

Achieving Universal Participation of Older Adults: An Exploration of Its Challenges and Spiritual Foundations

CATHERINE BIGONNESSE and
JEAN MARC BIGONNESSE

Abstract

As a daughter-father collaboration, this paper aims to discuss the challenge of involving older adults in the process of participation in society. It first explores some of the root causes of ageism, such as the stigma attached to discussions of death in our society and the materialist conception of human ontology. In the second part, this paper suggests how a discussion based on spirituality, especially some principles of the Bahá'í Faith, can address this issue. We conclude this paper sharing some thoughts and comments about the role of older adults in the process of community building, a major objective assigned to the global Bahá'í community by the Universal House of Justice, the governing body of the Bahá'í Faith.

Résumé

Cet article, fruit d'une collaboration père-fille, abordera le défi de la participation

universelle des aînés au développement de la société. En premier lieu, nous abordons quelques-uns des facteurs fondamentaux de l'âgeisme tels que la perception de la mort dans les sociétés occidentales ainsi que la conception matérialiste de l'être humain. Dans un deuxième temps, cet article propose comment une réflexion axée sur la spiritualité, particulièrement sous l'angle des principes de la Foi bahá'íe, est en mesure de répondre à ce défi. En conclusion nous offrons quelques réflexions et commentaires à propos du rôle des aînés dans le processus du développement des communautés, un objectif majeur demandé à l'ensemble de la communauté bahá'íe par la Maison universelle de justice, corps administratif mondial de la foi bahá'íe.

Resumen

Como una colaboración entre hija y padre, este ensayo busca discutir el desafío de involucrar a los adultos mayores en el proceso de participación en la sociedad. Primero, explora algunas de las causas de raíz de discriminación por edad, tal como el estigma ligado a las discusiones sobre la muerte en nuestra sociedad y el concepto materialista sobre la ontología humana. En la segunda parte, este ensayo sugiere cómo una discusión basada en la espiritualidad, especialmente en algunos principios de la Fe Bahá'í, pueden atender este asunto. Concluimos este ensayo compartiendo algunos pensamientos y comentarios acerca del rol de los adultos mayores en el proceso de construcción de comunidad, un objetivo principal asignado por la Casa Universal de Justicia, el cuerpo gobernante de la Fe Bahá'í, a la comunidad bahá'í global.

INTRODUCTION

Humanity has reached a stage never observed before: a period of time where the majority of the world population is aging. Soon, older adults will outnumber children (World Health Organization). For instance, in Canada, by 2036 it is estimated that 25% of the population will be aged sixty-five and over (Statistics Canada). Many nations will have among their population the largest proportion of older adults ever experienced before.

This demographic change is driven by two phenomena: a decline in fertility and an improvement in longevity (World Health Organization). In other words, contemporary families tend to have fewer children than did their parents and grandparents. Also, improvements and new discoveries in health, technology, and treatment of disease enable us to live longer. It is more common now than ever before to meet healthy and active individuals aged eighty, ninety, and a hundred years old. This phenomenon of aging communities will certainly impact many aspects of society that are presently still difficult to foresee.

In collectivist societies, older adults are often considered very important members of the community for their life experience, wisdom, and as living repositories of the collective history (Phillips et al.; Aboderin). In more individualist societies, such as Western societies,¹ especially since the ini-

tial phases of industrialization, older adults are often considered a burden (Achenbaum; Featherstone and Hepworth). However, globalization, demographic changes, and economic insecurity are likely to negatively change the perception of older adults, even in the collectivist societies (Vos et al.; Phillips et al.).

This negative perception of older adults is manifested through the apparition of what we call “apocalyptic demography” discourses (Lefrançois; McPherson and Wister; Gee and Gutman) and generation-based public policy debates (MacManus). These economic and social discourses present in news media, commercials, and political speeches encourage the idea that older members of our society are less active, do not contribute to the economy, and consume public services that younger members cannot afford to support. Some media have coined the phrase “silver tsunami” to depict the possible economic and social consequences of adults and seniors serving as the major proportion of the population (*Globe and Mail*). On the one hand, research has demonstrated that the impact of these demographic changes is not as “apocalyptic” as some want us to think (World Health Organization). On the other hand, many older adults face exclusion and loneliness (Cornwell et al.).

economic position but also the political and cultural contexts characteristic of countries in North America, Europe, as well as Australia and New Zealand” (Lloyd 627).

1 The term “Western societies” is used to denote “not only the advantageous

One explanation for the exclusion of older adults from the life of society is a specific form of prejudice based on age, what is commonly alluded to as “ageism.” Butler defines ageism as “a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old. . . . Ageism allows the younger generation to see older people as different from themselves, thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings” (35). Discrimination occurs when people are denied opportunities and resources based solely on their age; prejudice occurs when people who are perceived to be old are viewed stereotypically and negatively (Bytheway 338).

Looking at this condition from the perspective of the Bahá’í Faith, we find that one of the fundamental principles of this religion is the abolition of all types of prejudice, while another principle advocates “universal participation”— “the involvement of a growing number of people in a collective process of learning, one which is focused on the nature and dynamics of a path that conduces to the material and spiritual progress of their villages or neighbourhoods” (Office of Social and Economic Development 6). Such a concept includes people of all ages as participants in the betterment of human society.

However, before we can abolish this and other prejudices, we need to understand their origin. Only then can we begin to change our perceptions and attitudes to become inclusive and thereby achieve universal

participation. So it is that the purpose of this paper is to explore how we can strengthen the involvement of older adults in the process of universal participation to achieve the betterment of society. To do so, this discussion first exposes some of the root causes of ageism—such as the previously mentioned denial of death and the equally harmful materialist concept of human ontology.

The second part of this paper suggests a discussion based on spirituality and some principles of the Bahá’í Faith that can be employed to address ageism. We conclude by sharing some thoughts and comments about the role of older adults in the process of community building.

DYING IN WESTERN SOCIETIES

THE ROLE OF DEATH IN HUMAN LIFE

Before looking at how the involvement of older adults in the process of universal participation can be fostered, we need to understand which factors impede its achievement. To do so, we first need to acknowledge the role of death in human life. Death affects all aspects of our existence. First, death is essential to life itself. At the bio-ecological level, death of organisms and all living things helps to feed other living organisms. At the social level, the death of individuals helps regenerate life through youthfulness, which brings life new blood (Morin, *L’homme et La Mort*). Therefore, death contributes to the regeneration of life.

Second, death forces us to set out on a quest for meaning to life, which defines our choices, our roots, and our inner motivations. The natural cycle of life and death, as demonstrated by all created things in the material world, helps to evoke in each of us an awareness of our own mortality and a desire for transcendence, a need “for contact with some deep spiritual reality” (Hatcher i). In turn, this need for transcendence becomes an opportunity to explore our inner reality, our essential spiritual nature.

We humans distinguish ourselves from the animal kingdom by the consciousness of our own death. This awareness of our finitude generates an inner tension, an angst forcing us to question the meaning of life and our true nature. The Bahá'í Writings and other Sacred Scriptures teach us that the true nature of the human being is, in essence, dual (Hatcher i). On the one hand, it is material, contingent, and mortal; on the other hand, it is spiritual, heavenly, and eternal (Bahá'u'lláh 158–63).

Third, death is not only an event that symbolizes the end of life; death also shapes and defines our cultures and societies (Morin, *L'homme et La Mort* and “L'homme et La Mort”). In fact, death is one of the central life experiences around which cultures evolve and organize their beliefs and rituals. These beliefs and rituals allow their members to cope with the apparent disintegrative power of death (Thomas, *Anthropologie de La Mort*). Each society has its own way of commemorating the

transition of its loved ones from this life to another one. These ceremonies, found as far back as 100,000 BC, are like staged representations of life in the afterlife that offer rich symbolism and the manifestation of metaphysical thoughts (Mohen). Moreover, sacred scriptures talk about the meaning of death and life, as early as the Vedas some 3,000 years ago (Kübler-Ross). In that sense, ceremonies that celebrate death are a distinctive characteristic of humankind.

At the experiential level, however, death remains elusive. On this topic Bahá'u'lláh says that “the mysteries of man’s physical death and of his return have not been divulged, and still remain unread” (345). Sometimes brutal and unpredictable, death takes away the means by which others testify of our existence. For instance, how are we showing our love for our loved ones? It is through our actions in holding them in our arms, through our words in telling them how much we love them, and through our loving gaze. However, when we face the death of a loved one, the disappearance of all these material means to show our love is confusing and upsetting. Death does not destroy, in a formal sense, our own existence, but it removes radically the usual, knowable, and identifiable means we have to validate our existence in relation to others (Ziegler).

Even if death makes the physical manifestation of our loved ones disappear, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá mentions that when we die, we will meet our loved ones again:

And know thou for a certainty, that in the divine worlds, the spiritual beloved ones (believers) will recognize each other, and will seek union (with each other), but a spiritual union. Likewise, a love that one may have entertained for any one will not be forgotten in the world of the Kingdom. Likewise, thou wilt not forget (there) the life that thou hast had in the material world. (*Tablets 730*)

In sum, our relationship with death characterizes and defines our humanity. Death structures all existence. It is through our relationship with death that we define our relationship to life (Mohen). Now that we have briefly explored some of the different roles of death in human life, let us turn to a discussion about the attitude toward death in contemporary Western societies.

DEATH DENIAL, MATERIALISM, AND INDIVIDUALISM IN WESTERN SOCIETIES

Western societies are cultures that deny death (Thomas, *La Mort*; Ariès; Léonetti; Neimeyer and Werth, Jr.). Such denial testifies to Western societies' ambivalence about, and difficulty in dealing with, this inescapable event in human life. Fear of death and death denial are manifested through at least two interrelated phenomena: the rise of the illusion that we can beat death through major advances in medical sciences and technologies, and the rise of materialism and individualism.

On the one hand, the progress of science and medicine and their new "miracles" have, to some extent, replaced religion and radically transformed our beliefs and values toward human nature, human life, and death (Somerville; Hervieu-Léger, cited in Léonetti). That this progress enables us to live longer and healthier lives is certainly an important step in the advancement of our civilization. On the other hand, the rapid development of scientific knowledge and technology in the last decades has also given us the illusion of an unlimited power of science over death.

One manifestation of this illusion is the constantly growing acceptance of assisted suicide and euthanasia. These new ways of softening the end of life neutralize death, to some extent, and in some cases make it more bearable for family, society, and professionals to cope with losing a loved one (Michel Castra in Léonetti). The constant increase of euthanasia requests to prematurely end lives and "to die with dignity" may be related to the evolution of Western societies toward the ethos of work, production, consumption, and materialism of a high-tech society. Such a view gives rise to not only an imperative for a healthy and happy life, for feeling good about ourselves "comfortable in [our] own skin" (Bourgeault), but also to the consequent social exigencies for a "peaceful" and "natural" death at any cost (Lloyd 622). The desire for control and for the illusion of what is often perceived as the all-powerful authority of

science over life and death is expressed through high-tech and depersonalized medicine (Bourgeault; De Hannezel; Seale).

Moreover, our society is increasingly individualistic. Spiritual and social factors can explain the rise of individualism, materialism, and our disconnection with death in our lives.

There is a loss of collective rites and practices maintaining the social fabric (Somerville; Bondolfi). These collective rites and practices, inherited primarily from major world religions, foster the harmony and coherent functioning of society. They are rooted in fundamental values and beliefs that give meaning to life. In a period of just over seventy years, Western societies have evolved from one characterized by solidarity, a sense of community, and a collective concern for the wellbeing of its members to more of an individualist and isolating society focused on productivity, performance, and consumption (Somerville; Thomas, *La Mort*; Bourgeault; Prigent). From the conception of a collective destiny wherein familiarity with death was a form of acceptance of the natural order, we have progressively moved toward a conception of an individualized destiny of each member of a society (Ariès). The solidarity around the dying person has been progressively replaced by loneliness in a society of “every man for himself” in which trusting others is not encouraged and where its members prefer to rely on themselves (De Hannezel).

The social definition of death has changed because death itself has changed. It is less and less part of a collective whole and of collective rites and practices. More and more, death is self-sufficient, a form of unbinding individualism and an event disconnected from the life of society. Indeed, to a certain extent the logic of the autonomous individual with rights runs counter to the logic of the City.²

If the definition of death has changed, it is because the conceptualization of the human being itself has changed. The human being is less and less a part of a whole and increasingly a self-sufficient entity (Le Guay, cited in Léonetti), and Western societies have evolved into a culture that reinforces individualistic positions at the expense of social engagement or intersubjectivity (Prigent).

The dissociation of the social contract from the solidarity and reciprocity necessary to the coherent development of our society has led to loneliness, to a lack of harmony and meaningful relationships with others, and to isolation from each other. A highly technological society fosters our isolation, forcing us to live by ourselves in a voluntary independence but, consequently, to also live and die alone (Hervieu-Léger, cited in Léonetti). By the same token, this agonizing

² The City, in the sense of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), as a Social Contract, in which the individual must renounce his or her particular interest in favor of the “general interest” (Yriarte).

loneliness in the face of death accentuates our fear and denial.

In short, the combination of our desire to control every aspect of our life, including the dying process, and of our society's materialistic and individualistic view of human nature has profoundly changed the way we die in the twenty-first century. The erosion of solidarity means that the contemporary death is now medical, self-centered, and solitary (Léonetti).

AGING IN WESTERN SOCIETIES

We live in a society that promotes the glorification of youth and that is fundamentally afraid of aging. The aging individual, as a prelude to the end of life, symbolizes what we prefer to ignore: the moment of our own death. Confronted with a paralyzing unknown, we prefer to flee rather than to deal with death in a straightforward manner. To avoid facing the anguish generated by the image of an "old man," we prefer to isolate and conceal him far from our sight (Thomas, *La Mort*; Thomas, *Anthropologie de La Mort*).

The fear of aging and of losing independence are, to some extent, different manifestations of death denial and are a root cause of ageism (Chappell, McDonald, and Stones). As defined earlier, ageism is a form of prejudice based on age and in which a group of individuals is excluded from the society or discriminated against for the sole reason of their age. Many older adults face social exclusion because of

this form of prejudice. Furthermore, ageism is observed at both the individual and social levels.

At the individual level, the desire to hide the signs of aging is manifested through our obsession with plastic surgery and other procedures that seem to offer eternal youth. We gladly accept what science has to offer and, for many, even the thinnest possibility of extending the boundaries of aging or the hour of our death becomes the ultimate goal in life. Each sign of the aging body must be concealed and hidden, a drive that leads to the tyranny of "successful aging" (Billé and Martz).

At the social level, our collective fear of death and aging is manifested through two mechanisms. The first is the notion of retirement, which limits older adults' contribution to the "active life." In our society focused on materialism, productivity, and consumption, the contributions of the "old," the "slow," and the "dying" individual are not welcome.

The influence of ageism is also found in early work in gerontology on the social participation of older adults. For instance, activity theory (Cavan et al.) suggests that individuals who face age-related decline gradually abandon their social roles. Disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry) posits that older adults have to withdraw from society to let younger members take their place. These theories, now increasingly contested among social gerontologists, have limited the participation of older adults in the life

of society and have perpetuated ageism among the scientific community. Clearly, as a society we are extremely challenged in creating space for the older adults to meaningfully contribute to the community with respect to their needs and desires.

The second mechanism is the confinement of older adults to isolation in institutions far from our sight. For most of the twentieth century we witnessed a trend away from dying at home and toward dying in hospitals and institutional settings (Neimeyer and Werth Jr.; Seale; Lloyd). Nursing homes have thus become a pervasive symbol of social sequestration between the “fit” and the “frail,” the separation between the living and the dying, and the containment of the visible manifestation of aging (Milligan; Froggatt).

As a result, institutionalized older adults face despair and a sense of uselessness—or what has been coined as “social death” (Norwood; Thomas, *La Mort*). Trying to avoid any manifestation of aging, especially by secluding older adults from public life, is, once again, a manifestation of fear of our own death—and death denial—that dominates the attitude of contemporary Western societies. This fear, which may be at the subconscious level, is shaping the way we interact with the older members of our society and the prejudices we collectively share about them.

SPIRITUALITY AND AGEISM

As mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of this article is to discuss the

challenges and spiritual foundations of older adults' participation in the process of community building. We have noted some of the many challenges rooted in death denial—materialism and individualism in particular—which, in turn, encourage ageism in our society. Naturally, the same disintegration that characterizes our societies also affects our community life. As we discussed earlier, Western societies are imbued with a fear of death that has led to the cult of youth and an ageist culture.

The Universal House of Justice, the elected governing body of the Bahá'í Faith at the international level, in its message to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors on 28 December 2010 underscores how important it is for communities to be aware of various kinds of prejudice and exhorts communities to make every effort to eliminate them:

While it is true that, at the level of public discourse, great strides have been taken in refuting the falsehoods that give rise to prejudice in whatever form, it still permeates the structures of society and is systematically impressed on the individual consciousness. 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. (54)

In an effort to provide practical ways to eliminate prejudice and to foster universal participation, we would do well to reflect on the involvement of older adults in the process of universal participation.

As discussed earlier, universal participation can be defined as

the involvement of a growing number of people in a collective process of learning, one which is focused on the nature and dynamics of a path that conduces to the material and spiritual progress of their villages or neighbourhoods. Such a process would allow its participants to engage in the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge, a most potent and indispensable force in the advancement of civilization. (Office of Social and Economic Development 6)

As regards ageism, therefore, let us exam universal participation in relation to three principles: the dual nature of the human being, the oneness of humanity, and the desire for justice.

DUAL NATURE OF HUMAN BEING

As discussed earlier, the causes of ageism are rooted in the materialist perception of human nature prevalent

in many Western societies, a concept that the human being is entirely a physical construct. From this point of view, aging understandably symbolizes the decline of the physical body's attributes and thus marks the path to the end of its existence, to its annihilation. As previously mentioned, such a view naturally leads to the exclusion and discrimination of older adults, a means by which the rest of society can avoid the constant reminder of our own demise. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá warned that the concept that we will ever become annihilated not only is erroneous but also debases our notion of our essential nature and purpose in this life:

The conception of annihilation is a factor in human degradation, a cause of human debasement and lowliness a source of human fear and abjection. It has been conducive to the dispersion and weakening of human thought, whereas the realization of existence and continuity has upraised man to sublimity of ideals, established the foundations of human progress and stimulated the development of heavenly virtues; therefore, it behooves man to abandon thoughts of nonexistence and death, which are absolutely imaginary, and see himself ever-living, everlasting in the divine purpose of his creation. (*Promulgation* 89)

Were we to follow this advice and abandon the idea that our essential

reality, our self and self-consciousness, could cease to exist, we could more easily appreciate the allied notion that our existence should be characterized by a constant and progressive spiritual development. As mentioned so often by Bahá'u'lláh, human nature consists of two realities: material and spiritual. Contrary to the material aspect of the human body, which reaches its full capacity during its early physical life and then begins to decline, the progress of the essential self (the soul) knows no decline. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, our fundamental objective in this life is to become educated so that our soul is constantly progressing toward perfection:

Absolute repose does not exist in nature. All things either make progress or lose ground. Everything moves forward or backward, nothing is without motion. From his birth, a man progress physically until he reaches maturity, then, having arrived at the prime of this life, he begins to decline, the strength and powers of his body decrease, and he gradually arrives at the hour of death. . . .

But with the human soul, there is no decline. Its only movement is towards perfection; growth and progress alone constitute the motion of the soul. (*Paris Talks* 107–08)

Refuting the concept of annihilation and acknowledging that the soul

can only progress toward perfection are important principles in eliminating the root causes of ageism and exclusion of older adults in the life of society. Understanding that the purpose of our life is to develop our spiritual capacities and to be of service to humanity provides us with a different vision of the purpose of later life and changes our understanding of many aspects of this final stage of our earthly existence.

For example, the contemporary accepted notion of retirement is almost entirely influenced by materialism and individualism. As stressed earlier, when older adults retire, they are no longer considered part of the “active force” of society and enter the aforementioned “social death” (Thomas, *La Mort*; Norwood). With similar concepts regarding retirement and purpose of later life reflecting the materialistic vision of human beings, many older adults face a lack of purpose, boredom, loneliness, and depression.

However, if the notion of spirituality is integrated into our view of later life, the importance of developing the soul toward perfection and developing the individual through service to humanity can become the guiding principles of everyday actions, and our attitudes about aging can become vastly changed for the better. Bahá'u'lláh asserts that “all men have been created to carry an ever-advancing civilization” (215). Consequently, spiritual development is important throughout life; there is no reason for an individual's personal growth or contribution

to society to stop or even to dissipate as we age. In short, spiritual development knows no age, nor is there an age limit in our service to humanity (Ghadirian). A spiritual perspective about life thus provides new purpose and meaning to its later years.

ONENESS AND JUSTICE

For a society to strive for universal participation of its citizenry, older adults have to be included in every aspect of the life of society and of its community-building processes. Likewise, the principles of oneness and justice become extremely important in this objective.

The principle of oneness encourages us to see humanity as one collective body. The Universal House of Justice has stated that even as each part of the human body serves or receives assistance from the body as a whole, so each individual plays a role in the advancement of civilization. The concept of oneness thus stresses the importance of universal participation based on the ability of each individual to contribute his or her capacities and talents to the advancement of the body politic.

For example, in its message to the Bahá'ís of the world in the letter of Ridván 2010, the Universal House of Justice states that “access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each

individual according to his or her talents and abilities. Justice demands universal participation” (20). Consequently, if an important segment of society is prevented from participating in the affairs of the community, the development of the whole society becomes limited or even regressive. With older adults now having become the largest segment of society, addressing their exclusion because of ageism becomes an ever more pressing issue.

TRAINING INSTITUTES: CATALYST FOR UNIVERSAL PARTICIPATION

For almost twenty years, in their efforts to create inclusive spaces for everyone, Bahá'í communities throughout the world have offered training courses to foster community building. In 1996, the Universal House of Justice called for the implementation of training institutes worldwide. These institutes presently consist of nine courses aimed at supporting spiritual empowerment and capacity development to contribute to the betterment of society.³

An essential component of these courses are practices in which participants can express in various social and spiritual activities the concepts that are the focus of each course. In addition to courses, the institutes offer activities that likewise challenge all individuals within the community to be trained and to participate in a number

3 Other courses will be developed in the future.

of community-building activities. For example, participants are trained to support the spiritual development of children through the implementation of children classes that “nurture the tender hearts and minds of children.” Similarly, there are junior youth empowerment programs that attempt to “channel [their] surging energies,” gatherings “that strengthen the devotional character of the community,” and study circles “open to all, that enable people of varied backgrounds to advance on equal footing and explore the application of the teachings to their individual and collective lives” (The Universal House of Justice 3).

Through this series of courses, participants “will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation” (The Universal House of Justice 7). The sequence of courses is designed “to create an environment conducive at once to universal participation and to mutual support and assistance” (34). Training institutes worldwide offer spaces where individuals across all walks of life and from every age group and level of capacity are welcome. In 2013, The Universal House of Justice observed,

Through participation in the educational process promoted by the training institute, they [the participants] are motivated to reject the torpor and indifference inculcated by the forces of society

and pursue, instead, patterns of action which prove life altering. . . . Youth are empowered to take responsibility for the development of those around them younger than themselves. Older generations welcome the contribution of the youth to meaningful discussions about the affairs of the whole community. For young and old alike, the discipline cultivated through the community’s educational process builds capacity for consultation, and new spaces emerge for purposeful conversation. (143)

Although the training institutes are in a constant mode of learning, these establishments strive to implement, through a practical methodology, the concepts discussed earlier: (1) the dual nature of the human being in viewing participants’ potential for a lifelong spiritual progress and capacity development; and (2) oneness and justice in fostering the participation of every member of the community in the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge for the betterment of society.

UNIVERSAL PARTICIPATION IN ADVANCED AGE

As noted earlier, the participation of older adults in building a vibrant community life is a pressing issue. Our understanding of the role of the oldest members of our society will certainly change over time, even though it is

challenging to envision how it will unfold. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who traveled extensively well into His sixties to disseminate the message of His father, Bahá’u’lláh, is a source of inspiration for all of us, young and old alike.

Nevertheless, decline in strength, health, and capacity are undeniably part of the aging process. The time comes when, close to the final years of our lives, the type of participation discussed earlier becomes impossible. The Bahá’í Writings offer some perspectives regarding what individuals and communities can do to support those who are facing this period in life.

APPROACHING THE END OF LIFE

It can be challenging for aging individuals to experience declining capacities and for their loved ones and caregivers to witness what can be a dramatic change in personality and abilities. Key themes found in the Bahá’í Writings about the end of life and the approach of death are that this period can and should be experienced with joy and hope. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encourages us to pray and to be joyful when we are facing sorrow and sickness:

If sorrow and adversity visit us, let us turn our faces to the Kingdom and heavenly consolation will be outpoured.

If we are sick and in distress let us implore God’s healing, and He will answer our prayer.

When our thoughts are filled with the bitterness of this world,

let us turn our eyes to the sweetness of God’s compassion and He will send us heavenly calm! If we are imprisoned in the material world, our spirit can soar into the Heavens and we shall be free indeed!

When our days are drawing to a close let us think of the eternal worlds, and we shall be full of joy! (*Paris Talks* 136)

Nevertheless, the decline of cognitive functions and the onset of cognitive impairments, such as the various forms of dementia, are particularly painful for the affected individuals and their family. Despite the devastating effects of these conditions, Bahá’u’lláh reassures us that the soul and its spiritual power are not impaired by any infirmity of the body or the mind:

Know thou that the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose themselves between his soul and his body, for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments. Consider the light of the lamp. Though an external object may interfere with its radiance, the light itself continueth to shine with undiminished power. In like manner, every malady afflicting the body of man is an impediment that preventeth the soul from manifesting its inherent might and power. (153–54)

Moreover, while contemplating or facing our own demise, we should be hopeful and not succumb to fears of nonexistence. 'Abdu'l-Bahá reassures us that in the afterlife, we will be free from earthly limitations and sufferings. Indeed, when He was once asked how we should look forward to death, He replied, "How does one look forward to the goal of any journey? With hope and with expectation. It is even so with the end of this earthly journey. In the next world, man will find himself freed from many of the disabilities under which he now suffers" (*Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 96). In light of this perspective and encouragement, it is clear that the Bahá'í teachings exhort us to accept the final part of our life with joy, hope, and expectation of fulfillment.

THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY AT THE END OF LIFE

In later life, close family members will often take the role of caregivers, and there are many ways the community can support the needs of older adults and their caregivers. One way is through home visits. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that visiting the sick is the responsibility of everyone in the community and that "the utmost kindness and compassion to the sick and suffering" have a "greater effect than the remedy itself" (*Promulgation* 285). 'Abdu'l-Bahá also often speaks of the healing power of joy. He mentions that "happiness is a great healer to those who are ill" (285). In another passage, He refers to

the importance, when at the bedside of patients, to gladden their hearts:

Remedy the sick by means of heavenly joy and spiritual exultation, cure the sorely afflicted by imparting to them blissful glad tidings and heal the wounded through His resplendent bestowals. When at the bedside of a patient, cheer and gladden his heart and enrapture his spirit through celestial power. Indeed, such a heavenly breath quickeneth every moldering bone and reviveth the spirit of every sick and ailing one. (*Selections* 158)

Therefore, when visiting older adults and their family, we should make every effort to instill joy and happiness in their hearts and souls. This process can be assisted through reciting or sharing prayers. For example, organizing devotional gatherings at older adults' homes might serve to uplift their spirit. At the same time, however, we should also be mindful of respecting the limitations of those we visit. Our sensitivity to the limits of the aged is especially important for adults suffering from dementia who can rapidly become tired of social interactions and noises. Therefore, it is extremely important that the community consult with caregivers, whether they be professionals or family, regarding what limitations would best benefit the conditions of those whom we seek to assist at this crucial time in their lives.

Another way to bring joy and happiness into the hearts and souls of the aged is through music. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that the art of music is “the food of the soul and spirit,” and that “through the power and charm of music the spirit of man is uplifted” (*Promulgation* 71). On occasion, it might be salutary for musicians or singing groups to visit those older adults living in institutions for the elderly, such as assisted-living facilities. In this connection, research suggests that music has a beneficial effect on those with cognitive impairments, such as dementia (Matthews; Nair et al.).

Contact with children is especially valuable for older adults living in age-segregated institutions—assisted-living and long-term care facilities—where association with the youngest members of society is very limited. Here again recent research suggests that intergenerational programs where preschool children spend time with older adults in long-term care facilities are beneficial to both groups (Jarrott and Bruno; Eheart et al.). Older adults are happier and more relaxed and feel a sense of purpose, even as the children enjoy being exposed to the company of their elders and often sense how their own presence provides comfort and delight to those whom they visit. It is in this context that children’s class teachers trained through the Bahá’í institute process might instigate such intergenerational activities and visit assisted-living and long-term care facilities

with their class.

Junior youth groups can also render valuable support for older adults and their caregivers in the community. They could develop service projects that involve regular visits to older adults of the community or to a local assisted-living facility. Here too both the youth and the residents will benefit from simple conversations in which each can learn from the other.

In addition, research suggests that many older adults can remain in their homes instead of moving to assisted-living facilities if they have sufficient care from family and friends. In this context, the community can offer assistance, especially with burdensome housework or with home upkeep (Bigonnesse, Beaulieu, and Garon). Junior youth and youth could certainly help in that area while encouraging intergenerational relationships.

Finally, while clearly the elderly, especially those in the final years of their life, cannot be expected to participate the way they used to, they can still be fully integrated in the life of the community if creative and thoughtful programs are developed to reach out to those who otherwise sadly may be neglected. This is a tremendous challenge for every community, but especially for local Bahá’í communities where caring for the elderly and becoming aware of their circumstances will redound to the benefit of all of those involved, especially to the children and youth who, in so much of contemporary society, have so little contact with a rapidly growing segment of the population

that is all too often segregated, isolated, and socially neglected.

CONCLUSION

This article aims to better understand the challenges regarding universal participation of older adults in the process of community building. Beginning with a reflection about the role of death in human society and its impact on individuals themselves, we have discussed the attitude toward death in our contemporary society and how it brings about ageism. We further observed that in order to eliminate such prejudices, we have to understand their sources and find ways to abolish them. The knowledge gained about the causes of ageism and the exploration of spiritual concepts can help us better understand how to achieve the goal of true universal participation in our communities across

all ages, from youths to older adults. The spiritual concepts presented in the Bahá'í Writings—such as the dual nature of human beings, oneness, and justice—and discussed in the context of recent messages from the Universal House of Justice regarding the training institutes highlight potential solutions to encourage the involvement of older adults in the process of creating universal participation. Examining the Bahá'í response to the need for the entire society to get involved in order to bring about the vitalization of community life, we can derive the hope that, as time passes, we can better understand the spiritual foundations of older adults' universal participation and discover—as the programs become implemented—how the oldest members of our society will find their place and enrich the life of each community.

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