

Backbiting and the Local Spiritual Assembly

By Susan Gammage ¹

A friend asked:

Would an LSA be backbiting if they discuss the negative qualities of an individual at an LSA meeting when the individual was not present?

Do Assemblies have the right to hear and talk about community members' negative qualities if the LSA is being asked to make a decision about this member, even when the community member is not present?

Can an Assembly make decisions about community members, by NOT listening to negative reports of bad character traits and praying for guidance instead?

That question stimulated the following thoughts:

First of all, dealing with this issue is working on the spiritual frontier of an Assembly's growth, and patience is needed as we learn to rise to these challenges:

As you know, there can be many reasons for Assemblies not to respond to the believers. Undoubtedly, in some cases, it is because the friends and the Assemblies are struggling with issues on the frontier of their spiritual growth. Such a process can lead to tremendous development on both the individual and the collective levels. Sometimes we can facilitate this process of spiritual growth for individuals, and of maturation for Local and National Assemblies, by viewing these situations not as a problem but as opportunities for development. Taking part in this process should be a source of joy to us since we are, in effect, helping to build the kingdom of God on Earth. Nevertheless, patience is needed, particularly when it involves a subject that is close to our hearts, and when it seems that progress on the matter is lagging or has ceased entirely. We must maintain our confidence that the divinely ordained administrative system given to us by Bahá'u'lláh, and the inspiration of the Creative Word, will enable us to rise to these challenges. (Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 25 October, 1994)

What the believers need is not only ... to really study the teachings, but also to have more peace-makers circulating among them ... It is one of the functions of the older and the more mature Bahá'ís, to help the weaker ones to iron out their difficulties and learn to really function and live like true believers! (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 90, #310)

I thought my friend was quite correct to be concerned about backbiting.

¹ Prepared by David Bowie (2023) for posting, with permission of author, at https://bahai-library.com/gammage_various_essays

You are quite correct in your understanding of the importance of avoiding backbiting; such conduct strikes at the very unity of the Bahá'í community. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 90. #309)

In a letter written to an individual believer on behalf of the Guardian it is stated:

If we are better, if we show love, patience, and understanding of the weakness of others, if we seek to never criticize but rather encourage, others will do likewise, and we can really help the Cause through our example and spiritual strength. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 83, #291)

This reinforces the role of the Assembly to act as loving parents. If we learn from the example shown by the House of Justice in their letters to individuals, they are always loving and encouraging.

But this is a difficult lesson to learn.

Learning not to concern oneself with the faults of others seems to be one of the most difficult lessons for people to master, and that failing in this is a fertile cause of disputes among Bahá'ís as it is among men and women in general. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 89, #309)

Unfortunately it seems easier to gossip and criticize than to put into practice love, constructive words and cooperation:

Unfortunately, not only average people, but average Bahá'ís, are very immature; gossip, trouble-making, criticism, seem easier than the putting into practice of love, constructive words and cooperation. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 90, #310)

It's an imperfect eye that beholds imperfections in others:

The imperfect eye beholds imperfections. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 93)

This is the standard we need to reach for:

One must expose the praiseworthy qualities of the souls and not their evil attributes. The friends must overlook their shortcomings and faults and speak only of their virtues and not their defects. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Lights of Guidance, p. 91, #312)

One must see in every human being only that which is worthy of praise. When this is done, one can be a friend to the whole human race. If, however, we look at people from the standpoint of their faults, then being a friend to them is a formidable task. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 169)

Here's a story of how to apply the standard:

It is related that His Holiness Christ—May my life be a sacrifice to Him!—one day, accompanied by His apostles, passed by the corpse of a dead animal. One of them said: 'How putrid has this animal become!' The other exclaimed: 'How it is deformed!' A third cried out: 'What a stench! How cadaverous looking!' but His Holiness Christ said: "Look at its teeth! how white they are!" Consider, that He did not look at all at the defects of that animal; nay, rather, He searched well until He found the beautiful white teeth. He observed only the whiteness of the teeth and overlooked entirely the deformity of the body, the dissolution of its organs and the bad odour. This is the attribute of the children of the Kingdom. This is the conduct and the manner of the real Bahá'ís. I hope that all the believers will attain to this lofty station. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Star of the West, Vol. IV, No. 11, p. 192)

In the next quote it looks pretty clear that discussing the faults of others in their absence is forbidden:

As regards backbiting, i.e. discussing the faults of others in their absence, the teachings are very emphatic. In a Tablet to an American friend the Master wrote: 'The worst human quality and the most great sin is backbiting, more especially when it emanates from the tongues of the believers of God. If some means were devised so that the doors of backbiting were shut eternally and each one of the believers unsealed his lips in praise of others, then the Teachings of His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh would spread, the hearts be illumined, the spirits glorified, and the human world would attain to everlasting felicity.' (Quoted in Star of West, Vol. IV. p. 192) Bahá'u'lláh says in Hidden Words; 'Breathe not the sins of others so long as thou art a sinner. Shouldst thou transgress this command ACCURSED ARE THOU.' The condemnation of backbiting could hardly be couched in stronger language than in these passages, and it is obviously one of the foremost obligations for Bahá'ís to set their faces against this practice. Even if what is said against another person be true, the mentioning of his faults to others still comes under the category of backbiting, and is forbidden. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 88, #305)

Bahá'u'lláh makes, the advice quite clear and doesn't say there are exceptions to the rule.

Breathe not the sins of others so long as thou art thyself a sinner. Shouldst thou transgress this command, accursed wouldst thou be, and to this I bear witness. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Arabic Hidden Words, 27)

'Abdu'l-Bahá does not permit adverse criticism by name in discussion unless the situation is of such gravity as to endanger the interests of the Faith:

'Abdu'l-Bahá does not permit adverse criticism of individuals by name in discussion among the friends, even if the one criticizing believes that he is doing so to protect the interests of the Cause. If the situation is of such gravity as to endanger the

interests of the Faith, the complaint, as your National Spiritual Assembly has indicated, should be submitted to the Local Spiritual Assembly, or as you state to a representative of the institution of the Counsellors, for consideration and action. In such cases, of course, the name of the person or persons involved will have to be mentioned. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 90, #311)

Here is a checklist we could all use!

- Would this detraction serve any useful purpose?
- Would it please the Blessed Beauty?
- Would it contribute to the lasting honour of the friends?
- Would it promote the holy Faith?
- Would it support the covenant?
- Would it be of any possible benefit to any soul?

The answer to all of these is No, never!

If any individual should speak ill of one who is absent, it is incumbent on his hearers, in a spiritual and friendly manner, to stop him, and say in effect: would this detraction serve any useful purpose? Would it please the Blessed Beauty, contribute to the lasting honour of the friends, promote the holy Faith, support the covenant, or be of any possible benefit to any soul? No, never! (Selections From The Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 231)

The consequences are clear – it makes the dust to settle so thickly on the heart that the ears would hear no more; the eyes would no longer behold the light of truth; it dampens the zeal of the friends; makes them indifferent; and is the leading reason why the friends withdraw:

On the contrary, it would make the dust to settle so thickly on the heart that the ears would hear no more, and the eyes would not longer behold the light of truth. (Selections From The Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 231)

If any soul speak ill of an absent one, the only result will clearly be this: he will dampen the zeal of the friends and tend to make them indifferent. For backbiting is divisive, it is the leading cause among the friends of a disposition to withdraw. (Selections From The Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, pp. 230-231)

Even when an Assembly is dealing with an issue, backbiting causes more damage than the original offence:

If a believer faced with knowledge of another Bahá'ís conduct is unsure what course to take, he can, of course, always consult his Local Spiritual Assembly for advice. If, for some reason, he is reluctant at that stage to inform his Spiritual Assembly, he can consult an Auxiliary Board member or assistant. Whatever steps are taken, it is vital that the believers refrain from gossip and backbiting, for this can only harm

the Faith, causing perhaps more damage than would have been caused by the original offense. (Universal House of Justice, NSA USA - Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities)

Beware lest ye give ear to the words of those from whom the foul smell of malice and envy can be discerned; pay no heed to them, and stand ye for righteousness. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Summons of the Lord of Hosts, p. 200, #35)

And you are doing your utmost to educate and prevent others from making complaints against others in your presence.

It is obvious that if we listen to those who complain to us about the faults of others we are guilty of complicity in their backbiting. We should therefore, as tactfully as possible, but yet firmly, do our utmost to prevent others from making accusations or complaints against others in our presence. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 94, p. 325)

However, there is a difference in the consultations of an Assembly.

Confidentiality

Every believer must know that he can confide a personal problem to an institution of the Faith, with the assurance that knowledge of the matter will remain confidential:

...every believer must know that he can confide a personal problem to an institution of the Faith, with the assurance that knowledge of the matter will remain confidential. (Messages From The Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 554)

If a Bahá'í accepts confidential information, he is in duty bound to preserve that confidentiality:

Members of Assemblies, whether they are assistants [to Auxiliary Board members] or not, are obviously in a position to receive confidential information as individuals from several sources. It is an important principle of the Faith that one must not promise what one is not going to fulfill. Therefore, if a Bahá'í accepts confidential information either by virtue of his profession (e.g. as a doctor, a lawyer, etc.), or by permitting another person to confide in him, he is in duty bound to preserve that confidentiality. (Messages From The Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 554)

Individual Assembly members should not divulge confidential information learned in the Assembly.

Any information which comes to the notice of an Assembly member, solely by reason of his membership on that Assembly must not be divulged by that member,

even though the Assembly itself may later decide to share it. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 24, #123.1)

What about Assembly members who are also assistants to a member of the Auxiliary Board?

Assistants who are members of a National Assembly or a national committee do not function as assistants in relation to that body, and they have the same duty to observe the confidentiality of its consultations, and of matters considered by the Assembly to be confidential, as does any other member. (Messages From The Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 554)

If a member of the Assembly knows of a personal problem, and if he has not undertaken to keep it confidential, he may bring it to the Assembly's attention if he feels it would be in the interests of the Faith for him to do so, but he is not obliged to:

If a member of the Assembly knows of a personal problem, and if he has not undertaken to keep it confidential, he may bring it to the Assembly's attention if he feels it would be in the interests of the Faith for him to do so, but he is not obliged to. (Messages From The Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 555)

What about information learned within an institution?

Every institution in the Faith has certain matters which it considers should be kept confidential, and any member who is privy to such confidential information is obliged to preserve the confidentiality within the institution where he learned it. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 334, #1123)

On the other hand:

Where no confidentiality is involved the institutions must strive to avoid the stifling atmosphere of secrecy. (Messages From The Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 554)

The Assembly must itself carefully consider which information should rightly fall in the category of confidential information and which should not be shared with others, and which information may be divulged under special circumstances, and how such information may be divulged. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 34, #123.2)

What are the results of breaking confidentiality?

Should confidential matters regarding personal problems be freely shared with others, upon application, the confidence of the believers in the Assembly and its members will obviously be destroyed. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 34, #123.2)

My conclusion is that the confidential matters discussed within an Institution are very different from individual gossip and backbiting.