

Calamities - Causing the Limbs of Mankind to Shake

By Susan Gammage ¹

There are 2 extracts from the Bahá'í Writings, which, when taken together, tend to frighten many of us.

The world is in travail, and its agitation waxeth day by day. Its face is turned towards waywardness and unbelief. Such shall be its plight, that to disclose it now would not be meet and seemly. Its perversity will long continue. And when the appointed hour is come, there shall suddenly appear that which shall cause the limbs of mankind to quake. Then, and only then, will the Divine Standard be unfurled, and the Nightingale of Paradise warble its melody. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXI, p. 118)

Know, verily, that an unforeseen calamity followeth you, and grievous retribution awaiteth you. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Persian Hidden Words 63)

When I read about the Tanna, an island community in the Vanuatu archipelago, in the aftermath of Cyclone Pam in the International Teaching Council periodical "Reflections on Growth", and watched "The Resilience of the Tanna Bahá'í Community" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWDN-jOPtY> these two quotes came together.

Background information on Tanna

Tanna is one of 83 small islands in the country of Vanuatu, which is located in the South Pacific east of Australia and west of Fiji. It is 40 kilometres long and 19 kilometres wide, with a total area of 550 square kilometres. Its population of 30,000 is scattered in pockets across a volcanic outcrop.

In 2012, the Universal House of Justice named Tanna as one of 5 clusters where the process of entry by troops was sufficiently well advanced and conditions in these national communities were favourable for them to build a House of Worship. Progress was progressing nicely, with the whole island taking ownership of the building of the temple, Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í working together.

In 2015, within the space of just a few weeks, there was a measles outbreak; an earthquake with a magnitude of 6.5; the volcano erupted for the first time in 100 years and finally there was cyclone Pam, one of the most powerful storms to rip through the south Pacific. It was a category 5 storm, with sustained wind speeds of up to 320 km/hour lasting over a 24 hour period. It was the second-most intense tropical cyclone on record worldwide and certainly one of the worst natural disasters in the history of Vanuatu.

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

The cyclone crippled Vanuatu's infrastructure. 90 percent of the homes, schools and hospital buildings were damaged or destroyed. Telecommunications were paralyzed. There was no drinkable water left on the island. 96 per cent of their food crops were destroyed. People needed immediate assistance for clean water, food, shelter, healthcare and psycho-social care, but relief workers were battling poor weather and communications issues for days, hampering much of their efforts to reach the outer islands. A lack of airstrips and deep water ports hampered the speed of relief operations. It was not until two weeks after the cyclone struck, that aid finally reached all of the affected islands.

In April 2017, Tropical Cyclone Cook (a category two cyclone, which generated wind gusts of up to 130 kilometres per hour near its centre), buffeted Vanuatu with strong winds, heavy rain and rough seas, causing flash flooding in some parts of the country. A month later, in May 2017, Tanna was again battered by Cyclone Donna for several days, with gale force winds of up to 205km/hr. It was another category 5 storm, listed as the strongest out-of-season storm ever recorded in the Southern Hemisphere.

So here's my question: if even this community, which was so united before all these calamities, that the House of Justice said they could have a local Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, still needed to be brought to their knees to achieve even more unity what is it going to take for the West to be brought to her knees? I can't even imagine, and it terrifies me!

Nevertheless, I was inspired by this video, and continue to be so!

I looked at what the Bahá'í Writings have to say on the topic of the coming calamity and asked myself a number of questions.

Is humanity already in the middle of the calamity?

Calamities are already occurring:

Behold the disturbances which, for many a long year, have afflicted the earth, and the perturbation that hath seized its peoples. It hath either been ravaged by war, or tormented by sudden and unforeseen calamities. (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p.163)

The House of Justice points out that calamities have been and are occurring and will continue to happen until mankind has been chastened sufficiently to accept the Manifestation for this day. (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 15 April 1976)

<https://bahai-library.com/wwwboard/messages01/535.html>

When will our calamity come?

Since Bahá'u'lláh has said it is "unforeseen", we can't predict it:

The House of Justice points out that Bahá'u'lláh in no uncertain terms has said 'O ye peoples of the world! Know, verily, that an unforeseen calamity followeth you,

and grievous retribution awaiteth you. Think not that which ye have committed hath been effaced in My sight.' Therefore it considers that it would be fruitless to attempt to foresee the time or the nature of a calamity which Bahá'u'lláh Himself said was 'unforeseen'. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 128, #428)

What form will it take?

We do not know what form these upheavals will take, when exactly they will come, how severe they will be, nor how long they will last.

Although there is every reason to expect that the world will experience travails and testing as never before, we do not know what form these upheavals will take, when exactly they will come, how severe they will be, nor how long they will last." (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 19 March 1981, Lights of Guidance, p. 127, #426)

It won't necessarily be another war.

While the Guardian envisaged the likelihood of further warfare in the world, he did not categorically identify such war with the "unforeseen calamity" foretold by Bahá'u'lláh. In fact, he wrote, on another occasion: "We have no indication of exactly what nature the apocalyptic upheaval will be: it might be another war. (From a letter dated 21 November 1949, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) <https://bahai-library.com/wwwboard/messages01/535.html>

We cannot be certain that it will be in the form of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions or tidal waves:

No doubt the remarkable progress being made in scientific endeavour holds true in the study by experts of geological upheavals. But we cannot be certain that predictions of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions or tidal waves caused by such phenomena can be identified as the cataclysmic events to which Bahá'u'lláh refers. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 128, #428)

What are the signs of the calamity?

Criticism of others:

Vicious criticism is indeed a calamity. But its root is lack of faith in the system of Bahá'u'lláh, i.e., the Administrative Order—and lack of obedience to Him—for He has forbidden it! If the Bahá'ís would follow the Bahá'í laws in voting, in electing, in serving and in abiding by Assembly decision, all this waste of strength through criticizing others could be diverted into cooperation and achieving the Plan. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 92, #314)

Other signs include:

The violent derangement of the world's equilibrium; the trembling that will seize the limbs of mankind; the radical transformation of human society; the rolling up of the present-day Order; the fundamental changes affecting the structure of government; the weakening of the pillars of religion; the rise of dictatorships; the spread of tyranny; the fall of monarchies; the decline of ecclesiastical institutions; the increase of anarchy and chaos; the extension and consolidation of the Movement of the Left; the fanning into flame of the smouldering fire of racial strife; the development of infernal engines of war; the burning of cities; the contamination of the atmosphere of the earth—these stand out as the signs and portents that must either herald or accompany the retributive calamity which, as decreed by Him Who is the judge and Redeemer of mankind, must, sooner or later, afflict a society which, for the most part, and for over a century, has turned a deaf ear to the Voice of God's Messenger in this day—a calamity which must purge the human race of the dross of its age-long corruptions, and weld its component parts into a firmly knit world-embracing Fellowship... (Shoghi Effendi, Messages to the Bahá'í World, p.103)

Why do we have disasters?

We should try to understand why they occur.

Bahá'ís should not be diverted from the work of the Cause by the fear of catastrophes but should try to understand why they occur. The beloved Guardian, in innumerable places, has explained the reasons for these occurrences, and since they happen from time to time as explained above we should not be concerned as to when they occur. (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 15 April 1976, Lights of Guidance, p. 128, #427)

The actions of men.

In Akká, January 1908, this question was asked of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

"Are great calamities like this flood, the San Francisco earthquake, etc., caused by the wickedness of the people?"

To this He responded.

"Events like these happen because of the connection between the parts of the universe, for every small part has connection with every great part, and what affects one affects the other or all others. On account of this connection, the actions of man have effect. Whenever a promise is broken, it causes a commotion. For instance, suppose two nations have a disagreement. It is a difference in ideas only, and not a physical thing, not anything we can touch or see; yet this disagreement has a physical effect. It causes war, and thousands of men are cut in pieces. So, when man breaks his promise to God, in other words when he "violates the Covenant," the effect is physical, and calamities appear. (Daily Lessons

Received at Akká' by Helen Goodall & Ella Cooper. Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1979, pp. 21-22)

Disobedience to the Divine Commands:

According to the teaching of the Prophets, disease and all other forms of calamity are due to disobedience to the Divine Commands. Even disasters due to floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes are attributed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá indirectly to this cause. (Dr. J.E. Esslemont, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, 1980 edition, p. 95)

How long will it last?

The longer Bahá'u'lláh is withheld from healing the ills of the world, the more severe will be the crises:

... but as students of our Bahá'í writings it is clear that the longer the 'Divine Physician' (i.e. Bahá'u'lláh) is withheld from healing the ills of the world, the more severe will be the crises, and the more terrible the sufferings of the patient. (From a letter dated 21 November 1949, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, Lights of Guidance, p. 131, #439)

Will the Bahá'ís be protected?

In such a process of purgation, when all humanity is in the throes of dire suffering, the Bahá'ís should not hope to remain unaffected. Should we consider the beam that is in our own eye, we would immediately find that these sufferings are also meant for ourselves, who claimed to have attained. (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, Lights of Guidance, p. 133, #447)

We will be affected

Bewildered, agonized and helpless, [humanity] watches this great and mighty wind of God invading the remotest and fairest regions of the earth, rocking its foundations, deranging its equilibrium, sundering its nations, disrupting the homes of its peoples, wasting its cities, driving into exile its kings, pulling down its bulwarks, uprooting its institutions, dimming its light, and harrowing up the souls of its inhabitants. (Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day Is Come, p. 3)

How are we to respond?

Fear doesn't solve anything.

He does not feel that fear — for ourselves or for others — solves any problems, or enables us to better meet it if it ever does arise. We do not know what the future holds exactly, or how soon we may all pass through another ordeal worse than the

last one. (Shoghi Effendi cited in Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1979-1986, p. 452, par. 252.3a)

Our job is to labour serenely, confidently, and unremittingly to lend our share of assistance.

Ours rather the duty, however confused the scene, however dismal the present outlook, however circumscribed the resources we dispose of, to labor serenely, confidently, and unremittingly to lend our share of assistance, in whichever way circumstances may enable us, to the operation of the forces which, as marshaled and directed by Bahá'u'lláh, are leading humanity out of the valley of misery and shame to the loftiest summits of power and glory. (Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day Is Come, p.124)

Our duty is to actively teach receptive souls and help in the consolidation of the institutions.

The important aspect for the Bahá'ís is that their attitude and actions in response to the pending catastrophe be correct. We all know that the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is the world's only salvation, and that our duty is to actively teach receptive souls, and to do our utmost to help in the consolidation of the institutions of the Faith. Only in this way can we contribute our share of servitude at His Threshold, and we should then leave the rest to Him. (Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1979-1986, p. 452, par. 252.4)

We need to teach, and build community:

Bahá'ís need to be prepared both spiritually and materially to respond to disastrous events, and to assist others to respond, as well. Recent natural disasters demonstrated some basic issues that local communities should address which are generalized below. In a real sense, Bahá'ís simply need to do two things they have always done and are becoming increasingly skilled at doing through the cluster and institute processes: teach and build community. (USA- NSA, Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Chapter 14, p. 27)

How are we to look at these disasters?

There's a great wisdom behind them.

Although outwardly cataclysms are hard to understand and to endure, yet there lies a great wisdom behind them which appears later. All the visible material events are inter-related with invisible spiritual forces. The infinite phenomena of creation are as interdependent as the links of a chain.

When certain links become rusty, they are broken by unseen forces, to be replaced by newer and better ones. There are certain colossal events which transpire in the world of humanity which are required by the nature of the times. For example, the requirements of winter are cold, snow, hail and rain - but the birds and animals who live for six months, enjoying a short span of life, not

realizing the wisdom of winter, chide and make lament and are discontent, saying, "Why this awful frost? Why this hail and storm? Why not the balmy weather? Why not the eternal springtime? Why this injustice on the part of the creator? Why this suffering? What have we done to be meted out with this catastrophe?"

However, those souls who have lived many years and have acquired much experience and have weathered many severe winters realize that in order to enjoy the coming spring they must pass through the cold of winter. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Divine Philosophy, p. 116)

They are bounties, gifts and God's mercy and favor:

As to the calamities and afflictions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: These are not calamities, but bounties; they are not afflictions, but gifts; not hardships, but tranquillity; not trouble, but mercy—and we thank God for this great favor. (Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá v1, p. 128)

They are educative and remedial, so that we turn back to God.

The suffering that follows error is not vindictive, however, but educative and remedial. It is God's Voice proclaiming to man that he has strayed from the right path. If the suffering is terrible, it is only because the danger of wrongdoing is more terrible, for "the wages of sin is death."

Just as calamity is due to disobedience, so deliverance from calamity can be obtained only by obedience. There is no chance or uncertainty about the matter. Turning from God inevitably brings disaster, and turning to God as inevitably brings blessing. (Dr. J.E. Esslemont, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, 1980 edition, p. 95)

They are paving the way for the world's unification and ultimate redemption.

They should persevere in their task, undaunted by the rising tide of calamity and despair which afflicts the world, and which is mysteriously paving the way for its unification and ultimate redemption. (Shoghi Effendi, Dawn of a New Day, pp. 87-88)

They help us attribute more importance to spiritual matters:

You seem to complain about the calamities, that have befallen humanity. In the spiritual development of man a stage of purgation is indispensable, for it is while passing through it that the over-rated material needs are made to appear in their proper light. Unless society learns to attribute more importance to spiritual matters, it would never be fit to enter the golden era foretold by Bahá'u'lláh. The present calamities are parts of this process of purgation, through them alone will man learn his lesson. They are to teach the nations, that they have to view things internationally, they are to make the individual attribute more importance to his moral, than his material welfare. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, pp. 133-134, #447)

They help awaken us to the importance of our duty:

Such world crisis is necessary to awaken us to the importance of our duty and the carrying on of our task. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 134, #447)

They will help us do a better job teaching the Cause.

Suffering will increase our energy in setting before humanity the road to salvation, it will move us from our repose for we are far from doing our best in teaching the Cause and conveying the Message with which we have been entrusted. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 134, #447)

They promote the interests of the Faith in the world.

I am however assured and sustained by the conviction, never dimmed in my mind, that whatsoever comes to pass in the Cause of God, however disquieting in its immediate effects, is fraught with infinite Wisdom and tends ultimately to promote its interests in the world. Indeed, our experiences of the distant past, as well as of recent events, are too numerous and varied to permit of any misgiving or doubt as to the truth of this basic principle — a principle which throughout the vicissitudes of our sacred mission in this world we must never disregard or forget. (Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 27)

What can we do to prepare?

Move out of the cities:

Any intelligent person can understand from the experiences of the last world war, and keeping abreast of what modern science has developed in the way of weapons for any future war, that big cities all over the world are going to be in tremendous danger. This is what the Guardian has said to the pilgrims.

“Entirely aside from this, he has urged the Bahá'ís, for the sake of serving the Faith, to go out from these centers of intense materialism, where life nowadays is so hurried and grinding and, dispersing to towns and villages, carry the Message far and wide throughout the cities of the American Union. He strongly believes that the field outside the big Cities is more fertile, that the Bahá'ís in the end will be happier for having made this move, and that, in case of an outbreak of war, it stands to reason they will be safer, just the way any other person living in the country, or away from the big industrial areas, is safer.

“It is remarks such as these that the pilgrims have carried back in their notes. He sees no cause for alarm, but he certainly believes that the Bahá'ís should weigh these thoughts, and take action for the sake of spreading the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and for their own ultimate happiness as well. Indeed the two things go together.”

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, 20 June 1954, Lights of Guidance, p. 134, #448)

Don't waste time dwelling on what might befall us.

He has been told that some of the friends are disturbed over reports brought back by the pilgrims concerning the dangers facing America in the future whenever another world conflagration breaks out. He does not feel that the Bahá'ís should waste time dwelling on the dark side of things. (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, 20 June 1954, Lights of Guidance, p. 134, #448)

The House of Justice is telling us the same thing they told the Tanna community, after Cyclone Pam: concentrate every ounce of energy on the winning of the goals of the Five Year Plan:

In letters to other believers who have asked questions similar to yours, the House of Justice has emphasized that the friends should not waste their time and energies in fruitless speculations on this question. Rather, they should concentrate every ounce of energy on the winning of the goals of the Five Year Plan, which they have clearly before them, confident in the knowledge that whatever may happen in the world, however calamitous it may outwardly appear, will promote God's unalterable purpose for the unification of mankind. (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, June 2, 1976, Lights of Guidance, p. 128, #428)

What can we do in the middle of disaster?

Have perfect confidence in the abounding grace of God:

When calamity striketh, be ye patient and composed. However afflictive your sufferings may be, stay ye undisturbed, and with perfect confidence in the abounding grace of God, brave ye the tempest of tribulations and fiery ordeals. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 74)

Remember that we have the capacity to match any challenge that may confront us.

Having said all the foregoing, we pause to assure you of our full awareness of the great burdens you carry and of the ceaseless calls upon you to render services in the absence of adequate resources. Do not despair. Your capacity to respond will match any challenge that may confront you in these troubled times; you have only to act on principle. Your community's past has been glorious; its future is great beyond calculation. The divine promises to your community are certain; the blessings of Bahá'u'lláh are assured as you strive to fulfill His purpose. The wings of the beloved Master remain spread over you that you may succeed in discharging the tasks He has especially entrusted to your care. And our love ever surrounds you and your cherished community, growing stronger at every moment. Step forward then to meet the requirements of the hour with undiminished hope and confidence.

(Universal House of Justice, Rights and Responsibilities: The Complementary Roles of the Individual and Institutions, para. 49-50) https://bahai-library.com/uhj_nsa-us_1994-05-19

Use this prayer:

On the appearance of fearful natural events call ye to mind the might and majesty of your Lord, He Who heareth and seeth all, and say "Dominion is God's, the Lord of the seen and the unseen, the Lord of creation." (Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p 23)

When will the calamities end?

Humanity must suffer until it becomes spiritually awakened:

There is nothing in the teachings to tell us exactly how much longer the present turbulent state of the world is going to endure; but we do know that humanity must suffer until it becomes spiritually awakened, and that the Most Great Peace will come, as promised by Bahá'u'lláh." (From a letter dated 26 February 1946, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) https://bahai-library.com/pdf/compilations/compilation_calamities_sustainability_communities.pdf

It will end when the spirit of the Cause permeates the heart of man, and its universal teachings pull down the existing barriers:

The world with the various calamities that have befallen it, will be completely ravaged and its civilization demolished, if the Bahá'ís do not come to its help and imbue it with the spirit that Bahá'u'lláh has brought to the world. The economic factions, political parties, national hatreds, racial prejudices, and religious antagonisms, will continue to bring about devastating wars until the spirit of the Cause permeates the heart of man, and its universal teachings pull down the existing barriers. Let us be reminded of our duty by the misery we see around us, and arise for the prosecution of our noble duty." (From a letter dated 24 November 1931 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the American National Spiritual Assembly) https://bahai-library.com/itc_calamity_pilgrims_notes

Conclusion:

So here's the thing: in the midst of all of this chaos, when they had to rebuild everything, the Tanna Bahá'í community continued to fast, focused on finding ways to celebrate Naw-Rúz with the whole village (not just the Bahá'í community), and were totally obedient when the House told them to continue the core activities. They didn't say rebuild first – they said "keep going". And I think that's what we all must do. If the Bahá'ís get caught up in all the fear-mongering (no matter how real it may seem), we won't have any energy to focus on what's really important.

I really think we need to stay calm in the middle of the hurricane, knowing that (as the House of Justice said in paragraph 5 of the 2016 Riḍván Message).

Far from disheartening you, let the world's prejudices and hostilities be reminders of how urgently souls all around you need the healing balm that you alone can present to them.