

# Encouragement, Challenges, Healing, and Progress: The Bahá'í Faith in Indigenous Communities

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## *Abstract*

In his article, Alfred Kahn calls for all people to participate in a conversation about the challenges of Indigenous Communities and to participate in community-building activities among Indigenous people. Nephew of Franklin Kahn, the first Native American to be elected to the National Spiritual Assembly, the author shares his perspective on growing up among Bahá'í pioneers on Indigenous land. He also shares his candid assessment of the prophetic promises in the Bahá'í Writings about Native Americans' potential to contribute greatly to the peoples of the world once they have reconciled their own traditional views and teachings with the global promises of Bahá'u'lláh.

## *Resumé*

Dans cet article, Alfred Kahn appelle tout le monde à contribuer à une conversation collective concernant les défis auxquels sont confrontées les communautés autochtones et à prendre part à des activités de renforcement communautaire au sein des peuples autochtones. Neveu de Franklin Kahn – premier Autochtone américain

élu comme membre de l'Assemblée spirituelle nationale – l'auteur présente ses réflexions sur l'expérience qu'il a vécue en grandissant parmi des pionniers bahá'ís en territoire autochtone. Il présente également une évaluation franche des promesses prophétiques que l'on trouve dans les écrits bahá'ís concernant le potentiel qu'ont les Autochtones d'apporter une importante contribution aux peuples du monde une fois qu'ils auront concilié leurs propres perspectives et enseignements traditionnels avec les promesses universelles de Bahá'u'lláh.

## *Resumen*

En su artículo, Alfred Kahn llama a todas las personas a participar de una conversación sobre los desafíos que enfrentan las Comunidades Indígenas y a participar en actividades de construcción de comunidad entre la gente indígena. Nieto de Franklin Khan, el primer Nativo Americano a ser elegido a la Asamblea Espiritual Nacional, el autor comparte su perspectiva sobre criarse entre pioneros bahá'ís en tierra indígena. También comparte su evaluación cándida sobre las promesas proféticas en las Escrituras Bahá'ís sobre el potencial de los Nativos Americanos a contribuir grandemente a los pueblos del mundo cuando hayan reconciliado sus propios puntos de vista tradicionales y enseñanzas con las promesas globales de Bahá'u'lláh.

To be Indigenous is to be part of an immense, diverse, and gifted segment of humanity. I am descended from the Cherokee, Osage, and Navajo Tribes. I grew up on Diné Land—Diné is the correct and ancient name for my people, who are often referred to by the Puebloan term “Navajo,” although

both names continue to be used interchangeably. I am a third generation Bahá'í, beginning with both sets of Indigenous grandparents. I bring to the conversation about the future of Indigenous people a lifetime of experience and contemplation, and yet Indigenous challenges are not universal, simple, or static. We all are keepers of our heritage, and our Creator has granted each of us a distinct perspective.

At this auspicious time, all people have an opportunity to come together and share our struggles and learn from one another. Indigenous people, as a member of the human family, have issues that must be allowed to come to the forefront, be fairly examined and dealt with in a timely manner. Questions need to be asked at this critical moment: Who are we as an Indigenous people? How do we heal from racism? How do we heal from colonization? How do we heal from a genocide that still has not been appropriately recognized? How do we remember who we were—and are—without the distorting influence of hate and cultural genocide? How do we move forward? Must we as Indigenous people take a step toward unity among ourselves before we can take a step toward unity with the world?

#### NATIVE YOUTH TODAY

A conversation about the future of Indigenous people must start with a dialogue about young people today, and we can begin by looking at a vital

issue facing Native communities: Why are so many Native youth committing suicide?<sup>1</sup> I grew up in a community where it has become commonplace to hear that one's relative or fellow community member has committed suicide. Why is it happening? When did it begin? How did we get to this point? What do these actions mean? What forces lead these youth to take such drastic action? Native communities are left to ponder questions such as these, questions that persistently go unanswered.

To demonstrate a few contextual points, I would like to share a personal story. A friend of mine, who is not of Indigenous descent but who grew up close to the reservation with me, started a conversation with me that went as follows:

“I think Navajos need to find a way to become wealthy.”

I replied, “It is hard to become wealthy when the whole system is against you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we are mostly poor,” I answered, “because we are recovering from many generational traumas.”

“What are generational traumas?” he asked.

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1 Note that “Indigenous” and “Native” are used interchangeably among American Indians in the United States. Both words equally identify the original inhabitants of North America. The terms “Indigenous” and “Aboriginal” are more commonly used in Canada to refer to First Nations people.

“If you go back six hundred years, we had a form of wealth,” I responded. “We found wealth in our family systems built up over generations. About four hundred years ago the incursion of colonizers stripped much of that away and changed the way we view wealth. We as a people are still suffering from the events of those times.”

He commented, “But things are equal now. People can just go find a job and build up wealth.”

I answered: “In one sense that is true. But there are so many obstacles between the will to find a job and the long path toward wealth, like a significant lack of education, limited access to good health care and to nutritious food, and dangerous living conditions. We Native people face both blatant and subtle racism daily in all aspects of life—not to mention the obstacles that come from our own families, who expect us to remain on the reservation and take care of them, or from those who do not value education or money. When some of us embark on the path toward wealth, we encounter roadblocks from the outside world, but we are also pulled back from those within our tribe.”

“Well, at least it’s not as bad as when there was segregation, and racism is pretty much gone, isn’t it? I mean, we really don’t need affirmative action anymore because that just makes it harder on poor

whites, who have it just as bad as poor Natives or blacks.”

“Yes, it is true,” I said, “that being poor is challenging no matter your race. But the reality is that we are still suffering the consequences of the genocide of the 1800s, the enforced boarding school policies of the 1900s, and the cultural suffocation of our generation by the dominant culture through outdated government policies that are taking decades to change. The effects can be seen in parents who don’t know the Navajo language and didn’t teach it to their kids but then berate them for not speaking it; in the youth who begin life full of hope but gradually find their outlook on life darkening. The effects are all around us, and they stem from a rampant materialism that convinces Native youth to buy Nikes for a couple of hundred dollars when they can’t even afford to eat three meals a day.”

“Well what can I do about it?” he asked.

“Conversations like this one need to happen more often because part of the challenge is that most non-Indigenous individuals seem to have this expectation that the Navajo and other tribal people should just “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” If we can have deeper, more nuanced conversations, we can start to find ways to heal. Native or not, we all have a responsibility to foster this vital healing process.” I concluded.

We do not live in isolation. We are influenced by the views and attitudes of the people around, and we in turn influence the world; we are the product of these interactions. To move forward, we have to be able to engage in meaningful conversations about sensitive topics such as race, materialism, our history, our current situation—discourses that all too often are stripped down to clichés and polarized dichotomies. It is difficult and often uncomfortable for an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous person to speak face to face and candidly address such harsh realities. For Indigenous people, it is far easier just to set aside these issues in an attempt to forget about them, to sink into the abyss of drug or alcohol addiction, to lay blame without attempting to be conciliatory, and, when all else fails, to contemplate suicide as a means of escape from the harsh realities of life on most reservations.

Far too many Indigenous youth are shut in the psychological prison of knowing something is wrong but not being able to articulate the things they experience and feel. They are forced to try to communicate with a world that they suspect, most often correctly, is uninterested in their pain. The result is that suicides among Indigenous youth, junior youth included, have increased exponentially over the past twenty years, with the majority occurring on Indigenous reservations in the United States, on First Nations reserves in Canada, and in self-governing Indigenous territories

in the upper Arctic regions, such as Nunavut.<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, Native youth caught in this situation also feel an increasing and urgent pressure to be “Native,” to somehow be “better” in a world that has lost most of the institutions, structures, leaders, and community support that once constituted the foundation of Native life. The inability to articulate the reality of these forces—combined with pressures from teachers, commercials, friends, families, communities, tribes, and themselves—is what leads many Indigenous youth to destructive outlets and some, ultimately, to suicide.

Bahá'u'lláh brought the remedy for these and all the problems that society as a whole faces, and it is the revealed Word of God. God knows the pain of these youth, and they can find comfort in such sentiments as: “When calamity striketh, be ye patient and composed. However afflictive your sufferings may be, stay ye undisturbed, and with perfect confidence in the abounding

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2 The suicide rate among American Indian youth on reservations and in Canada on the reserves is well documented, with too many sources to list here. See, for example, a 9 March 2014 article in *The Washington Post* that says, “The silence that has shrouded suicide in Indian country is being pierced by growing alarm at the sheer numbers of young Native Americans taking their own lives—more than three times the national average, and up to 10 times the average on some reservations” (Horwitz).

grace of God, brave ye the tempest of tribulations and fiery ordeals” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 35:12). They become empowered when they understand that their calamities are God’s providence<sup>3</sup> and that He can transmute their abysmal distress into blissful joy. So it is that we can well ask: How do we as a community help these youth? How do we deliver this healing message?

I have found no better way than the institute process devised by the Universal House of Justice,<sup>4</sup> together with the example of our lives. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá revealed a prayer appropriate to this desire: “How can I succeed unless Thou assist me with the breath of the Holy Spirit, help me to triumph by the hosts of Thy glorious kingdom, and shower upon me Thy confirmations, which alone can change a gnat into an eagle, a drop of water into rivers and seas, and an atom into lights and

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3 “O SON OF MAN! My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy. Hasten thereunto that thou mayest become an eternal light and an immortal spirit. This is My command unto thee, do thou observe it” (Bahá’u’lláh, Arabic Hidden Words no. 51).

4 The concept of training institutes was introduced by the Universal House of Justice in the mid-1990s. Its purpose is to assist individuals in deepening their understanding of the Bahá’í teachings and to help them gain the spiritual insights and the practical skills they need to carry out the work of the community.

sun?” (*Tablets* 10:13). How can we be the conduits of God’s confirmations? What process changes a gnat into an eagle? And how long does it take?

One major step for youth in this difficult position is to develop the language necessary to have an informed conversation about the historical reality of the negative forces to which they are subjected. This process may take a lifetime, and it requires training, along with a willingness on the part of the individual to commit to the twofold moral purpose of individual and collective transformation. In my experience, once Native youth are able to have a conversation about and better understand the internal and external forces that are assailing them, they will often then find themselves facing the hard decision as to whether they should speak about their experiences to people who cannot entirely grasp the depth or breadth of this pain and this reality because they have not experienced the same challenges.

Perhaps when there will be a multitude of animators and facilitators<sup>5</sup> on the reservations, the process will advance more rapidly. The process can begin with just one or two ambitious

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5 A “junior youth animator” is someone who helps instigate programs at the community level to organize youth ages eleven to fourteen to establish positive relationships with one another and to serve the community in which they live. It is one of the four “core activities” established by the Universal House of Justice for the present Five Year Plan.

pioneers. Anyone can arise to be part of this transformation, and it is my hope that this conversation will inspire people to pioneer to reservations, where they can listen to youth, walk on a path of service with them and encourage them to participate in this vital discourse.

#### HEART-LEVEL JOURNEY

Becoming empowered is a journey of the heart, and it relies on friendships and true connections. This life is full of opportunities for us to make such journeys together. These interactions are what develop the positive qualities that we all have the potential to manifest. Our love for God finds its fullest expression in the love shown to His creatures. Our Native creation stories demonstrate this principle. The Holy Ones of Native history interacted with our people, overcame obstacles, and, in the end, taught us what we need to know through their example.

I have been privileged to witness many people make great strides in their personal journeys, extricating themselves from the trap of social ills that afflict Indigenous people. In particular, I have had the joy of witnessing the first glimmerings of the accomplishments of pioneers on Native land who are devoted to humbly serving Indigenous populations. Their souls become aglow with acceptance, love, honor, forgiveness, and, importantly, forbearance. These brilliant stars in my life each have their own stories of triumphs and tribulations.

Their process of transformation can be seen in the sharing between two souls. In my personal journey, for instance, there have been individuals like Jeff Kiely. He has pioneered to the Navajo Nation for close to forty years at the time of this writing. I consider him a mentor and an animator before the role of animator was developed.

When I was twelve years old, he and I were returning from a teaching project in Phoenix, Arizona. Having grown up around trailers and hogans, I was in awe of the vast urban landscape. He asked what I found so interesting, and I told him that I wondered what people were thinking when they decided to create things that way. He told me about architecture—it was the first time I ever heard of the profession. He masterfully linked architecture, sustainability, and cultural expression into one conversation during our three-hour car ride. He shared how people can contribute to the Earth's health by building with respect and care and, conversely, how people can exploit the planet carelessly, with no thought of others. He enabled me to see how these shapers of buildings and cities have the power either to contribute to making the world a better place or to perpetuate the spread of materialism. From that conversation I knew what I was meant to do, and like an arrow I launched myself toward my career path of architecture.

In that one conversation I was accompanied as I shaped my worldview and was empowered to think of myself as a potential contributor to the

future of mankind. At an age of optimism and idealism, I was not told what to think—I was listened to. I was encouraged rather than lectured. My highest aspirations were reinforced rather than ignored.

Erica Toussaint-Brock was another contributor to my development as a junior youth, as she was for many other youth. She was another animator before the term “animator” came into usage in the Bahá’í community. I would spend summers with her when I was a junior youth. She helped to foster in me a closer connection to the Bahá’í Writings. It was with her that I learned of the idea of using the Writings to help channel my energies toward serving mankind and finding a profession that would be of benefit to humanity. She also demonstrated through her example the habit of turning to the Writings to answer important life questions.

Meaningful conversations that transform youth and junior youth happen when one is a true friend and a wise advisor. These opportunities become apparent when we are present on the spiritual path of young people who are forging their own understandings of the world. Often, it is in seemingly small moments like these that the lives of young people undergo the most profound and enduring changes.

#### BAHÁ’Í PIONEERS ON NATIVE LAND

What I would like to focus on in these few words is how we as a people can consciously take constructive action

toward unity—unity with all races. The ultimate goal is to knit hearts together. Whether turning to the Bahá’í Writings or to the Native teachings, one can see that the lives of our heroes and martyrs contribute to this ultimate goal for humankind.

We are in a stage of growth that is unlike any humanity has experienced in the past. Little wonder that those of us on the frontlines of this endeavor sometimes find ourselves perplexed at the challenges and feeling utterly inadequate. Not until there is a sizable number of Native people responsible for our own growth will the many challenges and daunting dynamics fall into the background.

As this process advances, unity becomes increasingly manifest in the community. In our fight against racism and injustice, we are challenged to acknowledge many harsh realities that people of color have long experienced. While we advocate for justice and have frank consultations about real issues, we can keep our focus on the good we see and the growth we witness. The Bahá’í Writings provide the remedy to the many ills that afflict the world, and the guidance from the Universal House of Justice provides the vision of how to implement that remedy. It is incumbent on us Indigenous people to read our reality and courageously apply the Bahá’í teachings to the dire adversities that presently afflict our people.

Whatever culture you come from, sharing your cultural knowledge can be difficult. Indigenous people feel

this acutely because not everything we know can be easily or quickly conveyed. Bahá'u'lláh admonishes: "Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it" (*Gleanings* 99:3). I have found this to be particularly true when attempting to share deep or cultural knowledge with people of other cultures.

When attempting to help Indigenous communities, good intention must be tempered with heightened consciousness. The greatest obstacles that arise while serving communities come from what we do not know, and that ignorance can lead to wrong actions, even if we are well-intentioned. We do not know what we do not know. This challenge of being limited by our perspectives is fundamental to human reality. In this regard not enough emphasis can be placed on the guidance by the Universal House of Justice that we adopt a "humble posture of learning" (Ridván letter 2008). Assuming that one "knows" at any stage in development—whether one is a pioneer or Indigenous—and trying to impose this "knowledge" on others often leads to conflict.

In the fledgling initiatives in which I have participated with Native youth, both on the reservation and off, I have seen well-intentioned individuals swooping in and taking over, seemingly unaware of the detrimental effect of their actions. Influences

of hierarchical control still persist in places where instead there should be accompaniment. Currently, when these problems get brought up in the places that should be safe for open and frank consultation, the people raising them often get dismissed, criticized, isolated, or forgotten. Paternalism deeply permeates attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors, and it may take many generations to overcome it.

Paternalism may be a common attitudinal challenge in the lives of Native people as we strive to teach ourselves about this often unspoken and unrecognized disorder, and we must combat this tendency until we attain self-determination. We must learn how to deal with people who do not know that they are being paternalistic.

I have not yet fully answered this question for myself, except to remember that this whole process is in its embryonic stages and to show more love to all those involved. Bahá'u'lláh says: "Nothing whatever can, in this Day, inflict a greater harm upon this Cause than dissension and strife, contention, estrangement and apathy, among the loved ones of God" (*Gleanings* 5:5). So many times I have seen Native people exert their full energy in teaching, in sharing, and in serving the Faith, only to be ultimately hurt by fellow loved ones, or to become so exhausted by paternalistic attitudes that the initial enthusiasm understandably deteriorates into apathy. We often show love when it is easy, but when our assumptions are challenged, our comfort is impeded, and our modes of operation

are dismissed, we are forced to reach beyond ourselves.

Having grown up on Native land amidst Bahá'í pioneers, I believe one has to learn to love mistakes. Everyone makes them, but that should not stop people from serving or pioneering. Bahá'í institutions should likewise allow for mistakes. Mistakes are how we learn. Mistakes are how we grow. In my experience, mistakes, followed by love and learning, are essential to the institute process.

Our common destiny, Natives and non-Natives alike, should always be at the forefront of our minds. With the thought of oneness in our hearts we can accept that we are not all the same. With love we can continue to work side by side even though we hold different opinions. The time will come when we will have learned as a community that we can have differences between races and cultures without unnecessary division or discord. We will learn that being united does not mean we must all be the same or act the same way. The homogenizing processes so prevalent in society are not the only way—or even the best way—to establish bonds among people. Culture and diversity will gradually become understood as assets, not as impediments, to universal oneness.

#### PROPERLY TRAINING OURSELVES

Whether a teenager on the Pine Ridge reservation, an elder from the Micmac tribe living in New York, a Potawatomi college student

in Oregon, a Tarahumara mother in Juarez, or a Tlingit engineer in Brussels, we all have a bond, a connection. Beyond blood quantum, language, federal recognition, geographic location, and even cultural knowledge, we share a common destiny. And we will either achieve that destiny together or we will fall short of it together.

We can illumine the whole world if we are trained and educated properly. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá prophetically observed, “these Indians, should they be educated and guided, there can be no doubt that they will become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 16). But to achieve this education, we must begin by cleansing our hearts from all the dust and dross of this world.

One of the biggest obstacles to our growth is an attachment to an image of who we are. The world is full of images of Indigenous people portrayed as “noble savages.” These images are pervasive and influence indigenous people in obvious and subtle ways. Cinema's stereotypical depictions of indigenous people play a tremendous role in the minds of viewers including Indigenous people ourselves. Sadly, many highly educated scholars still ascribe to a view of Indigenous people as primitive. This view continues to permeate anthropological, historical and educational literature worldwide. How can we see ourselves clearly if we believe we are part of a backwards race?

Just as harmful—if not more so—is the notion that we are somehow better than the other races. Indigenous people have no inherent superiority over any other race. We strive to distinguish ourselves by our servitude to our Creator. We have been chosen and honored by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prophecy not because we are better, but quite the opposite. We have been chosen because of our crying need.

Another obstacle to the progress of Indigenous people is the thought that things were better in our heroic past. All of the Creation Stories that have been shared with me demonstrate how our tribes emerged through trials and challenges, growing incrementally each time. We progressed as a result of the crises that our people encountered. If we look at our current situation as the newest phase in this ever-advancing cyclical learning process, we can see that the present condition of the world is not a mistake by our Creator, but rather a great upheaval prophesied by all our Holy People.

Similarly challenging is the notion that we as a people are victims. I know the story of my ancestor who survived the Long Walk.<sup>6</sup> I know firsthand the poisonous effect alcohol has on a family. I witness discrimination daily, as

many do. There are stories too horrible to tell. But we can choose to define ourselves not by our adversities, but rather by our triumphs over them.

Related to these two obstacles is a third—that we seem to need our oppressors to acknowledge these wrongs in order for us to move forward. It may take time, but we as a people can arise independently and shape our own destiny. We have an opportunity not only to forgive past actions, but also to operate with forbearance and love in a world full of injustice.

Perhaps this is not a comprehensive list of all the obstacles we face, but it will serve as a start for an important and necessary discourse about this subject. Once we have truly cleansed our hearts and our minds, we can move forward to the constructive action of properly training and educating ourselves.

The ocean of God’s words is vast, and we can find the remedy for our people’s ills in the application of His teachings. We are beginning to train ourselves in junior youth groups, study circles, children’s classes, and devotional gatherings. We are taking ownership of these initiatives by translating these practices into our Native languages, drawing from our culture to enrich the arts, deriving inspiration from the stories of our Holy People, and promoting those teachings of Theirs that are confirmed in the Bahá’í Writings.

We are in a time of change, and we, as Indigenous Bahá’ís, can influence the global conversation on Indigenous

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6 See Paul G. Zolbrod’s *Diné bahané: The Navajo Creation Story* (Albuquerque, NM: U of New Mexico P, 1984) and Chester Kahn’s interview in Linda Covey’s unpublished MA thesis, “Diné Becoming Bahá’í: Through the Lens of Ancient Prophecies” (2011).

identity by affirming the sacred heritages of all people and embracing their inherent diversity. We do not need to create new, man-made lines of division; rather, we need to see that we are all members of one human family. We witness in the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the special attention paid to those members of the human family most oppressed, and we can arise to shower on the most afflicted of our tribes our concerted assistance and determined effort. We Indigenous people can demonstrate through our example the power of obliterating man-made differences while respecting the heritage and inherent nobility of all people.

#### GRASSROOTS SOCIAL ACTION

My uncles Chester and Franklin Kahn<sup>7</sup> founded the Native American Bahá'í Institute (NABI), an institute conceived not by any national or international body but by the local Navajo population according to its needs. They ventured out of the reservation to get an education, and they discovered the Bahá'í Faith. One of the things that stood out most to them about their first Bahá'í teachers was that the teachers encouraged them to learn and value their culture. My uncles declared their faith in Bahá'u'lláh

and returned home to share the message. The result was the 1962 Council Fire, and later the establishment of NABI.

I grew up around NABI. I have had a front-row seat for an experiment of grassroots social action rarely witnessed in America or the world. I see how people from the community and from all over the world work to put into practice the Bahá'í teachings. I see how the institutions of the Bahá'í Faith try to find a way to support and encourage growth. And I see how the community ebbs and flows around this process.

Old modes of thought and action linger as each new approach to expansion and consolidation is added to the petri dish of a community trying to align itself with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. This sometimes chaotic process has given the slow-paced community of Burntwater, Arizona, in which NABI is located, whiplash on many occasions. At times, people have been pushed to the side or left behind while the process moved forward, but usually these same believers have re-engaged after a period of recovery.

The origin of this problem stems from a need for understanding in the community, as it can be challenging at times for its members to understand decisions that seem to have been made *for* them rather than *by* them or *with* them. Administrators and institutions sometimes attempt to implement their visions based on how they view the facilities and how they think the community should grow. Consequently,

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7 Both Franklin and Chester Kahn were elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, the first Native Americans to be so honored.

the process of learning has been painful for many, but eventually there will be a time when a balance will be struck between the individual, the institutions, and the community—the three protagonists of the plans of the Universal House of Justice.

Energies are dissipated when any one of the three protagonists are suppressed or dominated. Many who have come to serve at NABI have learned a great deal about how to empower Indigenous communities and individuals. They often have had to set aside any previous training in administration that had taught them to embrace a method whereby a few at the top run things for those below them. They have also had to let go of the illusion that they know what's best for the community. This learning process of which NABI has been a part has coincided with the guidance from the Universal House of Justice on these same subjects of accompaniment and grassroots development.

At this point a few Navajo youth have been able to transcend the many pitfalls of society and the dire conditions of the reservation and have arisen to serve. For those who live in the vicinity of NABI, the realities of holding a study circle include traveling one to two hours on dirt roads to gather participants—assuming that they are at home and are not committed to the many demands that reservation life places on them.

Currently, at least one Indigenous youth is toiling at NABI at any given time in order to advance the process.

These one or two youths often come from Bahá'í families and have a lifetime of preparation. They understand much about the challenges and realities of the area while the people who “run” NABI often do not. Much is expected of these youth and they often lack vital accompaniment from supporters.<sup>8</sup>

It has been interesting to see growth and learning happen, only to have the process start all over again with each new NABI administration. The local community is learning to be patient and wait for the time when the administrators' experience matures and they can re-engage. They are learning a lot about how to receive administrators and deal with institutions that think they know what is best, and it is my sincere hope that the Indigenous community will grow to a point where they learn their right to ownership of the process and thereby become empowered to contribute meaningfully to shaping the future of NABI.

The institute process has been helpful in preparing people to serve at NABI, assisting them to internalize concepts such as a “humble posture of learning,” intrinsic motivation, and freedom from paternalism. The first and second milestones<sup>9</sup> of the institute

8 In the context of the institute process, the terms “accompany” and “accompaniment” allude to the practice of assisting others in learning how to carry out the various core activities. Unit 1 of Ruhi Book 10, *Building Vibrant Communities*, is dedicated to this subject.

9 See the letter from the Universal

process are particularly challenging because it seems we have to train people about our reality before they can make any meaningful contribution to the growth of the community. Ultimately, to reach the third milestone we have to turn the challenges of reservation life, racism, paternalism, and materialism into assets. Slowly this is occurring, but not because of improved facilities or big events or the wisdom of outside assistance; rather, it is happening as little spiritual battles are won by the people from within the community itself.

#### WHAT NATIVE PEOPLE WILL BRING TO THE WORLD

We Native people can build upon the rich history and perspectives that we bring to the world and foster material and spiritual advancement in areas of which we have a deep knowledge—such as health, medicine, dreams, the mind, emotion, arts, storytelling, community, prayer, and sacrifice, all of which are dear to our hearts. Our ancient understanding of these concepts is of high value and significance to us, and our focus lies in their continued development, as generations succeed one another.

When I cast my vision forward, like a scout surveying uncharted terrain ahead, I can see the potential of humanity, and Indigenous people

in particular, to make new advancements in science and art. As Native people, we are in touch with our deep knowledge and therefore understand the power of the sacred in accessing dreams, spiritual connections, memory, health, and physical and scientific endeavors. Within the tribes of the earth, great powers and potential lie hidden. The Golden Age of mankind as prophesied by all our Holy People and all the Manifestations will cause the whole world to make tremendous progress on a level never before witnessed by humanity. When that day comes, will Indigenous people of the world be able to contribute the seeds of new knowledge with which God endowed us?

At the present time, the last of the Navajo medicine people who were raised among the established Navajo cultural and social institutions are passing away. A few intrepid youth are striving to live a Navajo way of life while resisting the tides of materialistic cultural influences.

There is an upsurge in the Indigenous preservation movement, but the Navajo Way is not an ancient relic to be preserved in stasis; it is an evolving, changing Beauty Way. It requires an acknowledged consciousness—and a conscientiousness—of the sacred at all times, along with an integrated holistic life in alignment with the well-being of Mother Earth. It has outmoded traditions associated with a warrior society, which lends itself well to becoming updated to a spiritual warrior society. It has inherent social

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House of Justice dated 29 December 2015 for an explanation of the three milestones that mark the progress of clusters through various stages of development.

assets in the qualities of a people who progressed with a balance between the male and the female, a harmony consciously developed within their societal framework. Navajo people maintain an understanding of the spiritual nature of man and the illusory nature of this world. However, day by day the lamps of knowledge among the Navajo are put out by the intentional and unintentional forces of the old world order.

When the barrier between science and religion is removed and the unity of mankind established, what will remain of Indigenous peoples? On that day, what will remain of our sacred Mother Earth, the source of all life? The Great Creator, known by many different names throughout history, has placed in our hands the power to contribute to building a new world in this Formative Age of the Bahá'í Faith.<sup>10</sup> If we do not arise to serve mankind now, when will we? What are we waiting for? All of humanity must be part of

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10 "In disclosing the panoramic vision of the unfoldment of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi refers to three major evolutionary stages through which the Faith must pass—the Apostolic or Heroic Age (1844-1921) associated with the Central Figures of the Faith; the Formative or Transitional Age (1921-), the 'hallmark' of which is the rise and establishment of the Administrative Order, based on the execution of the provisions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament; and, the Golden Age which will represent the 'consummation of this glorious Dispensation'" (The Universal House of Justice, "The Epochs of the Formative Age").

this conversation and invited to be part of our progress moving forward. We all must ask ourselves: When the history of mankind is told and the chapter of the Indigenous people is written, what will have been our contribution?

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