

# THE JOURNAL OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

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

**Volume 28, number 3**

**Fall 2018**



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

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

Volume 28 Number 3 Fall 2018

Publications Mail  
Registration No. 09448

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*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 American Theological Library Association and 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

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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.

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Cover: JANE BLANCH MACMILLAN Fishing Spot, Baffin Island (acrylic, 18" x 24")

# From the Editor's Desk

JOHN S. HATCHER

EXPLORING THE IMPLICATIONS  
OF A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK  
FOR BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARSHIP

This issue is dedicated to the challenge by the Universal House of Justice to the Association of Bahá'í Studies that this strategically important organization utilize its resources to consciously and progressively clarify how the elements of the conceptual framework that encompasses the vision and activities of the worldwide Bahá'í community as it works toward the advancement of spiritual and material civilization can be incorporated into the Association's various initiatives. But first, let us begin by considering what exactly is intended by the terms "conceptual framework" and "framework for action," which are so often used in describing the approach at the heart of the sequence of Five Year Plans initiated by the Universal House of Justice.

Both terms will be discussed at greater length in the first article, "Toward a Framework for Action," by member of the Universal House of Justice Mr. Paul Lamplé. However, we should note that "conceptual framework" is not a phrase coined by the Bahá'í Faith, nor is the process

to which it alludes devised solely for Bahá'í purposes. A conceptual framework, most generally, refers to the process of creating an intellectual tool that provides a way to progressively clarify the available concepts, methods, and strategies for accomplishing a set of objectives that require a complex process, as opposed to defining a clear-cut prescription for action.

From a Bahá'í perspective, perhaps the most powerful example for understanding a conceptual framework can be seen in the indirect, multifaceted, and ingenuous plan devised by the Creator whereby we humans—who are essentially spiritual—gradually learn about our nature and spiritual reality in general. We accomplish this objective by going through an elaborately conceived period of association with physical reality as we navigate the physical avatar that is our body through social and spiritual development by means of a series of increasingly complex relationships: first with parents and siblings, then with friends and playmates, next with our neighborhood and community, and ultimately with the world at large.

This framework for our advancement is conceptual because it is characterized by a process in which the objective (our spiritual enlightenment expressed in spiritual relationships), together with the framework for achieving that objective (individual and collective social action), are both organic and endlessly flexible. Both are capable of a limitless progression that accords with our continually

expanding needs and capacities as inherently social beings.

In this sense, the framework for expressing knowledge in action is never arbitrary or staid because there is no fixed or final point of development in our ultimate objective of bringing about by degrees the spiritual and material civilization that will be the outcome of Bahá'u'lláh's mission. Clearly, then, the framework required to pursue and achieve this goal must itself be flexible and unconstrained in its capacity to evolve to befit every stage in this process. In other words, even as there is no end to human progress, so there is no final stage for the complexification or efficacy of the framework facilitating and fostering that progress.

Another important feature of a conceptual framework is that it accommodates subsystems that likewise are capable of flexibility and a certain degree of autonomy. For this reason, the conceptual framework encompassing the specific features of the "framework for action" in the successive Five Year Plans might be usefully compared to the various systems within the human body. Each system—the nervous system, the circulatory system, the digestive system, the respiratory system, and so on—has a somewhat discrete and well-defined function in maintaining the health and vitality of the body. Yet none is self-sufficient; all are acutely attuned to the constantly changing needs of the body. In this same context, all systems of the body are, more or less, equally essential.

Thus, whereas we might assign a superior status to the brain as being in command of the body, the brain could not long survive without blood from the circulatory system being infused with oxygen from the respiratory system.

Like the conceptual framework that is the Creator's design for us to become gradually acquainted with, so that we may be educated about our essential nature, what the Bahá'í Writings term the "Major Plan of God" is an equally valuable example of a conceptual framework. "The Major Plan," sometimes alluded to as the "Greater Plan of God,"<sup>1</sup> is the "process of world unification . . . whose operation will continue, gathering force and momentum, until the human race has been united in a global society that has banished war and taken charge of its collective destiny" (*Century of Light* 138). Included as the most obvious systematic framework for bringing about this divinely ordained objective for the human race on planet Earth—and presumably any other planet capable of bringing about human life—are the systematic interventions by God involving successive and progressive revelations by His Vicegerents, designated as "Manifestations" by Bahá'u'lláh and characterized as being pre-existent, immaculate, infallible, and omniscient at will.

Further, within each Revelation are likewise subsidiary plans for promulgating and instituting this central

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1 See Wendi Momen, *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*, p. 89.

spiritual objective and bringing about individual and collective transformation appropriate to the age in which the Revelation occurs. It is in this context that the specific plans of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice are designated as constituting aspects of the Minor Plan of God:

Our fellow human beings everywhere are insensibly subjected at one and the same time to the conflicting emotions incited by the continuous operation of simultaneous processes of “rise and of fall, of integration and of disintegration, of order and chaos.” These Shoghi Effendi identified as aspects of the Major Plan and Minor Plan of God, the two known ways in which His purpose for humankind is going forward. The Major Plan is associated with turbulence and calamity and proceeds with an apparent, random disorderliness, but is, in fact, inexorably driving humanity towards unity and maturity. (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 155)

Because these parts of the Minor Plan are set forth systematically and logically by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the authoritatively appointed agencies of the Bahá’í Faith—the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice—and because our capacity as human beings for thought and action is necessarily limited and grows through experience over time, a conceptual framework for action that structures our continually

evolving understanding and practice is helpful for organizing our systematic execution of the Minor Plan: “Unlike His Major Plan, which works mysteriously, God’s Minor Plan is clearly delineated, operates according to orderly and well-known processes, and has been given to us to execute. Its ultimate goal is the Most Great Peace” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 155).

In the context of the strategic role that the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh plays at this turning point in human history—the maturation of the human body politic—we can appreciate how the framework for action in earlier plans by the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice—although part and parcel of Bahá’u’lláh’s overarching framework for bringing about the Most Great Peace<sup>2</sup> and the Golden Age of Bahá’u’lláh<sup>3</sup>—devised distinctive functions requiring frameworks appropriate to the various stages of progress toward this long-range objective. For example, the primary objective of the Guardian’s final plan, the Ten Year World Crusade (1953–1963), was to establish a sufficient number of National Spiritual Assemblies to function as pillars (the electorate) for the future Universal House of Justice.

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2 “A condition of permanent peace and world unity to be founded on the spiritual principles and institutions of the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh” (Momen 175).

3 “A future age of the Bahá’í Era, the arrival of which will be signaled by the establishment of the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh” (Momen 88).

But in a more “down to earth” and directly relevant manner, the conceptual framework in which the Bahá'í community is presently involved is the attempt by Bahá'ís to approach the tasks Bahá'u'lláh gave us in an evolving, more systematic manner. What we as Bahá'ís are doing now is trying, in this age of maturity, to be more conscious of how we are participating in this great enterprise, and the idea of a conceptual framework is important because with our limited capacity, we cannot grasp all at once the guidance we have been given by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice. Therefore, we do the best we can by assembling the relevant parts of that conceptual guidance and gradually putting them into practice through continuous study, consultation, action, and reflection.

The “framework for action,” then—as the term has been applied repeatedly during the last two decades (1996–2018) of plans conceived and implemented by the Universal House of Justice—refers to our effort to be conscious of the concepts, methods, practices, and instruments required to undertake an organic process capable of responding to an organic objective. And the principal objective for this process is stated clearly at the outset by the Universal House of Justice: “At Ridván 1996, the Bahá'ís of the world will embark on a global enterprise aimed at one major accomplishment: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops” (letter dated 26 December 1995).

Note that the goal stated here is not merely an increase in the number of adherents, but an advancement *in the process itself*. In short, while still an integral part of the conceptual framework of the Divine Plan instigated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, this new stage of plans emphasizes establishing the foundational requirements for the other parts of the framework that followed: the creation of training institutes and elected Regional Councils that would oversee these institutes, as well as the cultivation of a culture of learning and the need to develop individual and institutional capacity for sustainable growth.

During the 2000-2001 Twelve-Month Plan and in the years following, the framework for action—many elements of which had already been conceived and applied in various parts of the world in the preceding years—was consolidated and developed across a sequence of four Five Year Plans. As these Plans unfolded, we witnessed the creation of clusters, the devising of agencies necessary to translate vision into action within each cluster, the further development and implementation of the curriculum for the institutes (the Ruhi sequence), and three other core activities (children's classes, junior youth groups, and devotional meetings) to accompany the Ruhi study circles. What soon became apparent to all involved was the necessarily flexible and organic nature of the framework as vision beget action, and as reflection on the experience gained from the action helped refine

the vision and, subsequently, the conceptual framework itself.

Again, the worldwide success with this sequence of plans has derived from the organic nature of all the components of the framework for action within each plan. But as I discuss at some length in my recent book *God's Plan for Planet Earth—And Your Neighborhood*, for some believers and local Bahá'í communities that had become accustomed to a certain fixed and sometimes inflexible pattern of action for almost a century, switching to a continually changing and evolving grassroots process has been a substantial challenge. But, over time, it has become increasingly apparent that this conceptual framework and its emerging features greatly assist Local Spiritual Assemblies by eliminating some of the arduous and time-consuming work formerly dedicated to devising new local teaching plans every year. Now, instead, an inspiring, vital, and flexible a framework for outreach to the larger community is already in place and capable of being adapted to the exigencies of any community at whatever stage of development it may be and wherever in the world it may exist.

Furthermore, for those who have become Bahá'ís as this framework has been unfolding, there is no longer a long-term process whereby a new believer needs to go through a gradual and sometimes disorganized or haphazard education before knowing what Bahá'í life is about, what one does in the community, and how

action is carried out. New believers quickly become teachers, and any sense of rank—which might formerly have been characterized as being synonymous with longevity of membership—has been largely relegated to the past. Instead, believers old and new are challenged and exhorted to be attentive to the continuous changes and insights derived from the evolving framework, the newly emerging terminology to describe those changes, and the most recent messages from the House of Justice and the International Teaching Center—guidance that nurtures and sustains the global Bahá'í community as it builds communities in every country, territory, and island, from large urban environments to remote villages.

Returning, then, to the original concern about the implications of this conceptual framework for the work of the Association of Bahá'í Studies, the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, and Bahá'í scholarship in general, we are challenged to answer some hard questions. How does Bahá'í scholarly activity serve the advancement of spiritual and material civilization? What elements of a conceptual framework does it share with other aspects of Bahá'í endeavor, such as expansion and consolidation, social action, or involvement in the discourses of society, and what elements are distinct for its specific purposes? How does the cultivation of the intellectual life of the community serve all of these actions? Certainly, scholarship is not a thing of the past, a remnant of a dying age in

which the “learned” in “ivory towers” spoke in coded jargon to one another while the world fell into disarray. And because ABS is also endeavoring to encourage scholarship and create spaces for relevant scholarly discourse, it is likewise attempting to develop its own evolving framework for action.

The impulse that initiated serious consideration of how to identify the elements of this framework came in the form of a milestone letter on 24 July 2013 from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada—the institution charged with oversight of ABS. Part of this important document states the following about the relationship between ABS and the framework for action:

Through the specialized settings it creates, the Association can promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines. Central to the effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society is the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. It would be fruitful if the elements of this framework most relevant to the work of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies can be consciously and progressively clarified.

Dedicated to elucidating and expanding this insight, Mr. Lample's article does much more than merely explain the conceptual framework currently being implemented by the worldwide Bahá'í community. This substantial discourse is specifically aimed at both defining and encouraging scholarship, especially as scholarship relates to the major objectives of the Bahá'í Faith. Mr. Lample's discourse also usefully rehearses some caveats derived from past misunderstandings about the role of the scholar in the Bahá'í community.

The second article, “Transformative Leadership: Its Evolution and Impact” by Joan Barstow Hernandez, also demonstrates the practical application of scholarship in the transformation of society. Hernandez discusses the conceptual framework and the eighteen capabilities developed by Núr University as part of its Transformative Leadership program. Developed in the 1990s as a Bahá'í-inspired approach to leadership, this program has since been used in approximately sixty projects or workshops in forty countries in North and South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Hernandez focuses on the six elements that constitute the conceptual framework of this innovative approach.

The third article—by member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, Dr. Gerald Filson—began as a lengthy book review that the editorial board felt merited being further refined into what we believe a valuable assessment of

Sona Arbab's book, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*. Filson both rehearses the salient features of this work on education and assesses its contribution in considering what makes education effective. More specifically, he focuses on the method by which Arbab responds to the question of the central goal of education and, beyond that, how education can address our evolving need to learn about both the physical and social world at a time when knowledge and information are accumulating at such an incredible pace.

Finally, we have two lyric poems that demonstrate beautifully the subtle power that the poetic sensibility is capable of discovering, sometimes in the most unexpected places and circumstances. The first is "Slipping into the Light" by Cole Eubanks, and the second is "Silent Trades" by Cynthia Arriue-King. Both require reflection on our part, and both are well worth many readings. We also for the first time include two grayscale pictures—these from professional photographer Susan Jeffers—and we encourage further submissions from others whose talents lie in this field.

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## Slipping into the Light

COLE EUBANKS

In the window...behind the screen,  
a moth beats furious wings  
bleeding out powder.  
I free it releasing something  
in myself as well.

Soon the first dawn  
without me will arrive,  
and the only air  
that crosses these lips  
will be a breeze.

Hearing ticks  
of the second hand  
for the first time,  
I startle my face with splashes.  
Watching liquid slipping  
through cupped hands.  
I am at peace for I have lived  
a life of humble wildness.

# Toward a Framework for Action<sup>1</sup>

PAUL LAMPLE

## *Abstract*

For nearly four decades, the Association for Bahá'í Studies in North America has labored to promote Bahá'í scholarly activity through a range of efforts that include encouraging young believers in their study of the Revelation and their academic pursuits, fostering approaches to assist the friends in correlating the teachings with issues arising in contemporary thought, and providing a forum for Bahá'í academics to present their work and collaborate with one another. A letter dated 24 July 2013, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, set forth fresh insights to assist the Association in reflecting on its progress to date and its prospects for the future, centered around developing the "notion of an evolving conceptual framework." The following are some personal thoughts about the nature of such a framework and what some of its elements might be.

## *Résumé*

Pendant près de quarante ans, l'Association d'études bahá'íes en Amérique du Nord a cherché à promouvoir l'érudition bahá'íe par la tenue d'activités diverses

visant à encourager les jeunes croyants à s'engager dans l'étude de la Révélation et à réaliser des travaux académiques y faisant référence, à stimuler chez les amis leur capacité de mettre en corrélation les enseignements bahá'ís et le discours sur les enjeux contemporains, ainsi qu'à offrir aux universitaires bahá'ís une tribune pour y présenter leurs travaux et collaborer entre eux. Une lettre datée du 24 juillet 2013 écrite au nom de la Maison universelle de justice et adressée à l'Assemblée spirituelle nationale du Canada énonçait des idées nouvelles visant à aider l'Association à se pencher sur les progrès accomplis et sur ses perspectives d'avenir et mettait l'accent sur la « notion d'un cadre conceptuel évolutif ». L'auteur présente ici ses réflexions personnelles à ce sujet.

## *Resumen*

Por casi cuatro décadas, la Asociación de Estudios Bahá'ís en Norte America ha laborado para promover actividad escolar Bahá'í a través de un rango de esfuerzos que incluyen animar a creyentes jóvenes en su estudio de la Revelación y en sus intereses académicos, fomentando enfoques para asistir a los amigos en correlacionar las enseñanzas con temas que nacen del pensamiento contemporáneo, y proveyendo un foro para los académicos bahá'ís donde pueden presentar su trabajo y colaborar los unos con los otros. Una carta con fecha del 24 de julio de 2013, escrita de parte de la Casa Universal de Justicia para la Asamblea Espiritual Nacional de Canadá, expuso nuevas ideas para ayudar a la Asociación reflexionar sobre su progreso hasta la fecha y sus prospectos para el futuro, centrado alrededor del desarrollo de la "noción de un marco conceptual en evolución". Los siguientes puntos son algunos pensamientos personales sobre este tema.

1 This article is based on the plenary talk by the same title presented at the 38th Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, Toronto, Ontario, August 2014.

## THE CONCEPT OF A FRAMEWORK

At the start of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi focused the attention of the friends on the importance of building the administrative order. For some, at that time, the very notion that the Bahá'í Faith could be organized—instead of merely being a movement or a reflection of the spirit of the age—was a challenge. A few consciously resisted the administration, eventually falling away or opposing the Faith. However, even the generality of the faithful believers, who accepted without question Shoghi Effendi's guidance, naturally struggled at this early stage to understand and appropriately apply the teachings concerning the administration. Among the issues that challenged them were the relationships between the Assemblies and individuals, between the National and Local Assemblies, and between the National Assembly and the National Convention. The Bahá'í electoral process needed to be conceived, grasped, and translated into an effective pattern of action. Understanding the nature and method of Bahá'í consultation and the importance of upholding the decision of the Assembly, even when that decision was wrong, or at least when perceived by some to be wrong, presented additional challenges.

It can be inferred from guidance provided by Shoghi Effendi that on occasion, owing to a lack of understanding or experience, a member of an institution might have used his or her position to achieve personal aims

or impose personal perspectives, and community members sometimes ignored the Assembly's decision when it did not conform to their preferences. At other times, in response to particular issues that arose, the friends might have set aside the guidance provided in the Writings and simply taken sides and argued. Again and again, when these and similar challenges arose, Shoghi Effendi reminded the believers of the importance of their unity, which was grounded in their common love for Bahá'u'lláh, and indicated that the resolution of their problems rested on putting into practice the principles of the administration. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi states:

One of the main reasons why the Faith does not advance more rapidly is because the friends have not learned to live with, and work within the framework of the Administrative Order. Either they crystallize it into too set a form, or they rebel against what they feel to be a System, and do not give it sufficient support. Both of these extremes impede the progress of the Faith, and the efficiency of the believers. (qtd. in Hornby 185)

In order to overcome the dichotomy of reducing the administration to a rigid set of procedures or rejecting it outright, Shoghi Effendi introduced the concept of a framework.<sup>2</sup> This

<sup>2</sup> Shoghi Effendi used the word framework in relation to the administration both in terms of its meaning as the basic

concept is useful because the nature of Bahá'í efforts for administration are too big, too broad, and too organic to crystallize it into a fixed form, but the system is essential and cannot be set aside. The concept of a framework allows for evolution in understanding as the set of ideas within the framework, as well as how they are perceived, change over time based on experience and circumstances. Thus, what Shoghi Effendi originally said about Bahá'í administration was elaborated over the course of his ministry, and more has been added since the establishment of the Universal House of Justice. Some concepts and practices of the administration are permanent, some are temporary, and some are contextual. Even principles—which are unchanging—may be applied differently in different circumstances or at different times. In this sense, a framework should not be

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pattern of the institutions of the administrative order (for example, “the framework of His Administrative Order has been erected” [*World Order* 168]) and as the conceptual structure underlying the administrative system (for example, “One of the main reasons why the Faith does not advance more rapidly is because the friends have not learned to live with, and work within the framework of the Administrative Order,” which is “a system both living and dynamic” that requires “obedience to its principles and regulations” so as to “be able to direct their energies as a united force into the different channels of service that lie open to them” [*Light of Divine Guidance* 1:185–86]).

understood as a particular lens for the study of the Revelation, which is too vast to be restricted in this way; rather, it is a construct for being able to focus on learning how to translate the Bahá'í teachings into action in a particular area.

For example, the process of large-scale expansion of the Faith began during the Ten Year Crusade (1953–1963) in the final years of the life of Shoghi Effendi. However, for some forty years, the ability to sustain and extend the process on a systematic basis, maintaining the necessary balance between expansion and consolidation, remained elusive. To resolve this problem, the Universal House of Justice set forth the provisions of the Four Year Plan (1996–2000).<sup>3</sup> As these efforts

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3 “At Ridván 1996, the Bahá'ís of the world will embark on a global enterprise aimed at one major accomplishment: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. This is to be achieved through marked progress in the activity and development of the individual believer, of the institutions, and of the local community. That an advance in this process depends on the progress of all three of these intimately connected participants is abundantly clear. The next four years must witness a dramatic upsurge in effective teaching activities undertaken at the initiative of the individual. Thousands upon thousands of believers will need to be aided to express the vitality of their faith through constancy in teaching the Cause and by supporting the plans of their institutions and the endeavors of their communities.

continued to evolve within the Five Year Plan (2001–2006), it was helpful to begin to conceive of a framework for action pertaining to the work of growth and community-building, which has gradually evolved in complexity through experience to guide the work of the series of Five Year Plans through the end of the first century of the Formative Age. As the Universal House of Justice explains:

Over the past four and a half years, as the believers throughout the world have striven to pursue the aim of advancing the process

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They should be helped to realize that their efforts will be sustained by the degree to which their inner life and private character ‘mirror forth in their manifold aspects the splendor of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá’u’lláh.’ An acceleration in the tempo of individual teaching must necessarily be complemented by a multiplication in the number of regional and local teaching projects. To this end the institutions should be assisted in increasing their ability to consult according to Bahá’í principles, to unify the friends in a common vision, and to use their talents in service to the Cause. Furthermore, those who enter the Faith must be integrated into vibrant local communities, characterized by tolerance and love and guided by a strong sense of purpose and collective will, environments in which the capacities of all components—men, women, youth and children—are developed and their powers multiplied in unified action” (Universal House of Justice, *Messages* 213:2).

of entry by troops, it has become increasingly clear that the close of the present Five Year Plan will mark a decisive moment in the unfoldment of the historical enterprise on which the community of the Greatest Name is embarked. The elements required for a concerted effort to infuse the diverse regions of the world with the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation have crystallized into a framework for action that now needs only to be exploited. (*Turning Point* 35:2)

There is no need here to provide an overview of the elements of this framework, which have been set out and elaborated in numerous messages of the House of Justice since 1996 and with which the community is generally familiar. However, another example can be found in the experience of Bahá’ís over some three decades in the field of social and economic development. In a paper published in 2012, the Office of Social and Economic Development writes:

Achieving progressively higher degrees of coherence both within and among the broad interconnected fields of endeavour in which the Bahá’í community is engaged is clearly a vital concern. It suggests that areas of activity are to be complementary, integrated, and mutually supportive. Further, it implies the existence of a common, overarching framework

that gives shape to activities and which evolves and becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. The expression of the divers elements of the framework will not, of course, be uniform in all spheres of action. In relation to any given area of activity, some elements move to the fore, while others act only in the background . . . .

Among the elements most relevant to social action are statements that define the character of progress—that civilization has both a material and a spiritual dimension, that humanity is on the threshold of its collective maturity, that there are destructive and constructive forces operating in the world which serve to propel humanity along the path towards its full maturity, that the relationships necessary to sustain society must be recast in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, that the transformation required must occur simultaneously within human consciousness and the structure of social institutions. . . .

Other elements that speak to the nature of social action are derived from a particular perspective on the role of knowledge in the development of society. The complementarity of science and religion, the imperative of spiritual and material education, the influence of values inherent to technology on the organization of society, and the relevance of

appropriate technology to social progress are among the issues involved. Views related to the generation and application of knowledge have implications not only for the nature of development but also for the question of methodology. . . . [Y]et another set of elements of the framework [are] . . . those statements that analyze concepts such as individualism, power, authority, personal comfort, selfless service, work, and excellence.

Finally, at the heart of the conceptual framework for social action lie elements that describe beliefs about fundamental issues of existence, such as the nature of the human being, the purpose of life, the oneness of humanity, and the equality of men and women. While for Bahá'ís these touch on immutable convictions, they are not static—the way in which they are understood and find expression in various contexts evolves over time. (“Social Action” 3–4)

It is evident, from these examples, that the idea of a “framework” has nothing to do with a narrow imposition of methods or formulaic procedures, but is intended to provide an evolving, shared understanding of beliefs, concepts, methods, practices, vision and approaches relevant to advancing work in the particular arena of endeavor at hand. The Universal House of Justice addresses this concept of a framework in relation to the

work of the Association for Bahá'í Studies and calls for a continuing clarification of its elements in its letter of July 24, 2013, to the National Assembly of Canada:

Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present. It is, perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the friends to explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly interests that the endeavours of the Association for Bahá'í Studies can be conceived. Through the specialized settings it creates, the Association can promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines. Central to the effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society is the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. It would be fruitful if the elements of this framework most relevant to the work of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies can be consciously and progressively clarified. (letter dated 24 July 2013)

This is not to say, of course, that it is necessary to restart such considerations about the work of the Association from the beginning. Just as the framework pertaining to the work of expansion and consolidation drew upon insights and experience that predated the Four Year Plan, there is a significant legacy pertaining to Bahá'í scholarly activity and the work of the Association from the 1970s until now. Many thoughtful books, articles, and presentations have been prepared by believers intensely concerned with the intellectual life of the community over the course of these decades, and many of them are immediately relevant to such considerations. And it is not the purpose of this discussion to provide an extensive exploration of such issues but rather simply to touch upon a few concepts specifically mentioned in the letter from the House of Justice that contribute to clarifying relevant aspects of a framework that can help shape the efforts of the Association in fostering the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community. Furthermore, the ideas offered here are the personal opinions of one individual.

LEARNING AND THE  
VITAL CONTRIBUTION  
OF LEARNED INDIVIDUALS

Before examining at some length a few concepts that come to the fore when considering progress in the intellectual life of the community, two important points must be mentioned first. Because they are addressed at some

length elsewhere, only a brief mention is made here.<sup>4</sup>

First, as in the other areas of endeavor in which the Bahá'í community is engaged, learning—an ongoing process involving study, consultation, action, and reflection—is a critical component of a framework for action pertaining to the work of the Association for Bahá'í Studies in order to gradually but systematically grow in the ability to cultivate the intellectual life of the community and the capacity of succeeding generations of young believers to participate in this process. “Perhaps the most important” of the elements of a framework most relevant to the work of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies “is learning in action,” the House of Justice explains. In this way, “the friends participate in an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation in order to address obstacles and share successes, re-examine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time” (letter dated 24 July 2013).

Much scholarly work is, of course, an individual enterprise. But even in such instances, the aim is not the mere expression of personal opinions. There is also an explicitly collective dimension to such endeavor, in which individuals collaborate in the exchange of views for the investigation of reality, the search for truth,

and the generation of knowledge. Therefore, it is useful to consider the extent to which this work, involving potentially a wide range of methods and approaches, can be systematized among groups of individuals or within the Association itself. The Universal House of Justice raises a number of possibilities as starting points for inquiry:

As unity of thought around essential concepts emerges, the Association may find it useful to explore fresh approaches with some simple steps that can grow in complexity. Gradually, those aspects of the conceptual framework pertaining to intellectual inquiry in diverse fields will become clearer and grow richer. For example, a number of small seminars could be held to assist individuals from certain professions or academic disciplines to examine some aspect of the discourse of their field. Specific topics could be selected, and a group of participants with experience could share articles, prepare papers, and consult on contemporary perspectives and related Bahá'í concepts. Special interest groups, such as philosophy or religious studies, could have gatherings to intensify their efforts. Periodic communications or follow-up meetings could be arranged to increase the effectiveness of the participation of these groups of individuals in aspects of the discourse in their

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4 See Paul Lample, *Revelation and Social Reality: Learning How to Translate What Is Written into Reality and Action*, chapter 4.

chosen fields. Focus could also be directed toward those areas in the academic literature pertaining to the Faith that are ignored or dealt with in a misleading or problematic manner. In addition, existing activities, such as the hosting of a large conference, may be reimagined. Of course, continued exertions must be directed toward preparing and disseminating articles, periodicals, and books. (letter dated 24 July 2013)

Second, the Bahá'í Writings are quite explicit in describing the importance of the mind, the acquisition of knowledge, and the contribution that learned individuals, with expertise in diverse fields of human endeavor, will need to make toward achieving the aims of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

There are certain pillars which have been established as the unshakeable supports of the Faith of God. The mightiest of these is learning and the use of the mind, the expansion of consciousness, and insight into the realities of the universe and the hidden mysteries of Almighty God. To promote knowledge is thus an inescapable duty imposed on every one of the friends of God. (*Selections* 126)

Shoghi Effendi urges the friends “to accord honor, veneration and respect

to—and endorse the efforts of—exponents of the arts and sciences, and to esteem and revere those who are possessed of extensive knowledge and scholarly erudition” (qtd. in *Compilation* 348). He envisioned that the friends in fields of human inquiry, such as economics and education, would have to learn over time to translate the teachings into constructive action for the betterment of the world.<sup>5</sup> Contributions can be made in all disciplines of human endeavor, including, but not limited to, the Faith as an object of study, whether through rigorous examination of the Texts or through closely associated disciplines such as translation, history, philosophy, theology, or Middle Eastern studies. These contributions will include, of course, rigorous and thoughtful scholarship of a high standard in an academic sense, although such efforts, owing to a degree of specialization and skill, will not involve all. In general, however, Shoghi Effendi sets forth a wide definition for such scholarly endeavor, emphasizing the sense in which Bahá'ís are engaged with the world:

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<sup>5</sup> See “Economics” in *The Light of Guidance*, p. 626 and “Education” in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 1, p. 35. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 29 November 1938 states: “as we all know that the powers released by the Manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh in this day are destined in the course of time to reveal themselves through the instrumentality of His followers, and in every conceivable field of human endeavour.”

The Cause needs more Bahá'í scholars, people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.

The Cause has the remedy for all the world's ills. The reason why more people don't accept it is because the Bahá'ís are not always capable of presenting it to them in a way that meets the immediate needs of their minds. (qtd. in *Compilation* 431)

To this conception, a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice adds:

At this early stage in the development of the Faith, it would not be useful to propound a highly restrictive definition of the term "Bahá'í scholarship". In a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice to one of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies recently, it is stated that:

The House of Justice advises you not to attempt to define too narrowly the form that Bahá'í scholarship should take, or the approach that scholars should adopt. Rather should you strive to develop within your Association respect for a wide range of approaches and endeavors. No doubt there

will be some Bahá'ís who will wish to work in isolation, while others will desire consultation and collaboration with those having similar interests. Your aim should be to promote an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance within which will be included scholars whose principal interest is in theological issues as well as those scholars whose interests lie in relating the insights provided by the Bahá'í teachings to contemporary thought in the arts and sciences.

A similar diversity should characterize the endeavors pursued by Bahá'í scholars, accommodating their interests and skills as well as the needs of the Faith. The course of world events, the development of new trends of thought and the extension of the teaching work all tend to highlight attractive and beneficial areas to which Bahá'í scholars might well direct their attention. Likewise, the expansion of the activities of the Bahá'í International Community in its relationship with United Nations agencies and other international bodies creates attractive opportunities for scholars to make a direct and highly valued contribution to the enhancement of the prestige of the Faith and to its proclamation within an influential and receptive stratum of society. As the Bahá'í community continues to emerge inexorably from obscurity, it will be confronted by enemies, from both within and

without, whose aim will be to malign and misrepresent its principles, so that its admirers might be disillusioned and the faith of its adherents might be shaken; Bahá'í scholars have a vital role to play in the defence of the Faith through their contribution to anticipatory measures and their response to defamatory accusations levelled against the Faith.

Thus, there should be room within the scope of Bahá'í scholarship to accommodate not only those who are interested in theological issues and in the historical origins of the Faith, but also those who are interested in relating the Bahá'í teachings to their field of academic or professional interest, as well as those believers who may lack formal academic qualifications but who have, through their perceptive study of the teachings, acquired insights which are of interest to others. (letter dated 19 October 1993)

#### THE NATURE OF THE QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE

“One of the critical aspects of a conceptual framework that will require careful attention in the years ahead,” the House of Justice indicated with regard to the work of the Association, “is the generation and application of knowledge” (letter dated 24 July 2013). The human capacity to know—including both powers and limitations—as well as the importance and means

for investigating reality, are matters examined in some detail in the Bahá'í Writings. If thoughtful Bahá'ís are to carry out adequately their responsibility to translate what has been written by Bahá'u'lláh into practical and effective action to achieve His purpose, there must be a way to achieve unity of thought within the community on many issues so that the friends are not pulled in contradictory directions by claims from the diverse fields of human endeavor about what is true or what must be done.

The idiosyncracies of human thought and the understanding of reality are explored by journalist Will Storr in his book *The Unpersuadables: Conversations with the Enemies of Science*, which contains interviews with individuals who are immersed in worldviews that appear to stand in sharp contrast to scientific truth. Storr observes the tendency of human beings to construct a particular view of reality and then cling tenaciously to that view despite evidence to the contrary.

I consider—as everyone surely does—that my opinions are the correct ones. And yet, I have never met anyone whose *every single thought* I agree with. When you take these two positions together, they become a way of saying, ‘Nobody is as right about as many things as me.’ And that cannot be true. Because to accept that would be to confer upon myself a God-like status. It would mean that I possess a superpower: a clarity of

thought that is unique among humans. Okay, fine. So I accept that I am wrong about things—I *must* be wrong about them. A lot of them. But when I look back over my shoulder and I double-check what I think about religion and politics and science and all the rest of it . . . well, I know I am right about that . . . and that . . . and that and that and—it is usually at this point that I start to feel strange. I know that I am not right about everything, and yet I am simultaneously convinced that I am. . . . And I think it is true to say that it is not just me—that is, we all secretly believe we are right about everything and, by extension, we are all wrong. . . .

I have watched as these personal battles have manifested in the wider world. The decade of terrorism we have just lived through had its roots, of course, in mismatched beliefs that are both political and religious. Those same years saw what has the appearance of an increasing suspicion of science. The white-coated priests of the laboratory, to whom we have granted custody of the truth for so long, are seemingly being treated with growing levels of doubt. We don't trust the MMR jab, we don't trust climate data, we don't trust genetically modified wheat or 'conventional' medicine or supermarket-bought beef. One response has been the cultural rise of the radicalized

rationalists: celebrity atheists who have written bestselling books and sponsored anti-God advertising on the sides of London buses; groups of self-declared 'Skeptics' who toured sold-out concert venues like rock stars, defining themselves in opposition to the kind of anti-scientific thinking that they declared dangerous. Every one of these people, convinced they are right. None of them convincing the other. (7–8)<sup>6</sup>

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6 The problem and limitations of the human capacity to know and describe reality is, of course, a central concern of philosophy, especially contemporary discussions on the philosophy of mind. For example, in *The View from Nowhere*, the philosopher Thomas Nagel explores the question of knowledge and concludes that human beings cannot fully resolve the tension between objective and subjective understanding. He observes: "First, we are finite beings, and even if each of us possesses a large dormant capacity for objective self-transcendence, our knowledge of the world will always be fragmentary, however much we extend it. Second, since the objective self, though it can escape the human perspective, is still as short-lived as we are, we must assume that its best efforts will soon be superseded. Third, the understanding of the world of which we are intrinsically capable—leaving aside limitations of time and technology—is also likely limited. . . . [R]eality probably extends beyond what we can conceive of. Finally, the development of richer and more powerful objective hypotheses does

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Storr finds that the tendency to hold to a fixed view—considering oneself to be right and others wrong—is not only a characteristic of those maintaining unscientific or irrational views, but also of those who claim to be the champions of rationality. As he notes, such inflexible attitudes are becoming prevalent in the discourse within contemporary society. In the United States, as but one example, there is a hardening of viewpoints evident in areas such as media and politics, resulting in polarization and dismissiveness that make it almost impossible to carry out a constructive dialogue on concerns vital to social order and well-being—that is, the attempt to understand reality in the face of differing views in order to find consensus in a search for solutions to humanity's problems. Increasingly in today's world, civility has diminished. Arrogance is mistaken for leadership. Self-righteousness supplants righteousness. Hypocrisy abounds. And there is insistence on the correctness of one's views even when they fly in the face of objective evidence. Indeed, in some quarters there is a systematic effort to undermine science, diminish education, or exercise power to bend the perception of reality to serve a particular agenda. "Every one of these people, convinced they are right," as Storr states. "None of them convincing the other" (8).

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nothing to rule out the known and unknown skeptical possibilities which are the other aspect of any realist view" (86).

It should come as no surprise to Bahá'ís that the disintegration of the old world order described so vividly by Shoghi Effendi consists, to a large extent, in an inability of humanity to find agreement about the way things are and about what should be done. "Though the world is encompassed with misery and distress, yet no man hath paused to reflect what the cause or source of that may be," Bahá'u'lláh states. "No two men can be found who may be said to be outwardly and inwardly united. The evidences of discord and malice are apparent everywhere, though all were made for harmony and union" (*Gleanings* 112:1). The question, then, becomes how are we to resist such forces and not fall prey to the all too human tendency to insist that one's personal understanding is correct and take sides and fight it out? And how can we avoid absorbing from the wider society tendencies and habits that stand in marked contrast to the principles and methods identified in the Bahá'í teachings for the search for truth, the investigation of reality, the attainment of unity of thought and action, and the constructive resolution of the ills of humanity?

As Bahá'ís, we study the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh—whether at a basic or perhaps at a profound and systematic level—and we strive to understand His teachings and His purpose for humanity. In coming to grips with the nature of the limitations of the human mind, however, we would have to conclude that there must be some difference between what we personally understand

and what Bahá'u'lláh intends—even if at the moment we do not see what that difference might be. And although we strive to understand more, some gap will always remain; the entire dispensation will be the collective effort of the believers and humanity in general to understand more accurately and more deeply what Bahá'u'lláh said and to translate it ever more effectively into action. Humility is necessary, then, to acknowledge this fundamental gap when sharing personal understanding about the meaning of the teachings and the admonishments and safeguards set forth by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi that preserve their integrity and prevent any individual from imposing personal interpretations upon the community.

For example, as a result of what individual believers personally understand Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to mean, a community may move beyond disagreement and diversity of views to fall into disunity and contention. As noted above, Shoghi Effendi observed the tendency of the friends either to crystallize the administration into a set form or else to rebel against it and fail to give it sufficient support. Some years ago, tensions arose among some concerning the categorization of believers as liberals or fundamentalists, despite the Guardian's explicit prohibition about the use of such destructive terms. More recently, difficulties arose in some localities about aspects of the prosecution of the Divine Plan. These, and other such examples, commonly emerge from a sense that our

own understanding of the teachings are correct and thus, those of others are wrong. Yet the Writings are filled with advice and admonitions that remind us of the limitations of the mind and the attitudes that must prevail in the search for truth.

The Great Being saith: Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 198)

Every word is endowed with a spirit, therefore the speaker or expounder should carefully deliver his words at the appropriate time and place, for the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible. The Great Being saith: One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which both exert is manifest in the world. Therefore an enlightened man of wisdom should primarily speak with words as mild as milk, that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 172–73)

And as a fundamental aspect of the process of consultation 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. (*Selections* 88)<sup>7</sup>

To assist mature human beings in their collective investigation of reality and search for truth, Bahá'u'lláh not only extolled the methods of scientific inquiry, but emphasized the method of consultation. Of course, many problems or interesting questions

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7 'Abdu'l-Bahá similarly comments: "Consequently, it has become evident that the four criteria or standards of judgment by which the human mind reaches its conclusions are faulty and inaccurate" (*Promulgation* 255). Furthermore, He writes: "In accordance with the divine teachings in this glorious dispensation we should not belittle anyone and call him ignorant, saying: 'You know not, but I know'. Rather, we should look upon others with respect, and when attempting to explain and demonstrate, we should speak as if we are investigating the truth, saying: 'Here these things are before us. Let us investigate to determine where and in what form the truth can be found'" (*Selections* 30).

in various fields of inquiry do not readily lead to conclusions, but it must be remembered that consultation, as described by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, does not pertain merely to the decision-making processes of a Local Assembly. "Take ye counsel together in all matters," Bahá'u'lláh states, "inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding" (*Tablets* 168). He adds, "Consultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude. It is a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth. For everything there is and will continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation" (qtd. in *Compilation* 1:93). Consultation establishes a free exchange of differing views in a common search for truth, setting aside destructive, but regrettably all too common, worldly practices such as distorting or belittling the opinion of others, stubbornly insisting upon personal views and ad hominem attacks—all of which lead to discord and wrangling and cause the truth to remain hidden.

For Bahá'ís, the quest for knowledge is not something that begins and ends in words. Knowledge and action are intimately entwined. There is no knowledge of God without deeds faithful to the prescriptions of His Revelation. Ideas, even those that touch upon the abstract or the metaphysical, have implications for human behavior. "One

word is like unto springtime causing the tender saplings of the rose-garden of knowledge to become verdant and flourishing, while another word is even as a deadly poison,” Bahá’u’lláh states. “It behoveth a prudent man of wisdom to speak with utmost leniency and forbearance so that the sweetness of his words may induce everyone to attain that which becometh man’s station” (*Tablets* 175). “Knowledge is not enough,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains in one of His talks, “we must also work and study to bring to maturity the fruit of knowledge” (*Abdu’l-Bahá in London* 39). Thus, thought must be tested in action and both revised in light of outcomes until an efficacious result is achieved.

The quest for knowledge, and the assessment of its implications for action, may in some cases involve investigation into a particular question over many years or even generations; yet systematic progress can be made through a process of learning centered on consultation, including reflection on action. Such consultation is an instrument with broad implications whose value for the collective search for understanding is as yet largely unexplored. The problem of human understanding and the importance of discursive methods has not escaped the notice of contemporary philosophers; the conversive mode of investigation for the Bahá’í community has been touched upon by a number of Bahá’í writers and is at the heart of the process that drives the progress of stages of the Divine Plan.

All these points, of course, do not mean that in the search for truth, there is no place for critical thought, powerful arguments, or the initial clash of differing opinions, which is an inherent part of the consultative process. Indeed, on many issues, whether conceptual or practical, there is room for a range of personal views that never have to be reconciled with those of others. Individuals do not have to agree about everything. On those subjects where truth or collective action is the aim, however, contention, interminable wrangling, or immovable insistence on one’s personal views are formidable and debilitating obstacles.

#### SHARING PERSONAL OPINIONS

Another point that is fundamental to a conceptual framework and that informs the intellectual life of the Bahá’í community is that there is a wide scope for individuals to hold and express personal views. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail—that is to say, when every man according to his own idealization may give expression to his beliefs—development and growth are inevitable” (*Promulgation* 197). “He does not ask us to follow Him blindly,” a letter written on behalf of the Guardian states; “as He says in one of His Tablets, God has endowed man with a mind to operate as a torchlight and guide him to the truth” (qtd. in Hornby 552). And as a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice explains:

The interpretations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Guardian are divinely-guided statements of what the Word of God means and as such these interpretations are binding on the friends. However, the existence of authoritative interpretations in no way precludes the individual from engaging in his own study of the teachings and thereby arriving at his own interpretation or understanding. Indeed, Bahá’u’lláh invites the believers to “immerse” themselves in the “ocean” of His “words”, that they “may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths.” (letter dated 9 March 1987)

Given the limitations of the human mind, it is obvious that such expressions of personal views invariably include ideas that are partially, and sometimes perhaps even largely, incorrect. This awareness is fundamental to the relationships of individuals, the community, and the institutions as we engage in the investigation of reality and the generation and application of knowledge as guided by the Revelation and with the aim of the transformation of society. As discussed above, every individual will naturally feel that his or her ideas about the Faith are correct—and he or she may share them with personal conviction and with the strongest possible supporting arguments. Yet this conviction should be accompanied by an appreciation—by the presenter and by the recipients

of the remarks—that such views are not authoritative and may be wrong. Among the concepts set forth in the Bahá’í teachings are that individual opinions should not be suppressed, that such personal views should not be imposed on the community or presented as if they are authoritative, and that individuals should not fight with each other over questions pertaining to the meaning or application of the Text. These concepts are not contradictory but are part of a single integrated process.

For example, during the ministry of Bahá’u’lláh, two perspectives emerged about His station. Some saw Him to be the Supreme Manifestation of God, while others went further as a result of their understanding of certain passages from the Writings. When pressed on the matter, Bahá’u’lláh—no doubt in appreciation of the limitations of human capacity to understand completely such profound metaphysical truths—explained that so long as individuals were sincere, both views were right, but if they argued, both were wrong (Taherzadeh 303).<sup>8</sup> As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains:

In brief, O ye believers of God!  
The text of the Divine Book is

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<sup>8</sup> Over time, of course, the station of Bahá’u’lláh became further clarified through His own Writings and the authoritative interpretations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Yet even with such additional perspective, the limitations of the human mind and the space for personal understanding remain.

this: If two souls quarrel and contend about a question of the Divine questions, differing and disputing, both are wrong. The wisdom of this incontrovertible law of God is this: That between two souls from amongst the believers of God, no contention and dispute might arise; that they may speak with each other with infinite amity and love. (*Tablets 52*)

The Guardian states that “regarding such interpretations (of verses from the Scriptures) no one has the right to impose his view or opinion and require his listeners to believe in his particular interpretation of the sacred and prophetic writings. I have no objection to your interpretations and inferences so long as they are represented as your own personal observations and reflections” (*Unfolding 423*). And the Universal House of Justice writes:

Independent investigation of truth recognizes that no human being can have a full and correct understanding of the revelation of God; it places upon each individual the duty to strive for an ever greater understanding of the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, to apply them to the whole of his life; it is the mainspring of mature consultation, by which all the affairs of the community are conducted; it leads men to discover the secrets of the universe and promote the sciences. As you point out, this will produce great

diversity of views on a wide variety of subjects, and this is excellent. What it cannot and must not do is to produce “sects” in relation to the Teachings of the Faith; the Covenant provides the centre of guidance which is to prevent such a degeneration. (letter dated 20 October 1977)

In order to allow for a rich, frank, and possibly quite diverse exchange of personal views, certain terms should be understood and carefully used, avoiding dichotomies that are often misleading and unproductive. Consider, for example, the question of criticism. As Bahá'ís, we are discouraged from criticizing one another, and in this regard Shoghi Effendi mentions ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “contempt for and impatience of criticism” (*Advent 4*). “Vicious criticism is indeed a calamity,” a letter written on his behalf states. “But its root is lack of faith in the system of Bahá'u'lláh, i.e., the Administrative Order—and lack of obedience to Him—for He has forbidden it!” (qtd. in Hornby 104). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also explains: “It is again not permitted that any one of the honored members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously, though that decision be not right, for such criticism would prevent any decision from being enforced” (qtd. in *Compilation 1:95*). Such a use of the term is different, of course, from the legitimate criticisms that every believer is entitled to convey directly to the Local or National Assembly about the

affairs of the Cause, or even about the actions of one of its members<sup>9</sup>; there are well-defined channels for such criticism so that it may result in constructive change rather than disruption of the community or even schism of the type that affected previous dispensations. “If we disapprove of their decisions,” a letter written on behalf of the Guardian states, “we must be careful to avoid discussing such matters with other believers who have no authority to put them right” (qtd. in *Compilation* 2:112). It is vital, however, that all such concerns pertaining to the issue of criticism should be distinguished from the critical thought that is necessary in the search for understanding, lest such important and essential inquiry be inadvertently suppressed. Indeed, the House of Justice explains that destructive personal criticism and critical thought are not the same thing (*Messages* 60:31).

A similar example concerns the use of the term “dissent,” especially in a culture infused with the conceptions of Western political thought. On a particular topic, a believer may at times express a “dissenting” perspective—that

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9 “The Bahá'ís are fully entitled to address criticisms to their assemblies; they can freely air their views about policies or individual members of elected bodies to the assembly, local or national, but then they must whole-heartedly accept the advice or decision of the assembly, according to the principles already laid down for such matters in Bahá'í administration” (Shoghi Effendi qtd. in *Compilation* 2:112–13).

is, a view that differs from the majority view or from the way an idea is traditionally understood. Such ideas are welcome and indeed essential in the search for truth; a different perspective on an issue, even if it ultimately proves to be in error, may well contribute to obtaining a more profound grasp of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. Yet expressing a new idea is quite different than fomenting discord or dissension by contending with the authoritative Texts, attempting to impose one's personal views on the thought and action of the community, or insisting on the correctness of one's personal interpretations even when contradicted by a passage in the Writings or by a decision of the Universal House of Justice. For it is the House of Justice that is “to safeguard the unity of its followers and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its teachings” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 148) and to “deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book” (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament* 19).<sup>10</sup> At the same time, dissidence directed toward the authority of the Text itself or the provisions of the Covenant is a fundamental contradiction for anyone who professes to be a Bahá'í.<sup>11</sup>

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10 And He concludes: “Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself” (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament* 19).

11 “Such assertions emphasize a crucial point; it is this: in terms of the covenant, dissidence is a moral and intellectual

As learned believers explore the meaning of the Revelation, correlate its concepts and principles with contemporary thought, and consider its implications for action in various fields in light of scientific understanding, their exchange of views and presentation of perspectives are guided by a host of statements in the Writings. For example, Bahá'u'lláh explains:

Whatever is written should not transgress the bounds of tact and wisdom, and in the words used there should lie hid the property of milk, so that the children of the world may be nurtured therewith, and attain maturity. We have said in the past that one word hath the influence of

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contradiction of the main objective animating the Bahá'í community, namely, the establishment of the unity of mankind" (Universal House of Justice, *Messages* 60:36). And Bahá'u'lláh states: "O ye that dwell on earth! The religion of God is for love and unity; make it not the cause of enmity or dissension. In the eyes of men of insight and the beholders of the Most Sublime Vision, whatsoever are the effective means for safeguarding and promoting the happiness and welfare of the children of men have already been revealed by the Pen of Glory. But the foolish ones of the earth, being nurtured in evil passions and desires, have remained heedless of the consummate wisdom of Him Who is, in truth, the All-Wise, while their words and deeds are prompted by idle fancies and vain imaginings" (*Tablets* 222).

spring and causeth hearts to become fresh and verdant, while another is like unto blight which causeth the blossoms and flowers to wither. God grant that authors among the friends will write in such a way as would be acceptable to fair-minded souls, and not lead to cavilling by the people. (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, letter dated 20 June 1997)

Further, 'Abdu'l-Bahá observes that unity is essential in the the search for truth. He states: "The fact that we imagine ourselves to be right and everybody else wrong is the greatest of all obstacles in the path towards unity, and unity is necessary if we would reach truth, for truth is one" (*Paris Talks* 136). In a talk He explains:

The purpose is to emphasize the statement that consultation must have for its object the investigation of truth. He who expresses an opinion should not voice it as correct and right but set it forth as a contribution to the consensus of opinion, for the light of reality becomes apparent when two opinions coincide. A spark is produced when flint and steel come together. Man should weigh his opinions with the utmost serenity, calmness and composure. Before expressing his own views he should carefully consider the views already advanced by others. If he finds that a previously expressed opinion is more true and

worthy, he should accept it immediately and not willfully hold to an opinion of his own. By this excellent method he endeavors to arrive at unity and truth. Opposition and division are deplorable. (*Promulgation* 72–73)

The sensitivity and wisdom required when presenting new and challenging ideas are particularly important when the topic concerns the meaning of the Revelation or the action of the community. For the community is not an inert object unaffected by study conducted by detached and objective observers. Rather, the errors, misperceptions, and biases of a commentator are introduced into the discourse of the community. The contentious insistence on a particular personal viewpoint, rather than a wise presentation offered as a contribution to the search for truth, can lead to disunity and confusion as the friends respond in various ways to new ideas.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, in the Bahá'í community, unity is the highest value, since unity is essential for seeking and finding truth. Without unity, truth remains hidden, for truth is either obscured by continual argumentation or, even if a truth is discovered, lack of unity prevents translating new understandings into practical and effective action. It is for such a reason, where collective action is necessary, that Bahá'ís are advised to support the decision of an

Assembly, even though it might be wrong, because this will be the most efficient means to reveal the error and allow it to be corrected. “Though one of the parties may be in the right and they disagree, that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “but if they agree and both parties are in the wrong, as it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right” (qtd. in *Compilation* 1:96).

As Bahá'ís, we are trying to learn how, in the age of maturity of the human race, the relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions should be manifested in order to support the search for truth and right action. These protagonists are all part of one organic whole—not discordant and competing elements more reflective of the adolescent stage of social development. Individuals study the Revelation, as well as diverse fields of human knowledge, and, guarded by a humility born of a recognition of the limitations of human understanding and a firm grounding in the Covenant, share their perspectives and contribute to the progress of the Faith and the advancement of society. The community as a whole should welcome and appreciate the contributions of learned individuals and provide an environment that supports their efforts. While, on occasion, the unwisdom of the friends<sup>13</sup> may become manifest

<sup>12</sup> See Lample, *Revelation and Social Reality*, pp. 152–54.

<sup>13</sup> See the Universal House of Justice, *Messages of the Universal House of Justice: 1986–2001*, 60:46.

in insistence on the correctness of personal interpretations, in fruitless argumentation, or even in the conscious fomenting of discord, the members of the community should strive to become sensitive to identifying such errors and immune to its harmful influence. Institutions should be tolerant of new ideas, but ultimately they must protect the space for learning from the machinations of insincere individuals, as well as ensure the unity of the community. Over the years, the Universal House of Justice has described various features of the relationship among individuals, communities, and institutions that safeguard the search for knowledge.

#### INDIVIDUAL INTERPRETATION AND THE MEANING OF THE TEXT

The doctrines of the Faith and truths pertaining to spiritual reality are set forth in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and the writings of the authoritative interpreters of the teachings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Access to such knowledge, however, must come through the imperfect yet wondrous instrument of the human intellect, the "supreme emblem of God" that "stands first in the order of creation and first in rank, taking precedence over all created things" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret* 1). For Bahá'ís, it is a cardinal principle that individual conscience must not be coerced; each person is enjoined to study the Revelation, understand its meaning, obey its ordinances, and translate it

into action. At the same time, it must be recognized that the human mind is limited and prone to error, and thus the ultimate safeguard of the individual and the community is firmness in the Covenant and adherence to the principles of the administration. In this way, the integrity of the teachings and the unity in action of the community are preserved. What may seem to be the necessity of upholding ostensibly contradictory values—the freedom to seek truth and obedience to authority—is in fact just another example of the spirit of a true Bahá'í "to reconcile," in the words of Shoghi Effendi, "the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion, and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other" (*Bahá'í Administration* 64). The individual believer, the Bahá'í community, and its institutions are thus bound in a common effort to strive to understand and act on the teachings while knowing with certainty that there must be, to some extent, a gap between personal understanding and Bahá'u'lláh's intent. As the Universal House of Justice explains:

A clear distinction is made in our Faith between authoritative interpretation and the interpretation or understanding that each individual arrives at for himself from his study of its teachings. While the former is confined to the Guardian, the

latter, according to the guidance given to us by the Guardian himself, should by no means be suppressed. In fact such individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands and makes it clear that his views are merely his own. Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the teachings. As Shoghi Effendi wrote: "To deepen in the Cause means to read the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the Master so thoroughly as to be able to give it to others in its pure form. There are many who have some superficial idea of what the Cause stands for. They, therefore, present it together with all sorts of ideas that are their own. As the Cause is still in its early days we must be most careful lest we fall into this error and injure the Movement we so much adore. There is no limit to the study of the Cause. The more we read the Writings, the more truths we can find in Them, the more we will see that our previous notions were erroneous." So, although individual insights can be enlightening and helpful, they can also be misleading. The friends must therefore learn to listen to the views of others without being over-awed or allowing their faith

to be shaken, and to express their own views without pressing them on their fellow Bahá'ís. (*Messages* 35:13)

A question previously arose as to whether, as with the clergy in past dispensations, the authoritative interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, as well as the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, would unduly narrow the scope for personal investigation and understanding. The Universal House of Justice responds:

You express the fear that the authority conferred upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice could lead to a progressive reduction in the "available scope for personal interpretation," and that "the actual writings of the Manifestation will have less and less import," and you instance what has happened in previous Dispensations. The House of Justice suggests that, in thinking about this, you contemplate the way the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh has actually worked and you will be able to see how very different its processes are from those of, say, the development of the law in Rabbinical Judaism or the functioning of the Papacy in Christianity. The practice in the past in these two religions, and also to a great extent in Islam, has been to assume that the Revelation given by the Founder was the final,

perfect revelation of God's Will to mankind, and all subsequent elucidation and legislation has been interpretative in the sense that it aimed at applying this basic Revelation to the new problems and situations that have arisen. The Bahá'í premises are quite different. Although the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is accepted as the Word of God and His Law as the Law of God, it is understood from the outset that Revelation is progressive, and that the Law, although the Will of God for this Age, will undoubtedly be changed by the next Manifestation of God. Secondly, only the written text of the Revelation is regarded as authoritative. There is no Oral Law as in Judaism, no Tradition of the Church as in Christianity, no Hadith as in Islám. Thirdly, a clear distinction is drawn between Interpretation and Legislation. Authoritative interpretation is the exclusive prerogative of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, while infallible legislation is the function of the Universal House of Justice.

If you study the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and of the Guardian, you will see how tremendously they differ from the interpretations of the Rabbis and the Church. They are not a progressive fossilization of the Revelation, they are for the most part expositions which throw a clear light upon passages which may

have been considered obscure, they point up the intimate interrelationship between various teachings, they expound the implications of scriptural allusions, and they educate the Bahá'ís in the tremendous significances of the Words of Bahá'u'lláh. Rather than in any way supplanting the Words of the Manifestation, they lead us back to them time and again.

There is also an important distinction made in the Faith between authoritative interpretation, as described above, and the interpretation which every believer is fully entitled to voice. Believers are free, indeed are encouraged, to study the Writings for themselves and to express their understanding of them. Such personal interpretations can be most illuminating, but all Bahá'ís, including the one expressing the view, however learned he may be, should realize that it is only a personal view and can never be upheld as a standard for others to accept, nor should disputes ever be permitted to arise over differences in such opinions.

The legislation enacted by the Universal House of Justice is different from interpretation. Authoritative interpretation, as uttered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, is a divinely guided statement of what the Word of God means. The divinely inspired legislation of the Universal House of Justice does not

attempt to say what the revealed Word means—it states what must be done in cases where the revealed Text or its authoritative interpretation is not explicit. It is, therefore, on quite a different level from the Sacred Text, and the Universal House of Justice is empowered to abrogate or amend its own legislation whenever it judges the conditions make this desirable. Moreover, the attitude to legislation is different in the Bahá'í Faith. The human tendency in past Dispensations has been to want every question answered and to arrive at a binding decision affecting every small detail of belief or practice. The tendency in the Bahá'í Dispensation, from the time of Bahá'u'lláh Himself, has been to clarify the governing principles, to make binding pronouncements on details which are considered essential, but to leave a wide area to the conscience of the individual. The same tendency appears also in administrative matters. (letter dated 3 January 1982)

In a sport, such as soccer, there is a framework of defined parameters that establish its nature and set its rules. The elements of the framework are not intended to restrict the participants arbitrarily; rather, they create the arena for productive action—the skill and artistry of the game.

Without such a framework, there is no fruitful result, only chaos. The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and its body of authoritative interpretation, along with the guidance of the House of Justice that will direct the community's course over centuries, are not intended to shackle, but to liberate the human mind, and prepare and focus the community so that it may explore the oceans of spiritual and material reality and make progress along a course leading to the shaping of a new world order and a new civilization.

Thus, at any given time, there may be a range of ideas about a given aspect of reality in light of the Bahá'í teachings. Some of these perspectives, after further investigation, may not hold up and can be discarded, resulting in a clear consensus about the truth of a matter. In other instances, there may still remain a range of different perspectives that have some degree of justification and further understanding that requires additional experience and the elaboration of thought. Comfort with ambiguity is required in such instances, with space for different individuals to think differently, rather than contention or insistence upon the truth of a particular perspective on matters that cannot, or need not, be resolved at a given moment in time. Such an approach safeguards freedom of thought, as well as the unity of action on which the progress of the community depends.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PRINCIPLE  
OF THE HARMONY OF SCIENCE  
AND RELIGION

The final concept to be mentioned here, as another element of the framework governing engagement in Bahá'í scholarly activity, is the principle of the harmony of science and religion, of reason and faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as noted above, describes religion and science as "two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress" (*Paris Talks* 143). He adds, "Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism" (*Paris Talks* 143). Thus, in some manner, true religion acts to ensure true science; true science acts to ensure true religion; and these two, in harmony, are the means for human progress. But what is this appropriate interaction? How is it to be defined? How is it realized?

Even a cursory survey of the forces at work in the world brings to light the many challenges arising from a failure to find harmony between the two. In the prejudice, fanaticism, and violence sweeping the globe in the guise of religion; in the assaying of the truth of scientific findings in the balance of religious beliefs; in the stubborn perpetuation of irrational

religious doctrines and practices; in the postmodern devaluation of scientific method and knowledge; in the commercial subjugation of science; in the lens of materialistic philosophy that systematically distorts scientific assumptions and findings; in the contest for power—political and otherwise—that exploits both science and religion; in the false dichotomy at the heart of debates between superstition and materialism posing as religion and science; and in other such permutations can be found the many strategies and distortions that prevent humanity at this time from appreciating the harmony of science and religion upon which depends the quest for truth, morality, justice, and the advancement of civilization.

At this stage in the development of the Bahá'í community, we can expect to see a range of diverse personal views about the principle of the harmony of science and religion, and the conception of some believers will reflect widely held social conventions or the perspectives derived from the various disciplines of human thought.

Of course, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements about these principles would be accepted by all. Yet knowledgeable Bahá'ís with scientific training, for example, acutely aware of and sensitive to the excesses of religious fundamentalism in attempting to impose itself upon the minds of individuals, may lean toward the concept that science and religion are largely separate spheres—"non-overlapping magisteria" (Gould).

At the same time, other devoted believers immersed in a profound study of the Writings may be convinced, by an understanding of certain passages, that ultimately it is science that will evolve in the future to conform to, or be subsumed under, the truths of Revelation. A range of views by others may fall within these extremes. Rather than creating contentious debates by insisting on the correctness of one's personal interpretation about the meaning of the principle or its application in a particular instance, however, what is necessary—as in so many other areas of inquiry—is for the friends to consult, act together, and thereby advance within an evolving framework that will allow for unity of thought to emerge through experience over time.

Those engaged in Bahá'í scholarly activity, then, may well conduct their inquiries from any point along a spectrum of approaches representing very different views about the relationship of science and religion—for example, from the natural sciences, from the social sciences, from history, from philosophy, from secular religious studies, from theology, or from the study of the Sacred Texts within the community.

It thus falls to these friends to weigh the value of the methods within these various approaches, assessing their strengths and limitations. As “Bahá'ís who are involved in various disciplines—economics, education, history, social science, philosophy, and many others—are obviously conversant and fully engaged with the

methods employed in their fields,” the Universal House of Justice explains, “[i]t is they who have the responsibility to earnestly strive to reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work” (letter dated 24 July 2013). In such a process, a tendency toward false dichotomies and extreme perspectives that stand in contradiction to the principle of the harmony of science and religion may be avoided because the desired methods are not a reduction to creationism or scholasticism or to contending theological schools; neither is it scientism, nor secular religious studies, nor philosophical materialism.

Science, in its method, restricts the scope of its investigations to increase the reliability of its findings; however, contrary to the understanding of many, religion is not faith in the unbelievable or irrational. Philosophy may well serve to interpret scientific findings, but philosophical conclusions cannot be conflated with scientific truth. Careful attention should be given by Bahá'ís engaged in various fields to the assumptions pertaining to the relationship between science and religion that govern them, and while these assumptions cannot be summarily dismissed by the friends who participate in these spheres, neither can Bahá'ís ignore the truths articulated in the authoritative Bahá'í Texts. In brief, an effort must be made to deal with or reconcile all points of contradiction.

Thus, we need to recognize our condition at this stage in the development of the Faith. Human minds

are limited. In science, advancement is made because there is a truth referent greater than the conclusions of the human mind alone—the testing of ideas against the brute facts of nature through the scientific method. The reliability of science is based on the extent to which it can be grounded on these brute facts, rather than on personal impression. So too, for Bahá'ís, the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh provides a truth referent against which human conceptions must be weighed. In principle, the individual Bahá'í bends to the truth of this Revelation—the Revelation is not interpreted according to the wishes of the individual. So the teachings, and their authoritative interpretations, are statements of truth that cannot be altered. Of course, in the pursuit of truth there is latitude in personal understanding, but this freedom is intended to serve the purpose of finding the truth—and truth is one.

Reason alone is subject to certain limitations. In this respect, a difference can be observed between consultation and learning within an evolving framework and the circularity that can overtake continuous debate and argumentation about personal views. In his book *The Philosophy of Mind*, John Heil describes a tension within the discipline of philosophy that tends toward cycles of thought rather than toward a systematic progress in capturing insights and refining understanding over time:

In philosophy there is a tendency to take doctrines with which we

disagree and dismiss them out of hand. But a view can be wrong, even mostly wrong, without being altogether wrong. When you consider the historical development of theories in the philosophy of mind, you can see that the same difficulties cycle into focus again and again. One generation addresses the qualitative aspects of mentality, the next focuses on its scientific understanding, its successor takes up the problem of mental content. The cycle then starts over, each generation recovering what had been largely invisible to its immediate predecessor. (199–200)

Another example of a potential challenge in the encounter between reason and religion may be found within the discipline of theology when emphasis shifts from the implications of the meaning of the teachings for the unity of the community and the betterment of society to concern with the Faith primarily as the object of study. While there are naturally many aspects of the Revelation that address theological concepts that must be constructively examined, the discipline of theology and the practice of theologians or 'ulamá is grounded in assumptions and approaches of previous dispensations that have no part in the Bahá'í dispensation and that, indeed, have even been proscribed by Bahá'u'lláh.

In the book *Doctrine and Power*, theologian Carlos Galvao-Sobrinho

examines how in the fourth century of Christianity, doctrinal disagreements on theological issues, which previously were resolved through a search for consensus, evolved to become a means by which bishops exerted power:

Persistent confrontation, combined with a determination to undermine fellow prelates, replaced the former striving for consensus. . . . Challenged by their rivals and driven by a new certainty that they possessed the truth, church leaders embarked on a disruptive quest to prove their orthodoxy and to discredit their opponents. . . . with unprecedented zeal and passion, they set out to convince other Christians that their views represented the truth about God and the orthodox teachings of the church. (6)

As a result of this change, the essence of theological effort shifted from a search for truth to the imposition of power. Theologians and ecclesiastics insisted upon the correctness of their own views, and by this means they accrued power and influence. At the same time, they used what power and influence they had to ensure the acceptance of their views. The history of Christianity was thereby stained by these struggles, which resulted in endless bloodshed and countless divisions.

Consequently, we can appreciate why any inquiry into the value of the discipline of theology or its methods for Bahá'í thought must be weighed

against its limitations and the distinctive characteristics and injunctions of the Revelation. Ultimately, it is learned Bahá'ís in any field who, having studied in a profound manner both the Writings and their disciplines, are responsible for carefully considering such issues, shedding light on the value of methods, and serving as the first line of defense against extremes that lead either to imposing naïve personal religious beliefs on science or to placing an exaggerated value on certain interpretations of scientific method while imposing the materialistic interpretations of such findings in an unscientific manner on the evolution of the Bahá'í community.

Attaining this capacity requires a true understanding of a discipline, its strengths and limitations, and not simply insisting to the Bahá'í community that a particular point is true based on an appeal to authority from a particular field of inquiry. It is the responsibility of "Bahá'í scholars, people who not only are devoted to [the Faith] and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it," those "who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world" (Shoghi Effendi qtd. in *Compilation* 2:226) to acknowledge the range of legitimate debate within a discipline, help the community understand the range of its assets and liabilities as an instrument in the investigation of truth, and correlate and resolve the apparent points of conflict between

the perspectives of that field and the current understanding of the Bahá'í teachings.

The scope of the challenge may vary across different disciplines. In the natural sciences, there may be little overlap between the knowledge systems of science and religion, while across the social sciences and humanities the area of overlap grows more extensive. Education as a field, for example, can only advance so far without an appreciation of the spiritual reality of a human being. The study of religion, and particularly the study of the Bahá'í Faith in the context of the discipline of religious studies, whether from a secular or theological perspective, is subject to significant distortion by assumptions and methods that stand in sharp contrast to the Bahá'í teachings. Indeed, this sharp distinction begins at the outset with Bahá'u'lláh's definition of religion itself. Every learned believer has the opportunity to experience the joy and challenge of tackling such difficult problems that can contribute to the progress of the Faith and advancement of human knowledge.

AN EXAMPLE OF HOW DIFFERING  
OPINIONS MAY GIVE WAY IN THE  
SEARCH FOR TRUTH

As individuals, communities, and institutions gradually learn how to harmonize their efforts in the investigation of reality, truth will emerge over time in greater depth and abundance. In some instances associated with metaphysical questions, a diversity of

opinion may continue to prevail, owing to the limitations of the human mind to grasp such truths, even when they are discussed at some length by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Again, such diversity is to be expected, and although Bahá'ís may hold different opinions on such issues, there is no reason that this diversity itself should lead to discord, so long as individuals do not insist upon the correctness of their own views or try to impose their opinions on others.

For many other questions, however, just as in science, truth—or at least ever more robust insights into the nature of reality—will emerge over time. At first, many different views on a given topic may be held simultaneously by different Bahá'ís. Then, over time, as sound arguments are set forth that draw upon science and an analysis of the teachings and as knowledgeable believers consult on the evidence, some perspectives will eventually be demonstrated to be weaker or somehow defective, while others will prove to be stronger and more robust, until issues are clarified and the truth—the strength of a particular perspective—is revealed. On some subjects, this process may happen fairly quickly, while other questions may require generations to resolve.

The subject of evolution may provide a useful illustration of this process. In His talks and writings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá touches upon the theory of evolution, a subject in the field of biology that, beyond science, has had profound social and philosophical

implications for humanity since Darwin presented his findings in the mid 1800s. A range of personal interpretations about the meaning of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá said have been set forth by Bahá'ís over the years. And while it is not our purpose here to examine the Bahá'í perspective on evolution in depth, a general overview of these personal interpretations sheds light on the process of understanding the Bahá'í teachings by illustrating how diverse and sometimes conflicting opinions may be resolved over time in the search for truth.

At least four general perspectives have been set forth by individuals on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements about evolution. A traditional and somewhat widely held perspective, dating, perhaps, from Dr. John Esselmont's description of the topic in *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, suggests that, from the beginning of the appearance of life on earth, there has been a separation between the line of organisms that led to animals and the line that led to human beings. Drawing upon quotations from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, such as "from the beginning of his existence man has been a distinct species" (*Some Answered Questions* 47:10), it is concluded that there has never been a common biological ancestor between animals and humans.

A second perspective is similar to the first, but in emphasizing that this conclusion about human biological distinctiveness stands in sharp contrast to the findings of evolutionary science that humanity

shares the biological history of animals and is most closely related to apes, this view concludes that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is in error about the scientific basis of evolution and His statements in this context should be set aside. Still another distinct perspective proposes that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements are essentially in harmony with the contemporary findings of science. A fourth suggests that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's argument is not so much about the scientific basis of evolution, but rather, using the language common to the debates on evolution at that time in the Middle East, it is intended to make certain points about the social and philosophical principles of the new theory.

In the case of these four perspectives on evolution, the first, a kind of "parallel" evolution of animal and human, is incompatible with science. Advances in DNA analysis make it possible to determine the genetic similarities between humans and other species and impossible to imagine how such similarities could come about by any means other than biological kinship. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's strong admonition to weigh religious beliefs in the light of science would seem to require that any concept of parallel evolution should be set aside by Bahá'ís as an error in the individual interpretation of the meaning of His statements and thereby avoid the appearance of clinging to a theory of some kind of "creationism"—the antiscientific opinion articulated by adherents of some religious demoninations.

Of course, it is possible to make the argument that what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says is true in a given case and that a contemporary scientific understanding is wrong and will be revised in the future. For example, in *Some Answered Questions*, He explains that the Sacred Texts may indeed state truths not understood by science (7:14).

Yet despite this, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not state that the truth of scientific views should be weighed in the light of religious Texts. If Bahá’ís were to take this position continually when science and the interpretation of scripture conflict, they would be rightly regarded as unscientific, and they would undermine the principle of the harmony of science and religion as set forth by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. As scientific understanding advances, however, certain wisdom hidden in the Text may come to light. If one imagines that science changes in the future as a result of shedding certain of its materialistic philosophical assumptions, this change will be the result of advancement within science rather than scientists being compelled to accept the dictates of religious beliefs.

The second perspective on statements in the Writings about evolution, although upholding scientific findings, also appears to have some problems in that it insists there is only one way to interpret what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said and that this interpretation stands in contradiction to science. Yet it is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself Who said that science and religion agree. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that,

generally, any personal interpretation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements that contradicts scientific understanding could be set aside as erroneous—or at least called into question—and an alternative interpretation sought.

Given the limitations of human understanding, one obviously cannot insist one’s personal interpretation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements is exactly what He actually intended. Personal interpretation can be wrong. Further, this second perspective is illogical in presuming that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would insist on an incorrect understanding of scientific aspects of evolution, while at the same time urging—based on the principle of the harmony of science and religion—that believers not accept religious views that contradict science and reason. Stated another way, why would ‘Abdu’l-Bahá contradict the very principles He expounds? In seeking to understand the statements about evolution in the Bahá’í Writings, therefore, Bahá’ís should expect the principle of the harmony of science and religion to be upheld and not succumb to either superstition or materialism.

It would not be unreasonable to conclude, then, that the first two perspectives are questionable and should be set aside, while the truth may be sought in a more rigorous examination of the arguments pertaining to the latter two. This is not, of course, an exhaustive analysis of Bahá’í views on evolution, but hopefully it serves as a useful illustration of how various conflicting opinions may be resolved

over time in the search for truth. Sound conclusions should correlate simultaneously with the findings of science, reason, and the meaning of the Sacred Text. By proceeding in such a manner, individuals freely set out diverse personal opinions, but over time, on most questions, clarity, insight, and unity of thought emerge.

#### A POTENTIAL PITFALL

The points provided above are a few initial concepts associated with the collective search for truth drawn from the teachings that are an essential part of a conceptual framework that guides action to advance the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community. Many more could be added. But it is necessary, at this time, to include one additional consideration pertaining to a potential pitfall that can obstruct the search for truth and, in its most extreme and virulent form, is a threat to the very existence of the Faith, whose central principle is unity.

As previously mentioned, in the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, while the freedom of conscience of the individual is upheld, as is the freedom to express personal understanding, the views of an individual have no authority. Individuals or groups of individuals, no matter how learned, no matter the field of expertise, cannot insist upon the correctness of a personal interpretation of the Writings, impose such a view on others, or insist such a view is a guide to the action of individual believers or the community.

Rather, on matters pertaining to the Faith and its teachings, all are bound by the provisions of the Covenant. It is by this means that Bahá'u'lláh has resolved the question of religious truth and practice, quenching the fire of contention and sectarianism that dimmed the light of religion in previous dispensations.

Human beings differ. Their views differ. Their interests differ. History demonstrates the wide range of strategies employed to resolve or live with such differences, from blind obedience to unrestricted freedom, from brutal manifestations of power to tolerance and reasoned discourse. Bahá'u'lláh, responding to human reality and historical circumstances, sets forth the basis for the protection of the prerogatives and the harmony of relations among Bahá'í individuals, institutions, and the community within the framework of His administrative order. As a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice states:

Upon becoming a Bahá'í, one accepts certain fundamental beliefs; but invariably one's knowledge of the Teachings is limited and often mixed with personal ideas. Shoghi Effendi explains that "an exact and thorough comprehension of so vast a system, so sublime a revelation, so sacred a trust, is for obvious reasons beyond the reach and ken of our finite minds." Over time, through study, prayerful reflection, and an effort to live a Bahá'í life, immature ideas yield

to a more profound understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Service to the Cause plays a particular role in the process, for the meaning of the Text is clarified as one translates insights into effective action. As a matter of principle, individual understanding or interpretation should not be suppressed, but valued for whatever contribution it can make to the discourse of the Bahá'í community. Nor should it, through dogmatic insistence of the individual, be allowed to bring about disputes and arguments among the friends; personal opinion must always be distinguished from the explicit Text and its authoritative interpretation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and from the elucidations of the Universal House of Justice on "problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book." (letter dated 14 November 2005)<sup>14</sup>

The problem described here is not a matter of Covenant-breaking in the sense of challenging the authority as Center of the Cause or claiming to have equal authority, as witnessed at the time of the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, or Shoghi Effendi. Rather, it centers on the question of what

Bahá'u'lláh's Writings mean and what must be done in order to achieve His intended purpose for humanity. The problem is the insistence that a particular view of an individual about the meaning of the Bahá'í teachings is correct and that, as a result, the Bahá'í community must accept this individual's interpretation and its implications for Bahá'í practice—or at least, that the community should be open to endless dissent and disputation about such matters, while ignoring the consultative methods established by Bahá'u'lláh for resolving disagreements.

Such a posture, especially on issues central to the Covenant and the practice of the Faith, strikes at the heart of the authority invested in the twin institutions of the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh—the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice—whose common fundamental objective is to “insure the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority which flows from the Source of our Faith, to safeguard the unity of its followers and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its teachings” in acting to “administer its affairs, coordinate its activities, promote its interests, execute its laws and defend its subsidiary institutions” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 148).

The intellectual life of the community is vulnerable to this pitfall when there is excessive insistence by an individual or a group of individuals on the correctness of their personal understanding. Again, it is quite natural for an individual to believe that his or her

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14 For an overview of Bahá'í hermeneutics and practice, see Paul Lample, *Revelation and Social Reality*, especially chapter 2.

personal understanding of the teachings is in precise conformity with the meaning intended by Bahá'u'lláh. It is also obvious that this cannot always be true. Humility is required, as well as an attitude of learning, in order to work in harmony with other believers under the direction of the institutions to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's intended will and purpose. This condition includes the freedom to share one's views with others. However, for an individual to become so convinced of the truth of a personal interpretation, or even of what he or she concludes to be a limitation of Bahá'u'lláh's thought or of the interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá or Shoghi Effendi, and then for this same individual to attempt continually to bend the community to this personal understanding, is to strike at the unity of the community and to subvert the search for truth and the endeavor to translate the teachings into effective action. This attitude or action is very different from setting forth a point of view with sound arguments without insisting it is correct and without challenging an authoritative statement in the Writings or a decision of the House of Justice. It is, instead, an attempt to impose a change in the Bahá'í community in direct opposition to the safeguards Bahá'u'lláh put in place to maintain the unity of His Cause and preserve the integrity of His teachings. While, owing to the provisions of the Covenant, such improper efforts will ultimately fail, they can in the short term foment discord and confusion, create division, obstruct

progress, distort the understanding of the wider society about the Bahá'í teachings, and extinguish the light of faith in some misled souls.

In response to one such assault on the intellectual life of the community some years ago, the Universal House of Justice observed that there was a "campaign of internal opposition" (*Messages* 296:2), which, "while purporting to accept the legitimacy of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice as twin successors of Bahá'u'lláh and the Center of His Covenant," attempted "to cast doubt on the nature and scope of the authority conferred on them in the Writings" (*Messages* 296:5). The individuals involved "sought to use the language, the occasions and the credibility of scholarly activity to lend a counterfeit authority to a private enterprise which was essentially ideological in nature and self-motivated in origin" (letter dated 8 February 1998). The House of Justice stated that "Even if their original aims were idealistic in nature—no matter how ill-informed and erroneous in concept—they had evolved in practice into an assault on the Covenant which Bahá'u'lláh has created as a stronghold within which His Cause would evolve as He intends" (letter dated 8 February 1998). In asserting and attempting to win sympathy for their views, this group of individuals complained that a fundamentalist religious authority was attempting to suppress intellectual freedom; yet what actually occurred was an effort to create and impose a form

of ecclesiastical authority to usurp the authority Bahá'u'lláh placed in an elected body. As the House of Justice explained at the time, “by diminishing the station of Bahá'u'lláh—a disservice done to previous Manifestations by people similarly inclined—by casting doubt on the authority conferred on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, and by calling into question the integrity of Bahá’í administrative processes, they would be able to persuade a number of unwary followers that the Bahá’í Faith is in fact not a Divine Revelation but a kind of socio-political system being manipulated by ambitious individuals” (letter dated 8 February 1998). The scheme insisted “that even the nature of religion itself can be adequately understood only through the use of an academic methodology designed to ignore the truths that make religion what it is” (*Messages* 296:6). In the absence of a Guardian, they claimed to possess “quasi-doctrinal authority, parallel to and essentially independent of the local House of Justice, which would permit various interests to insinuate themselves into the direction of the life processes of the Cause” (*Messages* 296:7).<sup>15</sup> The problem that

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15 Such vain and idle imaginings turn on its head the authoritative guidance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “Let it not be imagined that the House of Justice will take any decision according to its own concepts and opinions. God forbid! The Supreme House of Justice will take decisions and establish laws through the inspiration and

aroused the concern of the House of Justice was “the systematic corruption of Bahá’í discourse in certain of the Internet discussion groups, a design which became increasingly apparent to many of the Bahá’í participants and whose first victim, if it were to succeed, would be Bahá’í scholarship itself” (letter dated 8 February 1998).

In establishing the basis of His religion, Bahá'u'lláh seized power from ecclesiastics, ended priesthood, and abrogated powers exercised by the learned in the Islamic dispensation. While extolling the truly learned, He redefined their obligations and guarded against their excesses through the instrument of His Covenant.<sup>16</sup> These

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confirmation of the Holy Spirit, because it is in the safekeeping and under the shelter and protection of the Ancient Beauty, and obedience to its decisions is a bounden and essential duty and an absolute obligation, and there is no escape for anyone” (qtd. in *Compilation of Compilations* 1:323).

16 “In a letter written on 14 March 1927 to the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Istanbul, the Guardian’s Secretary explained, on his behalf, the principle in the Cause of action by majority vote. He pointed out how, in the past, it was certain individuals who ‘accounted themselves as superior in knowledge and elevated in position’ who caused division, and that it was those ‘who pretended to be the most distinguished of all’ who ‘always proved themselves to be the source of contention.’ ‘But praise be to God,’ he continued, ‘that the Pen of Glory has done away with the unyielding dictatorial views of the learned

actions, which reflect the maturity of the human race that the provisions of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation seek to foster, in no way diminishes the vital importance of learning and scholarship, but frames, reinforces, protects, and canalizes such essential powers and contributions. In this way, Bahá'u'lláh upholds freedom of conscience and expression while safeguarding the development of the Faith and preserving the integrity of the teachings. The personal interpretation of individuals is both respected and bound within the constraints of wisdom. In this dispensation, there will be no St. Paul who recasts the thought of the Manifestation, no Arius whose actions sever the bonds of union among the believers.<sup>17</sup> "The friends who seek

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and the wise, dismissed the assertions of individuals as an authoritative criterion, even though they were recognized as the most accomplished and learned among men and ordained that all matters be referred to authorized centres and specified assemblies. Even so, no assembly has been invested with the absolute authority to deal with such general matters as affect the interests of nations. Nay rather, He has brought all the assemblies together under the shadow of one House of Justice, one divinely-appointed Centre, so that there would be only one Centre and all the rest integrated into a single body, revolving around one expressly-designated Pivot, thus making them all proof against schism and division" (Universal House of Justice, *Messages* 111:12).

17 Attitudes toward theology should not give rise to dichotomous thought.

to excel in scholarly activity will, of course, strive to live up to the high expectations set forth by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá," the Universal House of Justice states. "Whatever the extent of their achievements, they are an integral part of the community; they are

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Firmness in the Covenant is not the polar opposite of the freedom to express personal views; both are aspects of a harmonious body of thought set forth by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. They are points of spiritual guidance intended to lift us, guard us, and propel us, not clubs to use to beat each other. In this respect, the unity of the individual, the community, and the institutions again arises. The prerogatives and obligations, the aspirations and expectations, of each are not in opposition, but must find harmonious expression along the common part of their organic development according to the will and purpose of Bahá'u'lláh as expressed in His Teachings and by His authoritative interpreters. "The ocean of the Covenant shall send forth a wave and shall disperse and throw out these foams. Consider thou, at the time of Christ and after Him, how many childish attempts were made by different persons! What claims they have advanced and what a multitude have they gathered around themselves! Even Arius attracted to himself a million and a half followers and strove and endeavoured to sow the seeds of sedition in the Cause of Christ. But eventually the sea of Christ surged and cast out all the gathering froth and nothing was left behind save everlasting malediction." ('Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in *Star of the West* 10:5:96).

not exempt from obligations placed upon any believer and, at the same time, deserve the community's understanding, forbearance, support, and respect" (letter dated 24 July 2013).

"Whatever comes within the sphere of human comprehension must be limited and finite," 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms (*Promulgation* 72–73). In the Bahá'í Faith, no individual or group of scholars can say what the Bahá'í teachings really mean or how Bahá'ís ought to behave, and certainly no person could ever claim authority on the basis of their academic credentials or their "learned" opinions to challenge the actions or the elucidations of the House of Justice. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphatically affirms:

Today this process of deduction is the right of the body of the House of Justice, and the deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice. The difference is precisely this, that from the conclusions and endorsement of the body of the House of Justice whose members are elected by and known to the worldwide Bahá'í community, no differences will arise; whereas the conclusions of individual divines and scholars would definitely lead to differences, and result in schism, division, and dispersion. The oneness of the Word would be destroyed, the unity of the Faith would disappear, and the edifice of the Faith

of God would be shaken. (qtd. in Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 8)

In the course of history, human beings have learned the rules of logic and reasoned argument. If someone systematically violates these principles, there is no need for contention, for it is recognized by all that the argument is inferior and unsound, and others ignore it. In the Bahá'í electoral process, there is no electioneering, and an individual who acts in such an obvious manner to attract attention will not receive the votes of the electors who find such behavior to be unacceptable for qualification for membership in a Bahá'í institution. In a similar manner, the principles governing the action of learned individuals in contributing to the search for truth, the progress of the Cause, and the betterment of the world, have been clearly set forth by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and must be increasingly understood and internalized by the community. "Now some of the mischief-makers, with many stratagems, are seeking leadership, and in order to reach this position they instill doubts among the friends that they may cause differences, and that these differences may result in their drawing a party to themselves," 'Abdu'l-Bahá states. "But the friends of God must be awake and must know that the scattering of these doubts hath as its motive personal desires and the achievement of leadership. Do not disrupt Bahá'í unity, and know that this unity cannot be maintained save through faith in the Covenant of God" (*Selections* 214).

Although in some extreme cases, it may be necessary for the institutions to act, the generality of the believers should grow in understanding and wisdom to be impervious to such machinations.<sup>18</sup> Truth and right action emerge in the course of sincere individuals making efforts, and sometimes making mistakes. They cannot emerge from a misplaced desire to prevent all mistakes. What is more important, perhaps, is to discern the intent associated with the appearance of mistakes and the effort exerted by an individual to adhere to Bahá'í principles associated with collective action.

If the desire is to assist the progress of the Faith, if there is an effort to uphold the principles of consultation and of the administration, then unity is maintained, the decisions of the institutions—and particularly the guidance of the House of Justice to resolve difficult problems—will be

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18 “[T]he believers need to be deepened in their knowledge and appreciation of the Covenants of both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This is the stronghold of the Faith of every Bahá'í, and that which enables him to withstand every test and the attacks of the enemies outside the Faith, and the far more dangerous, insidious, lukewarm people inside the Faith who have no real attachment to the Covenant, and consequently uphold the intellectual aspect of the teachings while at the same time undermining the spiritual foundation upon which the whole Cause of God rests” (letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Light of Divine Guidance* 2:86).

respected, and mistakes will gradually be resolved. However, if there is an intent to impose personal views about the meaning of the Text on the understanding of the community, create contention, spread calumny, or acquire power to direct the community's affairs along the path of one's choosing, then such intention or action strikes a blow at the very process of the search for truth and sound collective action for the progress of the community. “Mere intellectual understanding of the teachings is not enough,” a letter written on behalf of the Guardian explains. “Deep spirituality is essential, and the foundation of true spirituality is steadfastness in the Covenant” (qtd. in Hornby 85).

When, in the 1890s, despite the best efforts of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, news of the machinations of Muhammad Ali began to circulate to the believers outside the Holy Land, creating doubts and confusion, one of the learned Bahá'ís wrote to Him seeking clarification about what was happening and guidance about what should be the proper attitude and conduct of the sincere friends. In a long and moving Tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá pours out His personal anguish and His resolute guidance for the safeguarding of the Faith of God. He advises the friends of their attitudes toward others and of their need to guard themselves:

Conduct yourself with the utmost gentleness, affection, friendliness, well-wishing and compassion. . . . Pray for all and implore God for

everyone's welfare. Mention every person with perfect courtesy. Do not anger anyone and treat all with kindness. . . . Like this servant, behave with the greatest forbearance and patience, and be accustomed to the holy fragrances.

However, do not be deceived by anyone, and do not lend ears to the flattery of some. Quickly discern the doubts of the doubtful. Be perspicacious. Do not be misled. Do not be attracted to the praise of the waverers. Fix your gaze on the Light of God and be the manifestation of "Beware the discernment of the believer, for he sees with the Light of God" (provisional translation).

'Abdu'l-Bahá also explains that the steadfastness of the believers in the face of such obvious errors—that is, their immunity to such machinations—would be the ultimate remedy for and safeguard against attempts to disrupt the Cause. He writes:

But you inquired about the remedy for this situation. As long as some have hope that through machinations and false rumors this upwelling of the life of the Covenant could be diverted from its natural channel and this effulgent star may be shifted from its heavenly orbit to another course, never shall these seditions end nor will these dark clouds be dissipated off the horizon of God's Cause.

But if the friends should truly rise as is incumbent on them in accordance with the Covenant and Testament, and manifest steadfastness and influence, then others will despair of changing and perverting the Centre of the Covenant, and will give up their provocations and deliberations. Gradually the radiant horizon of the Lord's Cause will be cleansed and sanctified of these dense clouds and the true friends and the sincere supporters, like your kind self, will be cheered and inspired. (provisional translation)

It is evident, from the Bahá'í teachings, that religion is to be the cause of the upliftment, the empowerment, and the liberation of the individual. Human conscience is free. And through true religion, the individual's capacities are cultivated to serve the Faith, to raise and nurture a family, to build community, to engage in occupations and in activities to address social and economic needs, and to participate in the wide range of human discourse directed toward the advancement of civilization. But to do this, religion must be safeguarded from fruitless theological debates that have divided it in the past and from the efforts of those who, because of pride or the desire for leadership, attempt to use religion for their own purposes. It was to preserve His Faith from these ills that Bahá'u'lláh instituted His Covenant. The freedom of the individual—indeed, the freedom of all individuals that emerges

from the application of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh—depends on steadfastness and the internalization of the implications of the Covenant so as to become inoculated against the kind of behavior that would subvert it. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

O loved ones of God! Give a hearing ear to my counsel and refrain from stirring up sedition. If you ever detect the odor of dissension from any soul, even though to outward seeming he be a prominent person or an accomplished scholar, you should know of a certainty that he is an anti-christ among men, an opponent of the religion of the glorious Lord, an adversary of the Almighty, a destroyer of the divine edifice, a violator of His Covenant and Testament, an outcast from the threshold of the All-Merciful. Indeed a man of experience and discernment is even as a brilliant light, is a moving impulse for the felicity and well being of the dwellers of both this petty world and of the Great Beyond. Prompted by faith and invested with the power of the Covenant he strives for the highest good of humanity and for the peace and security of mankind. (*Risaliy-i-Siyasiyyih*, provisional translation)

#### CONCLUSION

These are merely a few thoughts on the elements of a framework for action

pertaining to the scholarly or intellectual work of the Cause. Much of value, of course, has already been written over several decades. The message of 24 July 2013, written on behalf of the House of Justice to the National Assembly of Canada, makes it clear that the task at hand is not about starting over, but of taking stock and renewing and revitalizing effort. As noted, the nature of the framework that governs Bahá'í endeavors is evolving, and through study, consultation, experience, and reflection, the framework for action becomes richer and better defined over time.

The challenge is not unlike the effort for learning about growth and community-building in the last two decades. At the start of the Five Year Plan in 2001, for example, it was impossible to define an intensive program of growth, but only to point to some principles and prerequisites. By the end of that Plan in 2006, some 100 clusters achieved a certain level of activity that allowed the friends to extend a similar productive pattern of activity to 1,500 clusters worldwide. This progress then allowed for a further refinement of understanding in 2010, and a further advance in the efforts so that now work has begun in more than 5,000 clusters and at least 200 clusters have reached a level where hundreds of active workers have learned to engage thousands of participants in a pattern of Bahá'í community life that is vibrant, meaningful, and growing.

Among the questions that require

further consideration are: What are the elements of the framework for action for scholarly endeavor? How is it possible to strengthen the capacity of individuals to engage in a process of drawing relevant insights from the teachings and applying them in some manner to the concerns of their fields of interest? What structures can be created to accompany them, and what spaces can be created to assist them in reflecting on their efforts and learning to improve them over time? As the House of Justice writes:

It is timely, then, to reflect upon the many years of experience of the Association, the coherence of its undertakings with the major areas of action in which Bahá'ís are engaged, and the possibilities for the most productive avenues of endeavour in the future. . . . Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present. It is, perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the friends to explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly interests that the endeavours of the Association for Bahá'í Studies can be conceived. Through the specialized settings it creates, the Association can promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines. (letter dated 24 July 2013)

The task, then, before the Association for Bahá'í Studies and the Bahá'í community worldwide is to learn to contribute to bringing these concepts to bear in a pattern of action that becomes increasingly more expansive and effective over time.

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## Basalt

(Reynisfjara, Iceland)

SUSAN JEFFERS

## Silent Trades

CYNTHIA ARRIEU-KING

The class hates when in one translation blue night ends in a lily,  
and in the other a man goes into a bodega.

Their suffering is great when faced with no correct translation.  
A few hundred Venn diagrams overlapping  
nowhere. Always a piece seems missing.

Back in the times of silent trades  
if two peoples did not speak a common language  
one party left goods in a grassy area, the other waited, got closer, felt  
how heavy the salt or beef was,  
or picked the tool they needed, left pieces of gold.

Students start to translate: Some argue the plums  
in a poem should be plush, others fresh

In a poem, one thing is meant but that thing  
is meant by the totality of all language,  
the pure language that no one speaks.

So we are left with a goose flying overhead,  
but in place of its shadow  
a mallard swims.

# Transformative Leadership: Its Evolution and Impact

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## *Abstract*

The ideas behind the conceptual framework and eighteen capabilities of Núr University's Transformative Leadership Program were developed in the 1990s as a Bahá'í-inspired approach to leadership that could be used in academic settings or in projects of social action involving the general public. Since then, this program has been used in approximately sixty projects or workshops in forty countries in North and South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia, generating a significant impact regardless of culture. Both the conceptual framework, which consists of six elements, and the capabilities are closely related to a method of transformative learning, which enhances the power of its focus.

## *Résumé*

Durant les années 1990, l'Université Núr a établi un programme de leadership transformatif. Les idées sous-tendant le cadre conceptuel de ce programme et les dix-huit compétences à acquérir émanaient d'une démarche d'inspiration bahá'íe en matière de leadership qui peut servir tout autant dans un cadre universitaire que dans des projets d'action sociale engageant la population en général. Ce programme a par la suite été utilisé dans une soixantaine de projets ou d'ateliers qui se sont déroulés dans quarante pays d'Amérique

du Nord et du Sud, d'Europe, d'Afrique et d'Asie, lesquels ont eu un impact important quelles que soient les différences culturelles. Tant le cadre conceptuel, qui compte six éléments, que les compétences à acquérir sont liés de près à une méthode d'apprentissage transformatif, qui en renforce la portée.

## *Resumen*

Las ideas detrás del marco conceptual y las dieciocho capacidades del Programa de Liderazgo Transformativo de la Universidad Núr fueron desarrolladas en los 1990s como un acercamiento de inspiración bahá'í hacia el liderazgo el cual podría ser usado en escenarios académicos o en proyectos de acción social involucrando al público en general. Desde entonces, este programa ha sido utilizado en aproximadamente sesenta proyectos o talleres en cuarenta países en Norte y Sur América, Europa, África y Asia, generando un impacto significativo independientemente de la cultura. Ambos el marco conceptual, el cual consiste en seis elementos, y las capacidades, están íntimamente relacionadas al método de aprendizaje transformativo, lo cual realza el poder de su enfoque.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

Different approaches to transformative leadership have been proposed since 1978 when James McGregor Burns first introduced the phrase "transforming leadership" in his descriptive research on political leaders to refer to a type of leadership in which "leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of

morale and motivation” (20). Bernard M. Bass extended Burns’ ideas in 1985 in his book *Leadership and Performance*, highlighting the psychological mechanisms influencing transformational leadership and exploring the ways in which a leader can influence his subordinates.

However, there is no evidence that these approaches to transformational leadership influenced the approach developed by Núr University in Bolivia. Although Núr’s Transformative Leadership Program defines the purpose of leadership as “personal and social transformation,” it emphasizes the fact that all members of a group can exercise leadership, rather than focusing on how the leader can influence other group members, as Burns did.

The first element of the conceptual framework presented by Núr is “servant-oriented leadership,” similar to Robert Greenleaf’s *Servant Leadership*. The framework is also aligned with Stephen Covey’s *Principle-Centered Leadership*, in that it emphasizes guiding our lives by principles. In fact, it includes a number of quotes from Covey to support the ideas presented. Another important influence was the emphasis on the *development of capabilities* that characterizes the programs of FUNDAEC<sup>1</sup> in Colombia. Finally,

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1 FUNDAEC (Foundation for the Application and Teaching of the Sciences) is located in Cali, Colombia. Since the 1980s, FUNDAEC has contributed to the field of alternative education, focusing on the development of capabilities. It is best known

the Spanish title of the book by Eloy Anello and myself, *Liderazgo Moral* (*Moral Leadership*) which was later adopted to refer to the program, was inspired by the following statement made by the World Health Organization in 1988: “The strategy to achieve health for all (implies) the generation of moral leadership, which is generally lacking in many societies” (7).

The concepts included in Transformative Leadership are Bahá’í-inspired, being consciously developed in coherence with the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. However, they are not presented as Bahá’í concepts, as they were formulated for a public that knows nothing of the Bahá’í Faith. Although some quotes are included from Bahá’í sources, most are from well-known secular authors whose thinking aligns with Bahá’í principles.

Núr presents Transformative Leadership as “a program of transformative learning that contributes to a better practice of leadership, administration and the development of the human and institutional capabilities required by individuals, organizations and societies in continual progress” (Kepner 6). As such, it can be incorporated in both academic programs and social actions projects.

The fundamental concepts on which Moral/Transformative Leadership is based were first formulated

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for its SAT (Tutorial Learning System) program that provides alternative education in rural communities where government-funded high schools do not exist.

in a meeting of outstanding Bahá'í educators, including Dr. Farzam Arbab, Mr. Paul Lample, Dr. Eloy Anello, Ms. Lori McLaughlin Nogouchi, and others, sponsored by Herzen State Pedagogical University in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1992 (Anello, Hernandez and Khadem xv). After the fall of Communism, with its externally imposed code of conduct, educators in the Soviet Union had become aware of the need for a framework of moral education capable of integrating moral issues with academic topics. The meeting resulted in a document that briefly describes four elements of a conceptual framework of moral leadership and provides a list of fifteen capabilities.

Even before this meeting, Dr. Anello—one of the founders of Núr University—was giving workshops on community leadership, as part of a project called “Strengthening Non-Governmental Organizations and Training in Public Health,” carried out by Núr with financing from Project Hope.<sup>2</sup> He had also developed a passion for working with rural school teachers, as his work in public health had convinced him that when the school teachers in rural communities support a program, they serve as a catalyst, leading to the program’s success in that community.

However, at that time universities in

Bolivia could not offer academic programs to teachers, who completed a three-year program in separate teachers’ colleges. For further specialization, they took courses in the Higher Institute for Rural Education (ISER). One of the workshops that Dr. Anello gave in the project for strengthening NGOs was attended by Mr. Jordan Segovia, the rector of ISER. Consultation between Anello and Segovia led to the idea of offering an expanded version of the project to rural school teachers as an academic program. Núr University would write the twelve books needed in the three-semester course and would train fifteen instructors from ISER, plus thirty-five tutors that ISER would hire; in turn, the instructors and tutors would deliver the program to 460 rural school teachers (*Final Evaluation* 102, 105).

Dr. Anello invited Ms. Joan Hernandez to serve as coordinator of the program and to work closely with him in developing the books and training the teachers. The first book in the program was *Moral Leadership*. In writing the book, Anello and Hernandez expanded on the implications of the four elements of the conceptual framework developed in St. Petersburg and added a fifth element, transcendence, explaining that “we experience transcendence when we detach ourselves from the limitations of current reality and connect with a higher power, or to those eternal values and principles to which we are committed” (Anello et al. 112). As a result of their ongoing consultation, they also increased the

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<sup>2</sup> Project Hope was founded in 1958 as a global health and humanitarian relief organization that is committed to transforming lives and uplifting communities by empowering health care workers.

number of capabilities to eighteen, brainstorming about the implications of each capability and developing a chapter that explores each one.

The first edition of *Liderazgo Moral*, published in 1993, presents the five elements of the conceptual framework, a summary of the eighteen capabilities, and chapters on five of the capabilities. The authors decided to include the chapters on the remaining thirteen capabilities in other books of the series, relating each capability to relevant technical capabilities. For example, the capability of elaborating a principle-based shared vision became a chapter in the book on *Planificación Estratégica (Strategic Planning)* and the capabilities of consultation, encouraging others, and transforming dominating relations became chapters in the book on *Participación Comunitaria (Community Participation)*. As a result, the concepts of moral leadership were reinforced continually during the three-semester course, helping the participants more deeply identify with them.

The course had a tremendous impact on the lives and capabilities of the teachers who participated. Recently, one of the tutors recalled how his participation in the program contributed to lasting transformation in different areas of his life:

Moral leadership has helped me to understand the essential nobility of the human being. To see my students as beings with an essential nobility and latent potential

has helped me to focus . . . not only on academic contents, but also on developing their values and latent potential, identifying their potential and tending to it . . . .

Personally, the aspect of moral leadership which most helped me was the capability of contributing to the establishment of justice . . . . Something that motivated and helped me was to deeply understand the implications of gender equity. We can't speak of social justice, or of justice at any level, if we don't begin at home. This was an insight, a complicated process for me, as I was born and grew up in the Gran Chaco of Bolivia, a region characterized by deep-seated machismo, in which it is considered a sin, a crime, for a man to go into the kitchen to lend a hand with something, or to help his wife with the laundry. Committing myself to this process implied practicing these activities, which obviously was complicated for me and surprising to my family. (Kerr)

The transformative quality of the program quickly led to its replication, both in Bolivia and throughout Latin America. Plan International<sup>3</sup> sponsored a second program with teachers in the department of Tarija, Bolivia.

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3 Plan International is an international development and humanitarian organization that advances children's rights and equality for girls.

And thanks to changes in Bolivian law, Núr University was authorized to offer the program directly to teachers as part of a bachelor's degree in education, with programs in three areas of the country. Núr also began incorporating moral leadership in other projects, such as Leadership in Small Businesses and Feminine Leadership in Health (Núr University 2–3).

The program gained prestige throughout Latin America as Dr. Anello, in his role as Continental Counselor,<sup>4</sup> organized ten-day workshops for Auxiliary Board Members, both in South America and Central America. Furthermore, a module on moral leadership was included in the program of PRODES, a master's program focused on training Bahá'ís in social and economic development, offered in a number of countries throughout Latin America.

As a result, the book *Liderazgo Moral*, and to a lesser degree, the full community development program, became known throughout the Bahá'í world in Latin America, and more and more initiatives sprang up in different countries. In 1996 Núr trained an

organization in the Department of Rioja, Argentina, that then administered the full community development program with 325 teachers in the Department (Menking 1). And with financing from the World Bank, Núr offered the program at a master's level to 1,000 teachers in Ecuador in 1998–1999, incorporating facilitators from a number of countries in Latin America. Cornell Menking, who evaluated the program as his doctoral thesis two and a half years after it finished, when summarizing his in-depth interviews with ten participants, concludes:

All ten, without a doubt, found it stimulating and spoke highly of both the personal and professional challenges it presented. They appreciated how the program, and its facilitators, asked them to exercise their minds and not simply regurgitate ideas, as they accused their more traditional Ecuadorian educators of doing. They found the intellectual ideas behind the conceptual framework for moral leadership worthwhile, and continued—to varying degrees—to use the terminology and concepts two and half years later.

. . . Some of the more important concepts had faded from the participants' vocabulary and lives . . . . Much more important to the participants, it seems, was the lingering effect on their personal lives, in particular via the personal mental models . . . .

Most of them spoke of a radical

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4 The Continental Boards of Counselors are a part of the administrative order of the Bahá'í Faith and are responsible for overseeing the protection and propagation of the Faith. There are eighty-one Counselors in the world, organized in five Continental Boards. Every Board names a number of Auxiliary Board Members in each country to aid in carrying out its responsibilities.

change in their relationships with their families and/or co-workers and said that it impacted their relationships with others and improved them. Generally speaking, what these participants felt changed them was a new understanding of human potential, a more positive outlook. (Menking 123–24)

One of the interviewees spoke of how the process of questioning mental models had affected him:

[The program] makes you reason, makes you think and meditate so much about the traditional mental models you've had and it makes you look to adopt a new mental model and different conceptual frameworks, too. That's why I said if I would have studied that book and analyzed it when I was eighteen or nineteen, I would have been totally different. (Menking 84)

Menking also relates his experience with one of the teachers who was replicating a module of the program in a community, an essential part of the methodology:

Obviously, I was very impressed with Pavel's dedication to the PLE [Educational Leadership Program] and its concepts, but he truly exhibited a medley of these capabilities over that weekend. First of all, the simple fact that

he was replicating the workshop in the same spirit that it calls for demonstrated moral leadership. He showed little regard for his own personal comfort (for example, he gave me and the American professor I was traveling with the best room in the hostel and stayed in the common room with the others), was working in a difficult and impoverished area of great need, etc. Specifically, I watched him facilitate empowering educational activities, watched him encourage people, watched him consult and promote unity in diversity, watched him work humbly, systematically, joyously, and watched him work with perseverance in pursuit of his goals. He demonstrated his understanding of the concepts, his possession of the skills, and the personal attitudes and qualities to carry out the capabilities the program promotes. (Menking 90)

Bahá'ís from other parts of the world became aware of the program, and a provisional translation of *Moral Leadership* into English was distributed electronically. Over a number of years, a workshop was given prior to the Bahá'í Conference on Social and Economic Development in Orlando, Florida. By 1998, the Nancy Campbell Collegiate Institute (Stratford, Canada) had integrated the conceptual framework of moral leadership into its program, with special emphasis on the capabilities (Naylor 9). Outside of

the Americas, workshops were given in Germany (2001), Kosovo (2003), Namibia (2003), and other countries.

As a result, Bahá'ís in many countries started incorporating moral leadership into programs in which they were involved. Recently, at the 2018 International Bahá'í Convention<sup>5</sup> Ms. Hernandez struck up a conversation with a Bahá'í who had attended the workshop in Germany who commented on how she had used in Macedonia what she had learned about moral leadership, while a friend from Paraguay commented that the Bahá'ís there had used the material extensively with teachers.

Moral leadership began to be used in different fields, not just with teachers. Núr's own use of the program expanded, developing materials for a program in Youth Leadership, which was carried out in lower-class neighborhoods in both Santa Cruz and La Paz, Bolivia. A nationwide program for youth in Kosovo also incorporated concepts from the materials.

In the field of public health, Dr. May Khadem, co-founder and executive director of Health for Humanity,<sup>6</sup>

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5 Every five years, members from over 160 national administrative bodies of the Bahá'í Faith attend a convention in Haifa, Israel, in order to elect the members of the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í community.

6 Health for Humanity is dedicated to providing training for health professionals in the developing world through

asked for Dr. Anello's assistance in incorporating Núr's leadership training into its health development initiatives in Albania, Cameroon, and Mongolia. Over the course of six years—with the help of John Kepner<sup>7</sup> and Charles Howard,<sup>8</sup> the program was adapted for the public health sector and the manual translated into the languages of Albania and Mongolia, where it has been used extensively. A former Minister of Health in Mongolia was so impressed by the program that she later commented to Dr. Khadem:

I remember how bad the conditions used to be and now the eye department is a modern department with high quality services. However, it is not just the technical improvement that is noticeable. There is something else I have not seen before. The doctors treat the patients differently. . . .

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partnerships with health care institutions, focusing especially on eye care and preventing river blindness.

7 Núr's director of the project of Community Development in Tarija, Bolivia; of Educational Leadership in Ecuador; and of a project in Community Leadership in Brazil, all of which used the Transformative Leadership framework and the other modules on Community Development.

8 With John Kepner, Charles Howard was the co-facilitator of the two-year project of Community Leadership with youth and women in the outskirts of São Luís de Maranhão, Brazil, which used the twelve modules translated into Portuguese.

The ophthalmologists at Hospital #3 changed. . . . They have a very good relationship with the patients and with each other and have now become a model department, not only for the hospital, but for all of Mongolia. I want to see this spread. (Khadem)

After Dr. Khadem moved to China and began to work with Vision in Practice,<sup>9</sup> she also used the book there and had it translated into Chinese. In 2008 and 2009, Dr. Khadem and Dr. Anello offered elements of the program to personnel from Ministries of Health through the World Health Organization's Good Governance for Medicines programme.

On another front, the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education in Iran had heard of the work and invited Ms. Hernandez to give a master's level course on "Curriculum Development for Moral Education" to psychology students. In this online course, Ms. Hernandez included not only the conceptual framework of moral leadership, but also the eighteen capabilities and the methodology of transformative training. To date, Ms. Hernandez has given this course three times.

As part of the course, the students read *Transformative Leadership* and other complementary materials. In

2015 some students became so enthusiastic about the concepts contained in the book that they asked permission to translate it into Persian so that it could be incorporated into the core curriculum of the undergraduate program. As a result, approximately 400 undergraduate students are presently studying a course using this text.

An integral part of the conceptual framework of Transformative Leadership is that it "is not final, nor definitive, but evolving" through an ongoing process of consultation-action-reflection as different people and organizations work with it" (Anello et al. 123). In that spirit, the Spanish version of the book has been updated four times, including the addition of a sixth element to the framework—A Conviction of the Essential Nobility of the Human Being.

In January 2009, Dr. Anello invited Dr. Khadem to come to Bolivia to work with him and Ms. Hernandez on incorporating into the book some concepts on which they had worked. Alas, Dr. Anello's cancer prevented this meeting; but before his untimely death in October 2009, he shared with Ms. Hernandez the work that he had done with Dr. Khadem, so that she could incorporate the material into the 4<sup>th</sup> edition in Spanish, published in 2010. This edition also included for the first time the chapter on "Mental Models of Human Nature and Society," which was developed with the help of Peter Newton from Ecuador, who had served in the master's program there and had worked for years on the topic of Culture for Peace.

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9 Vision in Practice works with doctors in China to design high-quality, ethical, high-volume, low-cost, barrier-free models of eye care delivery in small communities.

In early 2011, Dr. Khadem contacted Ms. Hernandez to share a dream in which Dr. Anello had appeared to her, instructing her to work with Ms. Hernandez to publish the book in English. Thus began a three-year collaboration that led to the publication in 2014 of *Transformative Leadership: Developing the Hidden Dimension*.

More recently, the book has come to the attention of Bahá'ís in the United States. Personnel at the National Bahá'í Center wrote, asking how they could deepen in transformative leadership in addition to reading the book. As a result, Ms. Hernandez and Dr. Khadem developed a companion workbook: *Transformative Leadership: Mastering the Hidden Dimension*, containing numerous exercises and applications, which groups can use when studying the book together. Ms. Hernandez also developed an online course available to the general public (<https://transformative-leaders.teachable.com/p/transformative-leadership>) so that those interested in delving into transformative leadership on their own or applying it in their organizations can deepen their understanding and interact with others who are in the same process. Finally, Ms. Hernandez gave a training session for personnel at the US Bahá'í National Center in July 2018. After the training, Helen Butler, Training and Development Coordinator at the US Bahá'í National Center, e-mailed Ms. Hernandez the following feedback:

Staff who went through the training found it to be one of the

best trainings they had taken. Of particular importance was how it aligned with Bahá'í principles and how it identified and responded to the needs to foster unity, meet goals and build capacity. As we continue to share the model, we eagerly look forward to our entire staff engaging in building the necessary skills and capabilities to support fuller and richer participation in organizational life. (Butler)

In January 2017, Jessica Kerr, founder of Cultivating Capacities, a non-profit grassroots support organization, contacted Ms. Hernandez seeking training and materials to serve in community-building spaces in Colorado. A workshop was organized in June 2017 and offered to community members, with a special emphasis on educators and students. To aid Cultivating Capacities and other interested organizations in their work with youth and junior youth,<sup>10</sup> providing young people with tools to offer a positive response to problems they face, such as prejudice, racism, gender inequity, and bullying, in 2018 Ms. Hernandez prepared *Transformative Leadership for Youth*, in which summarized explanations of each major concept in the

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10 The term *junior youth* refers to adolescents between the ages of eleven and fourteen years old. The Bahá'í community promotes the formation of junior youth groups guided by an animator, who mentors them.

*Transformative Leadership* book are complemented by guides for discussion or activities. Using this material, Cultivating Capacities is continuing its efforts to integrate transformative leadership into schools and youth organizations in Northern Colorado. Most recently, in partnership with Intercultural Community Builders,<sup>11</sup> Kerr has entered into an agreement with a school in Fort Collins to give weekly two-hour seminars during two months to interested students, who are responding enthusiastically. She is also consulting with some members of the Colorado Department of Education about the possibility of offering training to teachers in interested school districts.

Even though the concepts and/or capabilities of Transformative Leadership have been incorporated in approximately sixty projects in forty countries (Kepner 8), to date knowledge of this approach to leadership has spread mostly through personal contact. To facilitate interaction among those interested in the approach, a webpage is currently being developed to provide ongoing information about the basic concepts and different activities and projects related to Transformative Leadership.

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<sup>11</sup> Intercultural Community Builders provides workshops and consulting services for youth and adults to teach intercultural competency skills that promote understanding and acceptance of individual cultural differences.

## THE CONTENTS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

Transformative leadership is closely linked to transformative learning, which includes the following elements:

- **Establishing context**
  - The twin processes of integration and disintegration that characterize the time in which we live and are moving us toward a planetary society
  - Primary group functions that enable all to exercise leadership
    1. *Fulfilling the purpose or goals of the group, team, or organization*
    2. *Strengthening unity among the members of the group*
    3. *Developing the capabilities of the members of the team, or organization, through training and accompaniment*
- **Questioning prevalent mental models**
  - Human Nature
  - Society
  - Leadership
- **Adopting a new conceptual framework**
  - Service-oriented leadership
  - The purpose of leadership: personal and social transformation
  - The moral responsibility to investigate and apply truth
  - A conviction of the essential nobility of human beings
  - Transcendence
  - The development of capabilities

- **Developing relevant capabilities**
  - Capabilities that contribute to personal transformation
    1. *Rectitude of conduct*
    2. *Self-discipline*
    3. *Learning from reflection on action*
    4. *Self-evaluation*
    5. *Systemic thinking*
    6. *Initiative*
    7. *Perseverance*
  - Capabilities that enhance human relations
    1. *Imbuing thoughts and actions with love*
    2. *Giving encouragement*
    3. *Using consultation in decision-making*
    4. *Constructing unity in diversity*
  - Capabilities that contribute to social transformation
    1. *Establishing justice*
    2. *Transforming dominating relationships*
    3. *Empowering education*
    4. *Formulating a shared principle-based vision*
    5. *Understanding historical perspective*
    6. *Transforming institutions*
  - An integrative capability: being a loving, responsible member of a family
- **Participating in a learning community**

living, which is characterized by the twin processes of disintegration and integration<sup>12</sup> and in which mankind, according to the Bahá'í teachings, is progressing toward greater maturity and a planetary society.

We also distinguish between having a formal position as a leader and exercising leadership, emphasizing that everyone can exercise leadership. Since leadership is exercised in a group, we identify three primary group functions:

- Fulfilling the purpose or goals of the group, team, or organization
- Strengthening unity among the members of the group, because “no power can exist except through unity” (Bahá'u'lláh, in *Compilation* 93). Anyone who has participated in a team or organization plagued by disunity can attest to the detrimental effect it has on achievement.
- Developing the capabilities of the members of the team, or organization, through training and accompaniment, so

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<sup>12</sup> In *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, Shoghi Effendi explains that mankind is passing simultaneously through a process of disintegration, in which time-honored social institutions are breaking down or losing their influence, and a process of integration, contributing to the gradual formation of a more just, united global social order.

## ESTABLISHING CONTEXT

We begin by examining the context of the historical period in which we are

that an increasing number of members can carry out ever more complex activities, empowering the organization as a whole.

All those who contribute to one of these group functions are exercising leadership because they are contributing to the progress and effectiveness of the group.

#### QUESTIONING PREVALENT MENTAL MODELS

If we have a cup that is full of water and we try to pour coffee into it, not much coffee will stay in the cup. If we want a good cup of coffee, first we must empty the cup, then pour in the coffee.

When people have longstanding ideas about something, we need to help them question those ideas before presenting them with new ones if we want the new ideas to have a lasting influence. Before offering the conceptual framework of transformative leadership, we question mental models in three areas that could hinder full acceptance and integration of the framework in participants' ways of thinking and acting.

#### *Human Nature*

As the Universal House of Justice explains in *The Promise of World Peace*: "a paralyzing contradiction has developed in human affairs. On the one hand, people of all nations proclaim not only their readiness but their

longing for peace and harmony . . . . On the other, uncritical assent is given to the proposition that human beings are incorrigibly selfish and aggressive" (2).

We critically analyze the deep-seated belief that human beings are selfish and aggressive by nature, clarifying misconceptions and presenting the alternative view that the advances of mankind through the millennia have been due to our ability to cooperate.

We also explore other mental models of human nature, such as determinism and fatalism, which lead to the abdication of personal responsibility, and conclude by presenting the concept that human beings have a dual nature: "In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 60). Following the lower nature *does* lead toward selfishness and aggression, while turning toward the higher nature leads to love, understanding, compassion, and peace. Because we are endowed with free will, we can each choose the nature that we wish to cultivate.

#### *Society*

Modern society is organized around competition. The economy, the legal system, politics, education, mass media, athletic events—all are usually based on competition. There are winners and losers; people consciously or

unconsciously consider others as opponents they have to beat.

People frequently defend this model by asserting that competition enhances performance and leads to excellence. However, “trying to do well and trying to beat others are two different things” (Kohn 55). According to the philosopher John McMurdy, who has investigated and compared the consequences of competition and cooperative learning in schools: “The pursuit of victory works to reduce the chance for excellence . . . . It tends to distract our attention from excellence of performance by rendering it subservient to emerging victorious” (qtd. in Kohn 56).

Furthermore, to the degree that it motivates anyone, competition only motivates those who have a chance of winning, while it discourages those who don’t. Numerous investigations have shown that the most productive form of work is cooperative, followed by independent work. Competition is the least productive. The more complicated the task, the better the results that come from cooperation compared to competition, because it is less likely that one person has all the necessary knowledge and skills to do it well (Kohn 46–50).

### *Leadership*

The term *leader* often calls to mind a top-down style of leadership in one of its variations. There are differences between authoritarian, paternalistic, know-it-all, and manipulative leadership; however, in all these styles, the

leader has the final word. When examined in the light of the three group functions, we discover that:

- These styles of leadership only seem effective when the tasks to be performed are relatively simple and routine. They do not motivate members’ initiative and creativity.
- They do not promote true unity, although paternalistic leadership may generate superficial unity if the members are grateful that the leader does all the work for them.
- None of these styles of leadership cultivates the capabilities of the other members of the group.

When faced with this analysis, some adduce that the solution is democratic leadership. Two positive, distinctive elements of democratic leadership are elections and participatory decision-making, but when these are carried out in an environment of competition they leave a lot to be desired. We therefore distinguish between *partisan democracy* and *deliberative democracy* (Karlberg 112). Deliberative democracy uses consultation in decision-making, which raises the quality of participatory decision-making. It can also include practices such as *elections without candidature* (Anello and Hernandez, *Participación Comunitaria* 176–78), which overcome many of the present-day problems related to elections and electioneering.

However, true leadership implies even more than consultative decision-making. It also demands the development of capabilities such as self-evaluation, learning from reflection on experience, effectively encouraging others, constructing unity in diversity, formulating a shared, principle-based vision, and many more.

Transformative leadership explores the nature of eighteen of these capabilities—some related to personal transformation; others, to bettering relationships; and still others, to the transformation of organizations and society at large.

#### ADOPTING A NEW CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of transformative leadership incorporates six elements that serve as a foundation for the application of the capabilities. These are:

- Service-oriented leadership
- The purpose of leadership: personal and social transformation
- The moral responsibility to investigate and apply truth
- A conviction of the essential nobility of human beings
- Transcendence
- The development of capabilities

#### *Service-Oriented Leadership*

Unlike dominant models of leadership that are motivated by a desire

for power, transformative leadership is motivated by a spirit of service. Transformative leadership seeks to serve others, rather than control them.

A spirit of service is born of love and of the recognition of our true position in life as a unique creation, with the corresponding mission of using our particular talents, capabilities, position, and economic means to better society and the lives of those around us. When we recognize that the highest position to which we can aspire is that of service and we strive to fill our acts of service with unselfish love, we become channels through which spirit flows, uniting hearts and contributing to the progress of an ever-advancing civilization.

Service is distinct from paternalism, which does for others what they can and should do for themselves. Nor should it be confused with subservience, which is characterized by self-deprecation and the desire for approval.

The most worthwhile services are those that help others develop their potential and strengthen ties of unity and friendship while contributing to the achievement of a meritorious vision.

When we act with a spirit of service, we strive to exercise *invisible leadership*. An analogy for this aspect of leadership is the wind that propels a sailboat: essential as it is, it cannot be seen. Invisible leadership does not aspire to reward or recognition; rather, upon achieving a goal, the leader turns to the others involved and

joyfully celebrates what the group has accomplished.

Service brings its own rewards. Two of the most important are the development of our own capabilities and a deep sense of inner joy.

*The Purpose of Leadership: Personal and Social Transformation*

Everything that exists has a purpose. Minerals, plants, and animals instinctively fulfill their purpose. Only we, as human beings, have the liberty to investigate and then consciously choose to live in accordance with our purpose.

As Bahá'ís, we are aware that human beings have a triple purpose:

- 1) To know and love God
- 2) To develop virtues and perfections (personal transformation)
- 3) To contribute to a civilization in continual progress (social transformation)

We nurture the knowledge and love of God through prayer and by reading and meditating on the Baha'i

Writings or other Holy Books. This practice serves as a source of energy and motivation that impels us to carry out the other two purposes.

Transformative leadership focuses on the dual purposes of personal and social transformation. We participate in personal transformation when we develop qualities and capabilities that enable us to better serve others. We participate in social transformation when we use our capabilities to contribute to the construction of a more just, united society, beginning with the groups, or organizations, in which we are currently involved, starting with the family.

Personal and social transformation go hand in hand—neither one is effective without the other. It is impossible to construct a just, unified society if as individuals we do not practice justice, unity, and other qualities in our daily lives, wholeheartedly participating in a process of personal transformation.

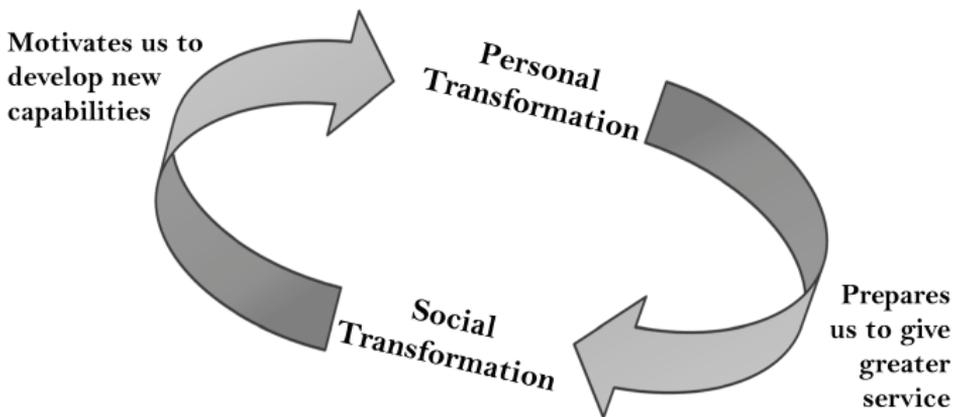


Figure 1: The Virtuous Cycle

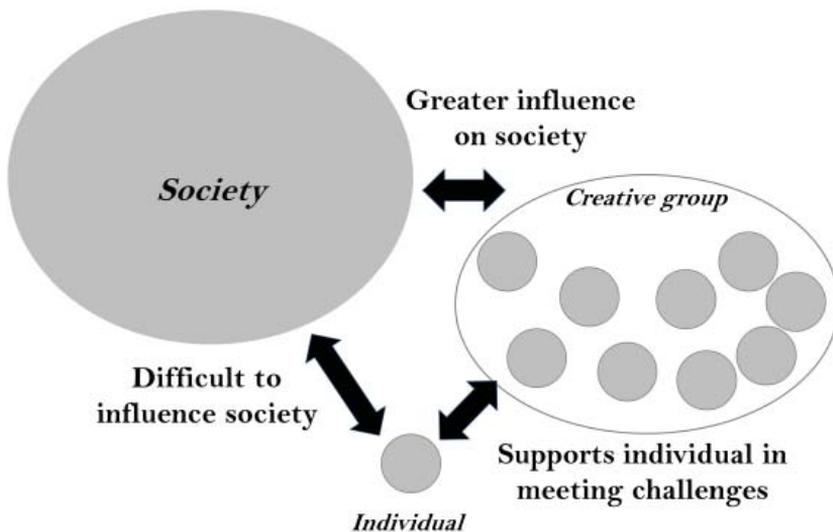
However, personal transformation alone is not enough to resolve the problems of the world. We need a shared vision of the desired society that we are striving to build and an agreement on the basic principles that will guide the functioning of that society—principles such as universal education, the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty, equal rights and opportunities for men and women, an appreciation of unity in diversity, decision-making focused on justice and the well-being of all, and others. Then, we need to practice those principles as we work to transform our vision into reality.

These two types of transformation form a virtuous circle as the development of capabilities and the dynamic force of our example increase our ability to contribute to social transformation. Our efforts to promote social transformation, in turn, motivate us to develop new capabilities and qualities.

Transformation is further enhanced when we form part of a *creative group* of people who share our vision. The support of other group members gives us strength and ideas with which to face the many challenges we encounter as we strive to implement our ideals. Likewise, working together we can carry out projects that are much more complex and significant than what we could achieve individually.

The structure of a creative group can vary greatly: from a formal organization, to a department or office in a larger organization, to an informal group of two or three friends who meet regularly to share their initiatives and challenges. What distinguishes a creative group is the mutual support for one another's process of personal transformation and the joint effort to contribute to social transformation.

Figure 2: The Role of a Creative Group in Personal and Social Transformation



*The Moral Responsibility to Investigate and Apply Truth*

Transformative leadership defines the fundamental moral responsibility as a commitment to truth, focusing on two aspects of this commitment:

1. the investigation of truth and wholehearted acceptance of the truths that our investigation leads us to recognize
2. the application of those truths in the processes of personal and social transformation in which we are involved.

Some argue that truth does not exist or that it is relative, or different, for each person. Our understanding is that truth refers to an objective reality, which does exist. What is relative is our understanding of truth, which is never complete. We can always increase our understanding of truth, or reality.

This concept of truth allows us to avoid the extremes of *dogmatism*, which insists that a certain understanding is the only truth, and *relativism*, which affirms that everyone has their own truth and all are equally valid. When we acknowledge that our understanding of the truth of any topic or situation is partial, we recognize the need to investigate in order to broaden our understanding. We continue to learn through reading, studying, listening to others and taking action, then reflecting with a posture of learning on the new ideas we have encountered.

When we investigate truth, we neither stubbornly insist on our own

opinions, nor blindly accept the ideas of others. Once we conclude that something is true—or once we have bettered our understanding of a certain truth—we then reflect on how we can apply that truth in the processes of personal and social transformation.

We need to apply this fundamental commitment to truth to our understanding of physical, emotional, social, and spiritual reality. In the physical world, the investigation of truth leads to the advance of science. In the emotional sphere, it leads to deeper self-understanding and better relationships with others. In the social sphere, it leads to a clearer diagnosis of problems and to making more effective decisions based on justice. The investigation of spiritual truth leads to a commitment to principles that then guide our actions. It also leads us to be open to what we can learn from religions and philosophies that are different from our own, cultivating a humble posture of learning.

In planning or problem-solving, we need to investigate both *contingent truth*, the situation that exists, and *ideal truth*, a principle-based vision of what we would like to achieve in the future. Then, we can see with greater clarity the steps needed to progress toward that vision from where we are.

One way of doing this is by:

1. Listing the facts that we know and others that we may need to investigate before making a decision.
2. Identifying principles related to the situation.

3. Defining our vision of the ideal situation, taking into account the principles we have identified.
4. Formulating the first steps to take toward a solution.

### *A Conviction of the Essential Nobility of Human Beings*

Human beings have a lower nature that expresses itself through negative emotions, such as hatred, jealousy, and envy. However, focusing on only our lower nature leads to an erroneous concept of human beings, because we also possess a higher nature.

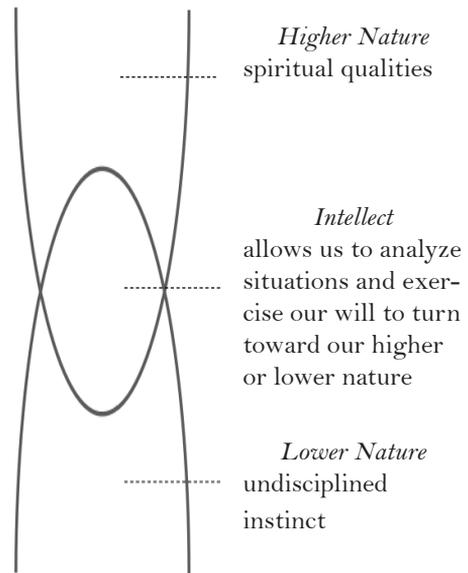
The affirmation that man was created in the *image of God* refers to the potential that each person has to develop moral qualities, such as kindness, generosity, truthfulness, upright conduct, justice, detachment, forgiveness, and many more. This view of human nature is reinforced by humanistic psychology, which emphasizes the potential of each person to grow through participating in a relationship characterized by acceptance, empathy, and authenticity.

We can allow our thoughts and feelings to be consumed by our lower nature and be carried away by our instincts. Or we can choose to exercise our free will and turn toward our higher nature, seeking to guide our actions by the moral principles to which we are committed. This effort contributes to the gradual process of personal transformation.

In every decision we make and every action we take, we have the opportunity to choose between following

our lower nature or our higher nature.

When we look at others, focusing on their qualities and their higher nature, we help them develop these qualities and their inherent nobility. As the philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe recognized: "When we take people . . . merely as they are, we make them worse; when we treat them as if they were what they should be, we improve them as far as they can be improved."



### *Transcendence*

The process of transformation is not easy. All too often, our egotistical desires, personal interests, or bad habits hamper our efforts to practice the truths, or principles, we have accepted. We know what we should do but at times find it hard to carry out. Likewise, when we work to promote social transformation, we encounter many frustrations. At times, others are irresponsible

or do not do what they said they would. The community may be apathetic and consider that it is impossible to better a situation. Others may oppose our ideas or even criticize us.

When we encounter these or other problems, which come both from our lower nature and from society at large, we need to practice transcendence, connecting with God or universal principles that help us take a step back from the immediate situation and see the bigger picture.

Before practicing transcendence, we are like players during a sports event, who are only aware of what is going on nearby. When we practice transcendence, we become like knowledgeable fans watching the event from the stands, from where there is a view of everything that is happening on the playing field.

In brief, transcendence helps us detach from a situation and focus on what is truly important. It helps us remember our vision so that we don't feel overwhelmed when we encounter problems, inspiring us to persevere without becoming discouraged or quitting. If we do not know what to do, it can serve as a source of guidance. If we are tempted to act in a way that is not in agreement with principles, it gives us strength to follow their direction.

Some ways to achieve transcendence include:

- Prayer or meditation
- Reflection on the vision and principles to which we are committed

- Communing with nature
- Listening to music
- Creating or appreciating art
- Conversing with a friend who has greater maturity than we do

Transcending a problem is not the same as trying to forget it or escape from it. When we try to escape a problem, we may forget it momentarily, but it is there waiting for us when we return. When we transcend a problem, we remain aware of it but see it from a different perspective that enables us to take constructive action.

#### *The Development of Capabilities*

In the past, the concept of a moral person was that of a person who avoided sinful actions, someone who went along with the *status quo* and did not rock the boat. Passive morality was the norm. Today, faced with the problems that confront the world and the need for social transformation, we need a more active morality. Rather than limiting moral behavior to our personal and family life, we need to be actively involved in the processes of personal and social transformation.

To be effective in these efforts for transformation, we need to develop the capabilities of transformative leadership. Each capability consists of a combination of concepts, skills, attitudes, and qualities. For example, concepts implicit in developing the capability of consultation include the following: the purpose of consultation is to make decisions that contribute to the common good, the integration of

diverse viewpoints leads to a deeper understanding of truth, consultation contributes to justice, and there are fundamental norms for participating in consultation and personal qualities that contribute to better consultation. Skills include creating a safe environment for people to express their thoughts fully, listening with empathy, and summarizing ideas. Attitudes include curiosity, appreciation, and openness to new ideas. And qualities include truthfulness and courtesy.

As soon as we understand the concepts related to a particular capability, we can begin to practice it. Our success will depend both on the degree to which we have understood the concepts and the extent to which we have developed the relevant skills, attitudes, and qualities, all of which take time to evolve. Even when we have a good understanding of the concepts and have tried our best to practice a capability during a period of time, we need to continue striving, without becoming complacent. There is always room for improving skills, attitudes, and qualities.

The effort to practice a new capability launches a process of transformation in our lives. Gradually, through continual effort and ongoing self-evaluation of the results, we deepen our understanding of the concepts and develop the skills, qualities, and attitudes necessary to better implement each capability.

Some of the capabilities of transformative leadership, such as *upright conduct*, have an implicit moral

dimension. Other capabilities, such as *initiative*, although vital for effective action and leadership, could be used for either moral or immoral ends. We ensure the right use of these capabilities by practicing them within the context of the other elements of the conceptual framework of transformative leadership.

#### DEVELOPING RELEVANT CAPABILITIES

It is not enough to familiarize ourselves with the conceptual framework of transformative leadership. We need to develop the capabilities to apply it. Because transformative leadership focuses on eighteen different capabilities, we have grouped them into three categories in order to remember them more easily. These are:

- Capabilities that contribute to personal transformation
- Capabilities that enhance human relations
- Capabilities that contribute to social transformation

The categorization of the capabilities is somewhat arbitrary, as it could be argued that a particular capability could be in a category other than the one where we have placed it. For example, *learning from reflection on action* can be done by both individuals and groups. Similarly, *constructing unity in diversity* both enhances relationships and contributes to the transformation of society. As explained, the purpose of the categorization is simply to serve as an aid to memory. The overview that follows mentions a few salient aspects of each capability.

*Capabilities that Contribute to Personal Transformation*

Rectitude of Conduct

We hold ourselves to a high standard of conduct, consciously applying moral principles in our lives and acting with integrity. We also take responsibility for solving problems in which we are involved, rather than blaming others or attributing issues to bad luck. In doing so, we apply the steps we learned in the *investigation and application of truth*: ascertaining the facts, identifying relevant principles, visualizing the desired end situation, and formulating steps that will lead to that result.

By developing and applying the capability, we become trustworthy. Others learn that they can count on us and that we will always strive to do what is right.

Self-Discipline

We recognize that success in any endeavor requires self-discipline, as does living a life with rectitude of conduct. Two keys to self-discipline are establishing good habits and associating with people who share our ideals. We can also follow Stephen Covey's advice to practice daily self-renewal by engaging in activities that strengthen the four dimensions of life:

- physically: exercising to keep our bodies in shape
- intellectually: reading, writing, engaging in creative problem solving and continually learning

- emotionally: cultivating patience, empathy, responsibility and other qualities
- spiritually: praying and meditating (Covey 38).

Although at first self-discipline may seem difficult, in time we discover the deep, lasting happiness that is born from a combination of self-control, the development of qualities and capabilities, and the attainment of significant achievements in life.

Learning from Reflection on Action

We perform many actions out of habit. Even when the results are negative, we often continue doing the same thing in the same way, simply hoping that it will turn out better next time. We do not realize that, as the expression goes, insanity *is* doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results. Reflecting on our experiences allows us to learn from them and to gradually develop more effective ways of acting.

Through reflection, we can identify the consequences of our actions and the advantages and disadvantages of acting as we did. We can evaluate if the way we acted facilitates the development of our capabilities and the capabilities of others and if it contributes to a just, united society. We may consider if the action has led to the end that we desire and if it has generated problems that we want to try to avoid in the future. Then we identify what we want to do the next time we are in a similar situation. Having

thought beforehand of how we want to act or respond, we are more likely to carry it out.

### Self-Evaluation

Knowledge of ourselves is the foundation for transformation. After identifying our talents, we can further develop and strengthen them, then use them in service to society.

We can also strive to improve in those areas in which we are weak. If we discover moral weaknesses, we need to detach ourselves from ego and from the excuses we commonly make for ourselves. Striving to develop the quality that can replace the weakness is one of the best ways to overcome it. Rather than resolving to *stop lying*, for example, it is more effective to make a special effort to *tell the truth* under all circumstances.

In our process of evaluation, rather than comparing ourselves to others, we compare ourselves to the highest criteria that we know. This helps us remain humble and continually strive to progress.

### Systemic Thinking

Systemic thinking aspires to see the whole and the relations between the parts that make up the whole. It contrasts with linear thinking, which considers each part in isolation and focuses on simplistic relations of cause and effect. Rather than focusing on *isolated events*, systemic thinking looks for *patterns* of which the events form a part. It then tries to identify the *systemic structure* that generates

those patterns and to resolve problems at that level.

Rather than responding to symptoms with quick fixes, which are usually short-lived, systemic thinking takes the time to work with underlying causes. Becoming familiar with common systemic structures, such as those presented by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline*, can help us to develop this capability.

### Initiative

There are two types of initiatives. A *routine initiative* consists of voluntarily carrying out a known activity or process in which there are usually clear steps to follow to accomplish the task. In contrast, a *creative initiative* involves new ideas or ways of acting. There is no clear path to follow. Because they are different from what is customarily done, creative initiatives are often met with initial resistance, in spite of the value they may offer. However, both types of initiative are necessary and valuable.

An initiative can be broken down into seven phases: intention, purpose, concrete planning, commitment, permission, opportune timing, and execution. At times we pass through the phases rapidly and somewhat unconsciously, especially with routine initiatives. But when an initiative gets bogged down, knowledge of the phases allows us to analyze where we are in the process, see with greater clarity the next step, and carry the initiative through to conclusion.

### Perseverance

Carrying an initiative through to completion demands effort during an ongoing period of time, patience to face and overcome difficulties, and a commitment to persevere in spite of unexpected problems that arise in the process.

We are more likely to persevere when the goal we are working toward is aligned with noble principles and even more so when those principles are among our most cherished values.

Careful planning that includes a balanced distribution of resources and effort, the practice of transcendence, and considering problems as tests or learning situations all contribute to perseverance.

### *Capabilities that Enhance Interpersonal Relationships*

#### Imbuing Thoughts and Actions with Love

Love is much more than a pleasant emotion that we sometimes are lucky enough to experience. Love is a capability that we can develop. Psychologist Erich Fromm indicates that “love is the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love,” entailing *knowledge* of the other person, *respect* for him and his way of being, *responsibility* in the relationship and *care* for the loved one (Fromm 20–21).

Increasing our capability to love begins with our thoughts, focusing on the essential nobility of ourselves and others and identifying things they have done for which we are grateful,

characteristics that we admire, or simply their potential. We communicate love both non-verbally—through smiles, hugs, and mentally beaming feelings of love toward others—and verbally, expressing our feelings of affection, gratitude, and appreciation. We also communicate love through our actions: listening attentively without multitasking, participating with others in events or activities they enjoy, or helping them with their tasks.

It is also important to become aware of the love language that each person most appreciates: words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service, gifts, or physical touch (Chapman 35).

#### Giving Encouragement

Most people have the potential to do much more with their lives and talents than they do. Encouragement motivates them to develop that potential. We can make a conscious effort to encourage others by focusing on their capabilities and potential. We try to “catch people doing something right” and then comment on what we like about what they did, how they did it, and the effort they made (Blanchard). It is important to state the comment as *our* response, to be *specific*, and to *emphasize the effort made* rather than attributing success to innate intelligence or capability. Some examples might be: “I appreciate the kindness and initiative you showed by inviting our new neighbor over for dinner.” Or: “I’m impressed by how hard you studied to do well on the test.”

If at times we feel that it is essential to correct someone, we can first comment on two qualities or characteristics we like, and then, rather than criticizing what the person is not doing right, give a suggestion of what might work better.

### Using Consultation in Decision-Making

Transformative leadership involves group decision-making. However, making a decision in a group does not in itself imply consultation. The process must adhere to the characteristics of consultation. The aim of consultation is the *investigation of truth*, leading to *just decisions* that promote the *common good* and the *well-being of all*. When we listen attentively to others' opinions, trying to understand their point of view, we come to a more complete understanding of the reality of a situation and can make more just decisions.

For consultation to fulfill its purpose, the first requirement is unity and harmony among the group's members. The following guidelines help promote and maintain unity:

- Always speak courteously
- Encourage quiet members to share their ideas
- Never make fun of another person or disparage their ideas
- Do not stubbornly insist on a particular idea
- Do not get upset if other members do not support your ideas
- Once the group makes a

decision, accept and support it without criticism

The quality of consultation also depends on the degree to which each of the participants has developed qualities outlined by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, such as sincerity and purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment, modesty and humility, patience, and a spirit of service (*Selections* no. 43).

Consultation is a key capability in the practice of transformative leadership because without this capability, even those who have recognized the defects of vertical models of leadership often fall back into those modes because they don't know how to guide a group toward consensus.

Consultation also contributes to the capability of *establishing justice*. When justice is recognized as the "indispensable compass in collective decision making" and "the only means by which unity of thought and action can be achieved . . . a consultative climate is encouraged that permits options to be examined dispassionately and appropriate courses of action selected" (Bahá'í International Community sec. II).

### Constructing Unity in Diversity

The principle of unity in diversity is the key to solving many social problems. It is the only way to avoid the extremes of *unity in uniformity*, in which one group tries to impose on others its values, customs, and ways of thinking, or *division in diversity*, in which different groups oppose one another and believe that the only way for each to

preserve its own customs and values is through separatism.

To learn from diversity, we need to cultivate attitudes such as openness to novelty and an appreciation for diverse ideas. When working with those different from ourselves, we begin by showing interest in their way of thinking and acting, then come to understand it and finally to appreciate it. In order to better coordinate and cooperate, we jointly identify principles related to the subject at hand, formulate a shared vision of what we wish to achieve, and then use consultation to explore the most just actions to take.

When only one person or a like-minded group makes a decision, it is easy for them to overlook ways in which that decision might affect others. In contrast, when unity in diversity is practiced and consultation involves diverse individuals who will be affected in different ways by a decision, all become aware of their viewpoints and are more likely to make just decisions.

### *Capabilities that Contribute to Social Transformation*

#### Establishing Justice

Justice is the foundation of social order and a necessary requirement for unified action. Acting justly implies giving each person his due, taking into account both his work and his needs. In some contexts, it implies equality, as in equal pay for equal work. In others, it implies equity, giving differentiated treatment based on specific needs

or contributions.

Establishing social justice implies working for:

- The elimination of exploitation and the extremes of wealth and poverty
- A balance between individual rights and collective well-being
- Just authorities, chosen on the basis of capacity and merit, free from the influence of politics, kinship, friendship, or money
- An impartial application of the law, in which no one remains above the law

The establishment of social justice also implies freeing people from ignorance—ignorance of universal principles on which justice is based, ignorance of laws and institutions to which people can turn when treated unjustly, and ignorance of alternatives and skills that can be used to escape from an oppressive situation.

In striving to establish social justice, as individuals we need to exemplify justice in our daily lives and employ just methods in our struggle. At times we see great champions of social justice who use their positions for personal gain, are dishonest, show favoritism, discriminate against women or minorities, or misrepresent those they oppose. This lack of coherence between words and deeds frustrates the achievement of the very goal they proclaim. Rather, the creation of a just society begins with the practice of

justice as individuals, in our families and organizations.

To act with justice, we first strive to eliminate every trace of prejudice because prejudice clouds our vision and warps our judgment. We then seek to make decisions and take actions based on principles, detached from the opinions of others or our own personal or sectarian interests.

When we encounter injustice, we assume the responsibility of speaking up, no matter how uncomfortable it may be.

### Transforming Dominating Relationships

If we want to transform dominating behavior, we need to begin by questioning the mental model that underlies domination, which includes ideas such as the following:

- Differences that exist between groups necessarily lead to conflict
- Domination of one person or group over others is inevitable
- It is acceptable to use power to impose one's will on another person or group

After becoming conscious of these ideas and questioning them, we can commit to a conceptual framework of relationships that is in agreement with principles such as the following:

- *Unity in diversity* contributes to greater well-being for all.
- *A shared vision, an agreement on principles*, and the practice of moral qualities—such as

truthfulness, honesty, justice, and courtesy—are the source of unity

- Differences that arise from diversity can be resolved through *consultation*

Once we internalize this conceptual framework, we can reflect on how to apply it coherently in our daily relations: in our family, with our friends, at the workplace, and in organizations to which we belong. We can begin by transforming relationships in which we have been dominating and then learn to stand up to and question others who are trying to dominate us.

### Empowering Education

We plan educational sessions by first identifying what we want the students or participants to be capable of *doing* as a result of their study. By using the learning cycle with its four phases of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application, we generate participation and engage the interest of those who are studying. We go beyond theory, creating opportunities for them to practice what they are learning. If the subject matter requires it, we include exercises that aid in transforming mental models into coherent conceptual frameworks.

We also strive to establish an empowering relationship with the students, being open and friendly, communicating high expectations, and humbly showing respect for their ideas, while dedicating sufficient time to our own preparation of the class or workshop.

### Formulating a Shared Principle-Based Vision

A shared vision contributes to unity of thought and aids in decision-making. It consists of the description of a *desired future* that is *challenging* but not impossible to attain and is based on *shared principles, ideals, and values*. The vision defines the ideal truth that will guide our steps in a specific field of endeavor. The success of any plan depends on vision.

By identifying certain principles and fundamental topics related to a subject area, then identifying what currently exists with regard to each one and how the group would like to see their institution with regard to each area in a certain number of years, a sizeable group can elaborate a shared vision.

### Understanding Historical Perspective

An understanding of history aids in giving direction to our actions and projects. First comes the awareness that we live in a unique moment in human history. Over thousands of years, humanity has progressed through stages that correspond to its infancy and childhood, slowly developing institutions and the ability to live in harmony with ever larger and more diverse social groups. Now we find ourselves in the turbulent stage of adolescence, struggling toward maturity and a planetary society. This insight gives directions to our efforts.

Secondly, it is important to understand that in times of transition such as ours, a *creative minority* with a clear vision of the future can have an

effect disproportionate to its size. This gives us hope and patience to continue striving.

### Transforming Institutions

It is important that institutions help their members apply many of the capabilities we have already mentioned: to give encouragement, to make decisions using consultation, to construct unity in diversity, to design empowering training programs, to exemplify justice, to formulate a principle-based vision, to learn from reflection on action, and to understand historical perspective.

Another important skill consists of matching people to the tasks for which they are best prepared and which they enjoy, inspiring each one with an understanding of the importance of her service.

Once a person is engaged in a particular task, appropriate accompaniment provides ongoing motivation. When a person does not have experience in a particular service, she needs and appreciates detailed, concrete guidance and accompaniment in carrying out certain activities. As she progresses, she thrives on appreciation. As her capacity grows, she can participate in decision-making and be delegated tasks with little need of accompaniment (Hersey et al. 160–61).

### *An Integrative Capability: Being a Loving, Responsible Member of a Family*

Because the family is the foundation of society, it is where we most need to

practice the capabilities of transformative leadership. Our families know us as we truly are—with all our virtues and defects. We cannot deceive them, pretending to have developed certain capabilities that, in truth, we only practice for brief periods of time in more superficial relationships. In the family we become aware of the degree to which we have truly developed a capability.

Our relationships with the members of our family form a pattern that we tend to repeat in society. If we practice consultation at home, the members of the family will tend to consult at work and in their relationships in society at large. If, on the contrary, some members dominate others, they will tend to repeat that behavior.

Family meetings serve to support the members in developing the capabilities. In a meeting, after each member has commented on a positive action that he or she has observed in each of the others during the week, we can share our understanding of a particular capability and consult on ideas about how to practice it in the family. In this way, children can begin to learn and practice the capabilities from an early age.

#### THE TRAINING METHODOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

To some degree, the methodology is incorporated in the contents, which follow the sequence of establishing context, questioning prevalent mental models, adopting a new conceptual

framework, and developing relevant capabilities. However, the transformative effect of the program is not only due to its contents, but also to the training methodology used when the content is presented in a workshop, a series of workshops, a classroom, or an online course.

In these cases, an important aspect of the training methodology consists of defining a *performance objective* that indicates what participants will be able to *do* when they finish, as well as *learning objectives* that identify step by step what the participants need to *learn* during the workshop or course—taking into account relevant concepts, skills, attitudes, and/or qualities—so that by time they finish, they will be capable of carrying out the performance objective (Hernandez, *Designing* 18).

For each learning objective, the facilitator plans activities based on the learning cycle with its four phases of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application. The inclusion of activities focused on experience, reflection, and application ensure that the workshop is participative, while maintaining a focus on the topic being studied. The application activities also serve either to consolidate the understanding of the topic or to practice the skills needed to apply what is being learned. The application activity is usually closely related to the relevant learning objective.

Since consulting about the topics being studied helps consolidate learning, in programs that include a

number of workshops participants are organized into cooperative learning groups that respond to reading comprehension questions and carry out simple practices related to the material they are studying for the next workshop. In online courses, a similar effect is achieved through the use of forums.

Following the dictum that the best way to learn is to teach, a final aspect of the methodology, which helps consolidate transformation in long-term projects, involves assigning the students the task of replicating in a simpler form the workshops in which they have participated. To help them in this process, the facilitator may provide them with a workshop design indicating possible activities.

#### PARTICIPATING IN A LEARNING COMMUNITY

Transformative leadership has amply demonstrated its power to transform the lives of those who integrate the conceptual framework and capabilities into their way of thinking and acting. However, simply reading the book *Transformative Leadership* is not enough to automatically ensure this transformation. Interacting with the concepts, striving to develop the capabilities, and, most importantly, participating on an ongoing basis with others who are on the same path are vital.

When Transformative Leadership has been used as content in long-term projects, a learning community has been generated by forming creative learning groups among the

participants. These meet weekly to participate in application exercises and also plan and replicate the workshops they have received. In online courses, forums in which the participants post their answers to questions and comment on the responses of others help achieve this purpose.

More recently, as a greater number of individuals or small organizations have become interested in the contents, they have experimented with forming a learning community through meeting online with other participants or sharing their learning with others in the teams or departments in which they work, using the complementary workbook as a guide.

In our pursuit of transformative leadership, we are aspiring to a very high standard requiring a lifetime commitment as individuals. We are fortunate to have had inspiring examples of leadership in our recent history—individuals such as Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela. However, at this critical time of increasing crises, we do not have the luxury of waiting for selfless charismatic leaders to arise and point the way to a better future. The needs of our age require that we each take up the challenge in our own spheres of influence and become those individuals who will commit to “being” the change the future demands of us, with the full recognition that pursuit of power

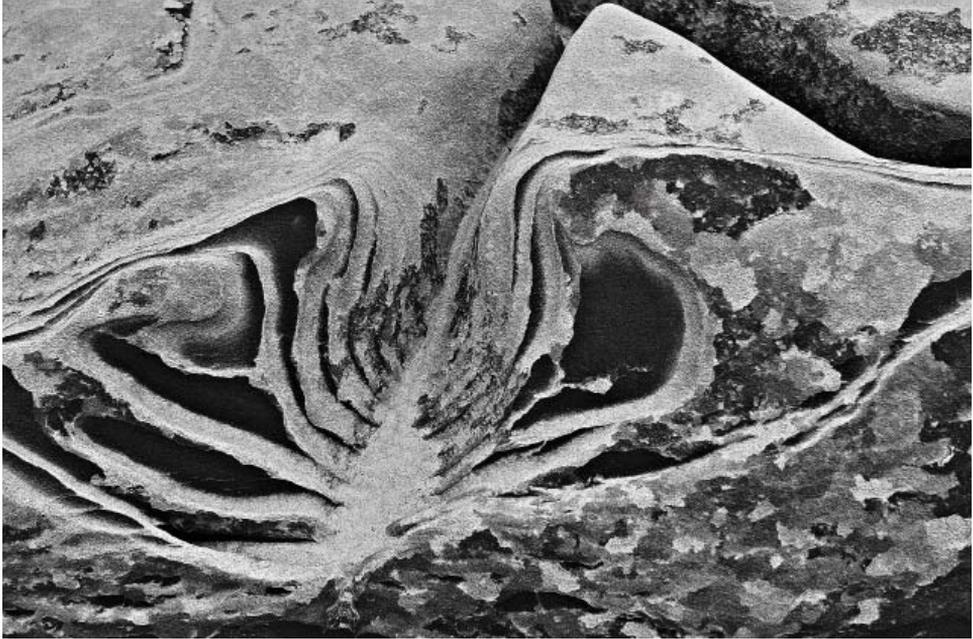
and self-interest will only perpetuate the tyranny of the past. It is an arduous journey we cannot afford to ignore.

How the future unfolds is hard to predict. However, it is undeniable that significant world-encompassing change is inevitable. We can facilitate the required transformation by becoming willing instruments for a better future, learning the path as we collaborate together. (Anello et al. 219)

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## Cinnabon

(Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness, New Mexico, USA )

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# A Reading of Sona Farid-Arbab's *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*

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## INTRODUCTION

In setting out to determine the nature and scope of education, questions immediately arise when considering what makes education effective. Among those questions are the following: What should be the goal of education? How can we fit everything into a curriculum at a time when knowledge and information are accumulating at an unbelievable rate? And how can education address our need to learn about both the physical and the social world, different as they are? Farid-Arbab's book, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*, is an admirable effort to provide answers to such questions by starting with two even more fundamental questions: What is the nature of the human being, or learner? And what is the nature of understanding?

Part 1 of this review of *Moral Empowerment* provides some comments about the background that led to the research and the ideas presented in the book. I then summarize the book

in part 2, paying attention to how the book develops a set of ideas about the subject (or learner), understanding (or the process of learning), and the objects of learning (the curriculum). Moral empowerment, covered in part 3, is the concept around which Farid-Arbab's conceptual framework is developed. In part 4, we look at the relationship between science and religion in order to gain a view of the range of appropriate objects of learning and the challenge of how to integrate a broad range of objects of learning into the curriculum. Finally, in part 5, we take up the central concept of capability as it serves to conceptualize an educational program. I then offer some concluding considerations on the continuity of thought, language, and action, as well as the collective and individual dimensions of education, along with a final note on the merits of the book.

## PART ONE:

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The conceptual framework that Farid-Arbab presents in this book is familiar to many members of the Bahá'í community and their friends because it informs the community's current educational efforts around the world. With moral empowerment as the principal aim of education, the book describes an array of ideas that support that aim, looking at the assumptions of the framework and their implications for pedagogy and curriculum decisions.

By “conceptual framework” we understand Farid-Arbab to mean a set of concepts that are interrelated. A conceptual framework is less rigid and formal than a theory but more explicit than a paradigm. It can govern research and action in a particular area when various theories are used as sources of insight without total commitment to any of them. A conceptual framework generates a working vocabulary that facilitates collective discussion, exchange, and exploration and invites study, action, and reflection. It is not static, and it evolves as its various elements are better understood and elaborated in practice.

The framework of concepts developed by Farid-Arbab draws on principles and concepts from the Bahá'í Faith, supplemented and reinforced with insights from contemporary philosophy and psychology—specifically, the foundations of psychology rather than the psychology of learning. This makes sense because the foundational issues connected with a view of human nature and human capabilities require the kind of reflection that is more at home in philosophy before a deliberate effort is made to take account of educational psychology.

While Farid-Arbab refers to philosophers for whom education has been a central concern—including Richard Peters, Graham Haydon, and John Dewey—she draws more on the work of British epistemologist Paul H. Hirst with respect, especially, to the objects of learning. She also assesses the nature of the learner and the process

of understanding, bringing into the discussion insights from a number of philosophers not usually associated with education: John McDowell, Crispin Wright, Bernard Williams, Martha Nussbaum, Hubert Dreyfus, along with references to Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and David Hume, as well as Alasdair MacIntyre, Immanuel Kant, and Søren Kierkegaard, among others. Their ideas, examined in the context of education, are a welcome feature of the book as contemporary philosophy has generated a rich set of insights about language, modernity, ethics, epistemology, and the nature of knowledge, as well as the nature of human practices and the differences between theoretical, or scientific, knowledge, and practical reason. Those insights are not canvassed nearly enough in educational theory. However, thinkers that are important in educational psychology are not overlooked, in particular Howard Gardner, Lev Vygotsky, and especially Jerome Bruner—three thinkers who give a wide overview of education in addition to their specific contributions to psychology and education.

In helping us understand and pursue better educational practice, the promise of this conceptual framework is already being tested in its successful application in educational initiatives of the Bahá'í community in diverse cultural and community settings around the world. More specifically, and with considerable rigor, the framework has proven its worth in more than forty

years of application and development in the work of the Fundación para la Aplicación Enseñanza de la Ciencias (FUNDAEC), a project in Colombia that gave birth to the ideas captured in this framework of concepts—one that has received praise and support from several foundations and research centers, including Canada's International Development Research Centre.

The Universal House of Justice has—over successive messages since the mid-1990s—described generally many of the concepts examined by Farid-Arbab, but with her book we now have a study of a number of those concepts at a greater level of detail and correlated with insights from philosophy. This should be of interest to Bahá'í adherents and their friends and partners in this promising worldwide educational enterprise. The publication will also be of interest to those who may not share the religious inspiration behind it.

Well suited to undertake this study, Farid-Arbab worked for ten years at the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre, the agency that supervises the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program that derives much of its approach from this conceptual framework. That program, among several other lines of action in the worldwide Bahá'í community, draws on concepts first pioneered by FUNDAEC. Farid-Arbab has been closely associated with FUNDAEC and so has benefited from familiarity with the thinking and developments that lie behind its success.

The kind of education Farid-Arbab has in mind is intended to meet the needs of a global community. It addresses issues that face those outside the richest 10 percent of the global population, while still important to those living in the wealthier pockets of the world. Farid-Arbab has in mind the current level of global inequity, as economic, cultural, and social agendas are determined by decisions made by small minorities in the richest nations of the world whose views shape the social and political dynamics that play out across the globe.

The effect that such inequity has had on education is a replication of patterns of formal education whose goals and organization are driven by models of what “modern development” should be at a time when conventional ideas of modern development are being questioned. The failure of education to respond adequately to world problems is linked partially to the structure of university and school educational models derived from an outworn idea of modernity, one ill-suited to emerging conditions in most countries of the world. In reaction, many responses have been driven by ideology more than by effective research, with outcomes scarcely better and often worse than failing traditional modes of education. Other well-meaning efforts—such as romantic and exaggerated notions of the traditional knowledge “of the people”—can overlook valuable scientific and technological knowledge essential to reaching at least modest levels of

prosperity. When those tensions are coupled with the understandable aspirations of families around the world to see their children gain the necessary formal accreditation to make their way in contemporary conditions, educational options too often reflect the contradictions of inequitable access to knowledge and efforts that remain too meagre to release the enormous potential of the world's young people. Even when enlightened reformers and philanthropists promote various schemes for development and education, often those who will benefit from them are treated as passive recipients instead of being empowered to make their own decisions and undertake their own course of action (Putnam 97). At the heart of this book is a vision of a new departure in how we think and practice education.

With moral empowerment as the goal of education, power to understand and take action is conceptualized, in Farid-Arbab's view, as shifted to those being educated; and morality and the responsibility to transform self and society are placed at the center of the educational enterprise. In taking such a view of education, she is wise enough to present her exploration of education by way of a framework of concepts, rather than in the form of a detailed theory, educational program, or set of pedagogical principles or procedures. Farid-Arbab writes, "[T]he aim [of the book] is to present a set of ideas that may assist those involved in Bahá'í-inspired endeavors to achieve greater coherence as they

strive to translate their ideals into effective educational programs. Emphasis is on the gradual development of a conceptual framework to which an increasing number of groups can contribute" (4). Such a framework must therefore be open to further development, as Farid-Arbab emphasizes. Her book, she states, might best be understood as a beginning exploration. By bringing into education a discussion of the spiritual nature of the subject and, less expected, the spiritual qualities that serve understanding itself, she gives the term "spiritual" a clarity and meaning that the term might not normally bring to mind.

Sometimes written in a condensed style, and not always easy to read, the framework is comprehensive enough to serve as a starting point, inviting and inspiring further practical experience, thinking, and research by setting out the beginnings of a vocabulary of concepts that will evolve, adjust, and develop more precision and depth over time. The value of Farid-Arbab's ideas is that they are robust enough to provide a vision and program of practice that is true to fundamental issues in education, yet described well enough to serve as the core of a research program that meets the criteria of a genuine—because systematic and collective—scientific approach to education.

#### PART TWO: A SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

As I have already mentioned and as the title clearly indicates, *Moral Empowerment* presents a framework of

ideas according to which the central goal of education is just that, moral empowerment. In developing those ideas, the author begins with an analysis of human nature and the range of human capacities that education should address. With this understanding of the learner, or “subject,” she examines the process of learning that has to do with “understanding” and the “fostering [of] spiritual qualities” as essential components in education. She then looks at “objects of learning,” or curriculum.

The first part of the book draws on the structure which that simple sentence describes about education at its most fundamental level: a subject understanding an object of learning. The chapter on moral empowerment is, therefore, followed by a chapter on the subject of understanding, then one on nurturing understanding, followed by three chapters on the objects of understanding.

It may be helpful to note Farid-Arbab’s vocabulary. She uses the term “subject” instead of “learner” and “understanding” as a more precise term than “learning,” linking understanding to spiritual qualities and other capabilities that work in an integrated manner with understanding. Unlike those who think of curriculum as a set of “subjects,” she uses the phrase “the object of understanding” as that which comprises the “content” or curricula of education. With this simple subject-verb-object sentence, “a subject understanding an object,” Farid-Arbab’s exploration points to

a relationship between the subjective and the objective, one of the principal themes of philosophy in the modern era.

The book presents an extensive list of capabilities of the subject, well beyond the merely cognitive and narrow list of capabilities that education typically addresses. In her view, understanding involves spiritual and moral qualities, attitudes, habits, and skills, as well as intellectual capacity and a motivation to act. The range of the objects of learning is also greater than that of a conventional curriculum would be. Thus, Farid-Arbab expands generously our appreciation of the three most important elements in the learning process: the subject of learning, understanding, and the objects of learning.

In the last half of the book, she turns to questions of pedagogy and curricula integration, engages in a deeper discussion of capabilities and agency of the learner, and closes with comments on the continuity of thought, language, and action and the need in modern life to avoid separating the qualities of the heart and the head and the individual and the collective.

For Farid-Arbab, the subject that understands is a human soul with faculties of perception, understanding, comprehension, imagination, and memory, as well as those faculties of the human soul such as love, justice, generosity, humility, awe, kindness, sacrifice, and affectivity. As extensive as this list of faculties is, Farid-Arbab argues that all need to be considered

in any adequate account of education. None of these features can be ignored if human nature in its reality is adequately understood, for these faculties and qualities are all essential in various ways at the personal, social, and institutional levels of human life. This larger field of view is crucial if moral empowerment is to be the *summum bonum*, the primary goal of education.

### PART THREE: THE CONCEPT OF MORAL EMPOWERMENT

“Moral empowerment” is not only the goal of education but also the organizing idea underpinning Farid-Arbab’s conceptual framework. The framework understands the subject at the center of education as a creature with multiple capabilities and qualities but who, in an age of calculation and information, is often characterized as merely cognitive and whose intelligence is thought to be primarily instrumental. In Farid-Arbab’s thinking, instead, reason, understanding, and wisdom are conceived as being integrated with spiritual and moral qualities, perceptual abilities, attitudes, intuition, dispositions, affectivity, and the capacity and power to act.

“All education which develops power to share effectively in social life is moral,” writes John Dewey (360). This is true for Farid-Arbab, as she understands that all education should aim at bettering human life, both for the individual and society. Education conceived as providing a better understanding of the physical and the

social worlds may be a suitable goal of education; but if genuine knowledge involves human capacities that include the dimension of action aimed at transforming life and contributing to society, then education needs to provide more than just an understanding and becomes necessarily moral. It is by way of active engagement with physical reality that science comes to understand the laws and forces at work and, by applying that knowledge, transform the physical parameters of human life. Likewise, an understanding of social reality and the forces, institutions, and patterns at work in that domain requires of learners, not a passive understanding nor—worse still—its application in manipulating others for one’s own benefit, but an engagement with social reality as a process of learning how to transform and improve society. Knowing our physical and social world is not about instrumental purposes, exploitation, or mere employment. Rather, human knowledge carries with it a responsibility that includes understanding and engaging the qualities of our nature that allow us to advance physical and social reality in moral ways.

Being moral means not merely being accountable to academic, intellectual, and practical betterment, but involves the transformation and remaking of the self and society—a process that involves efforts, through personal and group reflection, regarding just what is the best kind of life, for both individuals and the collective. As Dewey said, education should aim

at advancing our understanding of both the ends of human life as well as the means to pursue those ends.

Farid-Arbab works through a Bahá'í understanding of human nature with its view of intellectual, moral, and spiritual capabilities, all inseparable and all of which bear on the process of interaction and encounter between the human subject and objects of understanding. That process of coming to understand reality, taking in natural and social realities with their moral, cultural, and spiritual features, constitutes sound education.

This conception of education sees “doing,” “knowing,” and “being” as inseparable, each necessary to the other. There is an inseparability of the cognitive, moral, and spiritual qualities of the subject that includes perceptual, affective, and volitional capacities—all essential to genuine understanding and moral empowerment. Motivation, commitment, and action are as much a part of genuine understanding as the cognitive or perceptual skills.

Moral empowerment, the aim of education, also describes the process of education. The idea of “moral empowerment” here is not the same as a conventional understanding of values and virtues, nor is it an approach to moral dilemmas and decision-making that are added to the curriculum as ad hoc “moral education” classes. Neither should this concept be confused with the helpful ideas of empowerment that came out of important work in feminism a couple of decades ago, or with the notion used in the field of business

management and human resources. Moral empowerment is put forward in Farid-Arbab's book as the substance or core of all education—scientific, social, religious, and artistic. It has to do with the nature of being human, the nature of understanding as a process that involves all human capabilities, and the active, transformative engagement of the subject with the object of understanding.

Moral empowerment is that which can “enable students to take charge of their own intellectual and moral growth and to contribute to the transformation of society” (Farid-Arbab 13). That sort of agency of the individual correlates with a central theme of modernity, though it is here adjusted and refined. Leaving aside the deformation, if not corruption, of the idea of freedom, the moral autonomy of the individual has been central to modern self-understanding, while freedom and autonomy as key concepts of our agency as human beings have often been ignored in educational plans and programs. Although contested in its interpretation, autonomy arose from the reaction to blind and rigid authority and to unreasonable tradition, superstition, and oppressive domination. Here, the concept of moral empowerment moderates and refines what otherwise, in society, has become an ideal of unfettered liberty and irresponsible freedom.

Two Bahá'í principles reinforce Farid-Arbab's concept of moral empowerment. The first is the principle of the oneness of humanity. The

second is a view of current history that takes our age to be one of transition so overwhelming that it amounts to “the coming of age of the human race” (Shoghi Effendi 183)—hardly an exaggeration in light of the unceasing change in our economic, political, cultural, community, family, and personal lives.

Farid-Arbab analyzes those two principles by looking at two key factors in society: power and oppression. Education is a means of developing a set of capabilities that shifts our understanding of power from an idea of domination to a social dynamic shaped by love, thought and insight, knowledge, service to others, and the resilience and perseverance of people. This account of power differs radically from power defined as brute force or a means to subjugate.

Among its other dimensions, oppression has to do with the monopoly and exploitation of knowledge by the few. To overcome such oppression, universal access to knowledge and its generation and distribution is essential. Education is a primary path to justice and freedom because, by redefining justice as relief from oppression and power, education is a means of releasing human potential and motivating social change in this age of transition. Education does so without predetermining or prescribing the shape that would result from this alternative understanding of power. There is a positive directionality, of course, that such education gives to overcoming oppression and injustice,

but without rigid or preconceived results that, when forced on society, have corrupted well-meaning but ultimately misguided revolutions. Revolutions have tried to coerce social and individual transition without accommodating genuine universal participation where all individuals become protagonists of development as they acquire a sense of their own moral empowerment and learn how to contribute to the community and institutions of society. When allowed to do so, instead, the community and institutions, as collective enterprises, join with individuals as equally respected protagonists of social transformation that is a self-directing and self-correcting learning process aimed at societal well-being.

The principle of the oneness of humanity points to a process of transition to human maturity in which power is redefined and oppression gives way to the power of human character and understanding. In this framework, knowledge is taken to be something that ought to be accessible to all, that informs moral empowerment, and where education includes “being” and “doing” as much as “knowing.”

Dr. Farid-Arbab works through this analysis of power, oppression, and critical consciousness, drawing on works by Steven Lukes and Hannah Arendt and on Antonio Gramsci’s potent development of the process of “false consciousness.” She considers Paulo Freire’s analysis of how normality involves the acceptance of existing injustices and how the development of a sound, critical

consciousness enables us to become aware of our own agency. She notes the limitations of the concepts of these thinkers in which there is an understandable but nearly exclusive emphasis on a critical consciousness centered on overcoming problems, without a more forward-looking pedagogy that empowers students to deal with new configurations of complex reality once identifiable oppression or “false consciousness” is overcome. A more genuinely transformational and evolving pedagogy is required (see, for example, the last half of page 280 in Farid-Arbab). She draws attention to how the book’s conceptual framework introduces a mode of influencing social transformation that lies beyond political power and contestation. It is a learning process that is new in history and that draws on the power of spiritual qualities and the power of education and knowledge as these become ever more universally accessible.

An important observation she makes is that as society transforms and becomes more complex—which it must as it evolves toward oneness—“the scope for the expression of the capacities latent in each human being . . . correspondingly expand[s]. Because the relationship between the individual and society is a reciprocal one, the transformation now required must occur simultaneously within human consciousness and the structure of social institutions” (Farid-Arbab 16).

In Farid-Arbab’s discussion of understanding related to moral empowerment, she draws not only on Bahá’í

views of the human soul but on some compelling ideas in contemporary philosophy that also relate reason to morality. She points out the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism, Kant’s deontological view, and the views of Charles Taylor. She uses Alasdair MacIntyre’s arguments regarding the tight relationship of practical reason and the practice of virtues, pointing out the shortcomings of the concept of “virtue” compared to the concept of “capabilities.” She presents, over several pages, a helpful comparative analysis of John Rawls’s views on justice and his efforts to overcome utilitarianism and deontological positions, but notes the limitations of his concepts of “fairness” and “veil of ignorance,” given that they rest on the assumption that self-interest is a given. Even the possibility of transcending our self-interest is not something that plays a significant role, if any, in Rawls’s conception of justice. Yet from some perspectives—and certainly this is true of a Bahá’í view of justice—spiritual qualities are directly implicated in how injustice is perceived and how our reasoning then frames actions that might lead to situations of greater justice. Her discussion here might have included reference to MacIntyre’s book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, which, more than his book *After Virtue*, goes deeper into the close relationship between practical reason and different concepts of justice. In some historical periods, spiritual qualities were inseparable from processes of reasoning and collective deliberation about matters of justice and injustice.

PART FOUR: SCIENCE AND RELIGION  
IN EDUCATION

In chapters 5, 6, and 7, Farid-Arbab takes up the issue of objects of understanding. Chapter 5 is perhaps the most difficult chapter of the book as it looks at the differences between physical and social reality and makes the point that objectivity does not depend on an ontology of reality that is reduced to the physical. There are different kinds of realities—physical, social, and spiritual—an idea she explains in part by using Thomas Nagel's concept of an "extended reality" that goes beyond both the physical and social reality. While this chapter acknowledges different kinds of objectivity, it raises the challenge of the fragmentation of knowledge in education, a serious issue today. After bringing together a more complete and profound view of understanding, Farid-Arbab sees the unity and integration of the several features that constitute our understanding as a way to think through the integration of the curriculum in a manner that McDowell describes as "openness to the layout of reality" (Farid-Arbab 145).

Needless to say, the complex issues connected to questions of objectivity and the nature of reality in its multiplicity, involving arguments in epistemology and ontology that are contended in contemporary philosophy, cannot be summarized in one chapter, nor can the discussion of the integration of the objects of learning be determined in any final way. Chapters

6 and 7, however, are useful in setting out key concepts, important vocabulary, and the terms by which the issue of integration and pedagogy can be advanced. Yet it is only a beginning to addressing one of the most difficult issues in education.

Chapter 6 is a good overview of the misdirections and predicaments of modernity. It also introduces the challenge of integrating objects of learning, a subject that is then taken up in more detail in chapter 7. Chapter 6 looks especially at the complementarity of science and religion, using insights from John Searle, Thomas Nagel, Bernard Williams, David Bohm, and John McDowell. Farid-Arbab draws on their insights, and especially those of Nagel, in affirming reality as certainly independent of the human mind but also as far more than the mere physical.

Drawing on the work of Larry Laudan and important philosophers of science such as Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, and Imre Lakatos, she discusses the failure of the faith/reason distinction—the basis of the false dichotomy between science and religion. Too often religion is taken to be "blind faith" and science, "reason"; but, as she explains, both are institutions of knowledge. And qualities of faith and reason operate in them both if we really examine, on the one hand, scientific practice through the work of recent philosophy and the history of science and, on the other, if we understand religion by the terms in which the Bahá'í teachings explain its essence.

Among the explorations of this theme, Farid-Arbab relies on insights that demonstrate the inseparability of conceptual, perceptual, and spiritual qualities, drawing on John McDowell's arguments regarding the logical impossibility of distinguishing our perception of the world and our actions, the concepts we have about the world that we necessarily bring to both perception and action. We perceive and we take action as human beings that are always conceptually informed.

The argument of McDowell regarding the inseparable nature of our conceptual involvement with the world and our perception of reality is one that cannot be easily summarized, but Farid-Arbab does it as well as it can be managed in eight pages (230–38). For those interested, the argument began with Kant's observation that "thoughts without content [of an empirical kind] are empty" and "intuitions [or sensations in today's language] without concepts are blind," (Kant 394) and that theme has generated a lively conversation ever since in epistemology, taken up, among others for instance, by Donald Davidson in his criticism of the dualism of conceptual scheme and empirical content.<sup>1</sup>

This integration, or interpenetration, of human faculties is reflected in Bahá'u'lláh's comment about the

rational faculty being necessary even to our ability to perceive and understand reality and in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's comments about human faculties, particularly the "common faculty," and human understanding (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 83; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 243–44).

A passage of McDowell, cited and elaborated on by Farid-Arbab, provides a brief illustration of the nature of "spiritual perception," just one of the qualities allied to genuine understanding:

"The reliably kind behaviour" of a kind person "is not the outcome of a blind, not-rational habit or instinct." It has been learned through familiarity with kindness in our upbringing and education. On being kind in each occasion, the kind individual has a reliable sensitivity to the requirement which the situation imposes on behavior. McDowell holds that "the deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge" and "the sensitivity is, we might say, a sort of perceptual capacity." (Farid-Arbab 309)

There are so many things about which to learn—the natural world, society, institutions, tools and technologies of civilization (their use and their misuse)—and all of it takes in the natural, the normative, the cultural, the ethical, the aesthetic, and the spiritual. Many of those objects of understanding and learning go beyond the natural, and

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1 See McDowell's *Mind and World*, "Lecture One," pp. 1–23, and Davidson's "Meaning, Truth and Evidence" in *Truth, Language and History*, p. 48.

include the subtleties of language, institutions, patterns of human reality, moral principles, art, literature, and much that has to do with a genuine life of spirituality. They may seem somehow less “real” and less tangible, suffering as we are from the materialistic bias of the age. But they are not. They are just different in kind, essential objects of understanding in their own right, and open to systematic and cumulative treatment in education. There is no end to understanding, no end—for the individual and for the collective—to learning that can advance civilization.

Chapter 6 is helpful in gaining an introduction to the matter of integrating the multiple languages of science, philosophy, the arts, and morality—all of which are indispensable parts of an effective educational program. Certainly, “the language of science does not exhaust meaning,” (Farid-Arbab 187) and religious language is, like science, a language of both meaning and knowledge. The chapter develops a promising view of how religion generates knowledge, not simply by way of the language of religious revelation but in the way of understanding how religious language requires unending social interaction through which we gain an understanding of both religion and social dynamics. The language of religion involves love and understanding, or intersubjective agreement, as with science. It does not contradict science and is amenable to progressive clarification. At the same time, it also uses metaphor and other

devices common to poetry that give rise to multiple meanings at the same time. Religion, too, like science, acknowledges authority—but only once reason and experience assure one of legitimate authority. In one section of the chapter, the complementarity of languages is discussed, noting that the language of religion involves exhortations, stories, poetry, descriptive language, morality, and commandments, as well as vision and love: “education . . . needs to tap the roots of motivation and arouse the noblest of sentiments. It is not clear whether a combination of science, philosophy, the arts, and the humanities can accomplish this task without the language of religion” (Farid-Arbab 190).

Chapter 7 looks at alternative ways of conceiving the curriculum. One possibility, for example, puts social problems at the center of education. Another one divides the curriculum according to the conventional disciplines. Moral empowerment would seem to imply the value of putting concrete problems of human life at the center, and interdisciplinary studies try to do so, as “[t]he knowledge that students must make their own through education cannot be acquired in isolation from . . . the reality of their own lives and of society” (Farid-Arbab 199). However, as Farid-Arbab points out, there is no one-to-one match between disciplines and social problems (200); and the logic or form and development in specific disciplines of knowledge, whether in science or the arts and humanities, can be very

poorly covered in some interdisciplinary studies approaches, and a sound mastery of pertinent disciplines can be neglected if the formal logic of the disciplines is ignored.

A better approach to integration starts by focusing on the concept of “capability,” and chapter 8 does that. With the integration in our understanding of spiritual and moral qualities, attitudes, information, habits, and skills, a broader idea of rationality is available by which education can approach the curriculum by moving between the understanding of disciplines and the understanding of concrete problems, between thought and action. After all, because the concrete is always conceptual but also engaged with the other qualities of the spirit and mind, where heart and head are not separate, action relative to problems, and sound regard and respect for disciplines are not mutually exclusive. As Farid-Arbab explains, “The conception of capability serves to integrate theoretical and practical knowledge” (274).

#### PART FIVE: EXTENDED REALITY AND HUMAN CAPACITIES

The subject who understands objects of learning embarks on a process that is without end and embedded in relationships with other individuals, the community, with its norms and its culture, as well as the institutions of society, nature, technology, and God. All these relationships between the self and reality in its different forms

are ones that education ought to address properly.

A relationship offers something that textbooks or purely propositional knowledge—as important as they are—cannot offer, because understanding involves a relationship between the complete human being (the subject) and all those human faculties that bear on true insight and make for a spiritual and moral relationship with it, as well as attitudinal and affective capacities, as they are educated, and a perceptual relationship to realities beyond the physical one.

Education, then, should equip the learner with the motivation, the power, and the capacity to contribute to the transformation and advancement of society, as well as oneself, and that involves instilling in the subject an appreciation and comprehension of the integrated intellectual, moral, and spiritual capacities of the complete person. Those capacities include the power to act, but with an understanding of “power” as a strength borne of noble goals and carried forward by noble character—the range of qualities that distinguish and dignify the human person—and that, as a consequence, redounds to the quality of collective life in the human community.

The concept of “capability” as developed in Farid-Arbab’s framework is of central importance. It is an effective and practical way to think about, and plan, education. Farid-Arbab draws on a statement of FUNDAEC where “capability” is defined as the “developed capacity to think and act in a particular

sphere of activity and according to an explicit purpose” and such capabilities refer to “complex spheres of thought and action” (265). One way of gaining some idea of what “capability” means is to think of it as a heuristic device, or as “a strategy to organize elements of a curriculum” (265–66). A “capability . . . is developed progressively as one acquires a set of interrelated skills and abilities, assimilates the necessary information, advances in the understanding of relevant concepts, and acquires certain attitudes, habits and spiritual qualities” (265). One can think of Amartya Sen’s idea of “capability” as a “combination of functionings” and “attainments” (Sen 233) or how MacIntyre develops his idea of “practices” in *After Virtue*. However, both of those approaches do not get at the idea of capability well enough. Farid-Arbab proposes that capability be used as a heuristic device, or as a “strategy to organize elements of a curriculum” (265–66).

The value of this concept, however, is that it is at the right scale for developing educational objectives, and too rigorous a definition may prevent its heuristic value. It is neither too general or too large or so narrow and precise as to make difficult the practical work of laying out an educational program. It carries enough ambiguity and generality to take into account the nature of the subject and the range of human faculties involved in understanding. The concept of capabilities is a sound and effective way to think about the process of education. As capabilities

are acquired and advanced, the subject is on the road to moral empowerment. Capability is a concept employed by two highly regarded thinkers, Nussbaum and Sen. Farid-Arbab explores their use of the term, noting that her development of the concept differs in some important respects from theirs.

Learning is more effective when the student loves what he or she is trying to learn. It could be about understanding the natural world or society; understanding how the economy functions, how people relate to each other and to themselves, or how cars or houses are built, how engineers work, how to do arithmetic; or understanding our relation to God and the divine world. In addition, whatever kinds of learning in which we happen to engage, the process of understanding is enhanced if qualities and attitudes of respect, honesty, and integrity are employed in the process. With the exercise of perseverance and love of what we are studying, along with an attitude and emotions that serve to enhance our awareness and perception, our memory and imagination, the pursuit of learning and trying to understand something is never merely cognitive. One’s learning is aided if one is honest with oneself and with others about what one has been able to grasp, or not, if one approaches the object of learning with humility, but also with courage and resolve, and with faith that, by working hard, one will, in fact, learn something valuable.

One of the great motivations to our learning is our own curiosity and the

thirst we all have to know more about things. Curiosity is an important principle in the conceptual framework, as is motivation and its relationship to our attraction to beauty. If beauty and knowledge come together, as apparently mathematics does for mathematicians I know, and music does for musicians, then our understanding is quickened and advanced.

These considerations are essential to an adequate understanding of Farid-Arbab's book. That range of factors in understanding an object of learning are far more than simply factors that enable learning. The human being is one person, and the range of human faculties—understanding, perception, affectivity, memory, and imagination—are all part of that understanding as are spiritual qualities.

As Gardner's work *Multiple Intelligences* explains, interpersonal intelligence involves the capability of perceiving others' feelings, which allows an individual to really understand the other person in deeper ways, to know how to raise their spirits with the right comment or how to interact with them and love them. As the subject grows in his or her understanding of the wider community, he or she learns how to ask the right question of a group, which might lead to devising a project that helps move the community forward in its plans.

Kuhn describes the way in which scientists, as they learn more about the object of their research, come to "see" the phenomenon in a way that is intimate and familiar, whether it means

understanding what one sees looking through the microscope at cells or perceiving a confirmation, or an anomaly, in an experiment. This is similar to social perception, coming to perceive others in a different conceptual manner, really "seeing" them as they are, not at some reflective remove. This learned capability of perception is linked to understanding, where spiritual and moral sensibilities impact even the perception of reality.

The imagination, too, comes into play, for instance for the medical researcher conceiving of the best experiment to tease out the factors that lead to asthma or the kind of imagination by which the love of geometry in a grade school student might prompt her to devise an alternative, but still sound, proof to the one in the textbook. These modest references are meant simply to give an idea of how relationships—when one stops to consider the multiple and very different kinds of objects in that reality that extends far beyond the physical—involve our understanding with a set of qualities beyond the informational and cognitive if we are to navigate, learn, and enrich the quality of those relationships. This sense of what understanding an object of learning entails does not merely uphold a worthwhile educational aim, but is at the heart of what it means to understand and be educated.

William Wordsworth's poem *The Prelude* is a striking account in Western literature of human consciousness as it learns and develops

its understanding. Wordsworth described the poem as one that reflected the growth of his mind. Helen Vendler, in writing about that poem, notes that there is always an “incessant cooperation of the senses, the mind and the heart” for it is entirely “artificial [the] isolation from one another of perception, thought and passion.” As Farid-Arbab emphasizes, understanding is much more than cognitive, and this is as true of the scientist as it is of the writer or poet.

Nobel laureate and cytogeneticist Barbara McClintock is one among hundreds of scientists who have talked eloquently about this, referring to her great love for corn plants and the reality of genetic processes. She almost literally got inside the process of genetic reproduction, and her understanding and scientific output reflect as much.<sup>2</sup> How can one separate the process of understanding of those who become expert practitioners of science or art, industry or social service, between features that are strictly cognitive and those that are more affective, attitudinal, perceptual, and active in the ways of one who “knows” the objective reality of his or her educated capabilities?

Our understanding, then, is intimate with spiritual and moral capacities. It is joined, by way of the rational soul, with the perceptual capacities, affective capacities, and intuitive and inspired ways of the human spirit.

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<sup>2</sup> See Evelyn Fox Keller's *A Feeling for the Organism*.

Farid-Arbab's approach goes beyond the valuable research into different kinds of intelligences or “frames of mind” of Gardner; or the “emotional intelligence” made popular by Daniel Goleman, though more effectively explained by Ronald de Sousa in his book *The Rationality of Emotions*; or the “fast” and “slow” thinking that Daniel Kahneman analyzed and made popular in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, though those insights are also ones that Farid-Arbab might well have drawn on, as each, in their own way, are valuable contributions to this expanded view of how we understand and reason. Yet these are all still only partial views of the concept of understanding that Farid-Arbab has begun to explore. The heart and the head are indeed inseparable—the human being cannot be split down the middle—and the combination of faculties of the human soul are all intimate with what should be understood to constitute intelligence.

To summarize, intelligence, as Farid-Arbab states, should be understood “broadly as the combined capacity of a number of interacting faculties of the human soul,” which means that “[t]here is an infinite dimension to understanding” (79, 75). “[T]he power of the mind is not sensible, nor are any of the human attributes: These are intelligible realities. . . . Likewise, nature itself is an intelligible and not a sensible reality; the human spirit is an intelligible and not a sensible reality” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá qtd. in Farid-Arbab 148–49).

## CONCLUSION

*Moral Empowerment* closes with a chapter on the continuity of thought, language, and action, and the inseparable qualities of heart and head, as well as the essential interplay between the individual and the collective. The chapter is an apt ending for a book that contains so many different ideas, brought together, in a conceptual framework that speaks to the overall oneness of the subject as a soul, the oneness of those various qualities that inform our understanding, and the oneness of reality in all its multiplicity and diversity.

When we understand that the unity and integration of our thought, language, and action—the oneness of our capacities working in harmony and with a moral purpose—we can begin to see a way to overcoming the superficial language of modern culture that tends to dichotomize and divide, our feelings from our thoughts, our actions from our values, a culture that fragments our being, and the unity of our being with our knowing and our doing.

Throughout the Bahá'í Writings we are urged to “ponder in [our] heart” (for instance in *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, sections 18 and 82, and in many other tablets) and, with respect to the transcendent world, to both “know and love God.” In other words, the heart and the head, knowledge and love (and a host of other spiritual qualities), are not separate from our understanding. What we really know the most about, if we

pause to reflect, are those things in life that we understand and that we are attracted to—those in which our whole sense of being and our qualities of acting and doing come together with our knowing. That is genuine education. Even though this idea is so often acknowledged as important by teachers and parents and in commencement addresses at universities, there is a failure to systematize any conceptual framework that would invite genuine and cumulative progress in our being able to think about education through all those dimensions with clarity and with an honest relationship to the building of curriculum and pedagogical methods and processes. The conceptual framework presented in Farid-Arbab's book addresses this inadequacy and contributes to moving education forward.

In His writings, Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us: “Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom” (*Gleanings* 122:1). There is evidently much about the potential of the human being that we do not yet know. The current materialistic approach to human capacity, even if it does admit that there may be a much greater potential than has yet been realized, invariably sees it as amounting to little more than anticipating an increase in computational and information processing ability, or some other enhancement in purely cognitive capacities. Bahá'u'lláh's statement that “Man is the supreme Talisman”

(*Gleanings* 122:1), instead, hints at human capabilities beyond a more highly trained flesh-and-blood computer and certainly something more than a highly evolved animal, two popular views of human reality. The range of capacities—cognitive, attitudinal, perceptual, affective, moral, and spiritual—that distinguish the human subject of learning in Farid-Arbab's view brings to mind powers of the human being that go beyond current conceptions of human nature and potential. The conceptual framework explored by Farid-Arbab heightens the meaning of the entire passage cited earlier: "Man is the supreme Talisman. A lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess" (*Gleanings* 122:1).

This particular passage from Bahá'u'lláh's writings, which inspires many adherents of the Bahá'í Faith in their own educational work, goes on to point out the social or collective dimension that education must entail: "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom." And the passages goes on to say that the "purpose is that all men shall be regarded as one soul."

Thus it is that Farid-Arbab closes out her last chapter by commenting on the importance of the individual and the collective when she says that "the student should be immersed in the life of society" (310). The concept of moral empowerment addresses that division. Our mind itself develops in

a social context and by way of language. The relationship of language, thought, action, and the objective reality that makes up the human world today encompasses the entire globe. People are embedded in the entire world, not just in their local communities. Our consciousness of the oneness of humanity—and our actions to uphold and advance the reality expressed by that principle—is more important than ever and constitutes what moral empowerment needs to embody in today's world.

In the modern era, Dewey's work has been perhaps the most comprehensive effort at developing a general philosophy of education, though others, like Bruner, have worked with the same goal. They have understood that a general philosophy of education has to take into account a multitude of factors essential in educational decisions, from purposes to pedagogy, from the relation between the individual and the community to the economy, and to the norms and values that enable one not only to function in society as a mature individual but also to influence the transformation of that society.

The conceptual framework outlined by Farid-Arbab goes a long way toward providing such a philosophy of education using the tool of a framework of concepts that can serve as a kind of heuristic or guide to further research and educational practice. Her analysis represents impressive intellectual labor, examining, as it does, the meaning and implications of the framework and its concepts while

bringing them into a helpful engagement with insights from a range of thinkers.

The fundamental problem that Dewey, Bruner, and other educational philosophers have faced is how to develop a coherent philosophy of education able to respond adequately to the problems of modernity while yet situated in a modernity undergoing constant change. Like others, Dewey knew that traditional ways of education, derived from a host of bygone patterns of schooling and training, with influences from both religious instructional formats and management disciplines patterned on industrial production of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had to give way to new approaches if education was to meet the challenge of the emergence of science and democracy and the complexity of economic, cultural, social, and political revolutions that have characterized the last two to three centuries. The conceptual framework examined in Farid-Arbab's book doesn't attempt to reflect any predetermined shape of society as it evolves, nor does the framework reflect a fixed form of education, whether relying on an overdetermined idea of the subject (or student), a psychologically limited idea of understanding or learning, or a categorical idea of the object (curriculum) of understanding. Rather, she works from a capacious idea of human nature and its potential, and instead of having a precise outcome of societal change in mind, she draws on general principles that simply provide some

sense of the future directionality of human civilization.

In this sustained reflection on the conceptual framework pursued by FUNDAEC in Colombia and in the Bahá'í community in a more general way, now articulated by Farid-Arbab at a philosophical level, we have then the fundamentals of a promising research program. It is neither superficial, narrow, or fashionable. It neither lists a series of points that are mere technique, nor portrays itself as one more educational model among many that too often lack well-conceived and well-argued foundations. Rather, it contributes to an expanding, productive, and collective research program in education.

The book can serve as a catalyst for further development of the framework. Farid-Arbab looks at the concepts and their interrelationships, not so much from the perspective of someone who takes those concepts for granted because of her religious beliefs—though her faith in their soundness is understood—but rather from the perspective of insights from other educators and philosophers that help her justify the framework.

*Moral Empowerment* is a successful effort that expands what education conventionally understands of the nature and potential of the learner, what is understood of the process of understanding or learning, and what is the range of physical, social, and spiritual reality that ought to comprise the aims of education if we are to take advantage of the full potential of human

beings and help all people to a greater level of moral empowerment.

As Wordsworth wrote about the growth of his own mind in *The Prelude*, what we have loved,

Others will love, and we will  
teach them how;

Instruct them how the mind  
of man becomes

A thousand times more  
beautiful than the earth

On which he dwells, above  
this frame of things

(Which, 'mid all revolution  
in the hopes

And fears of men, doth still  
remain unchanged)

In beauty exalted, as it is  
itself

Of quality and fabric more  
divine. (14.2.446–54)

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