

Reconsidering the Civil Rights Era in the Footsteps of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá¹

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Abstract

This article reviews major principles concerning racial prejudice that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained during His 1912 visit to North America. Three of the principles that emerged from talks He gave during that trip were the fallacy of racial prejudice, the need to judge people by their moral character rather than their race, and the mutual responsibilities of different races toward each other. The article describes how these principles helped the author research and then write a combination history and memoir of race relations and desegregation in South Carolina during the civil rights era. The author comments on the difficult task of writing academic material that caters to a secular audience but draws on Bahá’í insights, and then explains attempts to do so in this research project.

Résumé

Le présent article passe en revue des principes essentiels en matière de préjugés raciaux que ‘Abdu’l-Bahá a explicités lors de sa visite de 1912 en Amérique du Nord. Trois des principes ressortant des conférences qu’il a données au cours de

ce voyage sont le caractère erroné des préjugés raciaux, la nécessité de juger les gens sur leur caractère moral plutôt que sur leur race, et les responsabilités des différentes races les unes envers les autres. L’auteure décrit comment ces principes l’ont aidée dans ses recherches et dans la rédaction d’un ouvrage alliant histoire et mémoires sur les relations raciales et la déségrégation en Caroline du Sud à l’époque des droits civiques. Soulignant la difficulté d’écrire un ouvrage universitaire qui s’adresse à un public laïc tout en s’inspirant d’idées bahá’íes, elle explique comment elle a cherché à y parvenir dans le cadre de son projet de recherche.

Resumen

Este artículo revisa importantes principios relacionados con prejuicio racial explicados por ‘Abdu’l-Bahá durante su visita a Norte América el 1912. Tres de los principios que emergieron de los discursos que El dió durante ese viaje fueron la falacia del prejuicio racial, la necesidad de juzgar a la gente por su caracter moral y no por su raza, y las responsabilidades mutuas de las diferentes razas, una hacia otra. El artículo describe como estos principios ayudaron a la autora investigar y despues escribir una historia de unión y memorias de las relaciones raciales y la desegregación en Carolina del Sur durante la era de derechos civiles. La autora comenta sobre la dificil tarea de escribir material académico dirigido a una adudicnca laica pero se inspira en visión bahá’í, y explica los esfuerzos de hacerlo en este proyecto de investigación.

One of the enduring challenges of our times is continuing social disunity, a major barrier to social progress. In North America, one manifestation of this problem is racial disunity, caused

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by the continuing effects of centuries of racism that have translated into both prejudiced behavior and systemic injustice. The Universal House of Justice has called out this particular problem several times, such as in its message of 22 July 2020, addressed to the Bahá'ís of the United States. In that letter, this worldwide governing body labeled racism “a profound deviation from the standard of true morality,” and called on Bahá'ís to “grasp the possibilities of this moment to create a consequential reform of the social order that will free it from the pernicious effects of racial prejudice.”

The challenge that this call to action offers to Bahá'í scholars—meaning those who strive to study relevant Bahá'í guidance and to consider its implications for intellectual discourse—is significant. Many of us have been writing about matters related to racial injustice for many years, but in the above passage the Universal House of Justice called for renewed efforts informed by the Revelation and leading to “consequential reform.” Of the three main tools the House of Justice identifies as fundamental ways to undertake social reform at this time—community building in clusters, social action projects, and participation in elevated discourse in whatever situations we find ourselves—the third has particular relevance to this context. This route is open to all believers. In an earlier letter, the Universal House of Justice noted: “every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the

teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present” (24 July 2013). Bahá'í scholars may find opportunities with compelling chances to promote social reform, such as in academic writing.

But how to do this? The academic world is crowded with writings about racism and interracial relations, and books, articles, blogs, conferences, organizations, and journalistic offerings abound in both academic and more general public settings. Given the resulting quagmire of commentary and discussion, how should one attempt to offer insights informed by the crucial concepts that the Bahá'í teachings offer? What concepts are of particular use in such a discussion, in addition to the necessarily constant call for racial unity?

This article discusses a few of the principles offered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that appear to relate particularly well to scholarship about the history of racism in the United States and that were helpful in my recent writing about the civil rights era (Thomas, *Struggling to Learn*). The first portion of this article will summarize relevant personal background and explain the unique characteristics of this research project. The second major portion will first highlight the importance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s 1912 visit for the study of American race relations and then address ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explanations of (1) the fallacy of racial prejudice, (2) the need to judge people by their character, and (3) the mutual responsibilities of different races toward each other. The third

major portion of the article will offer additional commentary on the process of scholarly inquiry as discourse. The main purpose of the article is to revisit the relevance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance to contemporary scholarship on race relations and to highlight the nuanced insights such guidance might offer to historical research. A secondary purpose is to show how the process of writing about such a topic can itself pose considerable challenges to a Bahá'í scholar wishing to contribute to public discourse.

A RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECT

The research project partially described here was a combination archival history and family/ personal memoir, a very different approach than I had previously used. I had undertaken historical research before, using archival sources, but that had been in the field of urban and regional planning, and with the purpose of writing books and articles that addressed contemporary issues of social equity in cities. Writing about racial inequity was also a familiar pursuit, but again this had been in the field of urban planning, with a primary aim of publishing reading material for university courses that addressed racial inequality in a field with major influence over minority-race people and communities. A third professional effort was to co-found a national organization that strengthened the racial diversity of faculty in American urban planning schools. A belief in racial unity and the need for social betterment, nurtured

by association with the Bahá'í Faith, therefore, transmuted into a series of collaborative professional efforts to improve racial equity, but often lacked direct reference to people outside of urban planning or to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. In more Baha'i-centered projects, I had studied spiritual principles of leadership in planning via various writing and service projects,² possibly contributing to needed discourse within the Bahá'í community but not always reaching a wider public as audience or participants.

This project, however, would have to be different. Given the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, the project would need to be outwardly oriented, meaning it should aim for an audience beyond the comfort zone of fellow Bahá'ís, but also reflect professional-standard caliber in order to join an established, crowded discourse in the world at large. The anticipated topics of school desegregation and civil rights in the U.S. South were unusual in my field, not being amongst the accepted areas of focus in urban planning—such as housing, transportation, land use, urban design, or planning history. Writing about such matters would mean reaching beyond the familiarity of my own academic community. The project would also demand emotional strength

2 Projects that offered formal and informal lessons in leadership included volunteer service for Bahá'í institutions such as the Auxiliary Board, regional councils, and local spiritual assemblies. See also June Manning Thomas, *Planning Progress: Lessons from Shoghi Effendi*.

to address a painful personal topic long set aside: my experiences growing up in the Jim Crow South and surviving the traumas of both racial segregation in public spaces and court-ordered racial desegregation of our local public schools. Not having kept personal journals during those years, I would also have to conduct archival research to unearth sources for something more than a memoir. While I was familiar with the basic methodology of historical research and the overall approach to the study of racial inequity, I was relatively new to the substantive field of educational inequality and the other areas of research involved; all of this required setting forth into new realms.

Baha'u'llah has said "At the outset of every endeavor, it is incumbent to look to the end of it." (*Tablets* 168). The end set at the beginning of this research project was to write an outwardly oriented book that diverse faculty could use in university classrooms that studied race relations, Black history, Black education, Southern history (especially for South Carolina), or the civil rights movement. The content would offer some autobiographical or family history, increasing its value to scholars and other people interested in race-related topics, but surround this with creditable historical research to encourage adoption in standard university courses. It would include information about the Bahá'í community and its precepts, but this would need to emerge carefully, as an integral part of the narrative. Given such goals, the best publisher would be a secular

university press with an established audience. To be accepted by such a publisher (none would commit until the very end of the project), the book would have to appear "secular" and yet draw upon spiritual insights.

Once this overall goal was clear, the next task was to consider the time-frame and conceptual framework. The heart of the narrative would be my own family and race relations in my hometown, but stories of their lives and this place unfolded over many decades. Sources, then, could not focus just on the 1960s—the school desegregation decade—but rather needed to include considerable primary and secondary sources about the late nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth century.³ Some years ago I had begun writing occasional pieces about my high school experiences. These short narratives, supplemented by personal memories and writings by family members, helped to extend the perspective and create

3 Primary sources are raw, direct historical materials such as reports, letters, minutes, and other matter often located in protected archival collections. Secondary sources are books and articles written by authors who did not have first-hand experience of the events being researched. I have consulted about two dozen archival collections of primary sources, mostly within the state of South Carolina. These included many boxes of materials covering the classic civil rights era (1954 to 1968) as well as several decades leading to it, in addition to occasional oral histories, some of which had been recorded (and transcribed) by archivists or previous researchers.

an undertone of personal subjectivity, but the bulk of the work would need to look to other sources.

From the beginning, my lens was that of the oneness of humanity. Racial unity was an integral component of this fundamental concept. This perspective was honed through years of life as a Bahá'í, living in Bahá'í communities that were well aware of these specific teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. It seemed apparent, as well, that constructive resilience would be a key concept; the heroic experiences of South Carolina's Black people connect very clearly to the Universal House of Justice's explanations of the concept of constructive resilience.⁴ A seminar on constructive resilience (sponsored at the Highlander School by the Association for Bahá'í Studies some years earlier) had helped me see this concept's potential. Beyond this, however, the specifics were unclear; how would this project evolve?

The research and resulting narrative began chronologically by exploring white missionaries' attempts to set up educational institutions for Black children and youth in South Carolina starting in 1869, just after the U.S. Civil War. The project then reviewed the subsequent history of the state's educational system for Black children

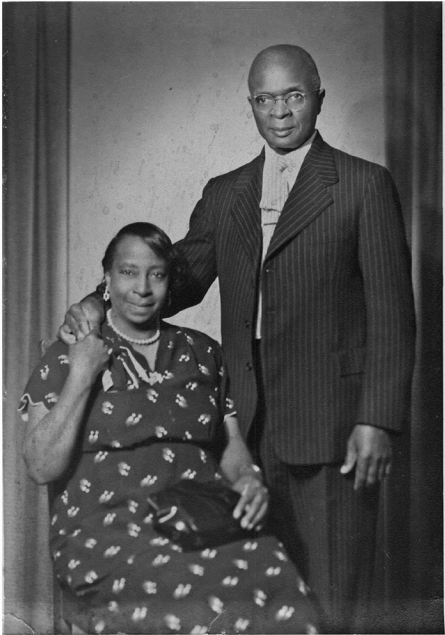
and youth over the next century, giving special attention to the evolution of two Black colleges, Claflin and South Carolina State, located in Orangeburg, my hometown until early adulthood. The project described both Jim Crow segregation and the statewide civil rights movement, particularly during the classical civil rights era of 1954 to 1968⁵, but before and afterwards as well. Some authors refer to a longer period of civil rights activism, extending from Reconstruction to the present (Hall), and this project included some commentary about that longer time span of struggle for human rights. The memoir portion, interwoven throughout, included personal reflections from the classical civil rights era, family stories, and commentary on the lingering effects of that era.

Family history became an integral part of the project, much more so than originally expected. My family struggled mightily to raise its children in the Jim Crow South, rife as it was with racial suppression. My maternal grandparents, Bahamian immigrants, managed to raise eight children despite living in extreme poverty in one of

4 The Universal House of Justice has written a series of letters explaining and elaborating upon the concept of constructive resilience, usually addressed to the Bahá'ís of Iran. See, for example, the letter dated 21 March 2010 "to the believers in the cradle of the Faith."

5 Some scholars consider the classical civil rights era as extending from 1954, the date of the U.S. Supreme Court's desegregation decision in *Brown v. Board of Education (Topeka)*, to 1964, date of a landmark U.S. Civil Rights Act. Some argue that the ending date for the classical era was 1965, with the Voting Rights Act of that year, or 1968, the date of another civil rights bill sometimes known as the Fair Housing Act.

Miami, Florida's Black neighborhoods. This project, however, referenced only my paternal grandparents, who lived their whole lives in rural and small-town South Carolina. These Carolina grandparents, the Reverend and Mrs. Irvin V. Manning, were extraordinary people.



Rev. and Mrs. I. V. Manning, the author's paternal grandparents. This couple is representative of South Carolina Black residents in mid-twentieth century South Carolina in the way they displayed admirable qualities in spite of racial oppression.

Family album photo.

They struggled to educate themselves as far as society allowed Blacks to in early twentieth century South Carolina, which meant some form of high school for my grandmother, but, for my grandfather, probably little schooling

beyond a few grades and then some ministerial training. Nevertheless, in their roles as an ordained Christian minister (Methodist Episcopal Church, now the United Methodist Church) and minister's wife, they then encouraged hundreds to attend school. They served up to four rural and small-town congregations at a time, rotating to a different congregation each week, mostly in the northern Piedmont and Pee Dee sections of the state. My talented grandmother exhibited the best qualities of rural Black women in the South, plus more, including thrift, creativity, and household skills such as canning, sewing her own clothes, gardening, crocheting, cooking, and playing the piano (to accompany her husband in church services). My cheerful, charismatic grandfather exemplified many noble qualities, such as principled leadership and extreme generosity of spirit. These grandparents—who as far as I can tell lived just above the poverty line until rescued by my father, once he and my mother gained stable incomes—managed to educate my father, according to his own written testimony, by paying close attention to their only living child's psychological, physical, emotional, and spiritual health. They sent him to one of Orangeburg's two Black colleges, Claflin, by making many financial sacrifices and encouraging him to work his way through school, which he did in part by serving as a resort waiter at Myrtle Beach, a vacation spot even then. He graduated from Claflin in 1940, well before the classic civil rights era began.

My parents married, obtained master's degrees, and eventually settled in Orangeburg as they began to work for Claffin. As they raised my sister and me, they endeavored to ensure that we received excellent academic instruction as well as spiritual nourishment through their own ironclad faith, our steady attendance and participation in local church activities, and relatively infrequent but seminal exposure to grandfather's inspirational and affecting sermons, not so much spoken as sung. (Grandpa Manning's was a style only truly gifted Southern Black preachers mastered; exhortations toward virtue and Bible verses mixed with hymns led to a musical call and response dialogue between the preacher and his congregation. From what I could see, many people loved and respected my grandfather.)

Along with my Black schoolmates, pictured here in our campus-based elementary school, Felton Training School, I grew up in Orangeburg during the classic civil rights era. As everyone else in that state and time, I attended racially segregated schools until 1964. That year, my parents joined a lawsuit filed by several parents supported by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); they filed the suit on behalf of me, their older child. In this way I was able to help desegregate our local white high school under court order, the only way white schools in the state would open to Black pupils in those days. I attended that desegregated school for three years, suffering harassment and trauma throughout, as did my fellow pioneering Black students, few in number.



Classroom scene, Felton Training School, Orangeburg, South Carolina, circa late 1950s. June Manning is at right, head bowed, with glasses.

Family album photo.

Such research and narrative topics as these lie firmly within the flourishing tradition of Black or race relations studies of nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty-first century America, but usually such work is academic and secular. What insights could we gain about those times from the Bahá'í teachings? How should we approach such subjects as Bahá'ís? How might 'Abdu'l-Bahá look at that critical time period? If we were specifically studying Bahá'ís or the Bahá'í community, the task would be clearer. Several Bahá'í authors have quite ably done such work (Venters, Etter-Lewis and Thomas, Abercrombie and Borovicka). When studying those who were not adherents of this faith community, such as most of the actors in this particular research project, what Bahá'í concepts would be particularly helpful? How might it be possible to discuss this era in a way that is illuminated by and benefits from concepts learned as a Bahá'í? This is exactly what the Universal House of Justice has asked us to do, as we bring knowledge gained from Bahá'í teachings into insights that can help the world at large. Can we, that is, learn to speak to or write for a secular public while engaging readers in a discussion that references Bahá'í experiences and concepts?

‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ COUNSELS
RACIAL UNITY

'Abdu'l-Bahá helps us with such a task. His talks were models of critical analysis that nevertheless offered

insights accessible to people of all faiths or backgrounds. He explained to Jewish audiences how their own history demonstrated the importance of valuing upright character over generations-old rituals. He achieved this engagement with His listeners partially because, in such talks, He referred to Jewish history and prophets, enhancing His audience's ability to hear and understand what He was saying. When 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke to Christian churches, He exhorted them to consider the admirable pathway of Christ as a model of how to interact with various peoples of the world, and again His deep knowledge of the Bible gave Him the vocabulary and the stories necessary to gain His audience's attention. Likewise with His talks to peace societies or to impoverished people in the Bowery Mission; the message was conveyed in a manner that fit the circumstance and the audience. 'Abdul-Bahá spoke to the generality of humanity, explaining key principles in practical terms understandable to audiences unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, thus exemplifying for Bahá'ís the standard of outward-looking orientation ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*).

One of the first inclinations for North American Bahá'ís investigating racial unity is to consult the extraordinary writings of Shoghi Effendi, such as *The Advent of Divine Justice*. In that 1938 book-length letter—designed to prepare North American Bahá'ís for their first Seven Year Plan, a monumental task that required refining their personal and community life—Shoghi

Effendi directly addressed several challenges facing North Americans in general and members of the Bahá’í Faith specifically. Concerning the challenge of racial prejudice, he clearly indicated that lingering prejudice could undermine all Bahá’í teaching efforts, which were essential in order to reach the goals of the Plan. He counseled that Black and white Bahá’ís each had specific tasks necessary to create greater racial unity, and he gave detailed advice about the responsibilities of each. He also warned that overcoming racial prejudice required both mutual action and long-term commitment: “Let neither think that the solution of so vast a problem is a matter that exclusively concerns the other. Let neither think that such a problem can either easily or immediately be resolved” (40). Shoghi Effendi continued to offer such guidance until his death in 1957 and, through his writings, beyond. After its establishment in 1963, the Universal House of Justice took on the mantle of leadership of the worldwide Bahá’í community and itself offered cogent guidance concerning racial unity and related matters.⁶

Both Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice based their guidance upon interpretation and careful extension of concepts emanating from the three Central Figures of their faith, the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Of these three, only

‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited North America in person, traveling, speaking, and observing for over eight months in 1912. While His insights were firmly rooted in the teachings of His father, Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s first-hand engagement with this continent makes His thinking, writing, and speeches particularly valuable commentaries on American race relations. We have a record of many of His North American talks collected in one volume, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*.

We should revisit the guidance ‘Abdu’l-Bahá presented in these talks—still as relevant today, as we mark the 100th anniversary of His passing on 28 November 1921, as it was when He offered it in 1912. We have abundant evidence of the continuing dilemma of racial disunity. When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited, He saw for Himself the sorry state of race relations at that time. Already the perniciousness of endemic racial prejudice had solidified in the form of casual and systemic racial subjugation. Steps undertaken just after the American Civil War to protect citizenship rights for formerly enslaved Black residents and their progeny had faltered catastrophically. After 1877, most Reconstruction-era steps toward Black social, economic, political and human rights dissipated in southern and bordering states when protective federal troops withdrew from that region, as a result of a political compromise. Legalized white supremacy regained its stranglehold. Other regions of the United States and Canada reflected sometimes-subtler

⁶ See, for example, its recent guidance to American Bahá’ís in a series of letters addressed to individuals (“Extracts from Letters”).

but clearly manifest forms of white supremacy, racial segregation, and oppression as well. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá arrived well after the unfolding of this process, but this did not deter Him from openly addressing its blatant injustice. He began to visit a wide range of audiences, remarking favorably upon any visible racial diversity among His listeners, offering tangible evidence of His high regard for Black people, and providing cogent guidance—by His talks and by the example of His personal conduct—on many subjects, including race relations.

The three principles described here—the fallacy of racial prejudice, the need to judge people by their moral character rather than their race, and the mutual responsibilities of different races toward each other—have been particularly useful for my own research, but they may have broader applicability to scholars and others trying to live in this multiracial but fragmented society. These principles are, of course, only a sample of the insights gained when considering ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s contributions to this specific discourse. Shoghi Effendi pointed out that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “courage, His genuine love, His informal and indiscriminating fellowship” had great influence as well, as he notes in *The Advent of Divine Justice*. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “example and conduct,” demonstrated at several “historic episodes and occasions,” were key; such episodes included His purposeful invitation to Louis Gregory to sit as the head of a banquet table that was otherwise filled only with white

guests, and His active encouragement of Gregory’s interracial marriage, the first of its kind in the Bahá’í community. Shoghi Effendi also cites ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “keen sense of justice, His spontaneous sympathy for the down-trodden, His ever-abiding sense of the oneness of the human race,” and “His overflowing love for its members,” among other qualities that modeled appropriate conduct (Shoghi Effendi 34). In this context, while ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks offer just one dimension of this multi-dimensional influence, they nevertheless provide helpful insights into the challenges and potential for North American race relations. Let us take each of the three principles in turn, citing as appropriate from *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*.

THE FALLACY OF RACIAL PREJUDICE

The first of the three insights of direct relevance to this discussion that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offered concerns the nature and origins of prejudice, and the need to become free of *all* prejudice, particularly racial. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá often spoke to His audiences about prejudice, sometimes referencing the world of nature, or explaining by comparison the origins of religious prejudice.

On many occasions, the natural world offered ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the opportunity to gently chide His audiences for their insistence on highlighting racial differences among human beings and acting on those perceived differences. Many are the examples in His talks, but this one from 10 November 1912,

given in the Washington, D.C., home of two white Bahá'ís, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Hannen, who had nurtured into this Faith a Black man, Louis Gregory, is illustrative: "Among the animals colors exist. The doves are white, black, red, blue; but notwithstanding the diversity of color they flock together in unity, happiness and fellowship, making no distinction among themselves, for they are all doves. Man is intelligent and thoughtful, endowed with powers of mind. Why, then, should he be influenced by distinction of color or race, since all belong to one human family?" (425–26). Later in that same talk 'Abdu'l-Bahá offers a detailed description of Isfandiyar, a Black servant of Bahá'u'lláh, who demonstrated many noble qualities: "If a perfect man could be found in the world, that man was Isfandiyar. He was the essence of love, radiant with sanctity and perfection, luminous with light" (426). 'Abdu'l-Bahá then offers many details about Isfandiyar and his extraordinary honesty, loyalty, and courage, thus championing a person who many whites would have disparaged simply because of his skin color.

'Abdu'l-Bahá also commented on the origins of prejudice, blaming it on upbringing and blind imitation, such as in religious bias. He lamented the fact that "the nations and religions are steeped in blind and bigoted imitations." He noted that parents passed on their biased views of life: "A man is a Jew because his father was a Jew. The Muslim follows implicitly the footsteps of his ancestors in belief and

observance" (141). As He explained in His talk to the Fourth Annual Conference of the NAACP, an organization that was at that time interracial, with perhaps one-fifth of its members white but with interracial tension within its own ranks (Sullivan 33), "color or race is of no importance. He who is the image and likeness of God, who is the manifestation of the bestowals of God, is acceptable at the threshold of God" (70). In another talk, given in a Baptist Temple, he states: "Prejudices of any kind are the destroyers of human happiness and welfare. Until they are dispelled, the advancement of the world of humanity is not possible; yet racial, religious and national biases are observed everywhere. . . . As long as [prejudice] prevails, warfare, animosity and hatred will continue" (181).

When we discuss the Jim Crow segregationist or civil rights eras, it is important to state that no genuine basis existed for the rampant racial prejudice and oppression that characterized that time. Many books and articles about that era speak of the heroism of the civil rights workers and of the dastardly deeds of their opponents, but without a full explanation of why the standoff existed in the first place, and with little or no explanation of the motivations of the opponents. The same problem exists today; many writings, talks, or presentations on Black history or racial prejudice offer historical detail, surely necessary, or analyze institutional racism, also essential, but fail to acknowledge the flimsy basis for such prejudice, analyze its continued existence,

and champion the essential unity of all humankind.

For the purpose of my research project, I decided to review the archival papers and published writings of a prominent southern white journalist based in Charleston⁷ who was a firm opponent of racial desegregation in the 1950s and 1960s. Although this review seemed necessary at the time, in hindsight perhaps it was not; it was discouraging, debilitating work, to put it mildly. It was disheartening to sit in well-organized and carefully stored archival collections, located mostly in air-conditioned library rooms at the University of South Carolina, and read the elaborate justifications this journalist put forth for keeping whites separate from and dominant over Blacks. He kept racist pamphlets as well, some of them sent to him by adoring fans. My graduate assistant—hired for this project—explored another of his collections on her own, also noting the careful way that archivists preserved this racist material. It was necessary to fortify this young Catholic woman for

the material she would encounter and verbalize to her, on several occasions, the essential unity of all people, but we occasionally needed to console each another. We prayed together in devotional meetings and repeated truths about racial unity in order to survive the assault of such overt racism, a dangerously one-sided discourse of hate.

It was clear that this white journalist, long dead, believed these justifications—and that he was not alone. He was a major adviser and speechwriter for prominent politicians including at least one U.S. Senator, and very popular among his readers. The concepts that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá propounded, such as the fundamental truth that differences in race are illusory and stem from ignorance, were not widely accepted, while racist practices, instead, were vehemently defended at that time. Defenders of white segregation tapped into not only their own prejudice but also that of their parents, grandparents, teachers, and political leaders. This suggested the need for a profound change in attitude about the nature of reality, just as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encouraged. The civil rights movement itself did manage to change some hearts but, with certain exceptions, (King) this was not the primary strategy during the classical era, meaning that prejudice and resentment lingered for decades afterwards, up to and including the present.

Here are several lessons we might take from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s approach. The first could be that, somewhere in our scholarship, it is important to declare the fallacy of racism and assert

7 Because of the intended secular audience and the historical methodology, in the resulting book it was necessary to name this journalist, William D. Workman, as well as one of the U.S. Senators he advised, Strom Thurmond, referenced in the next paragraph. The effort made in the book was to mention historical facts without resorting to disparaging name-calling (for example, by labeling policies, pamphlets and other materials pro-segregationist or racially oppressive but not calling individuals racist).

the essential oneness of all humanity. It was possible to state this principle in the book that emerged from my research project, although, in hindsight, I feel that it deserved even more attention. A second approach for scholars would be to describe the nobility of Black citizens as a way of highlighting the absurdity of racist arguments. One way to do that for this project was to immediately counter racist narrative with descriptions of praiseworthy Black citizens and local civil rights leaders; this was a pale reflection of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's praise of Isfandiyar but echoes that example. Another possible strategy would be to recount the personal damage done to members of the suppressed race because of fallacious assumptions and repressive actions. This approach emerged in the narrative we are describing in quite a few places, to encourage readers and audiences to recognize the fundamental injustice of practices and privileges widely accepted by the larger society.

HOW WE SHOULD VIEW THE RACIALLY OPPRESSED

A second helpful principle apparent in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks during His 1912 visit concerns how to view the racially oppressed, or even more specifically for this project, how the racially oppressed should view themselves. The previous section already begins to approach this subject, laying out the fundamental principle concerning the equality of all human beings, but we can push this discussion farther by

considering self-views of the racially oppressed.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance for this topic was a wonderful gift for all, but especially for minority-race people. Although many of His talks focused on the need to overlook racial differences, and although He expressed on several occasions great pleasure in speaking to interracial audiences, He did talk about different races, persistently emphasizing that quality of character rather than color was the true measure of a human being. He said this in different ways, one of which was to point out that the "spirit and intelligence of man is essential, and that is the manifestation of divine virtues, the merciful bestowals of God, the eternal life in baptism through the Holy Spirit" (70). Again at the Hannens' house, before describing Isfandiyar, He noted that "anyone whose heart is pure is dear to God—whether white or black, red or yellow" (425). 'Abdu'l-Bahá was calling people of all kinds, including minority-race people, to refine their own personal character, to manifest purity of heart and "divine virtues." This was, in some ways, a precursor of what we now think of as "constructive resilience," the call to an oppressed community to uphold spiritual standards and values even in the face of cruelty and injustice. The Universal House of Justice has similarly urged the long-suffering Baha'is of Iran to display such constructive resilience as a response to their continued and systematic persecution by the Iranian government.

My research project uncovered

strong evidence of the kind of quiet heroism that characterized African Americans throughout much of the twentieth century. Examples included those Black South Carolinians in the 1920s who used philanthropic funds from the Rosenwald Foundation to build schools for their children when local white school authorities would not build such schools or provide money for their operation. The Rosenwald grants required hefty local matches from the Black community, which was chronically impoverished and mired in agricultural sharecropping and peonage, a modern form of slavery. Even so, those Black residents gathered the material resources and hand labor necessary to provide the match necessary to raise exactly 500 school buildings (schools plus a few teachers' houses) for Black children in that state. This they did as they continued to pay taxes to public school systems that built brick schools for white children but nothing more than wooden shacks—at best!—for Black children. These thousands of unnamed Black parents and fellow community members had a vision: that life for their children would be better than their own lives, and that Black people had great potential even if the larger society said they did not. Black adults, even those without children, were willing to make the sacrifices necessary to make this a reality, displaying faith, tenacity, thrift, and ingenuity in the process. South Carolina's history includes many such stories of Black constructive resilience.

Another example was the visible

work of civil rights activists, such as the officers of my hometown NAACP, one of whom was my own church's minister, Matthew D. McCollom, whom I looked up to, when I was a child, as an extraordinary role model because of his courage, leadership, and eloquence. Other Black characters described in my book include more famous people such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Septima Clark—consummate educator, Charleston native, and compatriot of Dr. Martin Luther King—and Rev. Isaiah DeQuincey Newman, our state's field secretary for the NAACP, organizational counterpart to Mississippi's assassinated Medgar Evers, and family friend. Also highlighted is Rev. Joseph De Laine, Clarendon County community leader and driving force behind South Carolina's *Briggs v. Elliott* lawsuit against segregated public schools. It was important to discuss these people. Their names are familiar icons in the state's civil rights history, and Clark and King hold national recognition as well; they would be familiar to many in the intended reading audience. Archival collections particularly for Newman and NAACP state secretary Modjeska Simkins provided much useful information as well as insights into motivations, conflicts, and accomplishments.

While much of the civil rights movement needed heroic action by such Black leaders, the best of these actors were moral, not just civil rights, leaders. Furthermore, many ordinary people were steadily improving life for their families and for their

communities out of the glare of publicity and fame. They did this by carrying themselves with nobility in the face of oppression; encouraging honesty, truthfulness, belief in God, forbearance under tribulation; and in other ways exemplifying admirable qualities. From 'Abdu'l-Bahá's perspective, we might view such people as heroic. They survived Jim Crow segregation, often raised excellent families, and, at the same time, contributed service to their own communities. They supported community development projects and created educational institutions for Black Carolinians' children and youth. I found and described many examples of such people, in my hometown and state but also within my family.

The project, in fact, required me to reconsider the value of my forebears, people generally unknown whom I nevertheless knew quite well.

'Abdu'l-Bahá taught that character and virtues are the supreme measures of a human's worth—not color, fame, or social standing. When I understood this, much of the intended “civil rights era” data I was finding—that is, the facts, narratives, stories, and personal memories emerging as part of this research—began to make more sense. Some of this it was possible to interpret through a family lens.

To my knowledge, my grandfather never heard of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, but his selfless service to his parishioners was unmatched. Grandpa's particular forte—in addition to great sermons—was urging the members of his several congregations to become the best human beings they could; helping them undertake social action projects such as building new churches (of brick, to replace shabby wooden structures typical for impoverished rural folk);



New brick church and rural South Carolina Black congregation served by Rev. and Mrs. I. V. Manning; date and place unknown. Rev. Manning is in the front row, extreme far left, wearing a light suit, and Mrs. Manning, white dress, is in the front row to the right. Family album photo.

and encouraging them to educate their children all the way through college, if possible. His unfailing courtesy, lack of materialism, willingness to give away food and clothes to whomever arrived at his door (if Grandma was not around to temper his largesse), and purity of heart endeared him to all who knew him. Because as a child and teenager I loved those qualities in my grandfather, I was later able to recognize the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who exemplified similar qualities though magnified many times over.

Although my father and mother were not recognized locally as civil rights "leaders" and were, therefore, at first peripheral to my research project, I soon grew more appreciative of their quiet contributions to what Bahá'u'lláh calls "the betterment of the world."⁸ They became respectively president and mathematics professor of Dad's alma mater, the Methodist college now named Claflin University, where Black students were both educated in secular knowledge and nurtured in spiritual growth. An ordained minister and former faculty member, Dad served as college president for twenty-eight years, beginning in 1956 and so covering most of the classic civil rights era. My parents saw their work at Claflin as both spiritual and professional mission. They dedicated their lives to the survival and success of that college,

weathering many devastating setbacks, helping to uplift thousands of Black youth out of poverty, and setting them forward toward adult lives filled with purpose. As I read archival copies of my father's inspirational speeches to students and faculty, studied and absorbed his master's thesis, recalled my parents' support for civil rights activities, reviewed records of their professional lives, and considered the courage it took to file a school desegregation lawsuit on my behalf, their unassuming heroism became increasingly apparent. They were striving to provide the best for Black South Carolina youth as well as for their two daughters.

'Abdu'l-Bahá exhorted all people, no matter their religion, to exemplify noble character and strive to bring themselves up to the standards with which God would be pleased. As He notes: "Man must be a lover of the light, no matter from what dayspring it may appear. He must be a lover of the rose, no matter in what soil it may be growing. He must be a seeker of the truth, no matter from what source it come" (56). This suggests the need to recognize exemplary spiritual qualities regardless of a person's race or religious background. If we were to adopt 'Abdu'l-Bahá's strategy of uplifting any nobility of character found among the racially oppressed, both history and contemporary society would look much different. Our definition of heroism would shift; our view of critical events in the history of race relations bend and expand; our respect for ordinary citizens of extraordinary good

8 "The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct" (Bahá'u'lláh, qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* 24–25).

character increase. From this enlightened perspective, we would admire the station of Black families and communities who weathered peonage, Jim Crow segregation, denial of human rights, and systemic institutional racism and yet managed (and still manage) to survive and to raise children who believe in healthy spiritual principles such as truthfulness, faith, fortitude, generosity, and forgiveness. This approach would require us to write about the racially oppressed differently, delving into honed community assets and virtues, rather than dwelling exclusively on racial oppression and inferior material conditions.

THE MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITIES
OF DIFFERENT RACES
TOWARD EACH OTHER

A third illuminating principle that 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained during His North American talks concerned how people should treat each other—more specifically, how Blacks and whites should treat each other. Again, He pointed out that since God does not consider skin color, we should not pay so much attention to it either. However, He was reading the reality of America in 1912 (and beyond); people did and do pay attention to race, and they erected an elaborate system designed to ensure the oppression of one race by another. He saw and commented upon all-white meetings and dinners, and He pointed out the unjust economic handicaps and social mores that kept Blacks from associating freely with whites. Even so,

foreshadowing what Shoghi Effendi would later describe as mutual responsibilities of Blacks and whites to resolve issues of racial prejudice, He specifically called on whites to show love to Blacks, and, amazingly, for Blacks to feel gratitude toward whites.

This too is a corollary of the first principle we outlined, the fallacy of racial prejudice, or prejudice of any kind. It is also a natural extension of the second principle, the need to focus on judging people by their character rather than their color. This third principle extends beyond these, however, by specifically addressing actual treatment and behavior. Because all human beings are equal and race is an illusory barrier, He urged His audiences to mingle and to treat each other equally, as doves do. This would bring great benefit to both Blacks *and* whites, as He noted in a talk given to a mixed-race—but perhaps predominately Black—audience at Howard University, one of the most prominent Black institutions of higher education in the United States at that time: “Today I am very happy that white and black have gathered together in this meeting. I hope this coming together and harmony reaches such a degree that no distinctions shall remain among them, and they shall be together in the utmost harmony and love” (45). He went on to say in this talk, in words that echo through the ages: “You must try to create love between yourselves; and this love does not come about unless you are grateful to the whites, and the whites are loving toward you, and endeavor to promote your advancement

and enhance your honor. This will be the cause of love” (46).

The advice for whites was clear: not only should they *show* love towards Blacks, they should also try to promote the “advancement” and “honor” of Black citizens. This is a standard with stunning implications. Whites should not only forego prejudice and show love, they must also work for the advancement of the Black race? Whites should be champions for a race of people they have oppressed for centuries? At first this standard seemed too high to have any meaning for my research project, which documented strong white opposition to civil rights campaigns; few whites at that time met even the rudimentary requirement of foregoing prejudice.

Just as important was ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s call for Black people in His audience to feel gratitude. This must have seemed very difficult to accept in 1912. At that time, especially, there may not have appeared to be much for which to be grateful. Even now this is a challenging call. Yet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated that part of the reason for gratitude was that some whites had fought against slavery in the American Civil War and, earlier, fought for Black freedom through the abolitionist movement. His references to the soldiers from white Northern families who fought in a bloody war for the freedom of the Black enslaved surely affected the hearer then, as they do now. This approach sets a spiritual standard for Black people that is very much in keeping with the concept of constructive resilience: even in the

midst of oppression, He was calling on the racially oppressed to forego hatred and resentment and to rise to divine standards of conduct and attitude.

Describing such a duality of responsibility was perhaps ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s way of trying to find a meeting point for the two races to unite.⁹ In terms of my own research, this concept of Black gratitude was helpful not because I entered the project expecting to use it, but rather because of findings that made sense only by recognizing this principle. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a few whites did fight for Black freedom from oppression, and they did deserve some form of recognition as well as gratitude. My first intention was to focus on Black actors, as does much of civil rights literature. Indeed, the bulk of my project material highlights heroic Blacks, some of them named in above sections. However, evidence revealed white anomalies, people who, in spite of their privileged racial background, supported the Black struggle in South Carolina. The white majority greatly outnumbered these anomalies, but still they offered essential service. This fact forced me

9 Shoghi Effendi later added insight into this particular exhortation, giving many specifics relevant to institutions and to individuals. For example, he called upon Blacks to react to genuine efforts by white Bahá’ís to overcome their own racial prejudice by responding in turn with warmth, with “their readiness to forget the past, and their ability to wipe out every trace of suspicion that may still linger in their hearts and minds.” (*Advent* 40).

to notice them, and then to search for some way to understand them and recognize the markings of “the other tradition” of interracial cooperation.¹⁰ It became necessary, that is, to feel and express gratitude.

First among these anomalies in the project’s chronology, starting with the end of the American Civil War, were those white missionaries who founded churches and schools for formerly enslaved people; this was the origin of Claflin University, chartered in 1869 as an interracial institution, open to all. Men and women, missionaries and others, migrated from the North to the South specifically to help educate Black children and youth attending Claflin and other Black schools. Some of these exceptional whites I had heard about all my life—because Claflin had named buildings after them, making their names intimately familiar to us faculty members’ kids living on or near campus—but I had not recognized them for what they were: champions of the formerly enslaved.

Another, singular example emerged from the next era, the 1920s and 1930s, with evidence of the lonely but essential efforts of J. B. Felton, a white man and the state’s head of education for Black children. Felton, who administered the Rosenwald Foundation program in South Carolina, fought hard to help build the aforementioned 500 school buildings for Black children.

This feat required him to work both with white school or political officials and with the Black communities that needed to provide a substantial match to the Foundation’s disbursement. Felton, in fact, supported construction of my own elementary/junior high school building, then named after him, Felton Training School. This was cause for gratitude, indeed; that school, located on the campus of South Carolina State College (now University), gave many of us a wonderful education. Felton focused largely on improving physical school facilities. In the process he and his Black collaborators countered repressive state legislation, miniscule public expenditures for Black schoolchildren, plantation policies that discouraged Black education by requiring children to labor in the fields, and anti-Black violence in the form of pogroms and lynching parties. The success of this school building program in the face of such obstacles and opposition honors both Felton and hundreds of stalwart, self-sacrificing local Black communities.

Just before the classical civil rights era, in the 1940s, other whites for whom many of us feel grateful emerged. One of these would be recognizable to any South Carolina reader familiar with civil rights history in that state. Julius Waties Waring was a federal circuit judge who in the 1940s experienced a change of heart about racial matters and, in spite of his privileged white Charlestonian upbringing, began to make racially fair judicial decisions concerning Black South Carolinians’

10 See, Richard W. Thomas, *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress and Understanding Interracial Unity. A Study of US Race Relations.*

voting rights and teachers' salaries. Judge Waring was a true civil rights hero; one of his many contributions was a dissenting opinion in *Briggs v. Elliott*, the lawsuit that predated and became absorbed within the more famous *Brown v. Board of Education* (Topeka, Kansas) case. Judge Waring's dissent in *Briggs* was a stunning commentary on the fallacy of racial prejudice and significant enough to influence Thurgood Marshall's arguments before the US Supreme Court, leading to that court upholding *Brown* and striking down the legality of enforced racial segregation in public schools (Waring, Gergel).

Research also revealed that during the classical civil rights era not all South Carolina whites were die-hard segregationists. When the white pro-segregation journalist described earlier wrote to several of the state's white religious and nonprofit leaders just after the 1954 *Brown* decision, soliciting their opinions about what he considered an objectionable court ruling, several whites wrote back refusing to defend racial segregation; these letters too are on file in the journalist's archives. Some of their statements were magnificent rebuttals of legalized racial prejudice. Few whites spoke in public about those sentiments, however, without reprisals such as job loss, a high risk for outspoken white dissenters during that era. A notable exception who did speak out was a courageous white woman, Alice Spearman Wright, who headed the South Carolina Council on Human Relations (SCCHR)

during the 1950s and early 1960s. Not only did she work to support interracial dialogue, she also provided tangible support for Black civil rights leaders and for Black children and youth desegregating schools, social activism that earned her repercussions and deep enmity from local whites but heartfelt expressions of gratitude from Black people familiar with her work (Middleton and Barnes). She kept meticulous records for SCCHR, records now safely housed in the University of South Carolina's archival collection and also reviewed for this project.

INTEGRATING BAHÁ'Í CONCEPTS

Although some are reluctant to reference Bahá'í concepts in academic work, many of these concepts have powerful applicability, in diverse areas of inquiry. Examples cited above related to race relations, including constructive resilience, the need to judge people by their character, and the fallacy of racial prejudice, but similar depth of spiritual insight comes from exploring the applicability to a wider society of Bahá'í concepts such as the harmony of science and religion, the equality of men and women, consultation, or sustainable agriculture, for example.

While scholars can describe and illustrate such concepts, deeds have much greater power than words. Books, articles, and lectures constantly exhort exemplary principles, urging the population to be more sociable, more communicative, more resourceful, less prejudiced, *ad infinitum*. At some

point, however, people want to read, or hear about, or meet those who act on their principles, either as individuals or as groups.

The fact that Bahá'ís living in a state that legally enforced racial segregation gathered in mixed-race groups and families throughout the mid-twentieth century offered an important counterpoint to legalized racism and sent a powerful message. While writing about the period from the 1930s to the 1960s, it first became possible to mention the courageous efforts of the South Carolina Bahá'í community. The book chapter that recounts the odious writings of the segregationist journalist, for example, ends by describing the small Bahá'í community that was gaining a presence in the state and refusing to support racial segregation in its community life. As another example, one book section, written largely in memoir mode and dealing with harassment in high school, ends by describing my meeting a Black college student who recommended study of that Faith as an antidote to the daily expressions of racism I was experiencing. Discussion of Greenville's Furman University, which I attended during the school year 1967-68, references the Bahá'ís I met in Greenville. Such discussions help integrate Bahá'í concepts into a narrative that a secular university press would publish and that an intended audience of university students, faculty, and adults might read. This occasional inclusion was, therefore, a purposeful strategy that hopefully will be successful.

The Bahá'í Faith becomes, in essence, the hidden surprise, the reward for steadfast readers. Bahá'ís were the ones who met together interracially even through all the racial turmoil described above. It was possible to describe that community as a place of respite; the Bahá'ís were different, examples of an alternative vision, steadfast proponents of racial unity. The work that Bahá'í scholars had undertaken concerning the South Carolina Bahá'í community became essential reference points that readers could explore further.¹¹

The narrative's epilogue, a cursory update of family life, includes an account of my personal journey toward the Bahá'í Faith. At other places I mentioned my own concerns about white Christian behavior and observations about interracial unity among Bahá'ís; the epilogue describes more fully my initial conversations with Bahá'ís about racial unity and how these affected my own life. The last story in the book describes a 2020 campus commemoration held for Joseph Vaughn, a Bahá'í man from Greenville, South Carolina, who first desegregated Furman University and now has a statue erected there in his honor. This account offered another opportunity to integrate reference to the Bahá'í Faith into the text.

Surely it could have been possible

11 See, Richard Abercrombie and JoAnn Borovicka, *Crossing the Line: A Memoir of Race, Religion, and Change*, and Louis Venters, *No Jim Crow Church: The Origins of South Carolina's Bahá'í Community*.

to say much more; the necessary balancing act was how much could be said that would still be accepted by a secular publishing outlet located in a religiously conservative state. I held my breath as the acquisitions editor at the University of South Carolina Press read the draft epilogue after having read several other draft chapters in previous months without committing. My husband lovingly warned me that the epilogue read like “a fireside” (an introductory talk on the Bahá'í Faith), but soon after the acquisitions editor read that epilogue, he sent me a book contract. That was a firm commitment to publish.

CONCLUSION

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks offer many concepts and practical principles that could help North Americans overcome the problem of racial disunity. I have highlighted here only three of these, selecting those that seemed particularly helpful for my own research and writing project, but these three principles are only a small part of the guidance contained in His talks during that 1912 visit and explained in other Bahá'í Writings as well. The source material used here, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, will prove useful for generations to come, as different scholars plunge into its depths and uncover the wisdom that lies within.

The principles selected for discussion include the indefensible nature of racial prejudice, the need to judge people by their virtues rather than by their external characteristics, and the

importance of Blacks and whites treating each other with love, support, and gratitude. It is impossible to explore fully even these few. The number of direct passages from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks that support each principle; the way each quotation offers yet another subtle inflection concerning definition and implications; and the actions that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá undertook to illustrate His spoken words are myriad. Yet we can continue to pursue such analysis; 110 years has not been enough time for this, but future scholars can continue to draw meaning from such source material.

These three principles assisted my own research into a critical period in the history of race relations. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s assurances about the fallacy of racial prejudice helped make it psychologically possible to survive deep dives into archival source materials filled with racial hatred, and to counter such falsehoods with an alternative perspective. The affirmations concerning the importance of virtue and character expanded the research project’s realm of heroism, allowing more confident exploration of unsung Black survivors of Jim Crow segregation in a Southern state. The exhortation that Black people feel gratitude toward white people as a part of their responsibility for racial unity, a challenging concept for many, opened a conceptual door to a different interpretation of history, one that uncovered several white allies who helped Blacks advance in a racially oppressive time and place. The background of a

steadfast Bahá'í community, striving to serve as a model of racial unity, provided examples of the possibilities for social reform. It is essential to recognize that 'Abdu'l-Bahá laid the groundwork not only for racial amity within North America, and not only for Bahá'ís, but also for the general public. Even now, we can go back to His talks and writings for guidance that can help us interpret the world as it unfolds around us now or in our past.

The Universal House of Justice's request mentioned at the outset of this article—that all members of the Bahá'í Faith look at the social situations in which we find ourselves and seek to engage in discourse as well as to promote “consequential reform”—is a challenging one. It is possible that we are living in just the early stages of this process, but progress has emerged. With the worldwide Bahá'í community's new series of global plans continuing throughout the next twenty-five years, recently described (Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021), it will be possible to make much further advances.

The first strategy designated by the Universal House of Justice as a way to bring social reform—community building within the geographic framework of clusters—has gained much from cumulative effort undertaken over the previous twenty-five year time frame, 1996-2021. During that time, the strategy of promoting social and economic development has also evolved, with such social action characterizing a growing set of initiatives

worldwide.¹² Public discourse as a strategy has evolved as well, at national, local, and individual levels. The Universal House of Justice praises in particular projects or organizational initiatives that promote informed discourse,¹³ but it continues to mention the essential role of individuals. As it notes: “Historically and now, social action and efforts to participate in the prevalent **discourses** of society have

12 Social action takes place in myriad ways, but one way is the creation of educational initiatives for children, junior youth, youth, and adults in the context of neighborhoods, villages, and cities. As recently noted, “in the field of social action the provision of education remains the signature contribution of Bahá'ís in most parts of the world. Pre-eminent among the structures and agencies created by the Bahá'í world to offer education is, of course, the training institute” (Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021).

13 Guidance continues to evolve, but here is a recent passage: “Projects, both large and small, have been started in order to respond to a range of social issues. Numerous Bahá'í-inspired organizations have been established by groups of individuals to work for many different objectives, and specialist entities have been founded to give attention to a particular discourse. All of these efforts, at whatever scale they have been undertaken, have benefited from being able to draw on the principles and insights guiding the activities occurring at the grassroots of the worldwide Bahá'í community, and they have also benefited from the wise counsels of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies” (Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021).

emerged not only in the context of growth, but also as a result of individual Bahá'ís striving to contribute to society's progress in ways available to them" (30 December 2021).

The path of discourse leading to "consequential reform" is a difficult one for those individuals working in academic fields dedicated to secular thought and not attuned to basic spiritual principles. It helps to remember that the efforts made are only part of the grander scheme, which is a worldwide community of fellow believers, and their friends, striving to undertake social reform through discourse in ways "available to them," ranging from simple conversations to project and organizational development. As we continue to engage in specific discourses and then to share and build on our experiences, we will continue to see positive change. No way exists to succeed in helping to create transformational discourse without trying.

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