

## To the Bahá'í youth

(A letter from Rúhíyyih Khánúm)<sup>1</sup>

This afternoon, I was reading an article written by an army nurse, and recounting some of her impressions and experiences. She told of a soldier who had lost both eyes and both legs ... and who was thinking of how best to break the news lovingly and gently to his mother and brothers and sisters. It seemed to just strike me between the eyes for a moment and overcome me. I thought what on earth I would do and feel if I had been both blinded and lost the use of my legs, indeed, lost the legs themselves. Then a wonderful feeling came over me. I can help that man right here by the way I behave as a Bahá'í!

It was as if a great realization of our duties as believers swept into my consciousness. Everywhere we look we see suffering, a suffering so great that one cannot tolerate the thought of it mentally, one pushes it out of one's consciousness because it is too soul-crushing. To really seriously, for even a moment, picture the feelings and condition in which millions of people find themselves, is absolutely unbearable. To think of the people who are hungry and cold; the old people who are debilitated through slow starvation and illness, with no one to help them in the daily tasks now far beyond their strength; the children ... we better pass over the children and not even try to think about them; the soldiers, living always in the hell of war or on leave and exposed to the terribly degenerating influence of liquor and bawdy companions, opiates to produce forgetfulness of what lies behind and what lies ahead; to think seems to risk breakdown and so we don't think, if we can help it. What can we do for them, these nameless, endless millions and millions of fellow men?

Rolling bandages and knitting mufflers and buying bonds and doing our part as civilians or workers, or even in some form of war service is not much, it's just a minimum. It helps and it must be done, but it is only a palliative. The Bahá'ís task is bigger and harder; it is to BE a Bahá'í.

The other day a man asked Shoghi Effendi: "What is the object of life to a Bahá'í?" As the Guardian repeated his answer to me (I had not been present with the visitor), indeed, before he did, I wondered in my own mind what it had been. Had he told the man that to us the object of life is to know God, or perfect our character? I never really dreamed of the answer he had given, which was this: the object of life to a Bahá'í is to promote the oneness of mankind. The whole object of our lives is bound up with the lives of all human beings; not a personal salvation we are seeking, but a universal one. We are not to cast eyes within ourselves and say: "Now get busy saving your soul and reserving a comfortable berth in the Next World!" No, we are to get busy on bringing Heaven to this Planet. That is a very big concept. The Guardian then went on to explain that our aim is to produce a world Civilization which will in turn react on the character of the individual. It is, in a way, the inverse of Christianity which started with the individual unit and through it reached out to the conglomerate life of men.

This does not mean we must neglect to prune our personalities and weed out our faults and weaknesses. But it does mean we have to do a lot of radiating out to others of what we know to be true through the study of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. It also means, it seems to me, that our "Administrative Order", our Spiritual Assemblies, committees, Nineteen Day Feasts and Conventions, present a near at hand and very challenging testing ground to us. If we don't and won't learn to work with our fellow believers as we can and should in our Bahá'í community life, then we cannot very well expect that the world is going to listen to us or follow our example; we are prone to think of our Administration as a set of procedures, a way of conducting Bahá'í business. Maybe that is why we do not get the results from it that we know we should get. It is not a bunch of regulations, it is a mould of oneness, a mould of

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joint life. Every single thing we conceive of as being Bahá'í—love, justice, lack of prejudice, fairmindedness, liberality, understanding, etc.—should find its living embodiment in our way of conducting as a group our affairs. When we have oneness on our assembly we will more than likely have it or be able to produce it in our community; when we get it as far as that, people will start entering the Cause in droves. Why shouldn't they? What is the world looking for except just this, something that actually does enable people to work and live harmoniously together? Until we can do it ourselves why should we believe anyone else is going to be interested in our ideas really seriously?

That is why I felt that I could help that soldier, and beyond him all the others of my kind, suffering so grievously today, if I just made it a point of being a Bahá'í. A real one. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is credited with having said that the secret of self-mastery is self-forgetfulness. If there is anything wrong with the way our administration works it is this, that we just don't forget ourselves. Our own little ego—or big one, as the case may be—goes right along with us into our Assembly or any other meeting; there we sit with our superiority complex or our inferiority complex or just our normal, healthy selves, waiting to impose our views or to get upset over an imaginary insult, or just to monopolize unconsciously time, or to be too tired to make the effort to contribute our legitimate share. I should be allowed to say this, in all humility and with deep sympathy for all my fellow Bahá'ís, as I served on many committees and once on an Assembly, and I look back with horror and amusement on my past follies and attitudes. I can remember how very important my point of view was to myself, how offended or distressed I got if it was not at least weighed with great consideration, how I sometime believed only I was a firm Bahá'í amongst those present who were about to wreck the Cause by a majority decision in which I did not share! We must be patient with not only others, but with ourselves too. But also we must try much harder to be Bahá'ís in the place where it counts most heavily—in our joint Bahá'í life.

There is really nothing easier in this world than to tell other people what to do; the pinch begins when you try to tell yourself what you ought to do and get yourself to do it! Even we Bahá'ís share in this commonest of human weaknesses. We are prone to fix our attention on the failings of our fellow believer, and thinking that if she (or he) were not such an impediment, the affairs of our group, assembly or community would run smoother. Of course, there is probably justification for our criticism. But the criticism is not going to help matters much; on the contrary, it is more likely continually to divert our attention from more important tasks. At the same time, some bias, some defect of our own, is no doubt a test and a hindrance to others as much as theirs is to us. The best way to overcome our weaknesses is, it seems to me, twofold: Try to perfect yourself, for if you are better it stands to reason the sum total of the community is that much better too; and direct your energies into really working according to the administration which is a living, dynamic thing, and not a set of dos and don't's.

Bahá'ís, quickened as they are by the fire of a living religious conviction, are for the most part conscientious in following the laws and principles of their Faith. They take pride in their teachings; they really love them and sincerely seek to live up to them. The sacrifices (for such they seem in the eyes of the sophisticated and the worldly) they make, such as not drinking, when it is the commonest social custom of the age, living a chaste and noble life in a society that for the most part believes any restriction on its sensual life to be unnecessary and unhealthy, accepting censure and even ostracism rather than go against the belief that all colours and classes are to be treated with absolute equality and associated with freely and lovingly—are gladly accepted as a means of demonstrating the reality of their Faith.

There is no doubt, too, that the believers have a high reputation for character

and integrity amongst those who contact them. But for some reason or other, all our little weaknesses seem to come out in the working of the Administrative Order, perhaps because it is the touchstone Bahá'u'lláh has applied to the ills of the world. I have thought about this very much and wondered why it is so; for what my conclusion is worth, I offer it to others. It can't be the whole answer—but maybe it will help a little towards finding it.

We have a tendency to put aside spiritual laws when we deal with administrative problems. If one thinks about it, this is the exact opposite of the whole concept of Bahá'í government. Bahá'u'lláh, the "Father", has come to establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. If we really believe this (which of course we do) then we must analyze it. It implies a world run by law, but spiritual law. It implies order, discipline, organization, but based on the principles given by God's unerring Prophet and not constructed by the little, self-interested minds of men. It follows that the place where a Bahá'í should be most actively one, living up to his teachings to the fullest extent of his capacity, is in any gathering representing the Administrative Order. And yet so often you see a very fine Bahá'í put aside a lot of, if not all, of his spiritual attitudes when he enters an Assembly meeting, or a committee or a Convention, and become a business man, a mere executive, or even something faintly resembling a politician! When this happens we may well suppose that inspiration and guidance from on High flies out of the window! We have plugged up the pipe line, and we are not going to be moved by the great spiritual forces of our Faith, but, just like the members of all other floundering councils of the world, by mixed motives, personality problems, individual aggressiveness, etc. I wonder why? Is it because we have the age old belief that God is something connected with a purely inner state, and there for the salvation of the soul and the after-life? Or because we feel we are competent to run any mundane affairs according to our own lights? Whatever it is, it is the thing that is preventing our Bahá'í community life from attracting large numbers to the Cause, because it is the thing that is preventing us from showing that love and unity, amongst a body of people, for which the whole human race is starving.

We think too much of our own capacities and abilities, and altogether too little of what the power of God can do through any little soul, however insignificant, who opens himself to that power. The greatest living example of what one person can do who hitches herself to the power of God, that I have seen, was Martha Root. Not that she was insignificant, she wasn't; she was a fairly gifted and intelligent woman. But what she accomplished was infinitely beyond her own resources. And she knew it. She also well understood the process at work. She used to say: "Bahá'u'lláh does it." She was too modest to put the matter even more pointedly and say:

"I let Bahá'u'lláh do it."