

# **RACE UNITY DAY <sup>1</sup>**

**Bahá'í Faith Community Center**

**Scottsdale, AZ**

**June 11, 2017**

**“WE MUST LEARN TO LIVE TOGETHER AS BROTHERS  
OR PERISH TOGETHER AS FOOLS”**

**Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

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<sup>1</sup> See online, with related works, at [https://bahai-library.com/toth\\_four\\_talks](https://bahai-library.com/toth_four_talks)

Good evening! How happy I am to be here with all of you tonight. Before we open with Langston Hughe's 1926 poem, *I Dream a World*, take a moment, please, think about your own personal dream related to race unity. Keep it in mind throughout this evening's program. Let it evolve. Because,

*I dream a world where man  
No other will scorn,  
Where love will bless the earth  
And peace its paths adorn.  
I dream a world where all  
Will know sweet freedom's way,  
Where greed no longer saps the soul .  
Nor avarice blights our day.  
A world I dream where black or white,  
Whatever race you be,  
Will share the bounties of the earth  
And every man is free.  
Where wretchedness will hang its head,  
And joy, like a pearl,  
Attend the needs of all mankind.  
Of such I dream—  
Our world!'*

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech expanded on this theme. He also warned,

*We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.*

Rather than deliver a lengthy, expository explanation of what the latter phrase means, or what it might look like, let's turn again to poetry with this gem by James Patrick Kinney:

*Six humans trapped by happenstance  
in black and bitter cold,  
each one possessed a stick of wood,  
or so the story's told.*

*Their dying fire in need of logs,  
the first woman held hers back,  
for on the faces around the fire  
she noted one was black.*

*The next man looking across the way  
saw one not of his church,  
and couldn't bring himself to give*

*the fire his stick of birch.*

*The third one sat in tattered clothes.*

*He gave his coat a hitch.*

*Why should his log be put to use*

*to warm the idle rich.*

*The rich man just sat back and thought*

*of the wealth he had in store,*

*and how to keep what he had earned*

*from the lazy, shiftless poor.*

*The black man's face bespoke revenge*

*as the fire passed from his sight,*

*for all he saw in his stick of wood*

*was a chance to spite the white.*

*And the last man of this forlorn group*

*did naught except for gain.*

*Giving only to those who gave*

*was how he played his game.*

*The logs held tight in death's still hands  
was proof of human sin.  
They didn't die from the cold without,  
They died from the cold within.<sup>ii</sup>*

A stark and apt illustration of the causes and ultimate consequences of prejudice. A prejudice that still infects our society. This past February [2017] the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the U.S. wrote, " The tensions, divisions, and injustices that currently beset America are symptoms of a longstanding illness. The nation is afflicted with a deep spiritual disorder, manifest in rampant materialism, widespread moral decay, and a deeply ingrained racial prejudice. As a result, millions of our fellow Americans, subject to systemic injustices in many facets of life, are prevented from making their full contributions to society and of partaking fully in its benefits. No one is immune to this disorder—we are all members of this society and to some degree suffer the effects of its maladies."

Prejudice is the first in a four-step process that leads down a slippery slope into which we will could all fall and "perish together as fools."

**Prejudice**, comprised of

unreasonable feelings, opinions, or attitudes, especially of a hostile nature, regarding an ethnic, racial, social or religious group.<sup>iii</sup>

is completely antithetical to the Bahá'í teachings. It fosters separation. The Bahá'í Writings tell us to be inclusive and foster unity:

*Through our ignorance and lack of viewpoint we divide this common home, we divide the members of this family into various races, we divide religion into different sects and then with those suppositional divisions we wage war against one another; we shed one another's blood and we pillage one another's possessions. Is not this unpardonable ignorance? Is this not the height of injustice? Were we just and could we observe without prejudice we would realize that there are no fundamental differences.<sup>iv</sup>*

Our Writings also direct us to

*... lay aside all prejudice... and ...become the cause of the unification of the human race.<sup>v</sup>*

From prejudice grows **scapegoating**. When things go wrong, it's so easy to sway the blame onto those you dislike, distrust, and believe are lesser in stature than you. It relieves the oppressor(s) of any sense of personal responsibility.

Scapegoating morphs into **discrimination**. The Jim Crow era in the U. S. is a prime example of unjust and unfair actions by individuals and government against an entire race of people. Though those laws are gone, discriminatory behaviors endure.

The Bahá'í teachings declare that:

*... If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated it should be a discrimination not against but rather in favour of the minority, be it racial or otherwise.... every organized community enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any Faith, race, class or nation within it.*<sup>vi</sup>

The true danger that arises and spreads cancer-like from the first three steps, prejudice, scapegoating, and discrimination, is **persecution**. The most obvious examples being the post-slavery cross-burnings, beatings, and lynchings of African-Americans, the relocation camps in the U. S. for its own citizens of Japanese descent, the slave labor and death camps of Nazi Germany, and let's not ignore the current systematic arrests, imprisonments and executions of Bahá'ís in Iran — that nation's largest religious minority.

The only cure — and I say cure because as was said earlier, racial prejudice is a "longstanding illness" and a "spiritual disorder" — the only cure is to recognize, accept and embrace the reality of the oneness of the human race.

Civil rights activist Anne Braden wrote of the happiness she felt as a child in church when her pastor intoned:

*O God, who hast made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the whole earth.*

*... as he spoke, she recalled, I would feel a sense of exaltation — a sense of being momentarily a part of a world that was large enough to include all mankind.<sup>viiiviii</sup>*

But then confusion engulfed her: Black people weren't included in this worldwide embrace — at least not in her town. She noted,

*The pictures on the Sunday School walls showed Jesus surrounded by children of all colors, the black and the yellow along with the white — all sitting in a circle together.<sup>ix</sup>*

The astute child had trouble looking at those pictures as she contemplated the alternate reality in which she lived.

*I knew some Negro children, she said, But we did not sit in a circle together. We did not sit anywhere together.<sup>x</sup>*

Children aren't born with prejudice. It is a learned phenomenon. Why should man create distinctions that God does not? The Bahá'í Faith teaches that,

*God is no respecter of persons on account of either color or race. All colors are acceptable to Him...Inasmuch as all were created in the image of God, we must bring ourselves to realize that all embody divine possibilities....*

Think about it! *A garden is more beautiful when the flowers are many-colored and different; the variety lends charm and adornment.* Imagine us as the flowers in God's garden.

*In a flock of doves some are white, some black, red, blue; yet they make no distinction among themselves. All are doves no matter what the color.<sup>xi</sup>*

Teenager Samantha Abeel, shared the wisdom her grandmother dispensed as she sat, *calico and gingham spread long...needle in hand:*

*Life is a quilt / made of many different faces.  
she used to say,  
a fabric of different goals and dreams,  
each with different colors,  
different eyes, different hands,  
yet bound together  
by a single piece of thread.<sup>xii</sup>*

If we remove any section, the thread breaks — the quilt unravels.

The Native American hoop dance is another metaphor for the interconnectedness of all people and the necessity of unity. According to educator, Kevin Locke,

*The hoop or circle is the most pervasive and ubiquitous world archetype. For all people the shape represents peace, wholeness, harmony, beauty, sacredness, divinity, continuity, infinity, and wellbeing. The hoop or circle is God's mark on every aspect of creation even down to the smallest atom, proton and neutron. In its essence the hoop dance is a choreographed prayer — a prayer that we may all be restored to our place in the hoop of life, in God's creation.<sup>xiii</sup>*

As Locke dances, he gradually adds hoops until, while in constant motion, 28 different colored hoops unite into one beautiful network that keeps recreating itself into different shapes and patterns. The audience watches, enrapt in wonder — he lets one fall — the entire network collapses.

Paul Simon and Stevie Wonder sang:

*Ebony and ivory live together in perfect harmony,  
side by side on my piano keyboard, O Lord, why can't we?<sup>xiv</sup>*

We can, friends — we can.

We can consciously seek out people of another race or culture, get to know them. Robert C. Henderson once said, we need to integrate not just in schools and in meetings, but on the living room sofa and at the kitchen table. When we befriend people — get to know them on a personal level — our prejudices, even those insidiously subtle, subconscious ones that every one of us has, begin to dissolve.

So we won't keep our individual sticks from the communal fire, rather we'll add them and warm others whilst we warm ourselves. We are the ebony and ivory on the keyboard, the flowers in the garden, the many-colored doves of peace — we will keep our hoops connected. We *will* bring Dr. King's dream, the dream of

Langston Hughes, the dreams of us all, to fruition —The Most Great Peace *will come*.

Let's begin by internalizing these thoughts from children's poet Shel Silverstein:

I will not play at tug o' war.  
I'd rather play at hug o' war,  
Where everyone hugs  
Instead of tugs,  
Where everyone giggles  
And rolls on the rug,  
Where everyone kisses,  
And everyone grins,  
And everyone cuddles,  
And everyone wins.<sup>xv</sup>

At the end of tonight's program, introduce yourself to someone of a different race or culture. Share your dream. Share a hug. Begin to make the dream come true.

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<sup>i</sup> Langston Hughes, *I Dream a World*

<sup>ii</sup> James Patrick Kinney, *The Cold Within*, The Pacific Institute, Seattle, WA

<sup>iii</sup> dictionary.com

<sup>iv</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, pp. 178-179

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- <sup>v</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 163
- <sup>vi</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, pp. 28-29
- <sup>vii</sup> Anne Braden, *The Wall Between*, p. 22
- <sup>viii</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>ix</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>x</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>xi</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 113
- <sup>xii</sup><sup>xiii</sup> Samantha Abeel, *Quilt, Reach for the Moon*
- <sup>xiii</sup> Tish Leizens, December 16, 2012, [Kevin Locke: Elevating the Human Spirit through Music and Dance](#), *Indian Country Today*
- <sup>xiv</sup> Chorus to *Ebony and Ivory*, by Paul Simon
- <sup>xv</sup><sup>xvi</sup> Shel Silverstein, [Hug o'War](#), *Where the Sidewalk Ends*