

The Three Participants in the Divine Plan The Individual, the Community and the Institutions

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Introduction

At the start of the Four Year Plan in 1996, the Universal House of Justice drew attention to the necessity at this stage in the progress of the Cause and in the state of human society to significantly advance the process of entry by troops.¹ “This is to be achieved” the House of Justice wrote, “through marked progress in the activity and development of the individual believer, of the institutions and of the local community”², the three “intimately connected participants” in the “evolution of the new World Order.” The process of entry by troops strengthens as capacity is raised in each of these three participants in the civilization building process: “The continued development of this capacity will remain essential to the aim of advancing the process of entry by troops – the focus of the Baha’i world through the final years of the first century of the Formative Age”³ Central to our work, then, is nurturing of capacity in each of the three protagonists.

To understand the nature of the interacting processes that, in their totality, engender the expansion and consolidation of the Faith is vital to the successful execution of the Plan. In your efforts to further such understanding, you and your auxiliaries are encouraged to bear in mind a concept that lies at the foundation of the current global enterprise and, indeed, at the very heart of every stage of the Divine Plan, namely, that progress is achieved through the development of three participants—the individual, the institutions, and the community.⁴

These three participants, and the relationships forged among them, give rise to the character of society. In its 28 December 2010 message describing features of the present Five Year Plan, the House of Justice commented that:

Throughout human history, interactions among these three have been fraught with difficulties at every turn, with the individual clamouring for freedom, the institution demanding submission, and the community claiming precedence. Every society has defined, in one way or another, the relationships that bind the three, giving rise to periods of stability, interwoven with turmoil. Today, in this age of transition, as humanity struggles to attain its collective maturity, such relationships—nay, the very conception of the individual, of social institutions, and of the community—continue to be assailed by crises too numerous to count.⁵

And in a later message:

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

...relations among the three corresponding actors in the world at large--the citizen, the body politic, and the institutions of society--reflect the discord that characterizes humanity's turbulent stage of transition. Unwilling to act as interdependent parts of an organic whole, they are locked in a struggle for power which ultimately proves futile.⁶

The House of Justice has drawn our attention to how these three participants "are being shaped under the direct influence of His Revelation" and how "a new conception of each, appropriate for a humanity that has come of age, is emerging." "The relationships that bind them, too, are undergoing a profound transformation, bringing into the realm of existence civilization-building powers which can only be released through conformity with His decree"⁷ The House of Justice has described the relationships among the three participants as being "characterised by cooperation and reciprocity, manifestations of the interconnectedness that governs the universe."⁸

Clearly, then, the development of the individual, the community, and the institutions holds immense promise. But beyond this, we note with particular joy how the relationships binding these three are marked by such tender affection and mutual support....

In its Riḍván 2012 message, the House of Justice draws attention to the vision of the society "'Abdu'l-Bahá, in unnumbered Tablets and talks, depicts--where everyday interactions, as much as the relations of states, are shaped by consciousness of the oneness of humankind.'" It then points out that as the friends labor to advance a program of growth:

Relationships imbued with this consciousness are being cultivated by Bahá'ís and their friends in villages and neighbourhoods across the world; from them can be detected the pure fragrances of reciprocity and cooperation, of concord and love. Within such unassuming settings, a visible alternative to society's familiar strife is emerging. So it becomes apparent that the individual who wishes to exercise self-expression responsibly participates thoughtfully in consultation devoted to the common good and spurns the temptation to insist on personal opinion; a Bahá'í institution, appreciating the need for coordinated action channelled toward fruitful ends, aims not to control but to nurture and encourage; the community that is to take charge of its own development recognizes an invaluable asset in the unity afforded through whole-hearted engagement in the plans devised by the institutions. Under the influence of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, the relationships among these three are being endowed with new warmth, new life; in aggregate, they constitute a matrix within which a world spiritual civilization, bearing the imprint of divine inspiration, gradually matures.⁹

In your work as an assistant, you will be helping to advance one or more lines of action associated with one or more processes. Your efforts will be enhanced as you take into consideration in the cluster you are serving the development of each of the three participants and consider the "impact of the dynamism flowing from the interactions between them"¹⁰. It is, of course, not possible in this short workshop to explore in depth each of the participants and the relationships that bind them together. Yet, hopefully, this initial exploration can serve as a starting point for an ongoing conversation.

The Individual

In its messages, the Universal House of Justice has drawn attention to numerous characteristics of the individual emerging under the influence of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Chief among these, is a "vitality of faith." At the start of the present series of Plans, the House of Justice provided insight into how this vitality of faith is manifested in relation to the other participants in the work of civilization building:

The first calls for a vitality of the faith of each believer that is expressed through personal initiative and constancy in teaching the Cause to others, and through conscientious, individual effort to provide energy and resources to upbuild the community, to uphold the authority of its institutions, and to support local and regional plans and teaching projects.

Vitality of faith helps strengthen and shape individual initiative:

Shoghi Effendi underscored the absolute necessity of individual initiative and action. He explained that without the support of the individual, "at once wholehearted, continuous and generous," every measure and plan of his National Spiritual Assembly is "foredoomed to failure," the purpose of the Master's Divine Plan is "impeded"; furthermore, the sustaining strength of Bahá'u'lláh Himself "will be withheld from every and each individual who fails in the long run to arise and play his part." Hence, at the very crux of any progress to be made is the individual believer, who possesses the power of execution which only he can release through his own initiative and sustained action.¹¹

The House of Justice, at the start of the Four Year Plan, helped us identify some of the unique capacities of the individual:

The individual alone can exercise those capacities which include the ability to take initiative, to seize opportunities, to form friendships, to interact personally with others, to build relationships, to win the cooperation of others in common service to the Faith and society, and to convert into action the decisions made by consultative bodies.¹²

The Supreme Body went on to refer to some of the resources upon which the individual can draw to strengthen these capacities:

To optimize the use of these capacities, 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 reading and 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. In addition to these, the individual, having been given the duty to teach the Cause, is endowed with the capacity to attract particular blessings promised by Bahá'u'lláh.¹³

The duty to teach His Cause is worthy of special note, for the act of teaching is critical to the healthy development of the individual envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh. In your service as an assistant, no matter what your specific area of focus, your work will involve helping more and more individuals arise to obey this law.

"Whoso openeth his lips in this Day," the Blessed Beauty asserts, "and maketh mention of the name of his Lord, the hosts of Divine inspiration shall descend upon him from the heaven of My name, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. On him shall also descend the Concourse on high, each bearing aloft a chalice of pure light."¹⁴

But beyond the necessity of responding to the call of the institutions, the individual is charged by Bahá'u'lláh Himself with the sacred duty of teaching His Cause, described by Him as the "most meritorious of all deeds." So long as there are souls in need of enlightenment, this duty must surely remain the constant occupation of every believer. In its fulfilment, the individual is directly responsible to Bahá'u'lláh.¹⁵

Regarding the sense of inadequacy that sometimes hampers individual initiative, a letter written on his behalf conveys the Guardian's advice: "Chief among these, you mention the lack of courage and of initiative on the part of the believers, and a feeling of inferiority which prevents them from addressing the public. It is precisely these weaknesses that he wishes the friends to overcome, for these do not only paralyse their efforts but actually serve to quench the flame of faith in their hearts. Not until all the friends come to realize that every one of them is able, in his own measure, to deliver the Message, can they ever hope to reach the goal that has been set before them by a loving and wise Master.... Everyone is a potential teacher. He has only to use what God has given him and thus prove that he is faithful to his trust."¹⁶

The individual is not alone as he or she arises to teach and to carry out the many other services dedicated to building the world envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh. He or she is aided by the global Plan provided by the Universal House of Justice:

As translated into programmes and projects by national and local institutions, the Plan, among other things, gives direction, identifies goals, stimulates effort, provides a variety of needed facilities and materials to benefit the work of teachers and administrators. This is of course necessary for the proper functioning of the community, but is of no consequence unless its individual members respond through active participation. In so responding, each individual, too, must make a conscious decision as to what he or she will do to serve the Plan, and as to how, where and when to do it. This determination enables the individual to check the progress of his actions and, if necessary, to modify the steps being taken. Becoming accustomed to such a procedure of systematic striving lends meaning and fulfilment to the life of any Bahá'í.¹⁷

One of the responsibilities of the institutions is to encourage and support the individual and to provide a system of education aimed at assisting each person; such a system is provided for by the training institute. The institute process has been gaining strength now for over 15 years and institutes everywhere are developing capacity to train and mobilize contingents of individuals to carry out the many tasks of expansion and consolidation; much depends on its continued strengthening. The institute in your region will be of great assistance to you as all work to strengthen individual initiative and collective volition.

With the work of institutes growing in strength, attention has now to be given everywhere to systematizing teaching efforts. In the document "The Institution of the Counsellors" just issued, we emphasize the role that the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants play in helping the friends to meet this challenge, both at the level of individual initiative and of collective volition. As individuals progress through institute courses, they deepen their knowledge of the Faith, gain insights, and acquire skills of service. Some of the courses devoted to teaching will no doubt treat the subject in general terms. Others will focus on various means of sharing Bahá'u'lláh's message with specific segments of society, incorporating the wisdom gleaned from the teaching endeavours of the friends. This combined process of action, learning and training will endow communities with an ever-increasing number of capable and eager teachers of the Cause.

Yet,

Training alone, of course, does not necessarily lead to an upsurge in teaching activity. In every avenue of service, the friends need sustained encouragement. Our expectation is that the Auxiliary Board members, together with their assistants, will give special thought to how individual initiative can be cultivated, particularly as it relates to teaching. When training and encouragement are effective, a culture of growth is nourished in which the believers see their duty to teach as a natural consequence of having accepted Bahá'u'lláh.¹⁸

In discussing the work of the training institute, the House of Justice gave further insight into the nature of the individuals emerging under the influence of the Revelation. "So enkindled do their hearts become with the fire of the love of God that whoever approaches them feels its warmth" They "strive to be channels of the spirit, pure of heart, selfless and humble, possessing certitude and the courage that stems from reliance on God." The House of Justice has drawn attention to the "growing sense of initiative and resourcefulness, as well as the courage and audacity, that have come to characterize believers everywhere," and referred to "qualities such as consecration, zeal, confidence and tenacity attest to the enhanced vitality of their faith."¹⁹

In the following excerpt from its message of 27 December 2005, the House of Justice provides insight into the approach the institute takes to raising capacity and summarizes the contribution the institute is making:

Developments since then have served only to demonstrate further the efficacy of a sequence of courses that seeks to build capacity for service by concentrating on the

application of the spiritual insights gained through profound study of the Writings. Participants are exposed to a body of knowledge that fosters a set of related habits, attitudes and qualities and are assisted in sharpening certain skills and abilities needed to carry out acts of service. Discussions that revolve around the Creative Word, in the serious and uplifting atmosphere of a study circle, raise the level of consciousness about one's duties to the Cause and create an awareness of the joy one derives from teaching the Faith and serving its interests. The spiritual context in which specific deeds are addressed endows them with significance. Confidence is patiently built as the friends engage in progressively more complex and demanding acts of service. Yet, above all, it is reliance on God that sustains them in their endeavours. How abundant the accounts of believers who enter the teaching field with trepidation only to find themselves bolstered by confirmations on all sides. Seeing the possibilities and opportunities before them with new eyes, they witness firsthand the power of Divine assistance, as they strive to put into practice what they are learning and achieve results far exceeding their expectations. That the spirit of faith born out of intimate contact with the Word of God has such an effect on souls is by no means a new phenomenon. What is heartening is that the institute process is helping such large numbers experience the transforming potency of the Faith. To extend this edifying influence to hundreds of thousands more should be the object of intense effort over the next five years.

A discernible outcome of the emphasis on capacity building has been a steady increase in the exercise of individual initiative-initiative that is disciplined by an understanding of the requirements of systematic action in advancing the process of entry by troops. Endeavours are pursued in a humble posture of learning within the framework defined by the Plan. As a result, activities that give expression to a diversity of talents become harmonized into one forward movement, and the stagnation caused by endless debate over personal preferences about approach is avoided. Commitment to long-term action grows, putting in context the initiatives undertaken by the believers at any particular moment.

Nowhere has the rise in individual initiative been more clearly demonstrated than in the field of teaching. Whether in the form of firesides or study circles, individual efforts to teach the Faith are indisputably on the increase. Equipped with skills and methods, effective and accessible to all, and encouraged by the response their actions elicit, the believers are entering into closer association with people of many walks of life, engaging them in earnest conversation on themes of spiritual import. With greater and greater spiritual perception, they are able to sense receptivity and recognize thirst for the vivifying waters of Bahá'u'lláh's message. From among all those they encounter-parents of neighbourhood children, peers at school, colleagues at work, casual acquaintances-they seek out souls with whom they can share a portion of that which He has so graciously bestowed on humanity. Increased experience enables them to adapt their presentation to the seeker's needs, employing direct teaching methods that draw on the Writings to offer the message in a manner both forthcoming and inviting.²⁰

As with each of the participants in the Divine Plan, the institute will need to continue to develop capacity to carry out the tasks assigned to it. In your work as an assistant, you will want to strive to find ways to support and encourage all those serving the institute, from coordinators, to tutors, animators and children's class teachers. Already the institute has made a powerful contribution to advancing the Cause in the region and as its capacity increases it promises to lend much greater impetus yet. The following passage helps us think about the impact the institute is having on all three participants:

Here again, it is for the Auxiliary Board members and other relevant institutions and agencies, such as the Regional Council and institute board, to ensure that administrative structures being forged in the cluster take on the requisite characteristics. Specifically, the sequence of courses that we have recommended for use by institutes everywhere, which is facilitating so effectively the process of transformation under way, is designed to create an environment conducive at once to universal participation and to mutual support and assistance. The nature of relationships among individuals in this environment, all of whom consider themselves as treading a common path of service, was explained briefly in our *Riḍván* message.²¹

The two passages below will conclude this brief look at the development of the individual. The first gives further insight into the properties of the individual emerging under the influence of the Revelation. The second discusses the relationships among individuals working together.

And in the nearly eighty-thousand participants who attended the conferences we saw the emergence on the historical scene of an individual believer supremely confident in the efficacy of the Plan's methods and instruments and remarkably deft at wielding them. Each and every soul of this mighty sea stood as testimony to the transforming potency of the Faith. Each and every one was evidence of Baha'u'llah's promise to assist all those who arise with detachment and sincerity to serve Him. Each and every one offered a glimpse of that race of beings, consecrated and courageous, pure and sanctified, destined to evolve over generations under the direct influence of Baha'u'llah's Revelation. In them we saw the first signs of the fulfilment of our hope expressed at the outset of the Plan that the edifying influence of the Faith would be extended to hundreds of thousands through the institute process.²²

In relationships among the friends, then, this development in culture finds expression in the quality of their interactions. Learning as a mode of operation requires that all assume a posture of humility, a condition in which one becomes forgetful of self, placing complete trust in God, reliant on His all-sustaining power and confident in His unfailing assistance, knowing that He, and He alone, can change the gnat into an eagle, the drop into a boundless sea. And in such a state souls labour together ceaselessly, delighting not so much in their own accomplishments but in the progress and services of others. So it is that their

thoughts are centred at all times on helping one another scale the heights of service to His Cause and soar in the heaven of His knowledge. This is what we see in the present pattern of activity unfolding across the globe, propagated by young and old, by veteran and newly enrolled, working side by side.²³

The Community

At the start of the Four Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice offered helpful insights into the nature of the community:

It is of course more than the sum of its membership; 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; it is a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress.²⁴

A community, the House of Justice explained, “assumes its own character and identity as it grows in size.”²⁵ Indeed, a central and critical aspect of the development of the capacity of the community is growth, for only as a community increases in size do many of its latent powers become manifest. This was a point the House of Justice made plainly in its 28 December 2010 message:

What should be apparent is that, if the Administrative Order is to serve as a pattern for future society, then the community within which it is developing must not only acquire capacity to address increasingly complex material and spiritual requirements but also become larger and larger in size. How could it be otherwise? A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society. That the worldwide Bahá’í community has managed to avert the dangers of complacency is a source of abiding joy to us. Indeed, the community has well in hand its expansion and consolidation. Yet, to administer the affairs of teeming numbers in villages and cities around the globe—to raise aloft the standard of Bahá’u’lláh’s World Order for all to see—is still a distant goal.²⁶

Drawing attention to the interactions of the three participants, the House of Justice advised that the flourishing of the community would “demand a significant enhancement in the patterns of behavior by which the collective expression of the virtues of the individual members and the functioning of the Spiritual Assembly is manifest in the unity and fellowship of the community and the dynamism of its activity and growth.”²⁷ At that time, the House of Justice described some of the characteristics of a vibrant community to emerge under the influence of the Revelation: it would be “characterized by tolerance and love and guided by a strong sense of purpose and collective will, environments in which the

capacities of all components -- men, women, youth and children -- are developed and their powers multiplied in unified action."²⁸

In 2005, after 10 years of endeavor, the House of Justice reflected that "the enhanced vitality that distinguishes the life of the individual believer is equally evident in Bahá'í community life" but noted that the "the degree to which this vitality manifests itself depends, of course, on the stage of development of the cluster." The House of Justice went on to give the following description of the community emerging as the friends strive to apply the guidance of the Plan and establish vibrant programs of growth:

On several occasions we have made reference to the coherence that is brought to the process of growth through the establishment of study circles, devotional meetings and children's classes. The steady multiplication of core activities, propelled by the training institute, creates a sustainable pattern of expansion and consolidation that is at once structured and organic. As seekers join these activities and declare their faith, individual and collective teaching endeavours gather momentum. Through the effort made to ensure that a percentage of the new believers enrol in the institute courses, the pool of human resources required to carry out the work of the Faith swells. When strenuously pursued in a cluster, all of this activity eventually brings about conditions favourable for launching an intensive programme of growth.

What a close examination of clusters at this threshold confirms is that the coherence thus achieved extends to various aspects of community life. The study and application of the teachings become a pervasive habit, and the spirit of communal worship generated by devotional meetings begins to permeate the community's collective endeavours. A graceful integration of the arts into diverse activities enhances the surge of energy that mobilizes the believers. Classes for the spiritual education of children and junior youth serve to strengthen the roots of the Faith in the local population. Even an act of service as simple as visiting the home of a new believer, whether in a village in the Pacific Islands or in a vast metropolitan area like London, reinforces ties of fellowship that bind the members of the community Together. Conceived as a means for exposing believers to the fundamentals of the Faith, "home visits" are giving rise to an array of deepening efforts, both individual and collective, in which the friends are delving into the Writings and exploring their implications for their lives.²⁹

As the previous Five Year Plan drew to a close, many communities began to understand more fully that the work of building vibrant communities achieving spiritual and material progress would need to be shouldered more and more individuals, many of whom would come from the wider community, "by men and women eager to improve material and spiritual conditions in their surroundings." "A rhythm of community life, the House of Justice explained, "should gradually emerge, then, commensurate with the capacity of an expanding nucleus of individuals committed to Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a new World Order."³⁰

As a program of growth develops, the above pattern of action grows in scope and strengthens and “an emergent community spirit begins to exert its influence on the course of events.”³¹ “The spiritual foundations of the community are fortified in this way, the level of collective discourse is raised, social relations among the friends take on new meaning, and a sense of common purpose inspires their interactions.”³² The House of Justice explained that within the context of a program of growth, whether activities are scattered across the cluster or concentrated in one village or neighbourhood, a sense of common purpose characterizes the endeavours of the friends.

“As communities increase in size and gain experience, they refine their ability to read their immediate reality, analyze their possibilities and apply judiciously the methods and instruments of the Five Year Plan.”³³ This implies that, as a community grows, effort must be made to ensure capacity for learning in the community as a whole is increasing. “As in the case of the individual, learning is the hallmark of this phase of the development of the community. You and your auxiliaries are urged to exert every effort in the coming years to ensure that, in cluster after cluster, learning is woven into the fabric of decision-making.”³⁴

As you will recall, the 2010 Ridván message made reference to the significant strengthening perceived in the Bahá'í community of a culture in which learning is the mode of operation, a mode that fosters the informed participation of more and more people in a united effort to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to the construction of a divine civilization. This advance in culture, it is clear, affects not only the nature of relations among individuals but also the conduct of administrative affairs.³⁵

As a community learns to read its reality and to learn its capacity to plan for its growth and well-being increases. Over the past decade, we have seen the strengthening of numerous spaces for reflection and collective decision-making within the community, spaces in which the community gathers to reflect, analyze, and plan.

Not only does this advance in culture influence relations among individuals, but its effects can also be felt in the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith. As learning has come to distinguish the community's mode of operation, certain aspects of decision making related to expansion and consolidation have been assigned to the body of the believers, enabling planning and implementation to become more responsive to circumstances on the ground. Specifically, a space has been created, in the agency of the reflection meeting, for those engaged in activities at the cluster level to assemble from time to time in order to reach consensus on the current status of their situation, in light of experience and guidance from the institutions, and to determine their immediate steps forward. A similar space is opened by the institute, which makes provision for those serving as tutors, children's class teachers, and animators of junior youth groups in a cluster to meet severally and consult on their experience. Intimately connected to this grassroots consultative process are the agencies of the training institute and the Area Teaching Committee, together with the Auxiliary Board members, whose joint interactions provide another space in which decisions pertaining to growth are taken, in this case with a higher degree of formality. The workings of this cluster-

level system, born of exigencies, point to an important characteristic of Bahá'í administration: Even as a living organism, it has coded within it the capacity to accommodate higher and higher degrees of complexity, in terms of structures and processes, relationships and activities, as it evolves under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.³⁶

In its messages, the House of Justice draws attention to the "enhancement the spiritual life of Bahá'í communities" and comments that "this new spiritual vitality accounts for the growing participation of people of divers backgrounds" in core activities, participation that often leads to their recognition of Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for this Day.³⁷ By 2009, following the regional conferences, the House of Justice made the following observations to the Bahá'ís of the world:

What a purposeful and confident community it was that celebrated its accomplishments at the midway point of the current Plan in forty-one regional conferences across the globe! What an extraordinary contrast did its coherence and energy provide to the bewilderment and confusion of a world caught in a spiral of crisis! This, indeed, was the community of the blissful to which the Guardian had referred. This was a community aware of the vast potentialities with which it has been endowed and conscious of the role it is destined to play in rebuilding a broken world. This was a community in the ascendant, subject to severe repression in one part of the globe, yet rising up undeterred and undismayed as a united whole and strengthening its capacity to achieve Baha'u'llah's purpose to liberate humankind from the yoke of the most grievous oppression.³⁸

The Institutions

In its 31 December 1995 message, the Universal House of Justice stated that local and national institutions needed to "evolve more rapidly into a proper exercise of their responsibilities as channels of guidance, planners of the teaching work, developers of human resources, builders of communities, and loving shepherds of the multitudes." These descriptions, offered nearly 14 years ago, give us insight into the capacities and responsibilities of the institutions. In exploring this need for an evolution in the functioning of institutions, the House of Justice provided an insight into the relationship between the three participants in civilization building:

The evolution of local and national Bahá'í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members as well as on the part of those who elect them, for the Bahá'í community is engaged in an immense historical process that is entering a critical stage. 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.³⁹

The House of Justice then provided further insights into the capacities of this participant in the Divine Plan:

They can realize these prospects through increasing the ability of their members to take counsel together in accordance with the principles of the Faith and to consult with the friends under their jurisdiction, through fostering the spirit of service, through spontaneously collaborating with the Continental Counsellors and their auxiliaries, and through cultivating their external relations. Particularly must the progress in the evolution of the institutions be manifest in the multiplication of localities in which the functioning of the Spiritual Assembly enhances the individual believers' capacity to serve the Cause and fosters unified action. In sum, the maturity of the Spiritual Assembly must be measured not only by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning, but also by the continuity of the growth of Bahá'í membership, the effectiveness of the interaction between the Assembly and the members of its community, the quality of the spiritual and social life of the community, and the overall sense of vitality of a community in the process of dynamic, ever-advancing development.⁴⁰

The House of Justice went on to describe a critical and inescapable function of the institutions, to establish and support a vibrant educational process.

...to organize and maintain a process of developing human resources whereby Baha'is, new and veteran alike, can acquire the knowledge and capacity to sustain a continuous expansion and consolidation of the community. The establishment of training institutes is critical to such effort, since they are centres through which large numbers of individuals can acquire and improve their ability to teach and administer the Faith. Their existence underscores the importance of knowledge of the Faith as a source of power for invigorating the life of the Bahá'í community and of the individuals who compose it.⁴¹

In 2005, the House of Justice offered further insight into the capacities and functioning of the institutions of the Cause, noting that "none of the accomplishments of the individual or the community could be sustained without the guidance, encouragement and support of the third participant in the Plan--the institutions of the Faith."⁴²

It is heartening to see to what extent the institutions are promoting individual initiative, channelling energies into the teaching field, underscoring the value of systematic action, fostering the spiritual life of the community and nurturing a welcoming environment. In helping the community to remain focused on the aim of the Plan, they are learning in practical terms what it means to maintain unity of vision among the friends, to put mechanisms in place that facilitate their endeavours and to allocate resources in accordance with priorities wisely set.⁴³

In later guidance, reflecting on the increasing size and scope of programs of growth -- some of which have reached many thousands of regular participants -- the House of Justice went on to state that one of the signs of the maturation of the institutions is their ability to manage the growing complexity that accompanies increasing numbers of people actively participating in the activities of the community. "That the institutions of the Faith at all levels--from the local and the regional, to the national and the continental--are able to

manage such growing complexity with greater and greater dexterity is both a sign and a necessity of their steady maturation."⁴⁴ In this context, when thinking of the institutions we are referring to the Spiritual Assemblies, the Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members but also to the Regional Council's, Institute Boards, the many coordinators at the regional and cluster level, and the assistants.

Before turning attention to the specific work of the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, it will be helpful to reflect on the following guidance of the House of Justice regarding those called upon to serve as members of institutions, guidance that merits careful study and reflection:

It is our earnest hope that, in your efforts over the next Plan to promote the sound and harmonious development of Bahá'í administration at all levels, from the local to the national, you will do your utmost to help the friends carry out their functions in the context of the organic process of growth gathering momentum across the globe. The realization of this hope will hinge, to a large extent, on the degree to which those who have been called upon to render such service—whether elected to a Spiritual Assembly or named to one of its agencies, whether designated an institute coordinator or appointed one of your deputies—recognize the great privilege that is theirs and understand the boundaries which this privilege establishes for them.

Service on the institutions and agencies of the Faith is indeed a tremendous privilege, but not one that is sought by the individual; it is a duty and responsibility to which he or she may be called at any given time. It is understandable, of course, that all those involved in Bahá'í administration would rightly feel they have been invested with a singular honour in forming part, in whatever way, of a structure designed to be a channel through which the spirit of the Cause flows. Yet they should not imagine that such service entitles them to operate on the periphery of the learning process that is everywhere gaining strength, exempt from its inherent requirements. Nor should it be supposed that membership on administrative bodies provides an opportunity to promote one's own understanding of what is recorded in the Sacred Text and how the teachings should be applied, steering the community in whatever direction personal preferences dictate. Referring to members of Spiritual Assemblies, the Guardian wrote that they "must disregard utterly their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and inclinations, and concentrate their minds upon those measures that will conduce to the welfare and happiness of the Bahá'í Community and promote the common weal." Bahá'í institutions do exercise authority to guide the friends, and exert moral, spiritual and intellectual influence on the lives of individuals and communities. However, such functions are to be performed with the realization that an ethos of loving service pervades Bahá'í institutional identity. Qualifying authority and influence in this manner implies sacrifice on the part of those entrusted to administer the affairs of the Faith. Does not 'Abdu'l-Bahá tell us that "when a lump of iron is cast into the forge, its ferrous qualities of blackness, coldness and solidity, which symbolize the attributes of the human world, are concealed and disappear, while the fire's distinctive qualities of redness, heat and fluidity, which symbolize the virtues of the Kingdom, become

visibly apparent in it." As He averred, "ye must in this matter—that is, the serving of humankind—lay down your very lives, and as ye yield yourselves, rejoice."⁴⁵

To conclude this discussion of the institutions, below is an excerpt regarding the work of the Auxiliary Board members, and by extension their assistants, in the present Plan.

All of the institutions and agencies promoting the aim of the current series of global Plans need to exercise the measure of agility that the birth of such a dynamic process demands—but none more so than the Auxiliary Board members. To help the friends visualize this first important milestone, and the multiplicity of ways in which it can be reached, is central to the functioning of every Auxiliary Board member and an increasing number of his or her assistants. In this, as in all their work, they must display breadth of vision and clarity of thought, flexibility and resourcefulness. They should stand shoulder to shoulder with the friends, supporting them through their struggles and partaking in their joys. Some of these friends will quickly move to the forefront of activity, while others will step forward more tentatively; yet all require support and encouragement, offered not in the abstract but on the basis of that intimate knowledge which is only acquired by working side by side in the field of service. Faith in the capacity of every individual who shows a desire to serve will prove essential to the efforts of those who are to elicit from the believers wholehearted participation in the Plan. Unqualified love free of paternalism will be indispensable if they are to help turn hesitation into courage born of trust in God and transform a yearning for excitement into a commitment to long-term action. Calm determination will be vital as they strive to demonstrate how stumbling blocks can be made stepping stones for progress. And a readiness to listen, with heightened spiritual perception, will be invaluable in identifying obstacles that may prevent some of the friends from appreciating the imperative of unified action.

To this end, you and your auxiliaries will need to cultivate an atmosphere that encourages the friends to be methodical but not rigid, creative but not haphazard, decisive but not hasty, careful but not controlling, recognizing that, in the final analysis, it is not technique but unity of thought, consistent action, and dedication to learning which will bring about progress.⁴⁶

Further Reflection

Strengthening our understanding of the nature of each of the three participants in the Divine Plan and the relationships that inseparably bind them helps us to work in a clear and methodical manner in order to strengthen the various lines of action. It may be worth pointing out at this juncture that each of the three participants works to build capacity in the other two; there are, after all, only three participants in all. Each helps the other.

In every area of endeavor – establishing classes for the spiritual education of children, organizing a teaching project, establishing a small project of social and economic development – it is the development of capacity in each of the protagonists and the character and strength of the relationships among them that enable progress. To illustrate

this, below are several excerpts from recent guidance from the Universal House of Justice related to the capacity of the individual to carry out the laws of the Faith and live according to its standards. In this guidance, the House of Justice describes the role of each of the three protagonists.

As the letter makes clear, the issues involved can best be considered in light of the relationships that the Administrative Order seeks to forge among the individual, the institutions, and the community. While responsibility for adhering to the Bahá'í standard rests primarily on the individual believer, it is incumbent upon the institutions of the Faith to support the individual, largely through educational endeavours, and to foster a pattern of community life that is conducive to the spiritual upliftment of its members. It is understood, of course, that in the assumption of these and other sacred duties, Bahá'í institutions may find it necessary at times to take specific action as a means of protecting the community and the integrity of Bahá'í law.

In discharging their educational responsibilities towards the body of the believers, the institutions of the Faith need to bear in mind how little is accomplished when their efforts are reduced to repeated admonitions or to dogmatic instruction in proper conduct. Rather should their aim be to raise consciousness and to increase understanding. Theirs is not the duty to pry into personal lives or to impose Bahá'í law on the individual but to create an environment in which the friends eagerly arise to fulfil their obligations as followers of Bahá'u'lláh, to uphold His law, and to align their lives with His teachings. The efforts of the institutions will bear fruit to the extent that the friends, especially those of the younger generation, find themselves immersed in the activities of a vibrant and growing community and feel confirmed in the mission with which Bahá'u'lláh has entrusted them.

One of the most effective instruments at your disposal in this respect is the training institute. It strives to engage the individual in an educational process in which virtuous conduct and self-discipline are developed in the context of service, fostering a coherent and joyful pattern of life that weaves together study, worship, teaching, community building and, in general, involvement in other processes that seek to transform society. At the heart of the educational process is contact with the Word of God, whose power sustains every individual's attempts to purify his or her heart and to walk a path of service with "the feet of detachment". The Guardian encouraged young believers to learn through "active, whole-hearted and continued participation" in community activities. Addressed to one young believer, a letter written on his behalf explained: "Bahá'í community life provides you with an indispensable laboratory, where you can translate into living and constructive action the principles which you imbibe from the Teachings." "By becoming a real part of that living organism", the letter went on, "you can catch the real spirit which runs throughout the Bahá'í Teachings." Such wholehearted participation in the work of the Faith provides an invaluable context for the exertion made by young and old alike to align their lives with Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. This is not to say that individuals will not err from time to time, perhaps on occasion in serious ways. Yet,

when the desire to uphold the Bahá'í standard is nurtured through service to the common weal in an environment of unflinching love and warm encouragement, the friends will not feel, in the face of such difficulty, that they have no other recourse but to withdraw from community activity out of a sense of shame or, worse, to cover the challenges they are experiencing with the veneer of propriety, living a life in which public words do not conform to private deeds.

Clearly, then, individual moral development needs to be addressed in concert with efforts to enhance the capacities of the community and its institutions. The enclosed letter describes some of the characteristics of the community life that Bahá'ís, guided by the institutions, are striving to create. The environment sought is, at the most fundamental level, one of love and support, in which the believers, all endeavouring to achieve the Bahá'í standard in their personal conduct, show patience and respect to each other and, when needed, receive wise counsel and ready assistance. Gossip and backbiting have no place in the Bahá'í community; nor do judgemental attitudes and self-righteousness.

What is essential for every National Assembly to acknowledge in this connection is that, if mutual love and support within the community, important as it is, becomes the only focus, a stagnant environment engendered by an insular mentality will develop. The worldwide Bahá'í community is charged with an historic mission. It must acquire capacity to address increasingly complex spiritual and material requirements as it becomes larger and larger in size. The 28 December 2010 message of the House of Justice indicated: "A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society." The current series of global Plans sets out provisions for gradually building individual and collective capacity for the community's mission. The institutions of a Bahá'í community that has been allowed to become complacent will find it difficult to protect the younger members from the forces of gross materialism, with the accompanying moral decay, that are assailing society. This, then, points to the nature of the capacity-building process in which every Bahá'í institution must energetically engage.⁴⁷

And in a separate letter of the same date written to a few believers, the House of Justice stated further:

What the friends need to remember in this respect is that, in their efforts to achieve personal growth and to uphold Bahá'í ideals, they are not isolated individuals, withstanding alone the onslaught of the forces of moral decay operating in society. They are members of a purposeful community, global in scope, pursuing a bold spiritual mission—working to establish a pattern of activity and administrative structures suited to a humanity entering its age of maturity. Giving shape to the community's efforts is a framework for action defined by the global Plans of the

Faith. This framework promotes the transformation of the individual in conjunction with social transformation, as two inseparable processes. Specifically, the courses of the institute are intended to set the individual on a path in which qualities and attitudes, skills and abilities, are gradually acquired through service—service intended to quell the insistent self, helping to lift the individual out of its confines and placing him or her in a dynamic process of community building.

In this context, then, every individual finds himself or herself immersed in a community that serves increasingly as an environment conducive to the cultivation of those attributes that are to distinguish a Bahá'í life—an environment in which a spirit of unity animates one and all; in which the ties of fellowship bind them; in which mistakes are treated with tolerance and fear of failure is diminished; in which criticism of others is avoided and backbiting and gossip give way to mutual support and encouragement; in which young and old work shoulder to shoulder, studying the Creative Word together and accompanying one another in their efforts to serve; in which children are reared through an educational process that strives to sharpen their spiritual faculties and imbue them with the spirit of the Faith; in which young people are helped to detect the false messages spread by society, recognize its fruitless preoccupations, and resist its pressures, directing their energies instead towards its betterment. The institutions of the Faith, for their part, strive to ensure that such an environment is fostered. They do not pry into the personal lives of individuals. Nor are they vindictive and judgemental, eager to punish those who fall short of the Bahá'í standard. Except in extreme cases of blatant and flagrant disregard for the law that could potentially harm the Cause and may require them to administer sanctions, their attention is focused on encouragement, assistance, counsel, and education.

Such an environment creates a very different set of dynamics than the one found particularly in the highly individualistic societies of today. Marriage, for instance, need not be long delayed, as it is in some parts of the world where the maturity and responsibilities of adulthood are deferred in pursuit of the licence that a socially prolonged adolescence grants. For the individual, who both contributes to and draws strength from the environment that is the Bahá'í community, adhering to Bahá'í law is endowed with meaning and, though perhaps still difficult on occasion, does not pose the insurmountable challenge that you fear it will.⁴⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ From a message dated 31 December 1995 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world

² Ibid

³ From a message dated 27 December 2005 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

⁴ From a message dated 28 December 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

⁵ Ibid

⁶ From a message dated Riqdán 2012 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world

⁷ From a message dated 28 December 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

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- ⁸ Ibid
- ⁹ From a message dated Riḍván 2012 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ¹⁰ From a message dated Riḍván 2008 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ¹¹ From a message dated Riḍván 1996 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ¹² Ibid
- ¹³ Ibid
- ¹⁴ Ibid
- ¹⁵ From a message dated Riḍván 1998 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ¹⁶ From a message dated Riḍván 1996 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ¹⁷ From a message dated Riḍván 1998 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ¹⁸ From a message dated Riḍván 2000 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ¹⁹ From a message dated 27 December 2005 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
- ²⁰ Ibid
- ²¹ From a message dated 28 December 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
- ²² From a message dated Riḍván 2009 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ²³ From a message dated Riḍván 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ²⁴ From a message dated Riḍván 2006 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ²⁵ From a message dated 31 December 1995 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ²⁶ From a message dated Riḍván 1996 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ²⁷ From a message dated 31 December 1995 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ²⁸ From a message dated 26 December 1995 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
- ²⁹ From a message dated 27 December 2005 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
- ³⁰ From a message dated 28 December 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
- ³¹ From a message dated Riḍván 2013 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ³² From a message dated 27 December 2005 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
- ³³ From a message dated Riḍván 2013 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ³⁴ From a message dated 27 December 2005 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
- ³⁵ From a letter dated 13 April 2013 written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly
- ³⁶ From a message dated Riḍván 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ³⁷ From a message dated Riḍván 2005 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ³⁸ From a message dated Riḍván 2009 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ³⁹ From a message dated 21 December 2005 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ⁴⁰ From a message dated Riḍván 1996 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ⁴¹ From a message dated Riḍván 1998 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
- ⁴² From a message dated 27 December 2005 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
- ⁴³ Ibid
- ⁴⁴ From a message dated 28 December 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
- ⁴⁵ Ibid
- ⁴⁶ Ibid
- ⁴⁷ From a letter dated 19 April 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly
- ⁴⁸ From a letter dated 19 April 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to individual believers