

# A Personal Journey toward Reconciliation

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## *Abstract*

In describing a personal journey of engagement with Indigenous peoples, the author emphasizes the importance of learning, listening, and personal transformation, as well as the potentialities of the Bahá'í community's current series of global plans. These plans seek to build capacity in every human group to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. The methods and approaches of the plans also have potential to "disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another" (The Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010).

## *Resumé*

Dans son article, l'auteur relate un cheminement personnel d'interactions avec les peuples autochtones, soulignant l'importance de l'écoute, de l'apprentissage et de la transformation personnelle, ainsi que le potentiel que présente la série actuelle des plans mondiaux de la communauté bahá'íe. Ces plans cherchent à renforcer les capacités de tous les groupes humains à se lever et à contribuer à l'avancement de la civilisation. Ces plans exposent des méthodes et des approches qui peuvent désactiver « tous les instruments conçus par l'humanité durant la longue période de son enfance pour qu'un groupe en opprime un autre ». (Message du 28 décembre 2010 de la Maison universelle de justice)

## *Resumen*

Al describir un trayecto personal de acción con gente indígena, el autor enfatiza la importancia del aprendizaje, el escuchar, y la transformación personal, además de las potencialidades de la serie de planes globales actuales de la comunidad bahá'í. Estos planes buscan crear capacidad en cada grupo humano para que se levante y contribuya al avance de la civilización. Los métodos y enfoques de los planes también tienen el potencial de "inhabilitar cada instrumento ideado por la humanidad a través del periodo largo de su niñez para que un grupo oprima a otro" (La Casa Universal de Justicia, Mensaje del 28 de diciembre de 2010).

I begin this article with a broken heart after finding out several days ago about the death of a young man, Wilfred Amos Jr., from the Stoney Nakoda First Nation at Morley, near Banff, Alberta, in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. The youngest child of a large family, he was the same age as many of his nephews and nieces, who often called him "Uncle Babe."

His family traces its lineage to Chief Jacob Bearspaw, one of the signatories to Treaty 7. The Stoney Nakoda First Nation is made up of three bands (Bearspaw, Chiniquay, and Wesley), each of which has its own chief and councilors. In 1877, at Blackfoot Crossing, east of Calgary, Alberta, the three Nakoda chiefs were numbered among the First Nations signatories of Treaty 7, along with representatives of Queen Victoria.

When a group of Bahá'í friends from off-reserve first met Wilfred's family, his mother Caroline told us, "You know, we're really good people. We never drink, and we always teach our children to pray." This touched my heart very much. Wilfred attended our Bahá'í children's classes and several of our children and youth summer camps at Sylvan Lake Bahá'í Centre in Central Alberta. We had annual picnics with his family and other friends. Wilfred and several cousins, nieces, and nephews were close friends. They loved to lip-sync and play musical instruments in a small old house they called "Amos Hall." When Bahá'í Shabnam Tashakour and her husband, Travis Birch, lived in Calgary, where Travis was a dancer with the Alberta Ballet, he taught the youth some step dance moves. Once he took them to the Alberta Ballet practice studio so they could dance in front of a full-length mirror. A few off-reserve Bahá'ís attended their performances in Amos Hall.

The Amos family made a big effort to support the youth, and they tried to ward off pressures to consume alcohol and drugs from others on the reserve. One night, people from the reserve torched Amos Hall. Undeterred, the youth bought new equipment and began to use another old house, but again, some people stole the new equipment. We studied part of *Ruhi Book One*<sup>1</sup> in that house with four

youth from the reserve, including Wilfred, and a couple of youth and several adults living off-reserve. Over the years, a few Bahá'ís from communities surrounding the Stoney Nakoda First Nation have participated in activities with the Bahá'ís on the reserve.

When the youth of this family reached their mid-teen years, things went a little crazy and they succumbed to peer pressure, getting into drugs and alcohol despite the positive example set by the family, who made constant efforts to help them get back on the straight and narrow. Most of the youth did, but Wilfred couldn't escape the grips of addiction. In the end, after some years of alcohol abuse, he was a victim of manslaughter.

At the time of his death, he was still deeply grieving the early death of an older brother, as well as the passing of his own mother and father, all within the space of three years. Wilfred was the father of two young children, with whose mother he had an unhealthy on-again, off-again relationship. He made efforts to seek counseling, though he never got into treatment. He tried to stay sober for his children during their last Christmas together. During his last summer, he stayed for a time on the Big Horn Reserve with his sister and family. He went hunting and even shot an elk. After they dried the meat, the family was able to sell it to obtain badly needed money for groceries.

I give all these details about Wilfred because this is what is in my heart

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1 Titled *Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*, it is the first book in an educational program

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developed by the Ruhi Institute.

at this time. Though we hear so many stories about the deplorable conditions in Indigenous communities, Wilfred was not a statistic. He was a kind and gentle young man. He spoke his language fluently. His death cut short a life that should have been full of promise—the kind of life every youth in our land should have. As the deterioration of society proceeds rapidly at the family, community, and institutional levels, as Shoghi Effendi said it would<sup>2</sup>, Canada's Indigenous communities suffer disproportionately from conditions of injustice and oppression. The harsh reality of life on most reserves or poor neighborhoods where many First Nations people live today is a far cry from the lives of most average Canadian Bahá'ís, myself included.

Four years ago, after over thirty years serving among Indigenous people, I felt I had to know more about the reasons for these conditions. I carefully read many books, including the reports of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), released in 1996, and the reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), released in 2015.<sup>3</sup> Some days

my chin was on the floor! The truth of Canada's colonial history is devastating. The fact that Indigenous people have survived the onslaughts of broken treaties, near starvation, residential schools, isolation, and attempts at assimilation is a remarkable testament to their courage, strength, determination, and strong community bonds.

A forthcoming memoir of my spiritual journey and how it has been entwined with First Nations people attempts to give a brief summary of the learning that has come quite late in my life. The topics covered include Indigenous people before contact with Europeans; initial contact; the concept of "terra nullius" (the land was "empty" when the Europeans arrived); the Doctrine of Discovery; the Royal Proclamation of 1763 issued by King George III; the Canadian Confederation (which was entered into without the participation of the settlers' first allies, the Indigenous peoples); the Indian Act; treaties between First Nations and the government; residential schools; land claims; and current developments. Taken together, these topics would constitute a basic "Indigenous Studies 101" course, which the vast majority of Canadians have never received within the public school system. I have heard several Indigenous individuals say how tired they are of explaining these facts to non-Indigenous people—facts that, although obvious and lived by the former group,

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<sup>2</sup> See Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 155.

<sup>3</sup> Among the books which I found most helpful were *The Inconvenient Indian* by Cherokee author Thomas King (which covers both Canadian and American history) and *Unsettling The Settler Within* by Paulette Regan, a non-Indigenous professor who calls non-Indigenous people to own the true history of Canada and to

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undertake the difficult task of decolonizing themselves.

have been largely ignored by mainstream society until recently.<sup>4</sup>

In *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "A massive dose of truth must be administered to heal this chronic old disease of falsehood" (43). Bahá'u'lláh, in a prayer, asks God "to graciously assist them that have been led astray to be just and fair-minded, and to make them aware of that whereof they have been heedless" (*Bahá'í Prayers* 40). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) has provided that "massive dose of truth" through its hard work looking into the legacy of residential schools and Canada's colonial history. Through the work of both RCAP and the TRC, as well as many authors, a firm baseline of accurate history has now been established. My friend Bob Watts Jr.<sup>5</sup> believes there is a direct line between the pathologies in Indigenous communities today and residential schools. But before any healing could begin in our country, the truth needed to be told first.

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4 Better awareness was achieved when, in 2012, Idle No More began its grassroots movement among Indigenous people in Canada to protest impending parliamentary bills that would erode Indigenous sovereignty and environmental protections.

5 Bob Watts is the grandson of Jim and Melba Loft, the first Indigenous Bahá'í couple in Canada. He is an adjunct professor and fellow in the School of Policy Studies, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario; the recipient of an Indspire Award for Public Service; and a frequent speaker on Indigenous issues.

We are currently living through what feels like a watershed moment in Canadian history. The federal government has committed to implementing the ninety-four recommendations of the TRC. The same newspapers that seldom reported on the subject now publish many stories concerning Indigenous issues. There are now, at any given time, thirty thousand Indigenous people enrolled in post-secondary educational institutions. Newer, more accurate history is being offered in curricula from primary school to university. The Canadian Courts have ruled in favor of Indigenous rights claims in hundreds of cases. The city of Winnipeg, whose serious racism problem was exposed publicly by *Maclean's* magazine in January 2015<sup>6</sup>, has already begun a grassroots process of addressing racism and reconciliation that finally is breaking down walls between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.<sup>7</sup> Initiatives to effect reconciliation are popping up everywhere.

Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the TRC, stated at the unveiling of its final report in Ottawa in December 2015 that "[a] period of change is beginning that, if sustained by the will of the people, will forever realign the shared history of Indigenous and

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6 See "Welcome to Winnipeg Where Canada's Racism Problem Is At Its Worst" by Nancy Macdonald, *Maclean's Magazine* (2 Feb. 2015):16-24.

7 See "Taking a Stand" by Nancy Macdonald, *Maclean's Magazine* (8 Feb. 2016): 28-29.

non-Indigenous peoples” (“Justice Murray Sinclair’s Remarks”). Justice Sinclair has, however, cautioned that because the residential school system and attempts at assimilation endured for many generations, it will likewise take many generations to heal and make things right.

As I grieve Wilfred’s passing and inevitably wonder, as his family and friends may be doing, if more could have been done to prevent his death, I often recall a particular quote from the 28 December 2010 message of the Universal House of Justice introducing the 2011–2016 Five Year Plan. It states that the Bahá’í community must become larger and larger in size to allow the Administrative Order<sup>8</sup> to serve “as a pattern for future society”:

How could it be otherwise? A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society. (¶14)

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8 A Bahá’í term indicating the system of institutions that administers the affairs of the Bahá’í community.

Through my study of history I have come to understand to some small degree the reasons for this harsh reality lived by my neighbors and friends of the Stoney Nakoda First Nation and “experienced by the masses of society.” This article will later discuss how the framework of community building given to the Bahá’í world in recent plans by the Universal House of Justice is now gradually being implemented on the Stoney Nakoda First Nation, with a few active participants coming from the reserve itself. With Wilfred’s family, we were at the very early stages of implementing the Ruhi curriculum and junior youth program.<sup>9</sup> May Wilfred’s spirit and those of his relatives and ancestors in the next world fortify our exertions in the years ahead.

#### BEGINNINGS

My first impulses to reach out to Indigenous communities derived from two statements in the Bahá’í Writings. The first is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s well-known prophecy about Indigenous peoples: “Likewise, these Indians, should they be educated and guided, there can be no doubt that they will become so

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9 The educational curriculum designed by the Ruhi Institute includes a special program for children between the ages of twelve and fifteen (commonly referred to as “junior youth”) to “offer a setting in which young people can discuss ideas and form a strong moral identity” (“Overview”).

illuminated as to enlighten the whole world.” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 16). This assertion has inspired generations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís, including myself, to attempt to reach out to Indigenous populations throughout the Americas. In a letter dated 29 July 1957, Shoghi Effendi states plainly that “it is their right, and the duty of the non-Indian Bahá'ís, to see that they receive the Message of God for this day” (quoted in *Compilation* 222). Although it is certain that the most effective teaching of Indigenous people will be done by Indigenous Bahá'ís, I believe everyone has a role to play, whether direct or indirect, in educating ourselves, making our Bahá'í communities welcoming, working for justice, ridding ourselves of any vestiges of racism or paternalism, and contributing to processes of reconciliation.

Another passage about the importance of this service also touched me:

Let anyone who feels the urge among the participators in this crusade . . . direct in particular their attention, and win eventually the unqualified adherence, of the Negro, the Indian, the Eskimo, and Jewish races to his Faith. No more laudable and meritorious service can be rendered the Cause of God, at the present hour, than a successful effort to enhance the diversity of the members of the American Bahá'í community by swelling the ranks of the Faith through the enrollment of the

members of these races. (Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 204)

While we lived in Yellowknife during the late 1970s, I participated in a nine-day training institute and teaching campaign in the Mackenzie region of the Northwest Territories with Indigenous Bahá'ís Hazel Lovelace and Mark Wedge. Through my involvement with this and my attendance at a few Native Councils organized by and for Indigenous Bahá'ís during those years, I caught a vision of the strength of those Indigenous Bahá'ís who had become steadfast in the Covenant and who had made connections between the teachings of the Faith and their cultures. For years, however, I felt tremendous guilt because after the training institute, we taught the Faith to dozens of people in small communities in the Mackenzie region but did not have the resources to help them become active participants in it. On reading the publication *Century of Light*, prepared under the supervision of the Universal House of Justice in 2001, I finally let go of the guilt. I read that during several decades of expansion and consolidation of the Faith in various parts of the world, “there was virtually no type of teaching activity, no combination of expansion, consolidation and proclamation, no administrative option, no effort at cultural adaptation that was not being energetically tried in some part of the Bahá'í world” (103). It was this experience that led to the systematization of the teaching work

and, in particular, the development of the Ruhi Institute in Colombia, “a systematic and sustained programme of education in the Writings” (*Century of Light* 109).

I first met the Stoney Nakoda people in 1980 through Arthur Irwin, an early believer who had, with his wife Lily Ann, reached out to several First Nations in the Treaty 7 region and taught the Faith to the first members of the Siksika (Blackfoot), Piikani (Peigan), and Stoney Nakoda Nations (*Verge* 52, 70, 308). My experience of not being able to follow up with the newly enrolled Bahá'ís in the Northwest Territories eventually lead me to make a long-term commitment to developing friendships. But at first, though I never “preached,” for a while I probably acted in somewhat of a “missionary” mode: I was convinced of the truth of the Faith but did not know how to follow Shoghi Effendi's guidance to “adapt the presentation of the fundamental principles” of the Faith to “divers races and nations” (*Citadel* 26). It was difficult being a white woman bringing a religion, and it must have been looked upon with hesitation, if not outright suspicion, especially given the fraught history of religions within the Indigenous communities in Canada. I had much to learn about how to teach and interact in a genuine way with my Indigenous friends.

As one serves, one also becomes much more self-aware. Part of my spiritual journey has entailed learning more about my own background. My

grandparents on my father's side had emigrated from Ireland. My mother and her parents immigrated to Canada from Croatia, which was then part of the former Yugoslavia. In learning about these cultures—especially the Irish one—I realized that both of these peoples had also undergone centuries of oppression. In Ireland, I discovered similarities with the tribal life of the First Nations cultures I had met, such as the community support for families during times of grief and a strong attachment to land, freedom, and identity.

In the 1980s, I began a long period of healing from the disease of alcoholism, which had plagued the Irish side of my family for generations. Before becoming a Bahá'í in my mid-twenties I drank alcohol, and my drinking patterns were those of an alcoholic, but I had no difficulty giving it up as Bahá'ís are prohibited from consuming alcohol. But it took years for me to gain full awareness of the impact that my family background had on me—how it fostered such unhealthy attitudes as lack of trust, pervasive anxiety, low self-worth, and a need for control. I began the process of personal healing with help from counselors, prayer, the Bahá'í Writings, and emerging research in the field of addiction. While undertaking this process I realized that addiction was responsible for some situations I encountered on the reserve, and as I learned more about Indigenous history, I finally made the profound and emotional connections between residential schools and addiction.

Along the way, someone said to me (in connection with reaching out to Indigenous cultures), “You just need one friend.” I was indeed extremely lucky to form several deep and genuine friendships with Indigenous Bahá'ís. Their kindness and acceptance helped me learn and kept me from making too many mistakes—though I've often said I've made every mistake in the book. Fear of mistakes should not keep us from forging relationships as long as we learn from them. I believe that if our hearts and motives are pure, people are ready to forgive and reach out in return. In fact, I have been astonished, given their history, at Indigenous peoples' ability to forgive and their readiness to respond to genuine friendship.

Once, while on the Piikani (Peigan) Nation at Christmastime, I went with Gayle Strikes With A Gun to visit her brother and his wife at their home. There were dishes of candy, mandarin oranges, and fruitcake on the coffee table. Gayle's sister-in-law offered me something, and I declined politely, having just eaten. Gayle said to me quickly, “Pat, you must accept, otherwise they'll think you feel you're too good for their food.” I was so grateful to Gayle for caring enough for me as a friend to be honest with me so I wouldn't offend those who had welcomed me into their home.

Upon the publication of my biography of the Continental Board of Counsellors member Angus Cowan, *Angus: From the Heart*, Allison Healy of the Kainai Reserve and I made a trip across

the Prairies and into British Columbia to speak about Angus's life and revisit the areas in which he had served side by side with First Nations communities. Allison's friendships with people through the Powwow Trail opened many doors that I could never have entered as a non-Indigenous woman. As a member of the Bahá'í Council,<sup>10</sup> she also consistently supported the Bahá'í service on Stoney Nakoda First Nation. In addition, Deb Clement, who is of Cree descent and was adopted into the Blackfoot Nation, and Beverley Knowlton, originally from the Piikani First Nation, accompanied me to Stoney Nakoda.

I have never wanted to be a missionary or to be seen as one! However, I needed to find a way to connect with people on the reserve other than during Bahá'í service. Not being skilled in traditional crafts and arts, such as beading and painting, it was hard to find common interests or activities where I could join the local community and make more friends. In 1992, I finally found an activity that I really loved and in which I could freely participate when the Nakoda community began its revival of the round dance. In this dance, which is essentially spiritual, participants clasp hands with others and move in a clockwise circle to the beat of the drum. At the very first round dance I attended,

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10 An element of Bahá'í administration, between the local and national levels, instituted by the Universal House of Justice (Letter, 30 May 1997).

I was the only non-Indigenous person there. My friend Sheila Holloway was sitting across the room and I made a bee-line for her! I loved the round dances and for many years attended as many as possible, always feeling welcome and treated with respect. My intentions had evolved to wanting to become true friends with the Stoney Nakoda people—to gain trust and to show my deep respect for their culture. Through the round dance I met and became close with the late Nakoda elder Beatrice Poucette—a teepee holder at the Calgary Stampede—whose son Mark had been instrumental in bringing the round dance back to the reserve. In the 1990s, through Beatrice—and as an effort to build bridges between the people of Stoney Nakoda and the non-Indigenous community of Cochrane, about thirty minutes away—the Cochrane Bahá'ís sponsored two round dances with participation from both communities.

These friendships taught me much. I found that if the desire is there, a way will open to learn more. For example, every year the Calgary Stampede features an Indian Village, where members of the five tribes of Treaty 7 camp during the ten-day celebration. Visitors can learn about Indian history, teepees, traditional garments, foods, games, and powwows, as well as mingle with people from all over the world. There is a genuine effort to educate people in Indigenous ways. In Alberta there are world-class museums and interpretive centers such as the Glenbow Museum in Calgary,

Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump near Fort Macleod, and Blackfoot Crossing, which is located at the site where Treaty 7 was signed and showcases Blackfoot culture. All powwows are open to visitors. These are some of the ways in which I became aware of the incredible richness of the Indigenous cultures around me—cultures that have been experiencing a renaissance during the past few decades.

While doing research for my memoir, I had the privilege of attending three sessions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As heart-wrenching as these sessions were, they fostered my understanding of why conditions in Indigenous communities are the way they are; why our communities have, for the most part, lived such vastly different realities; and why we are in great need of reconciliation and healing relationships.

As I made friends and got to know people better, I was invited to birthdays, baby showers, weddings, and far too many wakes and funerals. There were other young people like Wilfred who died too soon. It was here especially that I saw the strong community bonds that characterize Indigenous communities. The whole community supports the family throughout the grieving process.

In the early years of teaching at Morley, we focused on building friendships, helping the friends form their Local Spiritual Assembly every year, organizing an annual picnic, assisting the Bahá'ís to attend activities in Cochrane and regional summer camps.

When the Ruhi curriculum became available, and when we met the Amos family, we began children's classes and, eventually, worked with junior youth and adults. Transportation, even to facilities on the widespread reserve, was and still is, often a challenge for the Stoney Nakoda people. The advent of the cellular phone and the wide availability of Internet services have made a huge difference for them, strengthening their connections to each other and to friends off-reserve and providing them with access to knowledge from around the world.

While many Bahá'ís from off-reserve, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, rose to serve on Stoney Nakoda First Nation over the years, our service was not completely consistent, and few human resources emerged from the Nakoda community itself. Shoghi Effendi emphasized that "pioneers from a foreign land can never take the place of native believers, who must always constitute the bedrock of any future development of the Faith in their country" (*Compilation* 206).

### TENSIONS

Perhaps we need to deal, at least in part, with tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís. While I prefer to write about the tremendous learning and richness that friendships with Indigenous people have brought into my life, it's obvious that Canadian and, by extension, American citizens, including Bahá'ís, have for the most part not been well informed about the

history of colonialism in North America and how it affects our relationship patterns. Learning about it is essential to creating respectful relationships that are free of paternalism:

Nor should any of the pioneers, at this early stage in the upbuilding of Bahá'í national communities, overlook the fundamental prerequisite for any successful teaching enterprise, which is to adapt the presentation of the fundamental principles of their Faith to the cultural and religious backgrounds, the ideologies, and the temperament of the diverse races and nations whom they are called upon to enlighten and attract. The susceptibilities of these races and nations . . . differing widely in their customs and standards of living, should at all times be carefully considered, and under no circumstances neglected. (Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 25)

I wade into the subject of the tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís with a great deal of trepidation. Shoghi Effendi has stated that it "is difficult for the friends to always remember that in matter[s] where race enters, a hundred times more consideration and wisdom in handling situations is necessary than when an issue is not complicated by this factor" (qtd. in Ewing 29).

I read something about communication recently that struck me: "The biggest communication problem is we do

not listen to understand. We listen to reply.” (*EnergyTherapy.biz*). For me, in conversations about healing, reconciliation, and oneness, it’s been important to learn to listen with humility and not always jump in with my own ideas. It’s not an easy lesson. Non-Indigenous people have dominated the conversation for so long—and in our Bahá’í communities too. It requires much self-awareness, humility, and selflessness to maintain a posture of learning. As I mentioned earlier, I am so grateful to those Indigenous Bahá’ís who have taken me under their wing and overlooked my many slip-ups.

Even though we Bahá’ís were not implicated in the residential schools, this part of Canadian history, as well as the whole history of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, belongs to us, whether we have been Canadians for generations or are relative newcomers to this country. Since the TRC hearings, many have said in regards to reconciliation that “we are all Treaty people.” In other words, all Canadians have a responsibility for the promises that were made on behalf of the people of Canada to the Indigenous communities.

I have become acutely aware of the privilege I enjoy and the oppression I have *not* had to endure simply because of my background. The following letter from Shoghi Effendi to a committee responsible for teaching Indigenous people, sheds a great deal of light on the attitudes we must develop in order to be effective:

He was very pleased to hear of initial steps you have taken to teach the Indians. He adds one suggestion (he does not know if it is practicable or not): can contact not be made with Indians who have become more or less absorbed into the life of the white element of the country and live in or visit the big cities? These people, finding the Bahá’ís sincerely lacking in either prejudice—or that even worse attitude, condescension—might not only take interest in our Teachings, but also help us to reach their people in the proper way.

It is a great mistake to believe that because people are illiterate or live primitive lives, they are lacking in either intelligence or sensibility. On the contrary, they may well look on us, with the evils of our civilization, with its moral corruption, its ruinous wars, its hypocrisy and conceit, as people who merit watching with both suspicion and contempt. We should meet them as equals, well-wishers, people who admire and respect their ancient descent, and who feel that they will be interested, as we are, in a living religion and not in the dead forms of present-day churches. (*Compilation* 208)

#### LEARNING

In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi describes the spiritual

prerequisites for success in any service the Bahá'ís are attempting to carry out. They include rectitude of conduct, a chaste and holy life, and freedom from racial prejudice (18–34). He also calls racial prejudice the “most . . . challenging issue” facing the Bahá'í community (23). While he was primarily referring to the relationships between African American and white believers, I've often thought that these qualities also apply to relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís, and that they are a fruitful subject of meditation for those who wish to contribute to this important field. Shoghi Effendi speaks in this letter about the “tremendous effort” needed by both races “if their outlook, their manners, and conduct are to reflect, in this darkened age, the spirit and teachings of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh” (39). He calls for the white race

to abandon once and for all their usually inherent and at times subconscious sense of superiority, to correct their tendency towards revealing a patronizing attitude towards the members of the other race, to persuade them through their intimate, spontaneous and informal association with them of the genuineness of their friendship and the sincerity of their intentions, and to master their impatience of any lack of responsiveness on the part of a people who have received, for so long a period, such grievous and slow-healing wounds. (33–34)

The phrase “master their impatience of any lack of responsiveness” has given me much food for reflection, as has the phrase “such grievous and slow-healing wounds.”

Shoghi Effendi goes on to appeal to the black race to “show by every means in their power the warmth of their response, their readiness to forget the past, and their ability to wipe out every trace of suspicion that may still linger in their hearts and minds” (*Advent* 39). He cautions the Bahá'ís that they should not wait for the problem to be solved outside of the Faith. He then calls them to the spiritual qualities that will be needed:

Let neither think that anything short of genuine love, extreme patience, true humility, consummate tact, sound initiative, mature wisdom, and deliberate, persistent, and prayerful effort, can succeed in blotting out the stain which this patent evil has left on the fair name of their common country. (*Advent* 39)

In the materials prepared for the worldwide Bahá'í youth conferences held from July to October 2013, a whole section is entitled “Fostering Mutual Support and Assistance.” In this section, an imaginary conversation is set up where several youth discuss the true friendships that must be established between the youth as they serve together. One youth says, “I think when people become true friends, and

are constantly encouraging each other, even what may at first seem impossible becomes achievable. Then service becomes pure joy, and the circle of friends grows” (*Youth Conferences* 6, 7).

Building relationships is always important, but within the Indigenous communities—as many have told me, and as I have discovered—it is requisite for any progress to occur. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá exhorts us: “Concern yourselves with one another. Help along one another’s projects and plans. Grieve over one another. Let none in the whole country go in need. Befriend one another until ye become as a single body, one and all” (qtd. in Hornby 178).

I was always struck by a comment made by Jacqueline Left Hand Bull, who greatly supported the service on Stoney Nakoda First Nation while she was a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors. She said that we as Bahá’ís do not go to the reserves as social workers. I have often thought about that. While we are not there to “fix” people’s problems, at the same time we need to be aware of people’s conditions—why they are the way they are—and to be “anxiously concerned with the needs of the age [w]e live in, and center [our] deliberations on its exigencies and requirements” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 106:1).

When I realized my family’s drinking problem—and after a combination of alcohol and prescription drug caused the early death of my oldest nephew, Mike—I felt obliged to urge my relatives to do something about

the alcoholism in our family. No one in the family was receptive, and I felt like I was in the depths of despair. When I related this to a friend, she gave me an image that was at once funny and instructive. She likened my actions to a big semi-trailer truck rolling down the highway toward me while I stood in the middle of the road waving a stop sign. Sometimes, if I’ve dwelt too much on the tragedies that occur or the seeming lack of consistent results from our outreach work, or if I have tried to do a “social work” type of service that I am not professionally qualified to do, I bring myself back to a place of trust in the latest guidance from the Universal House of Justice about building capacity within the community. Social breakdown is inevitable in this time of transition to the spiritual world order envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh. However, we have been given clear guidance and a framework within which to work. Of course there are, and increasingly will be, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá’ís who, through their professions, will be deeply involved in bettering social and economic conditions within Indigenous communities. The following words from the Universal House of Justice in the *Ridván 2010* message to the Bahá’ís of the world, stating that the community building process we are engaged in will unfold over centuries, have given me perspective and a renewed desire to continue:

Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only

at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society. "Is not the object of every Revelation", He Himself proclaims, "to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?" The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá'í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed. (¶25)

#### RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In 2009, the Bahá'í Council of Alberta designated the Rockyview-Big Horn Cluster where I live and which contains the three Stoney Nakoda Reserves of Morley, Bighorn, and Eden Valley—as an area for intensive growth. They particularly referred to

the Stoney Nakoda people as a receptive population. For a very short time, within my own heart I resisted this new step. After nearly thirty years of building friendships, I did not feel that the Indigenous people were sufficiently involved in the community-building activities. However, the Bahá'í Council promised there would be outside assistance to encourage increased participation by the inhabitants of the reservation.

A Persian youth from Calgary, Leva Eghbali, began to travel to Stoney Nakoda First Nation with her mother Humeyra to teach children's classes. Eventually she invited her friend Sama Imamverdi, and with their families, we began to be much more consistent in our activities. Eventually, other youth also participated. At the same time we were visiting Beatrice Poucette at an elders' lodge on the reserve and had received permission for the Bahá'ís to hold a few meetings there, such as a holy day observance and a devotional. In summer 2011, we hosted a three-day summer camp at the lodge, as it was no longer being used for elders. That fall, the manager said we could hold weekly children's classes and junior youth groups at the lodge. We started out meeting biweekly, but by the following year we were holding the classes every week. It was the first time we had ever been that consistent. A breakthrough came in 2012 when one of the Nakoda junior youth accompanied Leva and Sama to the community school and spoke about our junior youth spiritual empowerment

program.<sup>11</sup> The ranks of the junior youth participating swelled that year.

From fall 2013 to fall 2014, Leva and Sama took time off from their university studies to live in Cochrane and dedicate a year of service to Morley. The Cochrane Bahá'í community, the Bahá'í Council, and their parents supported them as much as possible. Sama's mother, Shamim Alavi, advised her to take every possible opportunity to serve that arose that year. Indeed, the two young women walked through every door that opened and received boundless confirmations from Bahá'u'lláh. With support from the principal, they began to volunteer daily at the Morley Community School, organizing talent shows and a club to raise school spirit, and offering other services as needed. They also made contact with Cathy Arcega, director of the Bears paw Youth Engagement Strategy. She invited Leva and Sama to offer the junior youth program to junior youth who came to the youth center after school. The young women befriended many youth; attended sweats, cultural camps, powwows, community gatherings, and hip-hop camps; and volunteered at Christmas parties and for the production of a short film on drug abuse—to name only a few of their extensive activities that year. Partway through the year, they began to offer a study of the 2013 worldwide youth conference materials, of the junior youth materials (especially *Glimmerings of Hope*, to which

the Nakoda youth related well), and then of Ruhi Book One.

I am fortunate to be part of the small team that grew out of that intense period. The team is supported by the Regional Bahá'í Council and the institute coordinator, who serves alongside tutors of the Ruhi books, as well as children's class teachers and junior youth group animators. Leva and Sama opened doors for me, too, so that I was able to serve on a larger coordinating team for youth development on the reserve—the Stoney Nakoda Youth Collaborative, which includes the youth director, the police force (RCMP), the Nakoda Youth Council, Alberta Health, Canada Bridges (a Calgary-based foundation), and others. Youth activities of all kinds—including sports, cultural activities, a youth drop-in, and a cadet program—have grown exponentially on the reserve. Our small team suggested, and has subsequently attended, three retreats with this group. Doing so has forged unity of vision and close bonds of friendship and has helped us to clarify and explain our Bahá'í-inspired activities and our motivations.

Since Leva's and Sama's year of service ended, our Bahá'í-inspired activities have remained constant, occurring once weekly and also during school breaks and summers. While participation has remained limited, we have sustained a devotional, a children's class, and a study circle, and recently have been working on re-establishing a junior youth group. A few Nakoda youth have attended youth conferences

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11 See note 9.

and intensive Ruhi courses in Calgary and Morley, served at regional winter and spring Bahá'í schools, and taken a road trip to Saskatoon to visit the junior youth groups there. Assisted by Leva and Sama, a youth is serving as a children's class teacher and another as a tutor. Our regular reflection meetings now include everyone, not just those from off-reserve. We have resisted expanding too quickly, as would be easy to do, without the increased participation of the youth from Morley, because without building local capacity, anything we start would not be sustainable.

#### TAKING OWNERSHIP

This brings me to the issue with which I have struggled for a long time—that of the Indigenous Bahá'ís taking more responsibility for their involvement in the Faith. The Universal House of Justice said that passivity “is bred by the forces of society today. A desire to be entertained is nurtured from childhood, with increasing efficiency, cultivating generations willing to be led by whoever proves skilful at appealing to superficial emotions” (“Ridván Message” 10). Personally, I come from a Roman Catholic background where the priest acts on behalf of the congregation. It is not just Indigenous communities that have been programmed to passivity; this is a widespread phenomenon.

In the same letter, the Universal House of Justice describes the framework of action within which the

Bahá'ís are now serving as “a process that seeks to raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development” (¶5). It continues:

The activities that drive this process (devotional meetings, children's classes, junior youth groups and study circles) . . . may well need to be maintained with assistance from outside the local population for a time. It is to be expected, however, that the multiplication of these core activities would soon be sustained by human resources indigenous to the neighborhood or village itself—by men and women eager to improve material and spiritual conditions in their surroundings. (¶5)

Because of my early experience in the North, when we were unable to help the new Indigenous Bahá'ís become fully engaged with the Faith, I have felt strongly about the importance of institute training. It has done my heart such good to hear the youth who have returned from intensive study of institute courses speaking of the Manifestations of God or of having elevated conversations. At the same time, Daniel Scott, then a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors, cautioned members of our team not to put all the weight on the institute process. He mentioned, as we ourselves have discovered, that the whole process needs to be bolstered

with the gamut of activities in which one would expect true friends to participate—such as helping each other with homework, going to movies, attending holy day celebrations and other community activities together, and interacting with each other through social media. Indeed, I see our Bahá'í youth doing this. For example, they were instrumental in helping one of the Nakoda youth register for university and find a place to live in Calgary while he studied there.

The words of the Universal House of Justice at Ridván 2010 encourage us to “find those souls longing to shed the lethargy imposed on them by society and work alongside one another in their neighbourhoods and villages to begin a process of collective transformation” (“Ridván Message” ¶6). Once we find these souls, they themselves begin to build the foundations for a deep transformation, both of individuals and, indeed, of the larger community and culture. The following quotation from the Universal House of Justice’s 28 December 2010 message to the Continental Boards of Counsellors contains that astonishing promise:

It should be apparent to all that the process set in motion by the current series of global Plans, seeks, in the approaches it takes and the methods it employs, to build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race,

irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. We pray that, as it steadily unfolds, its potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another may be realized. (34)

#### GAZING AHEAD

With the advent of the latest Five Year Plan of the Universal House of Justice,<sup>12</sup> we may be better able to visualize new developments for the Stoney Nakoda First Nation if we maintain our focus. In its 29 December 2015 message, the Universal House of Justice gives a glimpse into what must happen and alludes to the delicacy of the role that those from outside the community must play:

The pattern of community life has to be developed in places where receptivity wells up, those small centres of population where intense activity can be sustained. It is here, when carrying out the work of community building within such a narrow compass, that the interlocking dimensions of community life are most coherently expressed, here that the

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12 The fourth in the succession of Five Year Plans (2016–2021) instigated by the Universal House of Justice for the purpose of systematizing the expansion of the Faith worldwide.

process of collective transformation is most keenly felt—here that, in time, the society-building power inherent in the Faith becomes most visible. (¶ 17)

The Universal House of Justice goes on to explain the qualities required to work in these neighborhoods and villages, indicating that a long-term commitment is needed and that too much outside attention can smother an emerging pattern of action:

Therefore, a significant task facing you and your auxiliaries at the outset of the coming Plan will be to assist the friends everywhere to appreciate that, for existing programmes of growth to continue to gain strength, the strategy of initiating community-building activities in neighbourhoods and villages that show promise must be widely adopted and systematically followed. Individuals serving in such areas learn how to explain the purpose of those activities, how to demonstrate through deeds the purity of their motives, how to nurture environments where the hesitant can be reassured, how to help the inhabitants see the rich possibilities created by working together, and how to encourage them to arise to serve the best interests of their society. Yet, recognizing the real value of this work should also increase awareness of its delicate character. An emerging pattern

of action in a small area can easily be smothered by too much outside attention; accordingly, the number of friends who move to such locations or visit them frequently need not be great since, after all, the process being set in motion is essentially one that depends on the residents themselves. What is required from those involved, however, is long-term commitment and a yearning to become so familiar with the reality of a place that they integrate into local life and, eschewing any trace of prejudice or paternalism, form those bonds of true friendship that befit companions on a spiritual journey. The dynamic that develops in such settings creates a strong sense of collective will and movement. (¶ 18)

This year, the Stoney Nakoda First Nation has become its own cluster. Gazing to the future, the team serving here will need to rise to the challenge of observing three-month growth cycles for the whole Five Year Plan. This will necessitate training tutors from the local community, expanding core activities and accompanying those individuals who arise to serve. This fall the team is planning a youth conference for Morley, with local facilitators and utilizing the materials and format of the 2013 worldwide youth conferences. The vision is for the conference to become annual, progressively engaging more youth in arising to better themselves and their community.

A challenge we must meet is to involve families more extensively so that the activities will truly be understood as community building and not just as drop-off activities meant to entertain children and keep them busy. Some of our most successful activities have involved the use of the arts, including dance, drama, rap music, and painting, so we will need to learn how to integrate the arts more frequently. Efforts are ongoing to approach the elders to explain the institute process and its significance for community building, and to request their advice and assistance as we move forward. Slowly, as individuals begin to recognize the station of Bahá'u'lláh and the breadth

of His Revelation, they will make their own connections between their rich traditional ways and the Bahá'í teachings. It is likely that, as the Universal House of Justice has told us, the participants will be drawn "further and further into the life of society and would be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which they are engaged to encompass a widening range of human endeavours" ("Ridván Message" ¶ 27).

My own deepest wish and prayer is to serve as long as God gives me strength and to see the healing message of Bahá'u'lláh touch the hearts and lives of my Stoney Nakoda friends and neighbors.

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