

Portals to Growth: Creating Capacity for Service
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Notes from a Series of Talks by Dr. Farzam Arbab

Day 1

The Role of Education in Building Material and Spiritual Civilization

I would like to thank the National Spiritual Assembly for giving me the opportunity to participate in this delightful gathering. The main purpose of the conference, as I understand it, is for you to reflect on your efforts to expand and consolidate your community over the past few years. My pleasant duty, during these days, is to share with you some related thoughts on the question of education and on the nature of the Five Year Plan to assist you in your reflections. The Australian Bahá'í community has made significant strides especially during the Five Year Plan, and it has been a pleasure to witness from afar your impressive achievements as you learned systematically, built on your accomplishments, and moved to the forefront of Bahá'í activity worldwide.

Your National Spiritual Assembly has organized the conference in such a way that the themes of education and the Five Year Plan are woven together. I will begin my talk this morning with a few remarks on the question of the context of education—the philosophical, ideological, and historical context of the educational process in which the Bahá'í world has been engaged since the beginning of the Four Year Plan. I will then move on to a discussion of education as capacity building. Tomorrow, we will pick up the same subjects but will talk about them in more specific terms. First, I would like to make a few remarks on personal transformation, introducing in the process a distinction between what I am calling here our collective educational endeavors and our efforts as individuals to deepen ourselves.

In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi tells us that “the supreme and distinguishing function” of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation” is “none other than the calling into being of a new race of men”. The splendor of the attributes that will characterize this new human being, as described in the Writings, is beyond our current ability to appreciate. “Who can measure”, the Guardian, contemplating the future, asks, “the heights to which human intelligence, liberated from its shackles, will soar? Who can visualize the realms which the human spirit, vitalized by the outpouring light of Bahá'u'lláh, shining in the plenitude of its glory, will discover?” You are all familiar with numerous passages that offer us glimpses into the nature and character of the individual who is destined to emerge under the direct influence of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation:

A race of men, incomparable in character, shall be raised up which, with the feet of detachment, will tread under all who are in heaven and on earth, and will cast the sleeve of holiness over all that hath been created from water and clay.

Within the very breath of such souls as are pure and sanctified far-reaching potentialities are hidden. So great are these potentialities that they exercise their influence upon all created things.

“A treasure to the poor,” “an admonisher to the rich,” “an answerer of the cry of the needy,” “a joy to the sorrowful,” “a sea for the thirsty,” “a haven for the distressed,” “an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression,” “a balm to the suffering,” “eyes to the blind,” “an ornament to the countenance of truth,” “a crown to the brow of fidelity,” “a pillar of the temple of righteousness,” “a breath of life to the body of mankind,” “an ensign of the hosts of justice,” “an ark on the ocean of knowledge,” “a sun in the heaven of bounty,” “a gem on the diadem of wisdom,” “a fruit upon the tree of humility,” these are the kinds of words that describe this new human being.

When we reflect on such statements, and contemplate the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá who exemplified them, we are dazzled by the glimpses we get of the powers and capacities of this new creation—by the level of understanding the individual will attain, by the abilities and skills he or she will possess, by the attitudes and qualities that will characterize his or her being. We begin to realize that the Writings call for a most profound transformation at the level of the individual and recognize that education will have to play an increasingly important role in propelling it.

It will, of course, take centuries for this transformation, whose demands are overwhelming indeed, to occur. But what is clear is that the vision of the new human being has to be present whenever we try to address the question of education. For if we close our eyes to this vision, we become vulnerable to enticement by the elaborate trappings of the superficiality that is being propagated aggressively throughout the planet in the name of progress, a superficiality that is a necessary characteristic of a world in disintegration.

This extraordinary vision of a new human being has implications for both our personal and our collective lives. A fundamental question before every one of us is: What do I have to do in order to align my thoughts and actions with those of the individual depicted in the Writings and how do I help others do the same? One immediate answer is that we need to turn constantly to the Writings and strive, through diligent study, to gain a better and better understanding of the nature of the transformation that is required. And, we should exert daily effort to translate what we understand into action. We all engage, of course, in such study, and much of what we call deepening is undertaken precisely with this aim in mind.

Those of us interested in the field of education, professionally or otherwise, usually strive to go a step further. We try to gain insight into the dynamics of the educational process from passages in the Writings and to use this understanding to enhance our study of prevalent educational theories and their approaches, methods and materials—this in an attempt to formulate our own view of education and its underlying concepts. One important reason for doing so is to increase our ability to influence educational efforts

outside the Bahá'í community with the teachings and principles of the Faith, and this is indeed a worthy aim.

But beyond our concern as individual believers with our own personal transformation, and as educators with influencing the field of education, we are all participants in the collective educational endeavors of the Bahá'í community, and it is mostly in this sense that we will be discussing education here. These collective endeavors elicit the commitment of a diverse community of people coming from widely different backgrounds, including some from the field of education, each bringing to our collective exertions his or her experience, knowledge and talents. Glancing at the participants in this conference alone, one gets a sense of the unique richness of the human resources that participate in our educational efforts.

Now these collective educational endeavors of the Bahá'í community will necessarily be much more than aggregates of our individual deepening efforts. Their aims, which will cover a broad range of both individual and collective accomplishments, will not be reached by courses of study that merely teach us how things will be in the future, the heights to which we will ascend, and the kind of individuals we are to become, although such courses of study are, without doubt, required. Beyond these, our collective educational endeavors must bring to light the philosophical, ideological and cultural elements that define the historical enterprise in which the Bahá'í community is engaged: to build a new civilization—and we should remember, of course, that every educational system develops within one or another ideological and cultural context.

Clearly, the process of personal transformation mentioned before is an important part of the larger process of civilization building. But what is essential to realize is that all the necessary philosophical and ideological underpinnings of our educational programs will not come from those teachings that are concerned with the individual and with personal transformation. In fact, if we focus exclusively on that one process, we will have inadvertently adopted at least some of the undesirable elements of the individualistic ideologies that are so prevalent today. Our writings emphasize an equally profound transformation in the structure of society, parallel and complementary to personal transformation. You are well familiar with the Guardian's statement that

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.

In the dynamics of this dual transformation—personal and in the structure of society—I would like to suggest, we must seek some of the most significant philosophical and ideological underpinnings of our educational endeavors. It is the process of civilization building these two transformations engender that should be the context within which we design and implement the educational programs of our communities. This may seem to be an obvious fact, but it can easily be forgotten. Your National Spiritual Assembly is

clearly well aware of it, since it has called for a conference to address education in the context of the Five Year Plan. We may express the connection between the two interwoven themes of the conference in the following way:

As a community, we are concerned with the transformation of both the individual and society and with the interaction between the two. We can, of course, promote this dual process by contributing to the projects of other groups with like-minded aims, and we certainly do so with the understanding that the Major Plan of God, in compliance with which very complex global forces act on every individual and nation, is moving humanity irresistibly closer to its destiny. Yet, we have a specific Bahá'í enterprise, our own historical endeavor, in which we are vigorously engaged as a community. This historical enterprise is anything but haphazard. It has clearly defined parameters. It proceeds in successive stages that are governed by the global plans given to us by the Head of the Faith: the unfoldment of the Divine Plan.

The success of each stage of this worldwide, historical enterprise depends on the capacity of the Bahá'í community to respond to the provisions set forth in the global plan that defines that stage. This capacity is not built merely by our seeking, as individuals, truths in the Sacred Scripture of the Faith and trying to live according to its exhortations and precepts. Clearly this is a matter of considerable import. But, apart from such personal exertions, an educational process is required that creates in the community as a whole the capacity to respond to the exigencies of the Divine Plan as it unfolds. At each stage, the logic and the structure of this educational process must necessarily be derived from the logic and structure of the global plan that governs our activity at that particular juncture.

With these thoughts in mind, let us reflect for a moment on the circumstances in which the Four Year, Twelve Month and Five Year Plans of the Faith were formulated by the Universal House of Justice. At Ridván 1996, when the House of Justice launched the Four Year Plan, the Community of the Greatest Name had already earned an impressive record of achievements. It had succeeded in implanting the banner of the Faith in every region of the globe and had proven its ability to unite people of diverse backgrounds. It had laid the foundations of Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order and had raised up its institutions in the remotest corners of the world. It had established the process of consultation as a tool for collective decision-making and had educated its members in its use. It had shown its capacity to bring in fresh recruits and to deepen them in the verities of the Faith, and to educate children and youth according to its precepts. It had emerged from obscurity and was demonstrating its potential to influence policy and thought in international fora, having specially become known for its stance on issues such as racial unity, human rights and the equality of men and women.

It was against the background of such victories, painstakingly won in the previous stages of the Divine Plan, that the House of Justice decided to call upon the Bahá'í world in its Ridván 1996 message to focus on one major accomplishment: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. We know, of course, from its subsequent messages, that this central aim will continue to be the focus of the series of worldwide plans that will

carry the Bahá'í community through the final years in the first century of the Faith's Formative Age.

To appreciate the significance of this call to advance the process of entry by troops, we need to have at least some knowledge of the different patterns that have characterized the growth of the community since its inception. Most of you are familiar with these patterns of growth, but let me describe them briefly here.

When the Twin Manifestations of God appeared, powerful spiritual forces were released in the world, and in Iran, thousands upon thousands of pure-hearted souls were affected by this burst of spiritual energy. It was a very special period of time in the history of the Faith, during which the number of adherents grew extremely fast. This rapid, intense growth was accompanied by a wave of persecutions, which the enemies of the Cause had hoped would extinguish the flame of faith enkindled in the hearts of so many and would erase all traces of the newly born religion. They succeeded, we know, in killing thousands of innocent believers. We also know, however, that for every drop of blood shed by those precious souls, hundreds and thousands would arise to serve the Faith. Here we are as a testimony to the truth of this statement.

During His Ministry, 'Abdu'l-Bahá began to systematically build Bahá'í communities around the world. Under His watchful eye, the community in Iran grew and prospered, establishing, for example, such social institutions as schools and hospitals. In the West, particularly in North America, He raised up a band of dedicated believers and prepared the way for the future unfoldment of the Divine Plan. Your own community came into existence through the efforts of two outstanding souls who responded to His call.

The pattern of growth that the Guardian established, as he set out to build the Administrative Order and execute the Divine Plan, was clear and straightforward. It called for individual believers to arise, go to specific localities unopened to the Faith, establish themselves as pioneers, teach, and gradually gather together in each locality a group of believers able to form a Local Spiritual Assembly. Geographic spread was clearly a fundamental concern. The number of believers remained relatively small, as did the size of a typical local Bahá'í community. This pattern of growth was extremely successful and led to the eagerly awaited election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963. Still effective, this pattern will probably continue to be instrumental in establishing the Faith in many localities throughout the world.

But already during the Guardian's lifetime, another pattern was starting to emerge. As a result of the efforts of a few far-sighted individuals who set out to reach the indigenous populations in countries like Uganda and Indonesia, enrollments into the Faith accelerated dramatically. As you can imagine, this development brought great joy to Shoghi Effendi's heart, and the subsequent plans of the Universal House of Justice, beginning with the Nine Year Plan in 1964, encouraged this mode of expansion. *Century of Light*, the historical account of the twentieth century that was prepared under the supervision of the House of Justice, explains the expansion of the Faith among the masses of humanity in these terms:

As believers from urban centers set out on sustained campaigns to reach the mass of the world's peoples living in villages and rural areas, they encountered a receptivity to Bahá'u'lláh's message far beyond anything they had imagined possible. While the response usually took forms very different from the ones with which the teachers had been familiar, the new declarants were eagerly welcomed. Tens of thousands of new Bahá'ís poured into the Cause throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America, often representing the greater part of whole rural villages. The 1960s and 1970s were heady days for a Bahá'í community most of whose growth outside of Iran had been slow and measured.

Those of us who became familiar with large-scale expansion during that period remember the excitement of those days. Receptivity and possibilities for growth were beyond our imagination. We plunged into the teaching work and made every effort to make entry by troops a sustainable reality. But as you know, it proved difficult to adequately face the challenges brought about by the burst of enrollments. The process of expansion raced far ahead of consolidation, despite the efforts of many committed believers to deepen the newly enrolled friends and foster community life. As a result, growth could not be sustained, enrollments dwindled, and the masses who had entered the Faith with such enthusiasm became increasingly inaccessible.

In the years that followed, the Bahá'í community as a whole strove to understand the dynamics of sustainable large-scale expansion and consolidation. "During these years," *Century of Light* tells us, "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. The net result of the experience was an intensive education of a great part of the Bahá'í community in the implications of the mass teaching work, an education that could have occurred in no other way."

Then, on the 26 December 1995, in its message to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors announcing the features of the Four Year Plan, we were called by the Universal House of Justice to focus exclusively on the aim of advancing the process of entry by troops. Two concepts were specially emphasized and have been repeatedly woven into the messages of the House of Justice regarding the global plans ever since: systematization and learning. If large-scale growth is to be realized and sustained, the House of Justice has been telling us, we will need to work in a learning mode and act systematically.

The first lesson the House of Justice brought to our attention at the inception of the Four Year Plan had to do with the role of human resource development in advancing the process of entry by troops. From all the experience leading up to that Plan, it had become clear that this process could only be sustained if, as expansion accelerated, a certain percentage of the believers were trained to perform the acts of service required by the process. You are well familiar with this passage from the 26 December 1995 message:

With the growth in the number of enrolments, it has become apparent that such occasional courses of instruction and the informal activities of community life, though important, are not sufficient as a means of human resource development, for they have resulted in only a relatively small band of active supporters of the Cause. These believers, no matter how dedicated, no matter how willing to make sacrifices, cannot attend to the needs of hundreds, much less thousands, of fledgling local communities. Systematic attention has to be given by Bahá'í institutions to training a significant number of believers and assisting them in serving the Cause according to their God-given talents and capacities.

With the launch of the Four Year Plan, then, the worldwide Bahá'í community embarked on an unprecedented educational endeavor. Later, in a letter dated 31 May 2001 addressed to an individual believer, the nature of this collective endeavor was brought into sharp focus.

The aim of the Five Year Plan, and indeed of the Plan before it and the ones that lie immediately ahead, is to advance the process of entry by troops. In its message of 26 December 1995 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the House of Justice clearly explained that occasional courses of instruction and the informal activities of community life, though important, had not proven sufficient as a means of human resource development. It indicated further that a systematic process for the development of human resources was essential to the sustained large-scale expansion of the Faith. To conceive and nurture an educational process of the magnitude envisioned by the Universal House of Justice is vastly different than thinking about one's own interests, which is not to say that personal study and spiritual growth are not legitimate and natural concerns of the individual.

We know that the educational process envisioned by the House of Justice was intended to lead to "marked progress in the activity and development of the individual believer, of the institutions, and of the local community." The House of Justice has referred to these three as "inseparable participants in the evolution of the new World Order". If we accept that the philosophical, ideological, cultural and historical context of our collective educational endeavors are to be found in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, then as we reflect on the nature of the educational process on which the Bahá'í world embarked some eight years ago, we must ask ourselves: What does it mean to build the capacity of these three participants in the Plan to assume their proper functions and contribute effectively to the advancement of entry by troops? This is the question to which I would now like to turn.

There are numerous passages in the Writings and in the guidance from the Universal House of Justice that give us a picture of how these three protagonists of the Plan are to function and interact. "The power to act", we are reminded by the Universal House of Justice "resides primarily in the entire body of the believers. This power is unlocked at the level of individual initiative and at the level of collective volition." "The role of the individual," we are further told, "is of unique importance in the work of the Cause. It is the individual who manifests the vitality of faith upon which the success of the teaching

work and the development of the community depends. Bahá'u'lláh's command to each believer to teach His Faith confers an inescapable responsibility which cannot be transferred to, or assumed by, any institution of the Cause. It is incumbent upon the individual to seize opportunities, form friendships, build relationships, and win the cooperation of others in common service to the Faith and society. The individual must convert into action the decisions made by consultative bodies."

As to the institutions, we are told by the House of Justice that, under its guidance, "legislative, executive and judicial authority over the affairs of the Bahá'í community is exercised by Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. This authority is also exercised by Regional Councils, committees and other agencies established by these institutions, to the extent that it is so delegated." But in addition to the exercise of legislative, executive and judicial authority, the institutions are to exert spiritual, moral and intellectual influence on the lives of the believers. This influence acquires a special character through the services performed by those individuals who are appointed to the high rank of Counsellors and by their deputies. In relation to the vital task of unlocking the power to act at the level of individual initiative and at the level of collective volition, we are specially advised that "If the Cause is to realize Bahá'u'lláh's purpose for humankind, every institution of the Faith must be concerned with the release of power in both these expressions, as they are with ensuring the wise administration of the community's affairs. The institution of the Counsellors is particularly charged with this vital task and is endowed with the capacity to accomplish it." Thus, we are reminded that:

Acting in their respective roles, the two institutions of the Counselors and the Spiritual Assemblies share responsibility for the protection and propagation of the Faith. The harmonious interaction between them ensures the constant flow of guidance, love and encouragement to the believers and invigorates their individual and collective endeavors to advance the Cause.

About the third protagonist of the Plan, we know that, the community, as distinct from the individual believer and the institutions, has its own life and dynamics. The community is "more than the sum of its membership", and it generates its own forces and moves according to a common will. To quote the Ridván 1996 message: "...it is a comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both within and beyond its own borders." Further: "It is a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress." What is essential to remember is that the individual believer and institutions can only exist and interact in an environment from which they can derive sustenance and to the enrichment of which they can dedicate themselves. On the community, then, rests the challenge of providing that environment where individual wills blend, where powers are multiplied and manifest themselves in collective action, where higher expressions of the human spirit can appear.

With these brief remarks on the nature and functions of the individual, the community and the institutions, let us go back and ask the question again: What does capacity building in the three protagonists of the Plan entail?

In the case of the individual, what should be clear from the passages I have quoted is the absolute importance of initiative and action. Without the support of the individual, “at once wholehearted, continuous and generous,” the Guardian explained, every measure and plan of the National Spiritual Assembly is “foredoomed to failure” and the purpose of the Master’s Divine Plan is “impeded”. Seen in this light, capacity building certainly entails the enabling of the individual to manifest innate powers and God-given talents in a creative and disciplined way, as he or she labors in the field of service and endeavors to contribute to the progress of the global plans of the Faith.

Inherent in this definition is a particular understanding of what it means to exercise individual initiative and participate in collective action. Individual initiative is not the same as the pursuit of whatever the heart desires or random motion according to some romantic definition of creativity. To be fruitful and avoid the alienation that results from unrestricted individualism, creativity must accept discipline, and initiative must move in the direction of oneness. Discipline needs to be maintained by the force of inner conviction. When imposed, it succeeds only in quenching the fire of creativity. Yet, it would also be misleading, in my estimation, to view inner discipline simply as a product of the individual will. The human soul manifests its latent powers as it learns submission to higher authority, fundamentally the authority of the spiritual and material laws that govern existence. Understanding these laws penetrates individual conscience and gives meaning to the authority bestowed on the institutions. “To labor in the arena of service,” the Universal House of Justice has written, “the individual draws upon his love for Bahá’u’lláh, the power of the Covenant, the dynamics of prayer, the inspiration and education derived from regular study of the Holy Texts, and the transformative forces that operate upon his soul as he strives to behave in accordance with the divine laws and principles.”

To manifest innate powers in a creative and disciplined way, the believers need to gain certain insights into spiritual matters, acquire some degree of knowledge of the Faith and its teachings, and develop a range of skills that enable them to perform acts of service effectively. These insights, knowledge, and skills will develop in them, to higher and higher degrees, the many capabilities that participation in the Plan will require of them: to build unity in diversity, to promote justice and look for ways to liberate victims of oppression, to participate effectively in consultation, to oppose lower passions by turning toward a higher purpose, to carry out their responsibilities with impeccable rectitude of conduct, to face challenges with wisdom and determination, to make of obstacles stepping stones for further progress, to encourage others and bring them joy. These are but a few of the capabilities that the protagonists of our global plans must systematically develop.

Building institutional capacity is, of course, intimately linked to the progress of the individual. “The evolution of local and national Bahá’í Assemblies at this time,” the

House of Justice wrote in 1996, “calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members as well as on the part of those who elect them... Bahá'u'lláh has given to the world institutions to operate in an Order designed to canalize the forces of a new civilization. Progress towards that glorious realization requires a great and continuous expansion of the Bahá'í community, so that adequate scope is provided for the maturation of these institutions.” And again: “A massive expansion of the Bahá'í community must be achieved far beyond all past records. The task of spreading the Message to the generality of mankind in villages, towns and cities must be rapidly extended. The need for this is critical, for without it the laboriously erected agencies of the Administrative Order will not be provided the scope to be able to develop and adequately demonstrate their inherent capacity to minister to the crying needs of humanity in its hour of deepening despair.”

In this context, then, institutions have to increasingly develop their capacity to exercise authority and exert influence so that the powers of individuals and groups are channelled towards the upliftment of humanity and the common good. Such capacity is created as the institutions strive to foster the efforts of an ever-growing number of friends in their individual and collective activities. That the development of capacity to channel the believers' energies applies equally to Assemblies and to the institution of the Counsellors is clear from some of the passages I have quoted earlier.

An important aspect of building institutional capacity is to ensure that the exercise of authority and influence is achieved not through the imposition of individual wills but in a consultative environment. There is no need for me to discuss here the features of the consultative process, which Bahá'u'lláh has given us as a means for the collective investigation of reality and decision-making. We know, of course, that consultation succeeds to the extent that every participant supports the decisions arrived at, regardless of the opinions with which he or she entered the discussion. In the context of building institutional capacity, this suggests the need for the development of a number of spiritual qualities by the participants. Honesty, fairness, tolerance, patience, and courtesy are a few that readily come to mind. To make a list of such attributes is not difficult. The question is how to develop them. What force can enable people to oppose their passions, to cling to truth even when it does not gratify some of their own perceived interests, and to accept a discipline that invokes both courage in expressing frank opinions and wisdom in becoming an active part of a consensus? This is a central question that a process of capacity building in the individual and the institutions has to address.

As is the case with the individual believer, the capabilities required of a decision-making body that is to discharge its sacred duties as a protagonist of the global plans of the Faith are numerous. It must be able to consult freely and harmoniously as a body and with the people it serves. It must realize that every decision has both a material and spiritual dimension. It must be able to arrive at decisions; to win the confidence, respect and genuine support of those affected by these decisions; and to implement decisions with an openness and flexibility that avoid all trace of dictatorial behavior. Beyond this, it would clearly need to develop the ability to maintain a clear perception of social reality and of the forces operating in it; to detect some of the opportunities offered by each historical

moment; to properly assess the resources of the community; to effectively use the energies and diverse talents of the available human resources; to integrate the diversity of aspirations and of activities of individuals and groups into one forward movement; to build and maintain unity; to uphold standards of justice. What this cursory list suggests is a mode of governance that is entirely different from what humanity has ever experienced. Its hallmark is its posture of learning.

As to the community, what we have said about the individual and institutions has profound implications for the development of the community and hence for culture. What are some of the characteristics of the culture that we are trying to create? “A joyous and active life conducive to spiritual transformation and systematic growth,” “an atmosphere of learning and disciplined behavior, characterized by patience and forbearance toward mistakes,” “an environment free of excessive criticism, of backbiting, of conflict and contention, which at the same time welcomes the expression of concern on the part of every believer”—these are a few of the statements about the Bahá’í community we find in the writings. A feeling of responsibility for its own spiritual well-being needs to animate the community. It should be encouraged, through a consultative process undertaken in the light of the Revelation, to reach its own vision of growth, arrive at unity of thought, and devise plans of action which its members, themselves, are capable of carrying out. The projects and activities resulting from such a consultative process may, at first, need to be rather narrow in scope, but can become increasingly complex as spiritual, social and economic development occurs.

These are some of the features of a process of capacity building in the three protagonists of the Global Plans of the Bahá’í World Community. Tomorrow, we will look more closely at this process as we discuss the training institute and the courses it presently offers. In your smaller reflection meetings today you will be asked to examine the way the capacity of your communities, particularly at the local and cluster levels, to act as protagonists of the Five Year Plan has been enhanced in the past few years. Specific examples you may be considering are the capacity to:

foster individual initiative within the framework of the Plan

direct the diverse talents of the friends to contribute to the aim of the Plan

pursue accelerated expansion of the community with unity of thought shaped by an ever deepening understanding of the writings and in accordance with the provisions of the Plan

elicit the participation of a growing number of individuals and families in the activities called for in the Plan rather than depending entirely on the services of a few

act as an environment in which believers and their friends feel free to express themselves and contribute to consultation

offer a sacred environment in which an increasing number of people can engage in the worship of God

offer an attractive environment of love and fellowship in which an increasing number of people can engage in the study of the Faith

engage in the affairs of the society at large, not wishing to take on the habits of a small religious congregation.

consult, plan and act in a learning mode.

I would like to bring this talk to an end by quoting some of the Guardian's words about the nature of the plans which we have said constitute the context in which our collective educational endeavors are to take place. The Guardian told us that the Divine Plan is "impelled by forces beyond our power to predict or appraise" and is "gaining momentum with every passing day". We know that our success at each stage of the Plan prepares us as a community to embark on the global plan that will mark the next stage of this mighty enterprise. But we should never forget that each stage brings us closer to that long-awaited moment in history, which the Guardian has described in these terms: the "final and crowning stage in the evolution of the Plan wrought by God Himself for humanity will, in turn, prove to be the signal for the birth of a world civilization, incomparable in its range, its character and potency, in the history of mankind—a civilization which posterity will, with one voice, acclaim as the fairest fruit of the Golden Age of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh."