at which we enter into mind-heart alignment and truly and meaningfully meet another person in what Buber describes as an “I-Thou experience,”<sup>21</sup> we uplift our own hearts and those of others who are suffering. The veils lift, and the light shines upon us as together we “find shelter in the heart of existence” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gems* 49). Such meetings of minds and hearts have been referred to as “authentic communication.”<sup>22</sup>

#### AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION

To grasp more deeply the process of authentic communication as it

---

21 An “I-Thou” experience refers to an intentional movement beyond simple linear verbal information exchange with the “other” and the recognition of our ultimate meaningful interrelatedness, thus reverently attuning ourselves to seeing and honoring the soul of the person with whom we are communicating. Such an orientation to the interpersonal space suggests consciously drawing on what was discussed earlier in this paper as the energetic and cellular archetypal wisdom of the heart.

22 See the cited work of Emmanuel Levinas, and also of Charles Taylor

takes place in our relationships, let us examine Winnicott’s psychological constructs of “the true self” and “the false self” and how they develop in the matrix of mother-child interactions. A caring mother responds to the physical and emotional needs of her baby with enough attunement that the baby can learn to feel safe, whole, and vibrant in its own body and in the world. The “true self” that develops in such a context is a sense of being alive and real in one’s own body and mind, which allows spontaneous, unforced, and creative feelings, as well as real closeness with others.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast, if a baby’s caregiver is unattuned to the infant’s emotional needs and conditions or, worse yet, depressed, abusive, or an alcoholic, the baby tends to focus its energies and actions on finding ways to get a positive response from the distracted and unhappy caregiver by trying to please, constantly seeking to anticipate the demands of the caregiver, and becoming excessively compliant. This defense mechanism of compliance forces the child to put undue attention into controlling or avoiding its own feelings for fear of creating further unhappiness in the caregiver. Eventually, the forming person tends to lose his or her sense of realness and meaning and learns to live in a flat, defensive stance—its “false self.”

In the above sense, there is a true self and a false self in each one of us. The true self expresses our innate

---

23 See *Winnicott on the Child*

health and creativity; and while it is usually restrained and governed (at least somewhat), it gives a person a sense of being alive, engaged, real, creative, and relational. That true self aspires toward truth, beauty, and goodness, and it searches, in all of its encounters with reality, for that ultimate understanding of truth, beauty, and goodness that constitutes spiritual education. For those who belong to religious or mystical traditions, this search usually entails a quest to find, love, and obey God. The adult developmental dynamic that Wade describes of continuing to seek an increasingly deeper alignment between our sense of our true self and social standards often sets us on a course of seeking to grasp how Manifestations of God in the human realm—such as Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, Bahá'u'lláh—may illuminate the nature of the ultimate true self, as well as the path to advancing human civilization toward spiritual justice.

In health, our internal life and our spontaneous feelings are not dominated or blocked by an excessively compliant false self, while a reasonable measure of compliance assists us in adapting to our environments. We strive, moment by moment, to connect with one another through our true selves; we seek to be aware of our various learned masks as they creep into communication, and we gently release these distortions as we continue to open up inner spaciousness and hospitality to encounters between souls. Such authentic encounters sustain

and enrich the life energy of all participants and protect from compassion fatigue.

Recent educational research has described how authentic communication can lead to developmental shifts, described as “head-to-heart shifts” (Cotten). According to Emmanuel Levinas, an authentic encounter with another person overcomes the unethical unconscious tendency to assimilate another person into the “totality” of our own assumptions and beliefs. My research on optimal adult development showed that people who strive to overcome this tendency to assimilate others into their own frame of reference are motivated to seek more authentic relationships with others through their attraction to truth, beauty, and goodness. The deeper that attraction, the more morally coherent a person appears to be and the more optimal the state of his or her personal development and relationships (Mustakova-Possardt, *Critical Consciousness*).<sup>24</sup>

As we observed in Emerson's case, characteristic of the psychosocial aspects of depression is that the person tends to have significant difficulties accessing and expressing that alive and real part of himself or herself; hence, Emerson's recurring feelings of emptiness and irritability and his tendency

---

24 For a more extensive discussion of authentic relating, see pgs. 57–59 of Glen Cotten's “The Role of Authentic Communication in Moral Development and Transformative Education: Reflections on a Case Study.”

to be unreflective and over-accommodating in close relationships, resulting in subsequent chronic resentment and relative lack of authentic communication. Exposure to nature, on the other hand, releases Emerson from the internalized pressure to over-accommodate and allows him to access the spontaneous aliveness and joy of his real self. For this reason, a growing number of treatment modalities rely on emphasizing healing and experiential aliveness through mind/body practices and a closer contact with nature.

In view of the above discussion of authentic communication, it clearly takes courage from the members of a spiritual community to choose to relate fully, with awareness of learned masks, and a willingness to keep releasing them. In community life, we encounter many variations of the barriers and masks. Accepting these as opportunities to learn how not to react to other people's masks by resorting to our own is a wonderful spiritual gift for all of us. As we persevere in returning to authentic communication with courage and a commitment to empathy and imagination one mindful moment at a time, we gradually grow to experience our communities as spiritual holding environments for all of us. Such courage translates into creating healthier communities and ultimately more social health.

HUMAN HEALTH AS A  
RELATIONAL PHENOMENON:  
A SOCIAL HEALTH APPROACH

The above discussion of affective disorders in relation to spiritual communities illustrates that we are relational beings and that much of our suffering, as well as much of our healing, happens in the context of relationships—relationships with ourselves, with loved ones and community, with nature, with society, and with God. The awareness of this aspect of our ontology can assist in liberating us from the purely individualistic understanding of emotional health and empower us to begin to think of it more in terms of degrees of social health.

Social health can be understood as a deeper reality of coherent and shared moral meaning and ethical and moral purpose, both of which allow a collective to intentionally uplift, unify, and support healthy interdependent living (Mustakova-Possardt, "Understanding Human Health as Social Health"). Authentic communication across constructions of meaning and life purpose creates moral coherence and social health in a human collective.

A convergence of research across a wide range of fields increasingly recognizes coherence as a central concept in health—both individual and collective.<sup>25</sup> The coherence of our beliefs, attitudes, and states of mind and heart

---

25 See Childre and Martin, McTaggart, Mustakova-Possardt and Woodall, *One Common Faith*, Poppo and Chang.

in a particular sociohistorical context is a dynamic condition, which reflects degrees of our use of free will toward awareness and authenticity from moment to moment. Hence, our moral coherence as a community is a synergistic collective product of the condition of each individual.

In a pervasive global context of crude materialism, it is not easy to find organizations, communities, and entities that aspire toward moral coherence and social health, even as global trends toward collective spiritual awakening are beginning to change organizational life (Bourne). Even spiritually minded organizations and communities can be afflicted by an inflated “sense of their own specialness” (Roche qtd. in Masumian 37) and therefore by degrees of incoherence between their claims and aspirations and the actual experience of community life and relationships. Such incoherence is often reflected in unspoken judgments about people with special challenges, as well as rigidity in applying religious and spiritual guidance. The result is the development of superficial interpersonal and community relationships. In this way, people who struggle with particular emotional or mental health vulnerabilities in our midst may serve as the canary in the mine, alerting us to the need to become more attuned to one another, more authentic in our relating, and more morally coherent.

If we return to the example of Emerson, spiritual discernment—the result of activating the inner vision

of the soul—would allow the members of a spiritual community to see Emerson’s quiet suffering, as well as the suffering of his family, and to understand its reality without feeling the need to judge. Such understanding would allow Emerson’s fellow Bahá’ís and their administrative bodies to communicate authentically while upholding standards of Bahá’í conduct and due process and would protect suffering families from a formalistic and avoidant approach.

Every group, community, and social setting faces the challenge of finding coherence—psychological, moral, spiritual, and social—amidst the reality of human interdependence.<sup>26</sup> The more we engage together to create coherence, relying on an epistemology of deep listening and authentic communication across our diversity, the more human suffering is likely to be greatly reduced. This is perhaps why in the opening Hidden Word, Bahá’u’lláh addresses us by saying: “O son of spirit! My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting” (Arabic no. 1). The choice to seek coherence is an act of free will.

---

26 For some cultural analyses of the struggle to find coherence in the Western context, see Robert N. Bellah et al.’s *Habits of the Heart* and Charles Taylor’s *The Ethics of Authenticity*. For global analyses of the struggle toward coherence, see *Century of Light* and *One Common Faith*.

FREE WILL AND THE STRUGGLE TO  
EMERGE VICTORIOUS

The exercise of free will is a power of the soul that we must aspire to develop deliberately. For example, choosing to learn skills of mindful self-regulation, emotional intelligence, spiritual self-reflection, and body awareness can give people who are depression-prone the leverage to discern early the onset of habitual and destructive patterns of thought and to intensify resilient practices of redirecting their minds and activating their spiritual energies through meditation, prayer, and contemplation.<sup>27</sup> Choosing to integrate into one's life age-old healing practices—such as qi gong, yoga, tai chi, acupuncture—which rely on stimulating the energetic coherence of living systems, is yet another powerful way to exercise free will in the direction of greater health.<sup>28</sup>

The same applies to those of us who live, work, or serve with people struggling with affective disorders. For all of us, regular exercises of individual and communal prayer and meditation, in communities that have established a pattern of devotional life, may serve to “soften the hardened clay” out of which well-entrenched undermining patterns of thought are molded and

<sup>27</sup> See Feinstein, Eden, and Craig; Masumian.

<sup>28</sup> For more details, refer to see Fritz-Albert Popps and Jiin-Ju Chang's “Mechanism of Interaction between Electromagnetic Fields and Living Systems.”

to cultivate spiritual habits of heart. Bahá'u'lláh addresses us as follows:

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 . . . hindered from soaring in the heavens of My divine knowledge. (*Gleanings* 153:6)

The daily cultivation and consolidation of skills of mindfulness and spiritual reflection can serve as wind under the wings of the birds of our souls—helping us lift ourselves again and again above the mire of self-limiting beliefs and superficial attitudes. In any human predicament, when the spirit of faith touches the heart, we begin to realize a renewed power of will despite all conditions. We gain renewed strength to “divest ourselves of all that we have taken from each other,” such as our conditioned perceptual filters (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gems* 15).

Thus, our journey toward healing begins. The path of self-knowledge

and recognition of “that which lea-  
deth unto loftiness or lowliness”  
(Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 34–35) is a long  
and arduous road, and none of us are  
exempt from experiencing depression  
at some point on our journey, even  
as we strive to “soar to the realm of  
guidance” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gems* 15).

People with depression have a spe-  
cial challenge in terms of the exercise  
of their free will, as do their caregiv-  
ers, who have to bear the burden of  
helping to create an ongoing holding  
environment for their depressed loved  
ones, often without being held them-  
selves by spiritual communities. The  
more deeply we accept that we are all  
on a continuum in terms of learning  
how to live with less unnecessary wor-  
ry, anxiety, and judgments, mindfully  
aware of each moment's potentiality,  
the more deeply we can support each  
other's efforts. Such an attitude of hu-  
mility and community goes a long way  
in overcoming a depressed person's  
tendency to feel like a special failure,  
as well as our tendency to silently as-  
sume that if they had more faith they  
would not suffer so much. We pray:

O Thou the Compassionate God.  
Bestow upon me a heart which,  
like unto a glass, may be illumined  
with the light of Thy love, and  
confer upon me thoughts which  
may change this world into a rose  
garden through the outpourings  
of heavenly grace. Thou art the  
Compassionate, the Merciful! Thou  
art the Great beneficent God!  
(‘Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in *Bahá'í Prayers*  
72).

#### CONCLUSION: CULTIVATING HAPPINESS

In order to create healing spiritual  
communities, we have to tap purpose-  
fully into the spiritual powers of the  
human mind as an emanation of the  
soul. Prayer and meditation release  
into our bodies and brains dopamine  
and serotonin—neurotransmitters  
that create “a sense of joy, calm and  
safety” and relieve “symptoms of ten-  
sion, sadness and anxiety” (Newberg  
and Waldman qtd. in Masumian 24).  
Such an intentional and steady orien-  
tation allows us to cultivate happiness  
without denying or suppressing the  
unavoidable human experiences of  
grief, loss, and suffering that are such  
an integral part of living. When we  
cultivate spiritual discernment, we can  
develop a healthy relationship to inner  
darkness and pain, letting them pass  
through and be fully felt, while mind-  
fully resisting the temptation to turn  
them into narratives of learned help-  
lessness. As we practice remaining  
open to life from moment to moment  
(as beautifully described by Michael  
A. Singer in *The Untethered Soul*), we  
discover that joy is a natural condition,  
which bubbles up in every moment  
that we are not too layered with false  
beliefs.

Thus, we learn to channel spirit  
into our lives by communing authentically  
with every aspect of life and with  
others. John E. Esslemont writes:

each individual has his share in  
determining the state of that so-  
cial “atmosphere.” It may not be

possible for everyone, in the present state of the world, to attain to perfect health, but it is possible for everyone to become a “willing channel” for the health-giving power of the Holy Spirit and thus to exert a healing, helpful influence both on his own body and on all with whom he comes in contact. (113)

We do not have to feel healthy or even good in order to become willing channels “for the health-giving power of the Holy Spirit” (Esslemont 113). At the core of our ability to participate in creating healing spiritual communities is keenness of vision—our readiness to discern how our personal filters may tend to distort clear perception. The Bahá'í Writings appeal to humanity in this age to cultivate a new and keener mind through the intentional development of both the powers of the mind and the inner vision of the heart:

We cherish the hope that through the loving-kindness of the All-Wise, the All-Knowing, obscuring dust may be dispelled and the power of perception enhanced, that the people may discover the purpose for which they have been called into being. In this Day whatsoever serveth to reduce blindness and to increase vision is worthy of consideration. This vision acteth as the agent and guide for true knowledge. Indeed in the estimation of men of

wisdom keenness of understanding is due to keenness of vision.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 35)

Because the human heart is deeply sensitive to its social environment, our relentless striving to speak to each other from a place of truth and joy constitutes the first and most fundamental step in transforming the world into a safer place for all. That step can only be practiced one moment at a time. Bahá'u'lláh reminds us that

the cause of ascent is lightness, and the cause of lightness is heat .

... He hath therefore kindled with the mystic hand that Fire that dieth not and sent it forth into the world, that this divine Fire might, by the heat of the love of God, guide and attract all mankind to the abode of the incomparable Friend. (*Tabernacle* 71)

Thus, whenever our interactions leave us feeling dense, entangled, weighed down, and cold, we have an opportunity to pause and access again our love of God, from which flows light. In this way, moment by moment, we re-orient ourselves to “the royal Falcon on the arm of the Almighty,” who “unfold[s] the drooping wings of every broken bird and start[s] it on its flight” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tabernacle* 29).

As we embrace this understanding, all of us can begin to fulfill the three main characteristics of a holding environment for others—the ability to support, to challenge, and to remain in place as a reliable resource over time

(Kegan). In a Bahá'í community context, to challenge and support each other and ourselves may be understood as aspiring to *live* the Bahá'í teachings authentically, avoiding judgments, truly opening our hearts to seeing and meeting each soul where they are, and together opening up meaningful paths of service to society in which every soul can participate and thus lay aside its own burden.

In our ongoing growth as spiritual communities, the most suffering souls serve as wonderful litmus tests for the vibrancy of deeper love in a community. We become co-creators of holding environments that foster the wellbeing of all. In this shared growth process, it helps to remember that “[t]he power of God can entirely transmute our characters and make of us beings entirely unlike our previous selves” (passage from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 22 November 1941, qtd. in *Coping with Life's Trials* 5).

#### WORKS CITED

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Abdu’l-Bahá in London*. UK Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982.
- . *Divine Philosophy*. Tudor Press, 1918.
- . *Some Answered Questions*. Bahá'í World Centre, 2016.
- . “Tablet to August Forel.” *The Bahá'í World*, vol. 15, Bahá'í World Centre, 1921, pp. 37–43.
- Armour, J. Andrews. “Anatomy and Function of the Intrathoracic Neurons Regulating the Mammalian Heart.” *Reflex Control of the Circulation*, edited by I. H. Zucker and J. P. Gilmore, CRC Press, 1991, pp. 1–37.
- Baer, Ruth A. *Mindfulness-Based Treatment Approaches: Clinician's Guide to Evidence Base and Application*. Elsevier, 2006.
- Bahá'í Prayers: A Selection of Prayers Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991.
- Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976.
- . *Tablets Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978.
- . *Gems of Divine Mysteries*. Bahá'í World Centre, 2002.
- . *The Hidden Words*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985.
- . *The Tabernacle of Unity*. Bahá'í World Centre, 2006.
- Bellah, Robert N. et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. California UP, 1985.
- Benson, Herbert. *The Relaxation Response*. William Morrow, 1975.
- The Bhagavad Gita*. Translated by Juan Mascaro, Penguin, 1988.

- Bourne, Edmund J. *Global Shift: How a New Worldview is Transforming Humanity*. New Harbinger Publications, 2008.
- Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Touchstone, 1996.
- Bunzel, B. et al. "Does Changing the Heart Mean Changing Personality? A Retrospective Inquiry of 47 Heart Transplant Patients." *Quality of Life Research*, vol. 1, 1992, pp. 251–56.
- Carlson, Richard, and Joseph Bailey. *Slowing Down to the Speed of Life: How to Create a More Peaceful, Simpler Life from the Inside Out*. HarperCollins 1997.
- Childre, Doc, and Howard Martin. *The HeartMath Solution*. HarperCollins, 1999.
- Childre, Doc et al. *Heart Intelligence: Connecting with the Intuitive Guidance of the Heart*. Waterfront Press, 2016.
- Cotten, Glen. "The Role of Authentic Communication in Moral Development and Transformative Education: Reflections on a Case Study." *Journal of Thought*, vol. 51, no. 1–2, 2017, pp. 47–64.
- The Dhammapada: The Path to Perfection*. Translated by Juan Mascaro, Penguin, 1988.
- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., American Psychiatric Association, 2013.
- Emmons, Robert. *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. Houghton Mifflin, 2007.
- Esslemont, John. E. *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*. US Bahá'í Publishing, 1923.
- Feinstein, David, Donna Eden, and Gary Craig. *The Promise of Energy Psychology*. Penguin, 2005.
- Fredrickson, Barbara L. "The Role of Positive Emotions in Positive Psychology: The Broaden and Build Theory of Positive Emotions." *American Psychologist*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2001, pp. 218–26.
- Hanley, Paul. *Eleven*. FriesenPress, 2014.
- Hanson, Rick. *Buddha's Brain*. New Harbinger, 2009.
- Hatcher, William S. *Love, Power, and Justice: The Dynamics of Authentic Morality*. US Bahá'í Publishing, 1998.
- Kabat-Zinn, John. *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. Bantam, 2013.
- Kegan, Robert. *The Evolving Self*. Harvard UP, 1982.
- Lacey, John, and Beatrice Lacey. "Two-Way Communication between the Heart and the Brain: Significance of Time Within the Cardiac Cycle." *American Psychologist*, 1978, pp. 99–113.
- Lambo, Adeoye. "Constraints on World Medical and Health Progress." *One World: The Health and Survival of the Human Species in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by R. Lanza, Health Press, 2000, pp. 111–28.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. Kluwer, 1991.

- Masumian, Farnaz. *The Divine Art of Meditation*. George Ronald, 2014.
- McCraty, R., W. A. Tiller, and M. Atkinson. "Head-Heart Entrainment: A Preliminary Survey." *Proceedings of the Brain-Mind Applied Neurophysiology EEC Neurofeedback Meeting*. 1996.
- McTaggart, Lynne. *The Field: The Quest for the Secret Force of the Universe*. Harper Collins, 2001.
- Miller, William R. *Integrating Spirituality into Treatment*. American Psychological Association, 1999.
- Miller, William R., and Martin Seligman. "Depression and Learned Helplessness in Man." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, vol. 84, 1975, pp. 228–39.
- Mustakova, Elena. "Understanding Human Health as Social Health." Franklin and Marshall's Conference on Rethinking Relationships, 2014. Conference Presentation.
- Mustakova-Possardt, Elena. *Critical Consciousness: A Study of Morality in Global Historical Context*. Westport: Greenwood/Praeger, 2003.
- Mustakova-Possardt, Elena, and John Woodall. "Toward Social Health for a Global Community." *Toward a Socially Responsible Psychology for a Global Era*, edited by Mustakova-Possardt et al., Springer SBM, 2014, pp. 91–119.
- National Institute for Healthcare Research (NIHR). *Scientific Research on Spirituality and Health: A Consensus Report*. NIHR, 1997.
- Newberg, Andrew, and Mark Waldman. *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist*. Balantine Books, 2009.
- Pagnini, Francesco, and Ellen Langer. "Perceived Control and Mindfulness: Implications for Clinical Practice." *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2016, pp. 91–102.
- Pearsall, Paul. *The Heart's Code: Tapping the Wisdom and Power of Our Heart Energy*. Broadway Books, 1998.
- Pert, Candace. *Molecules of Emotion: The Science Behind Mind-Body Medicine*. Scribner, 1997.
- Popps, Fritz-Albert, and Chang, Jiin-Ju. "Mechanism of Interaction between Electromagnetic Fields and Living Systems." *Science in China*, vol. 43, 2000, pp. 507–18.
- Pransky, George. *The Relationship Handbook*. McGraw Hill, 1992.
- Rankin, Lissa. *Mind Over Medicine: Scientific Proof That You Can Heal Yourself*. Hay House, 2013.
- Seligman, Martin. *Helplessness: On Depression, Development, and Death*. W. H. Freeman, 1992.
- Siegel, Daniel J. *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation*. Bantam, 2010.
- Singer, Michael A. *The Untethered Soul*. New Harbinger, 2007.
- Snyder, C. R., and Shane J. Lopez. *Handbook of Positive Psychology*. Oxford UP, 2005.

- Schwartz, G. E., and L. G. Russek. "Dynamic Energy Systems and Modern Physics: Fostering the Science and Spirit of Complementarity and Alternative Medicine." *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*. 3,3 (1997): pp. 46–56.
- Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard UP, 1991.
- Universal House of Justice. *Coping with Life's Trials: Extracts from Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice*.
- . *One Common Faith*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2005.
- . *Century of Light*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2001.
- Thich Nhat Hanh. *Peace Is Every Step*. Bantam, 1991.
- Wade, Jenny. *Changes of Mind: A Holonomic Theory of the Evolution of Consciousness*. SUNY UP, 1996.
- Weil, Henry. *Drops from the Ocean*. Bahá'í Publishing Trust New Delhi, 1987.
- Winnicott, Donald W. *Winnicott on the Child*. Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2002.
- World Health Organization. *Mental Health Atlas 2011*. World Health Organization, 2011.
- World Health Organization. (2013): *Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2020*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- . "Mental Health: Strengthening Our Response." *World Health Organization*, April 2016, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs220/en/>.

# Biographical Notes

DR. ROSHAN DANESH teaches, works, and researches in the areas of constitutional law, conflict resolution and peace-building, and the intersection between law and religion. He completed his doctoral studies at Harvard Law School.

RICK JOHNSON has a Ph.D. in political science from Duke University and, since 2008, has served as Instructional Chair and Assistant Dean of Instruction at Colorado Mountain College (CMC). During his time at CMC, he has also been Founding Director of the Isaacson School for Communication, Arts, and Media. Prior to his role at Colorado Mountain College, he spent a dozen years as a full-time college faculty member and was Co-Administrator of Louhelen Baha'i School from 1991-2007.

Egyptian-American poet YAHIA LABABIDI is the author of 6 critically-acclaimed books of poetry and prose. His first collection of aphorisms, *Signposts to Elsewhere* (Jane Street Press) was selected as a 2008 'Book of the Year' by *The Independent*, in the UK. His work has appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *World Literature Today*, *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera* and elsewhere. His forthcoming book, *Where Epics Fail*, was featured on PBS NewsHour and generously endorsed by Obama's inaugural poet, Richard

Blanco, who wrote: "Aphorisms are an ancient form, but its current-day master is Yahia Lababidi."

DR. ELENA MUSTAKOVA is an educator, social scientist, and former professor in adult developmental psychology, as well as a counselor and psychotherapist in the metro DC area. Her study of the lifespan development of critical moral consciousness received Harvard's Murray Dissertation Award, and the Award of the Association for Moral Education. Her second co-edited volume, *Toward a Socially Responsible Psychology for a Global Era*, examines how Western psychology needs to re-think itself in order to contribute to a more sustainable future. Elena lectures extensively both in the U.S. and internationally, and regularly travels to and serves in Bulgaria since 1995.

SHOLEH WOLPÉ, an Iranian-born poet and writer, has received the 2014 PEN/Heim, 2013 Midwest Book Award and 2010 Lois Roth Persian Translation prize. Her literary work includes four collections of poetry, two plays, three books of translations, and three anthologies. About Wolpé's latest collection of poems, *Keeping Time with Blue Hyacinths*, *Shelf Awareness Magazine* writes, "A gifted Iranian-American poet beautifully explores love and the loss of love, beauty and war and the ghosts of the past." Wolpé has lived in the UK and Trinidad and is presently based in Los Angeles.