

A PATH OF JUSTICE

*BUILDING COMMUNITIES
WITH THE POWER TO SHAPE THE WORLD*



Holly Hanson

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Tread ye the path of justice, for this, verily, is the straight path.

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, p. 185

For my parents,

Margaret Bremner Hanson and Robert Carl Hanson,
who taught me to ask questions, to seek justice,
and to find goodness in every person we encountered.

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PART 1

A Path of Justice

Chapter One

The Power of Thought

THE WORLD WE HAVE IS NOT THE WORLD WE WANT

In the world we have, people have lost their homes, their land and their means of livelihood, and they experience the deterioration in health that comes from lack of food. In the world we have, people are dying because of war: each year of the 21st century has seen more than 25 major armed conflicts.¹ People are dying in battle, they are dying when their homes are attacked. People are starving after they have fled their homes. This is not the world we want. In the world we have, people fear random violence—perpetrated by criminals wielding guns in vehicles, or on foot with machetes, or terrorists turning themselves and others into instruments of destruction. This is not the world we want. In the world we have, destitute families send children to do migrant labour in conditions little better than slavery, and women and children turn to prostitution to support themselves because they do not perceive any other means of survival.² We do not want people to have to endure these, or any of the innumerable other unjust conditions which burden humanity in the present. The world we have is not the world we want. We want peace, and we want secure protection of human dignity, and we want justice. But how do we move from the world we have to the world we want?

In order to translate our longing for justice into concrete actions that will create a just society, we must change the way we think. The plans people make for improving the world all begin with ideas about what causes social change. A belief that injustice can be overcome by recognizing and meeting the needs of minority groups leads to a strategy of human rights activism that focuses on publicizing the wrongs experienced by various groups and their demands for better treatment. A belief that free markets create prosperity for everyone leads to programmes which seek to encourage economic activity by eliminating restrictions on business and providing loans so that everyone can participate in markets. On the other hand, a belief that states are responsible for meeting the needs of their citizens leads to programmes designed to build the capacity of government structures. The belief that God alone is the source of all good, that the revealed Word of God should organise society, and that one's own group alone are God's people amongst a wilderness of infidels, can lead people to see the larger society as an enemy and try to attack it. All these beliefs have elements of truth: the strongest bases for social order have come from the teachings of the Messengers of God, and justice requires that every person have access to opportunities, including economic choice and the protection of the state. But the strategies based on these beliefs are not working. In many parts of the world, conditions are getting worse, not better. The extremes of wealth and poverty are more severe, and violence is more prevalent. The failure of our strategies shows that the way we understand the problems of the world is not adequate. We need to change how we think and how we act in order to move towards the world we want.

A straight-forward, practical path that enables people to work together to create a global community characterised by justice can be found in the words and the life of Bahá'u'lláh, the most recent Manifestation of God, and the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

Bahá'u'lláh brought a message to humanity from God around 150 years ago. He was born in Iran in 1817, banished and imprisoned for His claims of bringing a new Revelation from God, and He died in 1892 as a prisoner in 'Akká, in what was then the edge of the Ottoman Empire but is now northern Israel. Bahá'u'lláh, like Krishna, Buddha, Mohammed and Christ before Him, called human beings to draw closer to God. Bahá'u'lláh, like the other Manifestations of God, sought to bind hearts together. He taught that true

religion is the force that connects all things. But Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation also speaks directly to the needs of this time in human history. Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed that the destiny of humanity is to leave behind all of our divisions. His Revelation gives humanity the capacity to create a united, dynamic, and peaceful world civilization. This capacity is born in the love of God for us, and our love for God, which takes shape in the world in our efforts to manifest justice, love, unity, compassion, and generosity.

According to Bahá'u'lláh, justice is the thing that God loves most, and the capacity to perceive justice is the gift of God to every human being:

O SON OF SPIRIT!

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbour. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behoveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.³

Because human beings have the ability and responsibility to perceive justice, we can work to create it. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh wrote that making the world reflect God's intentions is the purpose of human life:

This Wronged One testifieth that the purpose for which mortal men have, from utter nothingness, stepped into the realm of being, is that they may work for the betterment of the world and live together in concord and harmony.⁴

Every aspect of the organised life of human beings can be built on the basic building block that God loves justice and has given human beings the capacity to create it. This is the foundation of effective strategies that can turn the world we have into the world we want.

A great realm of action opens to us if we recognize that justice and injustice begin with how we think, with how we perceive the world. The habits of our lives which are called social structures— the organisations we use to make decisions, the way we have access to resources like land or money, how we provide for the education of the young or the care of the old—all express the thoughts and beliefs of the people who created those structures.

Human capacity to think and act has created the wonderful advancements of human civilizations; but these same capacities to think and act have also held humanity trapped in oppressive patterns of behaviour. On the positive side, the power of thought has given rise to concepts of good government, to science, industry, invention, and everything we have collectively achieved that has carried civilization forward.⁵ On the negative side, human thought has made divisions among people seem natural, rationalized the extreme poverty of some and the extreme wealth of others, and roused people to violence and war.

We can map a path for changing the world we have by recognizing that social structures are embodiments of thought, which gather substance through generations of human decision-making. Once those structures are created, they influence both the thoughts and actions of people who live inside them.⁶ The character of thought determines the character of social structures. Self-interested, turning-away-from-God thought gradually creates social structures which hold people in unproductive, oppressive patterns of action. Humanity is liberated from oppressive social structures by thought that comes from God: human beings responding to the Will of God can potentially begin to organise themselves in ways which reshape human thinking, purify human actions, and gradually develop alternative patterns of interaction and new social structures.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the eldest Son of Bahá’u’lláh, explained the power of thought to shape social structures in His talks and writings. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was the perfect Example of how to put into practice the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, and He led the Bahá’í Faith after His Father’s death in 1892. He explained that He wrote His important book, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, to “produce fundamental changes in the thinking and the behaviour of society.” This book begins by praising the power of thought.⁷ It identifies religion as the source of selflessness, dedication, and other qualities which create beneficial social structures and institutions.⁸ It defines lack of religious faith and education as “the primary cause of oppression and injustice, of unrighteousness, irregularity and disorder” and states that mere material civilization is unproductive and illusory.⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá cautions against unthinking imitation of the past, describes the establishment of just patterns of political order as a slow, organic process, and prescribes education as the mechanism that sets that process in motion.¹⁰

Civilizations come into being from the shaping, empowering influence of a new way of thinking that comes to humanity through each Manifestation of God. Divine power is the beginning of this process: God sends Messengers to humanity and They release a power into the world, in addition to revealing a Holy Book.¹¹ Human beings, responding to the Manifestation of God, cause that Revelation to take effect in the world. When rulers and people attempt to make social policy conform to the Word of God, peace and institutions which benefit all the population can result. For example, King Asoka’s efforts to rule following the teachings of Buddha led to peace and the creation of tree-lined roads across India that last to this day. But humanity also has the capacity to turn away from the Revelations God sends. Social evolution happens in waves, with peaks and troughs, because selfish, godless thought distorts divinely-inspired institutions. We human beings undermine God’s intentions with our egos and selfish desires, and that is why God’s interaction with humanity has a succession of Divine Revelations, instead of only one.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá identified selfish thought and action as the source of oppressive social structures. Describing national borders and racial distinctions, He said: “These boundary lines and artificial barriers have been created by despots and conquerors who sought to attain dominion over mankind, thereby engendering patriotic feeling and rousing selfish devotion to merely local standards of government.” He went on to point out that “(a)s a rule they themselves enjoyed luxuries in palaces, surrounded by conditions of ease and affluence, while armies of soldiers, civilians and tillers of the soil fought and died at their command upon the field of battle, shedding their innocent blood for a delusion. . . .”¹² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá made the same statement, in His letter to the Executive Committee of the Central Organization for a Durable Peace, when He wrote that the boundaries “had been devised by man” and “. . . the establishment of various nations and the consequent shedding of blood and destruction of the edifice of humanity result from human ignorance and selfish motives.”¹³ Despots and conquerors assert a thought—like national boundaries—that benefits them. Gradually, the boundary which the despot created comes to seem ordinary, and people accept it as natural and inevitable, even though its origin was the selfish motive of a leader who sought to attain dominion over others.

Prejudices and hatreds which lead to so much violence and suffering are not the natural way that human beings respond to others who are different from themselves; they originate in the desire of some people to dominate others. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá expressed this eloquently:

What an extraordinary situation now obtains, when no one, hearing a claim advanced, asks himself what the speaker’s real motive might be, and what selfish purpose he might not have hidden behind the mask of words. You find, for example, that an individual seeking to further his own petty and personal concerns, will block the advancement of an entire people. To turn his own water mill, he will let the

farms and fields of all the others parch and wither. To maintain his own leadership, he will everlastingly direct the masses toward that prejudice and fanaticism which subvert the very base of civilization.¹⁴

A separation which gave some people an advantage over others can be used, in following generations, for the same purpose. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá both clearly indicate that self-interest is what motivates leaders to promote a blind imitation of the past.¹⁵ This is therefore an active process: people acting in self-interest promote and enhance the residues of the selfish actions of earlier generations. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes this as encrustation: "the dogmas and blind imitations which have gradually encrusted it [religion] and which are the cause of the decline and effacement of a nation."¹⁶ Encrustation implies layering and hardening: each layer of selfish thought makes an oppressive reality more substantial. Since clay is often an image for the desires of the self in the Bahá'í Writings, we can think of layer upon layer of the clay of human desires shaping the societies in which we live.

A few examples can show how human thought and action create divisions which then come to seem natural over time. In Kenya, clashes after the 2007 elections left more than one thousand people dead and hundreds of thousands displaced from their homes. The mutual distrust and antipathy which members of Kenya's ethnic groups showed in 2007 and in the previous decades might support the belief that tribal hatreds are ancient and enduring. But historians have found that only a few generations ago in the region that became Kenya, people often spoke more than one language and moved between subsistence strategies in a much more fluid fashion than our current ideas about tribal differences would allow. When farmers married into herding families, and began to centre their lives on keeping cattle instead of farming, they "became" Maasai, and when herders settled down to farm, they "became" Kamba.¹⁷ People of different tribes traded with each other, intermarried, and deliberately built mutually-supportive, cross-ethnic relationships as part of their subsistence strategies. Kenya's people began to perceive rigid tribal boundaries in the early 20th century, when British colonial authorities apportioned resources to clearly divided tribal groups. Tribal distinctions became even more important in the 1960s, when politicians sought the allegiance of voters through tribalistic claims, rather than offering citizens anything of substantial value. Later battles among politicians, fought on ethnic lines, intensified Kenyans' acceptance of ethnic prejudices against each other. Writing of the "challenges to genuine democracy" that characterised the 2007 elections, Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai wrote, "As is almost always the case, it was the innocent who suffered from the vanity and obstinacy of their leaders."¹⁸ The mutual distrust which Kenyans of different ethnic groups showed to each other may seem to be ancient, but in fact, earlier patterns of intermarriage and mutual assistance might be remembered by people still alive.

The hostility between Muslims and Hindus in the Indian subcontinent is also not the ancient conflict which many currently perceive. Before British colonial rule, people defined themselves through occupation, political allegiances, and language as well as through the forms of devotion they practiced. People incorporated Islamic and Hindu forms of worship in their lives; and conversion to Islam happened over generations.¹⁹ From the 18th century, aspiring British imperialists gained power by setting indigenous rulers against each other, and religion was part of their strategy. The idea that the Mughal conquest was a violent imposition of Islam by the sword, characterised by temple desecration, began with British colonial authors, who wanted to make their rule look benign by comparison. Mughal rulers were Muslims, but not all of them had an agenda of promoting Islam. The goal of their conquest of what is now India, like that of previous rulers who practiced what is now called Hinduism, was territory and political gain, and temples which were not military targets as the centre of states were not disturbed. Even the Mughal emperor Aurangazeb, who actively promoted Islam, reimposed the Islamic tax on non-believers, and desecrated temples, admonished, "According to the Holy Law and the exalted creed, it has been established that ancient temples should not be torn down."²⁰ Akbar, the Mughal emperor who promoted peaceful

cooperation of Muslims and Hindus, represents an aspect of the history of the subcontinent which post-Independence politicians have chosen to forget. British colonial authorities organised people according to their religion for the census and for laws of personal status, which gave the categories more meaning. 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' began to have the meanings they now have in India only in the 20th century, when politicians built on and exacerbated religious differences to win-over voters.

Differences which have no intrinsic meaning gradually acquire more and more force as some people use them to assert advantage over others. American racism deepened and became more solid in social structures over time, and each further assertion of racial distinction, each imitation of the past, had profound and powerful benefits for the political and social leaders who promulgated it.²¹ The practice of enslavement of Africans in the 17th and 18th centuries contributed to the development of racist ideology. In the 19th century, laws which limited the possibility for dark-skinned people to profit from their superior technical skills undermined people's capacity to create well-being for themselves even after slavery ended in the United States. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century laws that enforced habits of segregation added a cultural validity to the already existing economic deprivation. Mid-twentieth century practices privileged white people in the provision of services and government resources. Unthinking imitation of the past, combined with deeply selfish actions on the part of some, infused racial division into United States society.

A change of heart is not enough to dissolve the social structures which generations of self-interested action create. Although it is important to replace mistrust with confidence and antagonism with concern, the enduring spiritual, legal, economic, political and social consequences of prejudice also have to be transformed. Shoghi Effendi, the great grandson of Bahá'u'lláh, and the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 to 1957, demonstrated this in his instructions to the Bahá'ís of the United States regarding race relations among Bahá'ís (Shoghi Effendi became the leader—the Guardian— of the Bahá'í Faith in 1921 when 'Abdu'l-Bahá died, and He protected and united the Bahá'í community and guided its development until his death in 1957. The world governing council of the Bahá'í Faith, the Universal House of Justice, was first elected in 1963, and continues to be elected every five years through a representative process in which every adult Bahá'í in the world has the responsibility of voting). Shoghi Effendi wrote that it was not enough for American Bahá'ís to respond to racial division in American society with declarations or demonstrations of a belief in the oneness of humanity: it should be "deliberately cultivated through the various and everyday opportunities, no matter how insignificant, that present themselves, whether in their homes, their business offices, their schools and colleges, their social parties and recreation grounds" and in all their Bahá'í activities.²² He asked them to implement a structural solution that was to be motivated by their love and devotion to 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Self-interested actions—from a willingness to profit economically from enslavement to a willingness to profit politically from an assertion of racial distinctions—have shaped American society, just as the self-serving actions of colonial rulers and modern politicians have created communalism in the Indian sub-continent and tribalism in African nations. To eliminate these unjust structures requires vision, a cultivated intention to reject unthinking imitation of the past, social policies that facilitate structural change, and selflessness.

One final example of the power of thought to shape society is how we choose to understand the grotesque division between the wealthy and the poor that characterises the world in the present. According to the United Nations, 40% of the world's population earn 5% of world income, while the wealthiest 10% (which includes anyone whose income is over \$61,000 a year) earn 54% of world income.²³ We accommodate this appalling reality with categories of 'us' and 'them': developed and developing, first world and third world, modern and traditional. These categories seem to be natural,

inevitable, and real, and we have heard them all our lives. At the heart of this way of thinking is a subtle rationalization—that the rich are rich because they are knowledgeable, wealth-producing, and progressive, and the others are poor because they are uninformed, not entrepreneurial, and bound by tradition. Commenting on the perverse inequality of our world, in which the combined wealth of the 416 million least wealthy people is less than the combined wealth of the 500 richest people, Nelson Mandela said, “Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made, and it can be overcome and eradicated through the actions of human beings.”²⁴ Thought that comes from God makes the rationalization of injustice impossible. We know that the true reality is that there is only one world. The rich world and the poor world are the same world. The developed and the developing world are the same world; they came into being together, they have made each other. All of us, and our parents and grandparents and ancestors for about fifteen generations, made the world we have. There are no people on the planet who are centuries behind, who have been left out of some process of progress which the rest of us have enjoyed. There is no ‘they’ that need to catch up to ‘us’ who are superior, no others who have not been involved in building the world we have. There is no ‘they’, just us, all of us, the human race, burdened with a world that embodies unbearable injustice.

If there is no us and them, no one’s suffering can be explained away and made unavoidable. If some of us see that we have advantages other people do not have, we cannot assume they are natural; we have to ask where those advantages and privileges came from. A recognition of the oneness of humankind is a recognition that the way that all of us have lived on this planet has created its problems and all of us are going to have to change the way we live to fix them. In the words of the elected leaders of the Bahá’í Faith, the Universal House of Justice, “Acceptance of the oneness of mankind is the first fundamental prerequisite for reorganisation and administration of the world as one country, the home of humankind.”²⁵

The profound structural changes which will be necessary to realize a just, united, and peaceful world are possible when we develop the capacities for love and selflessness which contact with the Word of God engenders. This is the role of religion in society. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains: “Religion must be the cause of love. Religion must be the cause of justice, for the wisdom of the Manifestations of God is directed toward the establishing of the bond of a love which is indissoluble.”²⁶ True religion transforms the whole character of mankind, the inside of human beings and the outside of social structures.²⁷ It dissolves the hardened clay of oppression and tyranny:

Justice is, in this day, bewailing its plight, and Equity groaneth beneath the yoke of oppression. The thick clouds of tyranny have darkened the face of the earth, and enveloped its peoples. Through the movement of Our Pen of glory We have, at the bidding of the omnipotent Ordainer, breathed a new life into every human frame, and instilled into every word a fresh potency . . . Wherefore fear ye, O My well-beloved ones? Who is it that can dismay you? A touch of moisture sufficeth to dissolve the hardened clay out of which this perverse generation is molded.²⁸

Love of God, which creates in people a love for each other, is the solvent which dissolves layers and layers of hardened self-interest, and love of God inspires people to organise their lives in more positive, powerful ways. The followers of Bahá’u’lláh strive to build communities in which people support each other in a process of collective transformation motivated by love of God. The spiritual energy which each soul derives from responding to God’s most recent Messenger is channelled into “a process that seeks to raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development.”²⁹ For example, gathering together to pray is a core activity of the Bahá’í community. The Universal House of Justice describes this practice, “Thousands upon thousands, embracing the diversity of the entire human family, are engaged in systematic study of the Creative Word in an environment that is at

once serious and uplifting. . . . Responding to the inmost longing of every heart to commune with its Maker, they carry out acts of collective worship in diverse settings, uniting with others in prayer, awakening spiritual susceptibilities, and shaping a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character.”³⁰

The path to justice requires human beings to think about ourselves and our relationship to each other without the limitations which have been created by tyrants and oppressors. Recognizing what we can do in the world begins with understanding human reality, and a true understanding of human reality comes from strengthening our connection to the Divine. The simple gathering of people in a home or common space to worship God brings humanity closer to justice because it brings us closer to reality. Shoghi Effendi, explaining the importance of the Bahá’í Houses of Worship, wrote that the only “agency capable of removing the ills that have so long and so grievously afflicted humanity” would be the “direct and constant interaction” between the spiritual force of worship and conscious energies in service to humanity.³¹ When families, or youth, or coworkers determine to make devotional gatherings part of their lives, they are bringing God’s power into their lives, and setting in motion a chain of consequences. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, deeply moved by news of a battle between Ottoman Turks and Italians which foreshadowed the First World War, urged a Paris audience in 1912:

When a thought of war comes, oppose it by a stronger thought of peace. A thought of hatred must be destroyed by a more powerful thought of love. Thoughts of war bring destruction to all harmony, well-being, restfulness and content. Thoughts of love are constructive of brotherhood, peace, friendship, and happiness. . . . Do not think the peace of the world an ideal impossible to attain! Nothing is impossible to the Divine Benevolence of God. If you desire with all your heart, friendship with every race on earth, your thought, spiritual and positive, will spread; it will become the desire of others, growing stronger and stronger, until it reaches the minds of all men.³²

Devotional gatherings, like the other core activities that are the focus of Bahá’í community activities, are a way to systematically develop the power of stronger thoughts of peace.

In this chapter we have considered the power of thought. We can change the world by changing how we think because people are responsible for the conditions of the societies in which we live. The creation of social structures is a historical process that unfolds over time. They develop gradually through deliberate human actions. Oppressive structures are the result of generations of self-interest, building on top of each other through imitation of the past. Injustice is not inherent in the world—it is not inevitably there, like bad weather. People create injustice through intensely selfish, extremely powerful thought that shapes human action and human institutions. It builds up, layer by layer, and people live inside of it and consider it to be natural. On the other hand, structures that facilitate justice are the result of deliberate, continuous effort to implement the Will of God. We create the possibility of overcoming oppression by conscientiously abandoning habits of thought which are imitations of the past, and trying to align our actions with the intentions expressed by God’s Messengers. Human beings responding to the Will of God gradually create social structures which purify human actions and empower people. The goal of Bahá’í communities is to find people who are eager to join in this endeavour, “those souls longing to shed the lethargy imposed on them by society and work alongside one another in their neighbourhoods and villages to begin a process of collective transformation.”³³

This book explains what Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice—the leaders successively of the Bahá’í Faith since its beginning in 1863 until the present— have taught about the power of thought, and the capacity of human beings to carry Divine Revelation into actions that create justice. It has three intended audiences. For sceptics, it tries to offer a clear explanation of the central place of justice in the Bahá’í Faith, and how believers understand the role of religion in social

transformation. For those who have heard of Bahá'u'lláh and want to learn more about His Faith, it tries to introduce some fundamental aspects of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and explains why Bahá'ís organise themselves as they do and take the actions they take. By showing how the everyday actions of ordinary people in neighbourhoods, villages, and towns may contribute to bringing into existence the era of peace and justice which all the world's religions have foretold, it seeks to encourage those who have fallen in love with Bahá'u'lláh and consider themselves His followers. Chapter Two defines justice as a relationship among parts of a whole to which we all belong, and examines what holds us back from acting effectively to promulgate justice. Chapter Three traces the history of humanity's forgetting the true essence of economic activity, which is human interconnection. Chapter Four considers power in the realm of the organisation of society. Chapter Five explores how faith gives us the capacity to build communities that have the power to change the world. By carefully rethinking our fundamental assumptions about society, and striving to align our thoughts and actions with the Will of God, we become conscious of the role we can play in "rebuilding a broken world," and how we can strengthen our capacity "to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's purpose to liberate humankind from the yoke of the most grievous oppression."³⁴

We are the cells, the sinews and the bones of the tightly integrated, coherent organism which is the world, and all our actions have an effect far beyond ourselves. We are the evidence of the love of an All-Powerful Creator, and we can channel that love into worship and service that builds communities which heal the sick and bind the broken. We have tremendous power as citizens, and if we choose to use it, we can wield that power to focus our villages, our neighbourhoods, and our nations on the well-being of humanity. We have power as producers and consumers, and if we choose to, we can use that power to create equitable working conditions for all those with whom we are connected economically. We are blessed with God-given capacities to ask ourselves hard questions, to sacrifice what is comfortable, to innovate and to create social structures more equitable than the ones we have inherited. We can only take these actions if we refuse to imitate the past, if we recognize ourselves as part of a fundamentally-connected humanity, and if we embrace the power God has given us to shape the world.

Chapter Two

Perceiving Justice and Injustice

TO SEE WITH THE EYE OF JUSTICE IS NOT EASY.

Although we may aspire to be just, generations of accumulated prejudices and fears can obscure our vision. We live in a world “entangled in the mesh of its accumulated falsities”, “spiritually destitute, morally bankrupt, politically disrupted, socially convulsed, economically paralyzed, writhing, bleeding and breaking up . . .”³⁵ We have embraced these falsities and come to see these crisis conditions as normal. We learn in schools and universities that nation states are a source of security, that competition is an effective strategy to secure social welfare, and that some nations grew wealthy because they had skills and talents that other nations lacked. Strategies for improving people’s lives based on this so-called knowledge can perpetuate and intensify oppression. In order to see beyond perceptions of the world that distort its true reality, we need divine assistance. According to Bahá’u’lláh, “The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye.”³⁶ Since justice comes from God, and God gives us the capacity to perceive it, we can use the Word of God as a way to distinguish justice from injustice. This chapter uses Bahá’u’lláh’s and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s clear instructions on what it means to act with justice to evaluate the state of the world today. It uses their observations regarding injustice to explain strategies we can use to begin to make the profound changes in the structure of society that creating justice requires.

Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explain actions which manifest justice as a particular kind of relationship among people, a way that we should hold ourselves in all our interactions with others. Bahá’u’lláh exhorts us, “if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou chooseth for thyself.”³⁷ He sets the same standard for rulers in His Tablet addressed to the Ottoman prime minister:

And finally We beseech God, exalted be His glory, to enable thee to aid His Faith and turn towards His justice, that thou mayest judge between the people even as thou wouldst judge between thine own kindred, and mayest choose for them that which thou chooseth for thine own self.³⁸

On a global scale, justice means to regard the world as a human body, and to see ourselves as a part of that living whole. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s definition of what it means to act with justice makes this clear:

The second attribute of perfection is justice and impartiality. This means to have no regard for one’s own personal benefits and selfish advantages, and to carry out the laws of God without the slightest concern for anything else. It means to see one’s self as only one of the servants of God, the All-Possessing, and except for aspiring to spiritual distinction, never attempting to be singled out from the others. It means to consider the welfare of the community as one’s own. It means, in brief, to regard humanity as a single individual, and one’s own self as a member of that corporeal form, and to know of a certainty that if pain or injury afflicts any member of that body, it must inevitably result in suffering for all the rest.³⁹

This understanding goes further than the view of justice as equal treatment. While it is true that “justice is allotting to each whatever is his due”⁴⁰, it is more than that. It is recognizing the reality of humanity’s interdependence, and seeing all our actions in relation to the well-being of others.

The force that implements justice is reward and punishment. Reward for good deeds and punishment for bad deeds is an expression of justice, and encourages further actions which are just. On the other hand,

rewarding destructive actions and punishing positive ones, is both unjust and leads to further injustice. Bahá'u'lláh states this principle:

Justice hath a mighty force at its command. It is none other than reward and punishment for the deeds of men. By the power of this force the tabernacle of order is established throughout the world, causing the wicked to restrain their natures for fear of punishment.⁴¹

When we examine the condition of human societies at the beginning of the 21st century, we can see disorder, dysfunction and oppression which are the consequence of humanity failing to be just. Collectively, we as members of the human race have not chosen for others what we have chosen for ourselves. We have not acted as though we were parts of an organic whole. We have rewarded evil deeds and ignored or punished good ones.

To see the world as a human body is a powerful tool. The Universal House of Justice has written that this is the context that must frame any effort to understand Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on social justice.⁴² Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

Regard the world as the human body which, though at its creation whole and perfect, hath been afflicted, through various causes, with grave disorders and maladies. Not for one day did it gain ease, nay its sickness waxed more severe, as it fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.⁴³

In another context, 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes the interdependence which this image implies:

As preordained by the Fountainhead of Creation, the temple of the world hath been fashioned after the image and likeness of the human body . . . By this is meant that even as the human body in this world which is outwardly composed of different limbs and organs, is in reality a closely integrated, coherent entity, similarly the structure of the physical world is like unto a single being whose limbs and members are inseparably linked together.⁴⁴

A critical part of this concept is that the connections between the parts are inherent to the organism. The consequence of those connections can be positive or negative, but the parts of the organism are always, inherently, inseparably connected. Interdependence in the natural world is revealed in the study of ecology, and disruption of that balance causes environmental degradation. A lack of recognition of interdependence in the human world leads to social instability and violence, to degradation and suffering for some and inordinate luxury and excess for others.

Current thinking on global issues tends to focus on places where many people live in extreme and increasing poverty, as if those places are the problem that needs to be solved. We act as though the manifestation of disorder in poor regions needs a remedy, while the manifestation of disorder in wealthy regions provides the model that everyone else should follow. In reality, the great wealth which characterises some areas of the world is just as much a part of the problem as the great poverty which characterises other areas. These divisions and inequalities have become part of the structure of our world. It is divided and unequal because it evolved in a way that empowered some parts of the human family over others. The weakness and lack of resources in some regions is not an unfortunate oversight which can be fixed by a transfer of tools, funds, or knowledge that will cause them to catch up with the regions that have the most resources. The resource-rich regions are what they are because the resource-poor regions are what they are. The connections are profound and structural. The parts of the world are a system, together.

If we regard the world as a human body, we can see how the problems of our world concern the whole structure, the whole system, not just a part of it. If one part of a body shows a symptom of illness, the whole body is ill. A person does not have measles only where the spots are. A person does not have the flu only in

the joints that hurt. The whole body has the illness. Similarly when the world is sick, the whole body of humankind has the sickness. If part of the world is not prospering, then all the parts of the world have a problem. The Universal House of Justice made this observation in a letter about social justice:

... not only are humanity's talents and capacities shared by all its members, but its problems and afflictions likewise ultimately affect all. Whether in sickness or health, the human family constitutes a single species, and the condition of any part of it cannot be intelligently considered in isolation from this systemic oneness.⁴⁵

A human body that begins to concentrate all its growth in one area will become deformed. If most of the nutrients and oxygen are flowing to a small part of the body, and the rest of the body gets less nutrients and oxygen as a result, which part of the body will be healthy? The part with too many resources will be sick: swollen, misshapen, cancerous. The parts of the body that are deprived of resources are also sick: they will be stunted and weak. If this condition continues for a long time, none of the parts will work properly. The structure of the body will change. Some muscles and bones will atrophy, others will become exaggerated and the structure will become distorted.

This is the condition of the body of the world we inhabit. In 2008, 10% of the world's population owned 85% of its wealth, which means that the other 90% controlled only 15% of the wealth. The extremes are even greater: 50% of the world's adult population owned only 1% of the world's wealth in 2008, while the richest 2% owned 50% of the world's wealth.⁴⁶ These divisions are so much a part of the reality of the world we live in that they shape our habits of thought. When we say North and South, developed and developing, modern and traditional, city and village, we are describing that distinction between the 10% with 85% of the wealth and the 90% with 15% of the wealth. Although these dichotomies seem to describe reality, we know that to divide the world in this way is false. The world is not the North world and the South world, or the developed world and the developing world—it is just one world. It is a closely integrated, coherent entity.

In a closely integrated, coherent entity, the parts fit together. We cannot imagine that the small part of humanity having most of the resources are smarter, more capable, more virtuous or more deserving than the vast majority of the world's population that does not have access to material resources, education, or political voice. Coherence means vital, active, continuous connections. The extreme wealth that characterises some of the world and the extreme poverty that characterises the rest of it have evolved together. The over-abundance of wealth and hyperactive economy in some regions and the lack of material resources and economic stagnation in other regions are aspects of one process of technological innovation, production and exchange which has involved all the parts of the planet over the past five hundred years.

Our current dilemmas are modern; they have not characterised all of human history. An earlier version of a global order existed at the height of Islamic civilization, when a relatively just, prosperous, dynamic system of international exchange—the *dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam)—extended from islands bordering the Pacific, across all of Asia through East and West Africa, to southern Spain. The basis of this world-encompassing system was the unity of the followers of Muhammed, whose commitment to Islamic law and the Qur'án linked people across wide differences of language and culture.⁴⁷ People, ideas, and goods moved along trade routes that were also pilgrimage routes, and Christians, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus also participated in the economic dynamism that widespread obedience to the laws of Muhammed created. We know from 800-year-old letters that were found in a Cairo synagogue that Muslims and Jews relied on each other as business partners and national boundaries did not hinder 12th century travellers (they travelled with proof that they had paid their taxes, but did not need passports).⁴⁸ Until Genoans competing with Venetians carried their conflict onto the high seas, the oceans had been understood as violence-free zones

for travel, including commerce. Rulers fought each other for territory on land, but the seas had been peaceful.

Global interaction changed in character when it expanded to include the whole world through 15th century advances in boat building and navigational technology. The largest and most advanced vessels were built by the Chinese, who sailed to Hormuz on the Persian Gulf, to Aden, and down the coast of East Africa between 1405 and 1433 in gigantic expeditions of dozens of ships and more than twenty thousand sailors. They were led by a Muslim court official, and they succeeded in their goals of gaining knowledge, and demonstrating the power of the Ming dynasty and increasing its tributaries. Portuguese and Spanish expeditions, on a much smaller scale, used their new ability to sail out of sight of land to try to break into the rich trade from Asia to Europe which was dominated by Muslims following pilgrimage routes. Because seizing control of trading cities through violence ruined the trade they hoped to capture, the Portuguese and Spanish eventually made their expeditions profitable by turning to strategies that had developed during the long conflict between Christians and Muslims in Europe. Christians and Muslims had enslaved each other during their wars in what is now Spain, and the Europeans applied Pope Nicholas V's sanction of enslavement in 1452 to the "infidels" of the new world. Granting control over people as well as territory to the conquerors was another practice from the religious wars in Spain that was adopted in Latin America. As a result, the first forms of exchange that encompassed the entire planet were based on strategies developed for war. A model of peaceful cross-cultural exchange had existed at that moment in human history in the patterns of exchange created by people following the laws of Muhammed, but humanity did not follow that path.

For the past five hundred years every region of the world has been involved in world-encompassing patterns of economic growth, but not every region has benefitted. Instead, human, cultural and material wealth has flowed out of some regions for the benefit of others. Vast amounts of Latin American gold and silver mined by slaves and Indians doing forced labour stimulated economic and technological growth from Spain to China from the 16th to the 19th century, but patterns of government and social organisation in the Andean region were so distorted by the process that they ceased to function. The plantation-labour complex which depended on enslaved African workers from the 17th to the 19th centuries produced vast wealth, but Africa lost many of its people and its social and political institutions were deeply compromised. The industrial production of goods that began in the 19th century and still continues also created immense wealth, but the regions of the world that provided only raw materials and consumed finished goods have paid the costs without experiencing most of the benefits. Each of these processes connected regions of the world in unjust patterns of production and exchange, and each of them had profound political ramifications. The consequence has been an extreme concentration of wealth and power and the loss of institutions and practices which maintained social order in many regions.

Bahá'u'lláh describes these conditions when He states that we should regard the world as a human body which at its creation had been whole and perfect, but which has been afflicted with grave disorders and maladies. Patterns of economic growth which benefited some at the expense of others are a fundamental dimension of those afflictions. The growing inequality in the world provides evidence of these unjust relationships. In 1820, after two centuries of slavery and imperial expansion but before industrialization, the income of the one-fifth of the world's people living in the highest income countries was 3 times higher than that of the one-fifth of the world's people living in the lowest income countries. By 1870, as industrialization took off, the ratio of incomes of the richest one-fifth to the poorest one-fifth was 7 to 1. In 1913, with the entrenchment of a world economic division of labour in which tropical areas produced commodities and the North produced manufactured goods, the income ratio had grown to 11 to 1. In 1960, as colonial rule ended in Africa, the richest one-fifth had incomes 30 times higher than the poorest one-

fifth. By 1997, after almost four decades of increasingly integrated global exchange, the income ratio had grown to 74 to 1.⁴⁹

The intentions of governments, people, and international institutions to solve the problem of poverty have not succeeded because the system and the structures are malformed. The healing of a systemic illness requires an intervention in the whole system, and this is what Bahá'u'lláh described when He said that the world is a sick body “the recovery of which dependeth upon the harmonizing of all of its component elements.”⁵⁰

In his vision of Bahá'u'lláh's world order, Shoghi Effendi described the harmonization of those elements. He wrote: “The economic resources of the world will be organised, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated,” and also “destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear.”⁵¹ The Universal House of Justice referred to the necessity for this kind of intervention when it criticized the man-made ideology that tends to “callously abandon starving millions to the operations of a market system that all too clearly is aggravating the plight of the majority of mankind, while enabling small sections to live in a condition of affluence scarcely dreamed of by our forebears.”⁵²

If we look at the whole body, the whole system, and see that it is gravely disordered, then it is clear that we have to change all of the parts of the system to make it better. Efforts to send resources from the hyperactive, resource-rich part to the atrophied, resource-poor part will inevitably fail—the disordered system will send those resources right back to the resource-rich part, because that is how the body has developed. Development assistance which is sincerely intended to benefit the least prosperous regions of the world can actually end up benefiting the parts with the most resources. Material resources spent on a development project are often spent largely in the donor country on salaries of experts and consultants and on equipment supplied as part of the project, which the recipient is obliged to acquire. International development professionals may not intend to be self-serving, but structures which have evolved to the benefit of the wealthiest parts of the world shape their actions.

Since world stability and order depend on the twin pillars of reward and punishment, it makes sense that the world we now inhabit is unstable and disordered. The patterns of interactions we have established, which go against the fundamental principle of justice which is that what harms one part harms the whole, have also perverted forms of reward and punishment. The regions and people of the world who have suffered most from our inequitable system of interaction continue to suffer, in the so-called solutions. For example, a university professor who has a PhD makes about \$250 a month with housing in a prestigious university in one African country. Since she will make at least ten times as much if she emigrates to the United States or Europe she, like many African academics, may choose to work in those places. To respond to the brain drain of well-qualified nationals out of universities such as this one, assistance programmes place North American professors in positions at these universities for one or two year periods. Those visitors get paid the equivalent of their North American salaries, travel allowances, and education allowances for their children, and they get nicer housing: their total remuneration is probably thirty times that of their African co-workers. Many of the nurses, doctors, teachers, lawyers and scientists who have left their own countries to work in other nations where salaries are higher regret taking their skills out of their home countries but feel that they have no choice—their families at home need the money that their foreign salaries provide. If they went home, they would not be paid what the aid workers who have replaced them receive. Individuals cannot fix this problem, projects cannot fix it—the structures have to change.

The flow of money from poor countries to wealthy countries is another evidence of the grave disorder of our world. More money flows from poor countries to rich countries in debt service than flows from rich countries to poor countries in assistance. Between 1980 and 2006, despite the World Bank initiative to forgive the debt of heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC), the nations known collectively as “the South” have paid \$7.673 trillion in external debt service, and during that period their debt increased from \$618 billion to \$3.150 trillion.⁵³ Some people see the increasing burden of debt for the poorest nations as proof that grasping capitalists want the poor to become poorer in order to increase their own profits. Others blame the poor, saying that their politicians are corrupt, they have not understood the principles of private ownership, they lack entrepreneurial drive. The immediate reasons are complicated and include a combination of rising interest rates, the 1970s oil shock, falling commodity prices, and graft; but the underlying cause is that the parts of the world are a closely-integrated, coherent entity. The form of the connections has been developed gradually, over a long time. They grew in a way that was designed for the benefit of some parts at the expense of other parts, and that is how they still work.

Justice requires a response to the grave disorder and imbalance of the world that goes beyond finding someone else to blame. It is not enough to say that the international financial system is not working for the benefit of all, or that elected politicians do not always act in the interests of the populace, however true those observations may be. The injunction “to consider the welfare of the community as one’s own . . . to regard humanity as a single individual, and one’s own self as a member of that corporeal form” draws us to the inside of the problem—it is our problem, because we are part of the organism of humanity.⁵⁴ Even though it can seem overwhelming and impossible to chart a path towards justice from structures of inequality which have developed over centuries, we know that God has given us this capacity. Justice is the “robe”, the “ornament”, and the “crown” of human beings.⁵⁵ Since what we want to do is find a way to transform injustice into justice, paying attention to the nature of injustice can help us identify the actions we can take.

The essence of oppression is to not know who we are, or what actions will benefit us. Bahá’u’lláh wrote, “What oppression is more grievous than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?”⁵⁶ He explained that the Biblical prophecy regarding the oppression of the last days refers to a time “when the reins of mankind will have fallen into the grasp of the foolish and ignorant . . . when certain knowledge will have given way to idle fancy, and corruption will have usurped the station of righteousness.” He observed that those conditions are fulfilled in the present, “when the reins of every community have fallen into the grasp of foolish leaders, who lead after their own whims and desire.”⁵⁷ When we human beings are deprived of access to the truth about ourselves and the world, we cease to be able to take meaningful action. The Universal House of Justice explains that injustice eventually deprives people of their human spirit of initiative:

Deliberate oppression aims at dehumanizing those whom it subjugates and at de-legitimizing them as members of society, entitled to neither rights nor consideration. Where such conditions persist over any length of time, many of those affected lose confidence in their own perception of themselves. Inexorably, they become drained of that spirit of initiative that is integral to human nature and are reduced to the level of objects to be dealt with as their rulers decide.⁵⁸

The heaviest consequence of oppression is that when we are its victims, we cease to have confidence in ourselves, and our very human capacity to organise, create, plan and take action is diminished.

Materialistic thinking is a form of oppression that diminishes our awareness of human capacity. The Universal House of Justice describes the “spiritual damage” caused by replacing religion with materialist ideologies: “Underlying all these outward afflictions is the spiritual damage reflected in the apathy that has

gripped the mass of the peoples of all nations and by the extinction of hope in the hearts of deprived and anguished millions.”⁵⁹

The eclipse of religion has sapped the spirit of initiative that is integral to human nature. “Humanity is battered by forces of oppression, whether generated from the depths of religious prejudice or the pinnacles of rampant materialism.”⁶⁰ Passivity is the result when “a desire to be entertained is nurtured from childhood, with increasing efficiency, cultivating generations willing to be led by whoever proves skilful at appealing to superficial emotions.”⁶¹ Apathy, passivity, a lack of concern for others, or a perception that we are powerless are not merely characteristics of the modern age; they are symptoms of oppression.

If ignorance of ourselves and the world is a cause of oppression, then education is the means to overcome it. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explores this dynamic:

Close investigation will show that the primary cause of oppression and injustice, of unrighteousness, irregularity and disorder, is the people’s lack of religious faith and the fact that they are uneducated. When, for example, the people are genuinely religious and are literate and well-schooled, and a difficulty presents itself, they can apply to the local authorities; if they do not meet with justice and secure their rights and if they see that the conduct of the local government is incompatible with the Divine good pleasure and the king’s justice, they can then take their case to higher courts and describe the deviation of the local administration from the spiritual law. Those courts can then send for the local records of the case and in this way justice will be done. At present, however, because of their inadequate schooling, most of the population lack even the vocabulary to explain what they want.⁶²

The education which arms people against injustice is in part religious—that we understand the capacities God has given us, and their power in the world. It is also secular—that we know how to read, that we have developed the skills of scientific observation and rational thinking, and that we understand the laws of the country in which we live, and how those laws are intended to function. Another aspect of education that enables us to overcome injustice is the cultivation of a set of moral capabilities such as, for example, the ability to work in groups and to cultivate unity which is essential because the learning which contributes to social transformation takes place in action in communities. The followers of Bahá’u’lláh are trying to build communities that are characterised by learning, that manifest “a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service—supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment.”⁶³ Developing the capacity to systematically learn together allows communities to turn their God-given capacities towards the betterment of the world.

One step on a path of justice is to overcome habits of thinking which originate in the attempt of some to dominate others. The Universal House of Justice has directly linked justice with the need to overcome common attitudes which naturalize inequity: “Only if you perceive honour and nobility in every human being—this independent of wealth or poverty—will you be able to champion the cause of justice.”⁶⁴ The Universal House of Justice particularly asks young people to transcend those boundaries in order to fully participate in the transformation of society:

The world that Bahá’í youth are inheriting is one in which the distribution of educational, economic and other basic opportunities is grossly unjust. Bahá’í youth must not be daunted by such barriers. Their challenge is to understand the real condition of humanity and to forge among themselves enduring spiritual bonds that free them not only from racial and national divisions but also from those created by social and material conditions, and that will fit them to carry forward the great trust reposed in them.⁶⁵

Since, as we saw in Chapter One, social structures are embodiments of thought built up over generations, we contribute to creating justice by forging bonds that recognize the honour and nobility of every human being.

It is difficult to free ourselves from the spiritual damage of materialism and generations of oppression. It is not easy to teach ourselves new patterns of interaction that are characterised by love and unity rather than alienation and distrust. But as Bahá'u'lláh implies, spiritual education, following the words of the Messenger of God for this day, can set us on that journey:

Beseech ye the One true God that He may, through the power of the hand of loving-kindness and spiritual education, purge and purify certain souls from the defilement of evil passions and corrupt desires, that they may arise and unloose their tongues for the sake of God, that perchance the evidences of injustice may be blotted out and the splendour of the light of justice may shed its radiance upon the whole world. The people are ignorant, and they stand in need of those who will expound the truth.⁶⁶

Bahá'u'lláh's beautiful words provide a practical strategy. Through love and spiritual education, we purify ourselves and others from the habits of thought which perpetuate injustice. In the world in which we live, where perverse extremes of wealth and poverty are accepted as ordinary and even inevitable, ignorance surrounds us and we are all in need of spiritual education.

It might seem naïve or idealistic to suggest that divisions among human beings which have been built over five centuries can be overcome through a process of education. What good is learning in the face of the overwhelming want and suffering people now experience? If the structures of world society perpetuate injustice, don't the structures need to change? Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the oneness of the human race, and the power He released into the world to accomplish it, are the answer to these logical questions. Everything that Bahá'í communities are doing to promote spiritual education has the goal of creating a just, peaceful, dynamic and united world civilization. As the Universal House of Justice explained the Bahá'í practice of visiting homes, "A visit to a home should be seen as one element of a coherent pattern of action that seeks to enable specific populations to contribute to the construction of the society envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh."⁶⁷ Conversations in homes enable those participating to find others who want to help provide spiritual education for children, to assist adolescents to develop moral character, and to join in study of the Word of God in a way that builds unity and builds capacity. Once these activities begin, the joy and attraction of hearts that participants feel tends to attract others. "The vibrancy it [the community] manifests and unity of purpose that animates its endeavours are drawing into its swelling ranks those from every walk of life eager to dedicate their time and energies to the welfare of humanity."⁶⁸ This vitality, and the creativity it unlocks, will, over time, contribute to the creation of new social structures.

Spiritual education is an effective response to injustice because it develops the capacities God has given humanity, which are far greater than we comprehend. On an individual level, we all have abilities to serve others, to draw closer to God, and to manifest courage and self-sacrifice which we have not yet brought forth. On another level, the effort of people around the world to communicate, consult and collaborate in pursuit of a common purpose also releases capacity and "gives shape to their collective powers."⁶⁹ Writing to the Bahá'ís of the world of the "profound implications of their mission", the Universal House of Justice emphasized the profound consequences of the actions of ordinary people:

Let them not underestimate the power inherent in the system they are putting in place for the propagation of His Faith, nor mistake the true purpose of the global enterprise on which they have embarked. Let them not deviate from the path of learning on which they are set, nor be distracted by the ephemeral pursuits of a bewildered society. Let them not fail to appreciate the value of the culture now taken root in the community that promotes the systematic study of the Creative Word in small groups in

order to build capacity for service. Let them never forget the imperative to tend to the needs of the children of the world and offer them lessons that develop their spiritual faculties and lay the foundations of a noble and upright character. Let them come to realize the full significance of their efforts to help young people form a strong moral identity in their early adolescent years and empower them to contribute to the well-being of their communities. . . . By the rectitude of their conduct, the sincerity of their love for their fellow human beings, and the ardour of their desire to serve the peoples of the world, may they vindicate the truth proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh that humanity is one.⁷⁰

An attempt to become more fully aware of our spiritual capacities and to use them in service to humanity has a range of consequences in different parts of the world. In the places where the disorder of humanity is manifested as poverty, people can move out of unjust global patterns through developing confidence in their capacity. In seeking ways to enhance prosperity in the absence of adequate material resources, people can focus on the resources of understanding, unity and trust among neighbours and community members. We can build those relationships working together in the activities Bahá'í communities organise, such as gathering to pray, studying the Word of God together, visiting others in their homes to discuss profound subjects, teaching classes for the spiritual education of children, and helping young adults to orient their lives to service to others.

These same activities can help people who live in cities and regions with more material wealth recognize how their patterns of life contribute to the problem of global inequality and expand their sense of responsibility. The effort to engage in conversations with others about fundamentally important subjects, and to find “men and women eager to improve material and spiritual conditions in their surroundings” can change the way we understand our own lives.⁷¹ It is relatively easy to ask oneself to make a financial contribution to suffering people some place else; it is much more difficult to be aware of other people's suffering and to think, “How am I implicated? Since my life and this other life full of suffering are connected, how can I change my life to make that one better?” Learning to see our lives in a spiritual context can motivate people with greater access to material resources to change their destructive habits of over-consumption. Serving others can help people see economic injustice inside their own towns and cities, which can motivate them to ask their governments to consider the interests of all humanity, and not just their own nation, in international deliberations. They can participate in consumer organisations that promote the purchase of commodities for which the producers have gotten fair prices. They can contribute to bringing balance to world exchange by supporting local and regional production. The bonds of love that develop as people work together in community activities often makes those with greater access to material resources see opportunities for service to others of which they were previously unaware.

The extreme inequality and systemic injustice that characterise our world have not been unavoidable effects of humanity's march towards modernity: these are conditions that we, the human race, have created as a result of the way we have understood ourselves, our relationship to God and to each other. We can address unjust patterns of globalization by changing the way we think and the way we act. By developing our understanding and changing our habits, we can, over time, transform the social structures that surround us. Because the living organism of the world is sick and it has to be healed everywhere, we are responsible for transforming the manifestations of that disorder in the regions where we live. If we strive to disentangle ourselves from the accumulated falsities of our understanding of the world, we see that there is no “they”. There are no people in the world who are centuries behind, who have been left out of some process of progress which the rest of us have enjoyed. What we have in the world today, all of us have created together. When we abandon the comfortable dichotomies of rich/urban/First World and poor/rural/Third World that rationalize injustice, we create the potential for unity of thought and action. All of us, the people of the world, have the capacity and the responsibility to contribute to creating order

out of the chaos of our world. The mission of Bahá'u'lláh, as the Messenger from God sent to humanity for this time, is to create a new world order. Bahá'u'lláh's new world order will not be new because it is global. Global patterns of production and exchange made the world we have now. Bahá'u'lláh's new world order will be new because it will be both global and just. The best-beloved of all things in God's sight is justice. God has chosen us to be the instruments to bring about His justice. God has given us the means to create it: everything we have—our ability to serve, to read, to learn, and to assist others, our gatherings in our homes, the crops we can grow, the transportation we can provide to others, the songs we compose that encourage others, and our ability to obey the laws of God—all of these are the tools we can use to create justice in the world. We have been trying to do this, we have been learning to do it more effectively, and we will continue to improve. It is God's intention that we will succeed brilliantly.

Chapter Three

Understanding the Spiritual Economy

JUSTICE REQUIRES THAT ALL PEOPLE EXPERIENCE MATERIAL PROSPERITY.

Justice also requires that all people experience freedom. Bitter ideological conflicts and even wars have been fought over the premise that these two components of a just society cannot be reconciled. In fact, both the capitalists who championed freedom and the socialists who championed distribution through state mechanisms lost sight of the fundamental spiritual impulses that animate human reality. The economic structures created in the 20th century were premised on materialism, and they have not worked. More than twenty years ago, the Universal House of Justice drew attention to the failures of both ideological camps:

The time has come when those who preach the dogmas of materialism, whether of the east or the west, whether of capitalism or socialism, must give account of the moral stewardship they have presumed to exercise. Where is the “new world” promised by these ideologies? Where is the international peace to whose ideals they proclaim their devotion? Where are the breakthroughs into new realms of cultural achievement produced by the aggrandizement of this race, of that nation or of a particular class? Why is the vast majority of the world’s peoples sinking ever deeper into hunger and wretchedness when wealth on a scale undreamed of by the Pharaohs, the Caesars, or even the imperialist powers of the nineteenth century is at the disposal of the present arbiters of human affairs?⁷²

In order to create a world economy that actually does provide both material prosperity and freedom to the people of the world, a fundamental rethinking is necessary. To create justice we need to free ourselves from assumptions that come from imitating the past, and marshal the power that comes from trying to see with our own eyes.

The way people have access to productive resources such as education, land, water, and credit, and the way they are paid for their work are fundamental building blocks of a just society. When a social order apportions material resources fairly, everyone benefits, society grows more united, and civilization advances. Instability and suffering are the consequence of unbalanced economic rewards. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá observed:

But the principal cause of these difficulties lies in the laws of the present civilization; for they lead to a small number of individuals accumulating incomparable fortunes, beyond their needs, while the greater number remain destitute, stripped and in the greatest misery. This is contrary to justice, to humanity, to equity; it is the height of iniquity, the opposite to what causes divine satisfaction.⁷³

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s rejection of laws which allow a small number to accumulate large fortunes while others are destitute can help us build an understanding of the elements of economic justice.

The fabulous luxury which kings and rulers have sometimes apportioned to themselves from the wealth of their countries is also not just, according to Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. It is easy to reject the claim made by dictators such as Mobutu of Congo (Zaire) that his palaces, airplanes and villas on the French Riviera demonstrated the prestige of the nation he ruled. However, it is also important to question the rationalization given by parliamentarians and civil servants who grant themselves comfortable homes and expensive vehicles, saying that they use these costly perquisites to better serve their constituents who live in dire want. Addressing the kings of the earth in one of His tablets, Bahá’u’lláh instructed,

Overstep not the bounds of moderation, and deal justly with them that serve thee. Bestow upon them according to their needs, and not to the extent that will enable them to lay up riches for themselves, to

deck their persons, to embellish their homes, to acquire the things that are of no benefit unto them, and to be numbered with the extravagant. Deal with them with undeviating justice, so that none among them may either suffer want, or be pampered with luxuries.

This is but manifest justice.⁷⁴

‘Abdu’l-Bahá made similar statements. He described just kings as those who “give no thought to amassing enormous fortunes for themselves; they believe, rather, that their own wealth lies in enriching their subjects. To them, if every individual citizen has affluence and ease, the royal coffers are full.” Along the same line, he described ministers of state, “Content with a modest stipend, they consecrate their days and nights to the execution of important duties and the devising of methods to insure the progress of the people.”⁷⁵ Although it may be hard to even imagine that rulers would strive that every citizen would be wealthy, and government administrators would be content with modest stipends, this assertion of justice can be the foundation of our view of economic possibilities.

In envisioning a path from the world we have to one characterised by justice, it is helpful to recognize that the extreme divisions which characterise our world are relatively new. In the present, the greatest gap is between city-dwellers who have gained their wealth through global finance and exchange, and rural people who still strive to win subsistence from the land. But it is not true that city-dwellers have always been extremely wealthy and farmers have always been abjectly poor—that is a rationalization that naturalizes injustice. The gap between the materially wealthiest and the materially poorest within nations, and between nations, has been steadily growing: what we now experience is an absurd distortion. The history of this transformation is complex. Some of it has to do with economic, social, and political transformations that followed imperial rule—many regions of Latin America and Africa have never been as populous, or as prosperous, as they were before the violence of conquest. But some aspects of this growing inequality have occurred in the past century, and even in the past few decades. Part of the gap between the city and the country is the result of a deliberate transfer of wealth: in the mid-20th century, urban electrification, paved streets and urban hospitals and schools were paid for with profits from the crops grown by rural citizens. In Uganda, for example, peasant farmers did not receive the full value of the cotton they grew, and the money the government saved by paying farmers less than the full value of their crops funded the building of the Owen Falls dam across the Nile. This seemed fair to colonial planners in 1954, because they believed that the entire nation would be enriched by the rapid urbanization which the dam’s electricity was supposed to facilitate. Without the full profits from their crops, and without the benefit of the schools they paid for in urban areas, modernity has made farmers in many nations much poorer in relation to their urban fellow citizens.

The history of the creation of extreme economic inequality is complicated because our lives are a seamless fabric of material and spiritual elements, and because the circumstances of the change have been infinitely diverse. We do not see the whole story if we look only at material change; we also need to consider the opportunities people had to love and care for each other, and notice how those were lost, or gained. To tell this whole story, fully representing the different parts of the world, would require a much longer book, so this chapter focuses on the economic transformation which happened in England and regions that followed England’s example, because that story is the one that has most influenced economic thinking. The long-term consequences of the economic transformations which took place as parts of experiments in socialism, and the wide variety of capitalist transformations which occurred in various nations are important stories which are not told here.

To strive to create a world economy characterised by justice, we have to recognize that the characteristics of the world economy that now exists are not inherent in any economic system. The lack of

moderation that characterises our economy, and the civilization it fuels, is not necessary and it is not healthy. Bahá'u'lláh calls attention to the role of moderation in securing justice:

Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation. He discerneth the truth in all things, through the guidance of Him Who is the All-Seeing. The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. Thus warneth you He Who is the All-Knowing. If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation.⁷⁶

'Abdu'l-Bahá explained one application of the principle of moderation: "rules and laws should be established to regulate the excessive fortunes of certain private individuals and meet the needs of millions of the poor masses; thus a certain moderation would be obtained."⁷⁷

Viewed from a perspective which incorporates both spiritual and material reality, our existing world economy is not adequately productive. This idea is developed in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's analogy of European and North American material society as a beautiful but dead body. During his travels 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke frequently and eloquently about material civilization and spiritual civilization. He admired the material developments he saw, but he said "material civilization alone will not satisfy; it cannot meet the conditions and requirements of the present age."⁷⁸ "Material civilization is likened to the body, whereas divine civilization is the spirit in that body. A body not manifesting the spirit is dead."⁷⁹ "For material civilization is like unto a beautiful body, and spiritual civilization is like unto the spirit of life. If that wondrous spirit of life enters this beautiful body, the body will become a channel for the distribution and development of the perfections of humanity."⁸⁰ People who live in the cities and wealthy parts of the world need to pay attention to this image. The possessions and activities that concern these people are beautiful, but dead. Their civilization could be alive, but it is not. If one group of people have a pattern of economic behaviour that is impressive but dead, and some other people have a pattern of economic behaviour that is not so impressive but alive, who should be sharing with whom?

'Abdu'l-Bahá also pointed to the inadequacy of European society as a model for the world when he wrote in *The Secret of Divine Civilization* that:

All the peoples of Europe, notwithstanding their vaunted civilization, sink and drown in this terrifying sea of passion and desire, and this is why all the phenomena of their culture come to nothing. Let no one wonder at this statement or deplore it. The primary purpose, the basic objective, in laying down powerful laws and setting up great principles and institutions dealing with every aspect of civilization, is human happiness; and human happiness consists only in drawing closer to the Threshold of Almighty God, and in securing the peace and well-being of every individual member, high and low alike, of the human race; and the supreme agencies for accomplishing these two objectives are the excellent qualities with which humanity has been endowed.⁸¹

'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement contains a fundamental critique of the principles of the dominant economic model which developed in Europe. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the goal of social institutions is human happiness which can be obtained through drawing closer to God and providing for the peace and well-being of every member of society. Virtues are the means to obtain these goals. Yet the premise of the modern world economy has been the promotion of self-interest. Over the past few hundred years, we have created patterns of production and exchange which promote the self-centred actions of solitary, individual economic actors. Not only are the rules designed to validate selfish motivations, the engine of economic prosperity is ever-increasing levels of consumption. 'Abdu'l-Bahá observed that European societies "sink and drown" in "this terrifying sea of passion and desire."

In order to begin to comprehend what it means to live in a society that considers drowning in desire to be absolutely normal, it is worth tracing the history of this process in some detail. Shoghi Effendi has given us a key to understanding the social dimensions of the transformation of the world economy over the past several hundred years in his 1957 letter which analysed the state of the world at that moment. He wrote:

Parallel with this [deterioration of morality], and pervading all departments of life—an evil which the nation, and indeed all those within the capitalist system, though to a lesser degree, share with that state and its satellites regarded as the sworn enemies of that system—is the crass materialism, which lays excessive and ever-increasing emphasis on material well-being, forgetful of those things of the spirit on which alone a sure and stable foundation can be laid for human society.⁸²

Shoghi Effendi highlights not only the ever-increasing emphasis on material well-being, but also, the consequence of that materialism, which is that it causes forgetfulness of those things of the spirit which are the only stable and sure foundation for society. To understand the consequences of the modern world economy, therefore, we have to look for what we have forgotten regarding the spiritual foundations of a stable society.

This forgetting is the intellectual history of the modern world economy that is based on markets and prioritizes capital. We have a tendency to think of modernity as we experience it as inevitable. This unexpressed thought, if we articulated it, might be, “Yes, many people suffered in Europe and around the world to create free market capitalism, but the end result was positive: we are all the beneficiaries of this increase in freedom for individuals.” Recognizing humanity’s capacity for moral choice requires a different interpretation. Bahá’u’lláh associates the technological capacities of the modern world with His Revelation —“such arts and material means as are now manifest have been achieved by virtue of His Knowledge” — but condemns how those capacities have been used, observing that the peoples of the world have been “agitated and alarmed” by the “deeply-rooted and overwhelming corruptions” of “the civilization of the West.”⁸³ Humanity could have had the positive dimensions of industrialization and economic intensification without the negative social consequences if we had chosen not to forget the spiritual foundations of a stable society. The structures of industrial capitalism, which we take for granted, which appear to be natural just like the boundaries of nation-states, are the creation of people who, like despots and conquerors, sought selfish advantage. The effects of their actions endured, solidified over generations, and we live inside of them.

This criticism of capitalism does not imply that communism or socialism as the human race experienced them in the 20th century were superior: they were not. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá foresaw the failure of experiments in collectivism when he said, “absolute equality in fortunes, honors, commerce, agriculture, industry would end in disorderliness, in chaos, in disorganization of the means of existence, and in universal disappointment: the order of the community would be quite destroyed.”⁸⁴ The socialist experiments of the 20th century brought great suffering to communities and to individuals. They led to a draining of initiative, a loss of purpose and confidence, equal to that caused by extremely successful capitalism. But capitalism, communism, and socialism as we experienced them in the 20th century are not the only options we have for creating a dynamic and just economic system. Humanity has not yet created an economic system which uses our vastly increased technological capacities in ways that are conducive to human well-being.

A transformation in how people used natural resources in Northern Europe was a crucial part of the beginning of capitalism. Patterns of land use that involved many different people using the same land in complex ways changed into a pattern of land use in which one person was the owner and sole controller of that land. One famous example occurred in Scotland: the Duchess of Sutherland claimed ownership of 794,000 acres, evicted 15,000 people by burning their homes and villages and destroying their crops, and

replaced them with 131,000 sheep.⁸⁵ The people who succeeded in enclosing land—depriving anyone else of rights to use it—became very much richer, and the people who lost their rights to sustenance became very, very much poorer, and entirely lost their capacity to control their productive lives. Enclosure was an assertion of self-interest. Its structural consequences have been profound. These regions never regained their capacity to create prosperity for large numbers of people, and it could be argued that the extremes of wealth and poverty that enclosure created have endured, in various manifestations, up to the present.

Loss of common lands and rural communities, as well as the push into wage labour, eroded social networks and habits of cooperation. When most people lost their access to any productive resources except their own labour, and wealth became more concentrated, relationships between people which had in the past had social and economic dimensions became solely economic. This is called commodification: it means that aspects of life which had many kinds of value, such as people's ability to work, came to have only a monetary value. When groups of people worked in turns on each other's fields, and worked together on common fields, that work had had social value as well as productive value. It had maintained the connections among members of a community. Capitalist production replaced the social motivations for working with merely material motivations for working, which undermined or destroyed forms of community interaction. Karl Polanyi's influential analysis of modern economic history describes this process as "the smashing up of social structures in order to extract the element of labor from them," and asserted that what European powers did in their colonies in the early 20th century "was done in the 18th century to white populations by white men for similar purposes."⁸⁶

The way England and then other countries industrialized and the ways cities grew in order to accommodate workers intensified the destruction of social networks and the transition to an insistently individualistic organisation of society. Suddenly, in the mid-nineteenth century, people had to figure out how to use the technological capacity of new kinds of engines and new kinds of tools. The human race had to create a new pattern of working to use these new technological capacities. We could have created industrial production with a sharing of profits between workers and owners, so that a new kind of production wove a more solid social fabric, instead of the new workers that allowed them to maintain relationships of mutual support, and forms of community solidarity, instead of grinding cooperative social practices into non-existence. The technology would have worked just as well that way. Instead, we created forms of industrial production in which all the profits went to owners and workers were barely able to stay alive as they worked. This assertion of self-interest has been perpetuated in rigid extremes of wealth and poverty, social class conflict, and our love affair with individualism.

The massive suffering and impoverishment caused by industrialization created a moral dilemma for people who observed it. Social mechanisms that had provided for the poor in the past did not work in the new circumstances. Adam Smith's assertion of the autonomy of markets in *The Wealth of Nations* was actually a defence of the evolving economic order written in opposition to the work of contemporary thinkers who made a determined effort to document the extremely negative social consequences of enclosure and early industrialization.⁸⁷ Some saw the suffering of people who had lost their land as a necessary evil if England was to beat rival nations, and urged that workers should be prevented from growing their own food, because then they would be willing to work for the lowest wage that would keep them alive: "the more soberly our lowest classes are made to live at all times, the cheaper may our manufactures be sold."⁸⁸ Instead of changing new laws and new technologies in order to maintain the principle that society had a responsibility to ensure the sustenance of all its members, people rationalized the growing social inequality by changing the way they thought. Influential thinkers used analogies of conflict among animals to explain why the new economic organisation was causing harm to people forced to work at near-starvation wages. Their theories left out human capacity to transcend the self, and to

recognize and care for the social whole. They forgot the true purpose of work. It is difficult to estimate how thoroughly our current habits of thought are influenced by their ideas, which rationalized the social violence of that moment in human history.⁸⁹

The technological capacities of industrial production created another problem. How could the production of goods continue to be profitable when so much had been produced that no one needed any more? If everyone had clothing, how could the textile mill that produced cloth keep operating? The solution to this problem was to convince people that meeting their needs was not enough. They needed to be convinced that they would be better people—happier, freer, and more alive—if they bought more things. Part of the history of the past hundred years is our increasing commitment to this manipulation of our reality. We have developed forms of economic organisation that require constantly increasing rates of consumption. Everything about the productive systems in which we live, from the measure of Gross National Product (GNP) to the advertising we see every day, to the way that we live on the landscape, asks us to think of ourselves as bundles of needs, needs that can be met through purchases. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá observed, “material forces have attacked mankind.”⁹⁰ The organisation of the laws, structures, and habits of our economy, its forms of information and its built environment, all perpetuate this fabrication. Growth-oriented, consumption-driven capitalism dehumanizes all of humanity while providing immense wealth to a few.

Increasing inequality has been seen by some as the inevitable price we have to pay for economic dynamism, but that view of economic reality is fundamentally unjust. If we hold to the standard of justice discussed in Chapter Two, that the good of the part is always served by the good of the whole, economic activity should have positive consequences for all participants. Commenting on European society’s focus on merely material development, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote:

A superficial culture, unsupported by a cultivated morality, is as “a confused medley of dreams,” and external lustre without inner perfection is “like a vapor in the desert which the thirsty dreameth to be water.” For results which would win the good pleasure of God and secure the peace and wellbeing of man, could never be fully achieved in a merely external civilization.⁹¹

The Universal House of Justice made a similar point regarding the illusory quality of merely material development in a fascinating letter to the Bahá’ís of Iran when it described the wealth generated in modern Iran:

What emerged, instead, through the single-minded exploitation of Iran’s petroleum resources, was wealth on an almost unimaginable scale. In the absence of anything resembling a system of social justice, the chief effect was to vastly enrich a privileged and self-serving minority, while leaving the mass of the population little better off than they had been before. Treasured cultural symbols and the heroic episodes of a glorious past were resurrected merely to decorate the monumental vulgarity of a society whose moral foundations were built on the shifting sands of ambition and appetite.⁹²

The implication of this strong statement is that the creation of vast wealth, without social justice, has no permanent positive effect on society.

To begin to create forms of economic interaction conducive to human well-being, we need to reassert the spiritual realities that we forgot about two hundred years ago, when people in one part of the world began to re-arrange social order to promote the interests of a few. A fundamental step in this process is to recognize that economies are embedded in social systems: we cannot think about economic production as one reality and the rest of society as something distinct from it. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained, “Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy.”⁹³ Part of our blind imitation of the past is to believe that economic prosperity and material well-being require that some people will be out of work and poor. This, clearly, is not the foundation of a stable society.

All economic activity creates social relationships. Every time a person makes something, or adds value to something, or buys or sells something, that action has both material and social consequences. People are connected with each other through everything which is produced or exchanged. This is the implication of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement: "The fundamentals of the whole economic condition are divine in nature and are associated with the world of the heart and spirit."⁹⁴ The social consequences of economic activity can be positive or negative, but they are never neutral. When farmers grow food with the intention to create well-being for the people who will consume it, this creates positive social relationships. When a factory owner shares profits with the workers who produce the goods, this creates positive social relationships. When a middle-person trader buys goods with a concern for the needs of the producer for a just price, this creates positive social relationships. The middle-person trader who squeezes producers and deceives consumers creates negative social relationships. The factory owner who takes all the profit and leaves the workers with bare subsistence creates negative social relationships. But, that same factory could be a source of positive social relationships if the owner provided for the workers adequately and shared profits with them.

We are entangled in the mesh of the accumulated falsity that markets are neutral and that self-interested actions create efficiency, that efficiency is a social good, and that economic vitality is not possible any other way. These habits of thought tell us that economic activity can be beneficial even when its social consequences are negative. A more valid perception, one that pays attention to those things of the spirit which are the only foundation for a stable society, would be that economic activity is only productive when it has positive social consequences. 'Abdu'l-Bahá consistently observed that the material civilization of the West, the fruit of capitalism, was not productive: "Material civilization alone is not sufficient and will not prove productive."⁹⁵ He wrote to the Committee for a Durable Peace, "Material civilization is like the body. No matter how infinitely graceful, elegant and beautiful it may be, it is dead. Divine civilization is like the spirit, and the body gets its life from the spirit, otherwise it becomes a corpse."⁹⁶ In order to breathe life into the dead body of material civilization, all our productive activity has to have positive social consequences. 'Abdu'l-Bahá urges us to "manifest true economics to the people. Show what love is, what kindness is, what true severance is and generosity."⁹⁷ We manifest true economics by making sure that any economic interaction has positive consequences for every party involved in it. Every economic activity we engage in—when we are producing things, adding value to things, or exchanging things—creates opportunities to express love, concern, and respect for other people. The more this happens, the more vital the connections will be, and also, the more prosperous.

The opposite is also true. Economic activity which does not recognize the interdependence of all participants, that expresses self-interest rather than concern for others, is not only not productive, it is utterly, essentially destructive. Over the long term, self-interested economic activity creates differences that engender hatred and social disorder. If the essence of economics is love, but we behave as though the essence of economics is selfishness, people are hurt, the social order breaks down, and divisions emerge. This is the story of the world we live in. Patterns of economic activity which benefit some participants but harm others are the real origin of many enduring conflicts which we attribute to culture, ethnicity, and religion.

Our contemporary experiences of social class conflict—and even the existence of the kind of class hierarchy our societies currently manifest—are the result of patterns of production which systematically rewarded a few and immiserated the majority. The British working class, for example, came into existence in the last years of the 18th century and the early years of the 19th as legal changes made it impossible for people to provide for themselves as they had previously, and forced hundreds of thousands into factory labour in dehumanizing conditions. People who had understood themselves with a broad and diverse set of

identities came to define themselves in terms of the difficult conditions they experienced, and against those whose interests opposed their own.⁹⁸ Ethnic conflicts which people believe to be ancient actually developed over the past century, in part through a deliberate policy to reduce the cost of producing commodities such as cotton, coffee, and cocoa. Colonial authorities provided schools, roads, and infrastructure to regions where the commodities grew well, and withheld all the means of development from drier regions where commodities did not grow. People in the drier regions were forced to travel to the commodity-growing regions to earn money to pay their tax, and because they had no other options, they had to accept work at low wages. The intentionally underdeveloped areas were called “labour reserves”. When the people whose regions were not developed spoke different languages than the people whose regions were developed, the frustration and envy they felt took on an ethnic dimension.⁹⁹ Prejudices and hatred that have arisen out of divisive, socially destructive economic practices cannot be resolved through appeals that people recognize the oneness of humanity. Wholesome patterns of economic interaction, which re-insert love and concern into production, will also be necessary.

If humanity had confronted the challenge of world-encompassing trade and the technologies that led to large scale industrial production with an unshakeable conviction of the dignity and rights of every person and the interdependence of society, we could have organised industrial production and global exchange differently. It would have been possible to expand trade, enhance forms of credit, and intensify production in ways that benefitted all participants. The powerful transformative processes that have shaped our modern world, including industrialization, imperialism, and globalization as we are now experiencing it, were not inevitable. Other possibilities existed, but we created a dynamic economic system that is spiritually dead and socially destructive.

Our continuing commitment to the false belief that economic activity is good if it is efficient leads to international trade policy and development practice which deliberately transform patterns of life which express social obligation into less personal, more self-oriented market relationships. A stark form of this is the imposition of forms of private property in land, where individual ownership of property is made to replace complex, relationship-oriented patterns of access to land in which many different members of a community have rights to various aspects of the land’s productive capacity. This is going backward, not forward. The same reduction of social responsibility and social connections can happen in a more subtle way when people move from family-owned and controlled agricultural activity into wage labour in an agricultural enterprise. If people on the edge of a Latin American city lose their land because it gets bought for an export-generating carnation farm, and those people who had been farmers become wage labourers that can look like a success. The nation’s economic statistics look better if the people are wage labourers, because what they produce generates hard currency. They may even have more money as labourers. Of course, they have to buy necessities they produced before. And if we consider that the criterion for economic activity is whether it builds bonds of love, they were probably better off as small farmers than as wage labourers. For these people, tighter integration into a global economy has been a backward step, not a forward one.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s instruction that his listeners should “manifest true economics,” with the elements of love, kindness, true severance and generosity provides new criteria for evaluating economic success. It creates a framework for imagining a modern world economy that moves beyond materialistic motives.¹⁰⁰ A deliberate and systematic insistence that economic interactions be characterised by love, severance, and generosity would transform human society in profound ways. Insisting on interactions characterised by love, severance, and generosity would change the way we human beings think about ourselves, because attention to love in our productive lives would make us aware that happiness does not come from owning things or satisfying desires, but from serving others. It would change the structure of wealth inside the

nation, inside cities, and around the world, because the impulse towards generosity on the part of those who have more than they need would facilitate the creation of prosperity where it does not now exist. The elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty would create stability and lead to profound improvements in health. A deliberate and systematic insistence on economic interactions characterised by love, severance and generosity would restructure the geographical organisation of economic activity, because productive units that build positive social relationships would probably happen more fundamentally inside regions, rather than on a global scale. It would require a change in the structure of ownership, because stockholders would not be content to receive profits from companies that might be treating workers unjustly and would demand more knowledge. Industrial processes would change, with a goal of drawing on the intelligence and creative capacity of workers, instead of seeking to replace workers with machines. We would have to redefine the measure of economic success, because people seeking to show love, severance, and generosity might decide that efficiency is an empty goal. It might lead us to producing less and throwing away less.

Freeing ourselves from spiritually-dead, destructive economic practices will be a gradual process. We will have to change conceptions of the nature of economics, policies of international institutions and governments, and many elements of the fabric of societies. For example, our current systems of economic indicators measure production. Anything that is produced—guns, cigarettes or pollution-recovery technology—counts equally as productive activity. Some economists are trying to create alternative economic indicators that would measure not only production, but also environmental health and social well-being. This kind of assessment would have the value of showing the relative weaknesses of materially-wealthy societies and it also could document the negative social consequences of purely material development.

Ordinary people also need to address the challenge of habits of economic life which create only an illusion of prosperity. Local level activity is fundamentally powerful because a just and healthy global body of the world requires different kinds of local economic linkages than those that characterise our current world economy. Productive activity which embodies love and concern for the wellbeing of all the participants will have fewer links which involve raw materials flowing from regions that are now relatively poor to regions which are relatively wealthy. It will have many more links inside regions, especially between countries in the regions that are now poorer. Locally-initiated development activities, and the regional links they build, can be the beginnings of those kinds of patterns.

It is also essential that we make the effort to infuse spiritual life into productive activity on the local level because the challenges and possibilities are vastly different in different places. In big cities, local groups may become involved in urban agriculture, using unused land to grow food and flowers. In this effort, people who are neighbours but strangers create a source of income, sustenance and beauty. They are also creating important social connections and building community. In many parts of the world, committed people in local communities may have to deliberately recreate habits of caring for each other—such as feeding the sick, encouraging young adults, and visiting the elderly—that have been devalued and almost forgotten. In other places, with other circumstances, local communities will perceive and address other kinds of needs.

We can, if we draw on our untapped powers of unity and collective vision, influence the patterns of productive life in our neighbourhoods, cities and regions. Where many people still control their work—by producing crops on land they own, or producing crafts, or providing services—people in an area can consult together about how to ensure that their efforts are mutually beneficial. They can consider ways to enhance patterns of equitable exchange in their region. Where people are further removed from control of production and most of their economic activity is as consumers, they can still make that activity an expression of love by thinking about the human, social consequences of their economic actions. They can

seek out real people, with whom they can build relationships, as sources for their purchases. They can support local farmers and make purchases from locally-owned businesses. Flourishing locally-owned enterprises create vital communities. When we create economic connections that have love and concern in them we are infusing life into the dead body of an economy built on self-centred and materialistic motivations.

Our actions contribute to the profound structural transformations which will be required to create a world economy characterised by justice. Patterns of global trade, systems of production and distribution, and national and international law will have to come to reflect the principle of the interdependence of the human race. When small groups of people make an effort to systematically learn how to shape their productive activities in a way that produces benefit for a whole group, they contribute to the creation of new economic patterns. An important step in this process is to change the way we understand human nature and society. Rampant materialism characterises our societies, so it is easy for people to believe that society must always be built on materialistic impulses. In order to create the possibility that people might organise society differently, people must demonstrate that self-interest is not the only motivation for economic activity. As the Universal House of Justice wrote in its message to the peoples of the world in 1985:

... it is in the glorification of material pursuits, at once the progenitor and common feature of all such ideologies, that we find the roots which nourish the falsehood that human beings are incorrigibly selfish and aggressive. It is here that the ground must be cleared for the building of a new world fit for our descendants.¹⁰¹

Many people around the world have found deep satisfaction and confirmation in service to others through study circles, devotional gatherings and providing classes for the spiritual education of children; these experiences help them to recognize that human beings are not incorrigibly selfish. The bonds of love that are created among people through their efforts to promote the Word of God can become manifest in their lives in mutual support. Where people who live close to each other in villages and neighbourhoods revive patterns of supporting and caring for each other, their love and mutual concern can begin to have more concrete and systematic material manifestations.

The Bahá'í community's intention to help societies overcome the oppression that is caused by a deadeningly-materialistic economy is clearly evident in the junior youth empowerment programme. This effort draws young people between the ages of 11 and 15 into serious consideration of the purpose of their lives. Together, junior youth analyse the social forces they experience, consider the motivations of advertisers who seek to ask them to define themselves through consumption, and develop their capacity to serve others. Junior youth groups channel the enthusiasm and the high aspirations of young people into channels of service to humanity, and create a safe haven to escape the self-absorption, negativity, and apathy which consumer culture can create. Junior youth groups help young people develop a strong moral character to "direct their energies toward the advancement of civilization."¹⁰² In Kiribati, a town council member called the programme "the medicine for the social sickness that is affecting the youth."¹⁰³ Reports from other locations suggests that the programme "engages their (the junior youth's) expanding consciousness in an exploration of reality that helps them to analyse the constructive and destructive forces operating in society and to recognize the influence these forces exert on their thoughts and actions, sharpening their spiritual perception, enhancing their powers of expression and reinforcing moral structures that will serve them throughout their lives."¹⁰⁴ Young adults who free themselves from the oppression of a materialistic understanding of their own selves, and find joy in directing their lives towards the betterment of humankind, contribute to the foundation in thought of an economy characterised by justice.

It is not true that self-interest is the engine of healthy economic growth and that maximum production at the lowest cost creates economic well-being for society. The founders of modern economics did not see the whole picture. "Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self," Bahá'u'lláh urged.¹⁰⁵ If we want economic activity that creates vitality, that has positive results, we have to think beyond ourselves. We have to make the effort to make our economic actions build positive relationships by expressing love, true severance, and generosity. The body of humanity is beautiful but dead. It will only be beautiful and alive when we take actions that ensure that all productive activity is social, caring and selfless activity.

Chapter Four

Recognizing and Utilizing Power

JUSTICE IS THE CONSEQUENCE OF GOOD GOVERNANCE, AND EVERY PERSON IN A SOCIETY PARTICIPATES IN CREATING IT.

When those who wield power in the world seek to serve the interests of the whole population and not only the interests of a few and citizens support their efforts, the result is unity, happiness, and social order. Bahá'u'lláh described the role of governing authorities in these words: "If the rulers and kings of the earth . . . arise and resolve to dedicate themselves to whatever will promote the highest interests of the whole of humanity, the reign of justice will assuredly be established amongst the children of men, and the effulgence of its light will envelop the whole earth."¹⁰⁶ Addressing the "kings of the earth" Bahá'u'lláh associated the right to govern with the obligation to uphold justice:

If ye stay not the hand of the oppressor, if ye fail to safeguard the rights of the downtrodden, what right have ye then to vaunt yourselves among men? . . . God hath committed into your hands the reins of the government of the people, that ye may rule with justice over them, safeguard the rights of the downtrodden, and punish the wrongdoers.¹⁰⁷

Engaged citizens and competent administrators also make essential contributions to a just and well-governed society. A profound level of citizen participation in governance is implied in the following statement of Bahá'u'lláh: "No man can attain his true station except through his justice. No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation."¹⁰⁸ This statement requires careful consideration, because imitation of the past can lead people to imagine that rulers are entirely responsible for social well-being, when in reality, everyone is responsible. 'Abdu'l-Bahá compares the wind, rain and sun that allow crops to grow when seasons change, to the forces that develop a society:

When, through the Divine bestowals, three things appear on earth, this world of dust will come alive, and stand forth wondrously adorned and full of grace. These are first, the fruitful winds of spring; second, the welling plenty of spring clouds; and third, the heat of the bright sun. When, out of the endless bounty of God, these three have been vouchsafed, then slowly, by His leave, dry trees and branches turn fresh and green again, and array themselves with many kinds of blossoms and fruits. It is the same when the pure intentions and the justice of the ruler, the wisdom and consummate skill and statecraft of the governing authorities, and the determination and unstinted efforts of the people, are all combined: then day by day the effects of the advancement, of the far-reaching reforms, of the pride and prosperity of government and people alike, will become clearly manifest.¹⁰⁹

In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's analogy, the pure intentions and justice of rulers are like the wind that facilitates pollination, the wisdom and consummate skill and statecraft of governing authorities are like the rain that enables plants to germinate and grow, and determination and unstinted efforts of people are like the sun that triggers photo-synthesis. Just as plants grow well when they have all these elements, a society prospers when it has rulers with pure intentions, able administrators, and a population striving to be educated and engaged.

Living under a just government is a distant dream for many people in the world today, however. Even when people have the right to vote for their leaders, elections are often undermined by systemic corruption and by campaigning that increases prejudices and divides society. The vast amounts of money candidates spend to get elected causes even well-intentioned politicians to focus their attention on whoever can fund

their campaigns. Media messages designed to make people vote for a particular politician inflame passions and distort the truth. When elected leaders act in their own self-interest, rather than that of the people whom they are supposed to serve, so-called democratic elections can be a tragic pretence. They can create an illusion of citizen participation when they actually diminish people's ability to articulate their concerns or to take actions that ensure their needs will be met. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote about the danger of self-serving parliamentarians more than a century ago in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*:

It is unquestionable that the object in establishing parliaments is to bring about justice and righteousness, but everything hinges on the efforts of the elected representatives. If their intention is sincere, desirable results and unforeseen improvements will be forthcoming; if not, it is certain that the whole thing will be meaningless, the country will come to a standstill and public affairs will continuously deteriorate.¹¹⁰

When structures of representative governance do not function, ordinary citizens face difficult challenges.

Failures of good governance lead to oppression. This is clear in obvious cases, when a government neglects an entire population or part of it, or deprives particular groups of the right to sustenance, political voice, or other freedoms. More subtly, the many barriers to electing upright and effective leaders can lead to a feeling of hopelessness. People "become drained of that spirit of initiative that is integral to human nature and are reduced to the level of objects to be dealt with as their rulers decide" which is, as we saw in Chapter Two, the ultimate consequence of oppression.¹¹¹ The deficiencies of current electoral practices are causing that kind of loss of confidence in our own abilities, according to the Universal House of Justice:

One of the signs of the breakdown of society in all parts of the world is the erosion of trust and collaboration between the individual and the institutions of governance. In many nations the electoral process has become discredited because of endemic corruption. Contributing to the widening distrust of so vital a process are the influence on the outcome from vested interests having access to lavish funds, the restrictions on freedom of choice inherent in the party system, and the distortion in public perception of the candidates by the bias expressed in the media. Apathy, alienation, and disillusionment are a consequence, too, as is a growing sense of despair of the unlikelihood that the most capable citizens will emerge to deal with the manifold problems of a defective social order.¹¹²

One manifestation of injustice is the neglect of education, health care and infrastructure which occurs when parliaments allocate large salaries and luxurious benefits to themselves and elected leaders devote all their energies to staying in power. "Apathy, alienation, and disillusionment" are a deeper manifestation of injustice: nations lose the vital contributions their citizens could make when people think of governing as the work of those who are venal and self-interested, and that there is nothing that they themselves can do to create positive social conditions.

A path towards justice requires human beings to recognize the capacity we have to participate in building a just society, even when the social structures that surround us are oppressive. To move beyond the diminished, defective social order that lack of good governance creates, we must have confidence in humanity's capacity to create structures that dispense justice, and see our own ability to help bring those structures into being. This is a spiritual capacity. The ability to perceive justice and to be attracted to it is a quality of the human soul given to us by God that human beings can cultivate, nurture, and wield under any social conditions, however difficult. The power released into the world by the Manifestation of God takes effect in part through the deliberate actions of believers, and the efforts people make to respond to the Word of God eventually shape social institutions. Bahá'u'lláh explained this process using an analogy: the clothing which warms and protects "the body of mankind," is justice, wisdom, and religious revelation. "As

the body of man needeth a garment to clothe it, so the body of mankind must needs be adorned with the mantle of justice and wisdom. Its robe is the Revelation vouchsafed unto it by God.”¹¹³ People put on that robe through their conscious effort to grow close to God, to follow Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings, and engage in social action together, and no force on earth can prevent them from doing so.

In a world which attaches supreme importance to political power, media attention, and instant results, it can be difficult to grasp the concept that people create justice through conscientious transformation of themselves and the patterns of interaction in their communities. A large protest action or civil disobedience which gets the attention of the world’s media may seem more real and more effective, but partisan conflict and dissension undermine the possibility of creating a functioning, coherent society. The Universal House of Justice explained this to the Bahá’ís in Iran:

Bahá’ís view government as a system for maintaining the welfare and orderly progress of human society, and obedience to the laws of the land is a distinguishing feature of their beliefs. . . . They are enjoined to work alongside their compatriots in fostering fellowship and unity and in establishing peace and justice. They seek to uphold their own rights, as well as the rights of others, through whatever legal means are available to them, conducting themselves at all times with honesty and integrity. They eschew conflict and dissension. They avoid contest for worldly power.¹¹⁴

The Bahá’í perspective is that constructive action facilitates lasting social progress, while dissension and conflict have negative consequences. This chapter first describes the logic of positive strategies for overcoming injustice. It then considers how those strategies function in three situations which have evoked strong public protests: demonstrations against the difficult conditions faced by farmers, protests against electoral fraud and the curtailment of freedom of expression, and vigils and demonstrations opposing war as a response to terrorism.

The powers that build justice are all positive. Love and unity create justice and are reinforced by it. Confidence that every human being potentially reflects divine qualities enables people to overcome their own shortcomings and engage constructively with those who treat them wrongly. Access to knowledge is the right of all people, and the establishment of systems for collective learning facilitates justice. Consultation contributes to justice. The administrative order ordained by Bahá’u’lláh can be an effective structure for creating unity and motivating social transformation. Recognizing that transformation occurs as a slow, organic process of building a better society through thousands and millions of small steps allows people to focus their energies in constructive ways. The Universal House of Justice emphasized the inherently positive process of overcoming injustice when it wrote to the Bahá’ís of Iran in 2009, “The victim of oppression can transcend it through an inner strength that shields the soul from bitterness and hatred and which sustains consistent, principled action.”¹¹⁵

Justice, which is fundamentally a relationship among people which recognizes their interdependence, is fuelled by love and unity, and at the same time, it creates them. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explanation of justice—“to regard humanity as a single individual, and one’s own self as a member of that corporeal form”—is a statement of the oneness of humanity.¹¹⁶ On the level of thought, unity allows us to perceive justice, and on a practical level, unity creates the energy, focus and momentum which sustained action requires. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá drew attention to the power of unity at every level of society, from the family to the nation, and the world:

Note ye how easily, where unity existeth in a given family, the affairs of that family are conducted; what progress the members of that family make, how they prosper in the world. Their concerns are in order, they enjoy comfort and tranquillity, they are secure, their position is assured, they come to be envied by all. Such a family but addeth to its stature and its lasting honour, as day succeedeth day. And if we widen

out the sphere of unity a little to include the inhabitants of a village who seek to be loving and united, who associate with and are kind to one another, what great advances they will be seen to make, how secure and protected they will be. Then let us widen out the sphere a little more, let us take the inhabitants of a city, all of them together: if they establish the strongest bonds of unity among themselves, how far they will progress, even in a brief period and what power they will exert. And if the sphere of unity be still further widened out, that is, if the inhabitants of a whole country develop peaceable hearts, and if with all their hearts and souls they yearn to cooperate with one another and to live in unity, and if they become kind and loving to one another, that country will achieve undying joy and lasting glory. Peace will it have, and plenty, and vast wealth.¹¹⁷

Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá both described unity as the medicine that will heal the sicknesses afflicting the human race. A deep love for humanity springs from a love of God. This love leads, in turn, to consciousness of the oneness of humanity, and motivates people to take action. 'Abdu'l-Bahá described the connections:

It is certain that the greatest of instrumentalities for achieving the advancement and the glory of man, the supreme agency for the enlightenment and the redemption of the world, is love and fellowship and unity among all the members of the human race. Nothing can be effected in the world, not even conceivably, without unity and agreement, and the perfect means for engendering fellowship and union is true religion.¹¹⁸

When people experience love and unity, they are drawn to creating justice. At the same time, observing efforts to establish justice creates trust and builds unity among people—love, justice, and unity reinforce each other.

Ensuring that all people have access to knowledge is a fundamental strategy for creating justice. We need knowledge to productively engage the material, social and spiritual worlds. Knowledge also gives people voice—we need to be able to accurately read the world around us, to reason logically, and to express ideas clearly in order to participate in making decisions that shape society. Asserting the “centrality of knowledge to social existence,” the Universal House of Justice observed “the perpetuation of ignorance is a most grievous form of oppression.”¹¹⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained that education is essential for social transformation:

The primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education. It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward. The principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples is ignorance. Today the mass of the people are uninformed even as to ordinary affairs, how much less do they grasp the core of the important problems and complex needs of the time.¹²⁰

As we saw in Chapter Two, education enables people to develop their latent spiritual, moral, and intellectual capacities, and to seek redress when they are treated unjustly.

The standard of justice is not met by merely providing the majority of the human race with a mediocre education, while a very small number, who are also the wealthiest and have the most material power, receive excellent training. If justice means to choose for others what we choose for ourselves, to think of ourselves as part of one organic whole, and “to know of a certainty that if pain or injury afflicts any member of that body, it must inevitably result in suffering for all the rest,”¹²¹ then everyone ought to have access to transformative and empowering education. We, the human race, have not yet created systems which allow most of us to benefit from the explosion of scientific knowledge that has characterised the past 150 years. A deeply unfortunate consequence of the combination of tremendous technological advances

with colonial rule was that pre-industrial processes of education, through which people had learned to improve their lives using the science of observation, were discredited as primitive, but never replaced.¹²² Unequal access to education generates and perpetuates unequal access to power. Explaining that “social change is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another,” the Universal House of Justice stated the standard which Bahá’ís must try to uphold:

Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities. Justice demands universal participation.¹²³

This challenge may seem overwhelming, but failure to address it leaves the majority of the world’s people vulnerable to manipulation by the few who have been favoured with education.

Focussing the activities of the Bahá’í community on processes that allow people to learn together is a way to move towards justice. Study circles, for example, allow people to develop skills and put them into practice in service to others. In 2010, the Universal House of Justice commented on the “striking contrast” between what the Bahá’ís are attempting and “the spiritually bankrupt and moribund ways of an old social order that so often seeks to harness human energy through domination, through greed, through guilt or through manipulation.”¹²⁴ As Bahá’ís try to build communities through “a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation” their interactions take on quite different qualities. According to the Universal House of Justice, 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.¹²⁵

Communities with these qualities express and point the way towards justice.

Consultation is an indispensable tool for overcoming injustice. In any situation, a decision that arises out of the thoughtful deliberation of a number of people is better than that made by just one person, because different points of view regarding a common goal assist in uncovering the truth. When people are struggling to change patterns of interaction which are fundamentally unfair, consultation is even more important, because it leads people to understanding and insight they might not achieve without it. Bahá’u’lláh wrote,

Consultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude. It is a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth. For everything there is and will continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation.¹²⁶

Transcending oppression requires moving beyond habits of thought which perpetuate injustice. Consultation can help to free us from unjust ways of thinking that have become embedded in the structure of society, and seem to be entirely natural. For example, the Universal House of Justice drew attention to the power of consultation to assist humanity to move beyond its commitment to the absolute sovereignty of nation-states, a transition in thought which will be necessary to create global structures that could guarantee world peace:

The courage, the resolution, the pure motive, the selfless love of one people for another—all the spiritual and moral qualities required for effecting this momentous step towards peace are focused on the will to act. And it is towards arousing the necessary volition that earnest consideration must be given to the reality of man, namely, his thought. To understand the relevance of this potent reality is also to appreciate the social necessity of actualizing its unique value through candid, dispassionate and cordial consultation, and of acting upon the results of this process.¹²⁷

Consultation allows us to use intellect and wisdom to become aware of possibilities for social organisation that we could not otherwise perceive.

A structure is necessary to channel human capacities to transform society. We find such a structure in the administrative order ordained by Bahá'u'lláh. In 2007, the Universal House of Justice observed that endemic corruption and partisan political fighting have made people despair that good government is unobtainable. “Evident everywhere is a yearning for institutions which will dispense justice, dispel oppression, and foster an enduring unity between the disparate elements of society.”¹²⁸ People need functioning institutions in order to mobilize collective will. To have broad legitimacy, those institutions have to be genuinely democratic and capable of unifying diverse peoples. To move humanity beyond the well-established habits and patterns which already characterise our societies, institutions must have the capacity to realize a vision. To endure, they must be resilient. The Bahá'í community's experience around the world is that when people make an effort to develop their collective capacities, their administrative institutions do manifest these characteristics. The Universal House of Justice explained the intention:

The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh is the divinely ordained system for which nations and peoples so desperately search. Hailed by the Báb in the Persian Bayán, its foundational features prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, this Order is without precedent in human history for its standard of justice and its commitment to the practical realization of the oneness of mankind, as well as for its capacity to promote change and the advancement of world civilization. It provides the means by which the Divine Will illumines the path of human progress and guides the eventual establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.¹²⁹

The structures of the Bahá'í administrative order give every person a voice—in consultations at the Nineteen Day Feast and in reflection meetings which gather together all the believers who live in a micro-region which Bahá'ís call a cluster. Every adult participates in electing Local and National Spiritual Assemblies, Regional Bahá'í Councils, and indirectly, the Universal House of Justice. Bahá'í administrative institutions are more than a world-encompassing system of participatory governance. Their goals in governing are deeper than just ensuring participation. Unifying humanity, developing capacities for selfless service to others, and making the human world reflect the divine world are the purpose of the laws, practices, and structures of Bahá'í administration.¹³⁰

The perspective that social transformation is a gradual, incremental process of building something new allows people to focus their energies on constructive activities rather than negative ones. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained this by comparing the development of social institutions to the development of the human body:

The world of politics is like the world of man; he is seed at first, and then passes by degrees to the condition of embryo and fetus, acquiring a bone structure, being clothed with flesh, taking on his own special form, . . . (T)he political world in the same way cannot instantaneously evolve from the nadir of defectiveness to the zenith of rightness and perfection. Rather, qualified individuals must strive by day and by night, using all those means which will conduce to progress, until the government and the people develop along every line from day to day and even from moment to moment.¹³¹

The insight that social institutions grow and mature over time, just as human beings do, creates a vast realm for human action. Instead of merely registering the faults of existing institutions, people can engage with deficient institutions in a way that facilitates their development. They can ask, what qualities and skills would people need for these structures to be more equitable? How do we develop those skills and qualities in ourselves, and encourage them in others? What changes in attitude would make transformation of these institutions more possible, and how do we foster those changes?

Our efforts to build communities that focus the energies of all participants on the betterment of society give us insights and skills with broad applicability. The more our capacities and resources develop, the more we are able to do with them. The Universal House of Justice described the early stages of this process:

A rich tapestry of community life begins to emerge in every cluster as acts of communal worship, interspersed with discussions undertaken in the intimate setting of the home, are woven together with activities that provide spiritual education to all members of the population—adults, youth and children. Social consciousness is heightened naturally as, for example, lively conversations proliferate among parents regarding the aspirations of their children and service projects spring up at the initiative of junior youth. Once human resources in a cluster are in sufficient abundance, and the pattern of growth firmly established, the community's engagement with society can, and indeed must, increase.¹³²

In order to conform to Bahá'u'lláh's standard of justice, these efforts will focus on building capacity within neighbourhoods and villages.

The scope and complexity of social action must be commensurate with the human resources available in a village or neighbourhood to carry it forward. Efforts best begin, then, on a modest scale and grow organically as capacity within the population develops. Capacity rises to new levels, of course, as the protagonists of social change learn to apply with increasing effectiveness elements of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, together with the contents and methods of science, to their social reality.¹³³

To clarify why Bahá'ís turn to these spiritual powers to contribute to a process of creating justice, it will be useful to consider three situations in which manifest injustice has been the focus of large scale protests and demonstrations. The plight of poor farmers, the longing of citizens for transparent elections and freedom of expression, and the aspirations of people that nations will resolve conflicts without war are all realities which require attention and action. It is certainly true that protests and demonstrations on the occasion of meetings of international organisations have drawn media attention to the global consequences of agricultural policies that benefit some nations at the expense of others, and that protests have raised global awareness of political injustices. In the first years of the 21st century, vast demonstrations across the planet expressed a widespread repudiation of war as a strategy of international relations. But what are the long term consequences of strategies for social change based on conflict? Imagining that Europe is the model for how all societies must develop has led to a valorisation of protest and social contest, since carefully-orchestrated protests did ameliorate some of the worst abuses of European industrialization and colonization. This perception ignores the reality that conflict as a social strategy also solidified divisions which made social progress much more difficult, and it dismisses the results obtained by more harmonious and inclusive forms of conflict resolution (For example, during the late colonial era, European trade unionists were sent to African colonies to teach African workers to stop seeking unity and to think and act more according to their class interests). The freedoms achieved through oppositional social movements a century ago are not valid models for the present. The apparent successes of protest as a strategy cannot be replicated now because the transformations society requires are too complex. It is not enough to be against poverty, against political corruption, and against war. Humanity has to find new ways to productively organise society, and devise ways to systematically create social processes and institutions that embody

justice. The power of love and unity, the structures for making decisions of the Bahá'í administrative order, consultation and education enable people to build something new, as the following examples show.

Small-scale farmers face immense challenges. Their ability to secure subsistence is diminishing—farm families forced into urban slums caused the population of urban areas to exceed that of rural areas early in the 21st century. Farmers have been losing ground legally, economically, and socially for more than a hundred years in many countries.¹³⁴ Can the powers of unity, love, and consultation, and the structures of Bahá'í administration, really contribute to surmounting these complex problems? Farmers need what everyone in society needs—access to education, health care, and infrastructure such as clean water and transportation. In order to grow crops, they need secure access to land, seeds and water. Farmers need recognition and support for the forms of reciprocity within communities and across ecological micro-regions which have given those who work the land resilience in the face of variable weather. They need legal structures that give them fair access to markets, and a fair return for their products. Farmers prosper when they are not forced to bear more than their share of taxation, and when prices for their products are relatively stable. People in rural communities can create some of these conditions for success themselves, but the basic cause of farmers' distress is the low value placed on agriculture and rural life in national and international systems of exchange.

One part of the way back to justice for farmers would be to recognize how much they have been disadvantaged through a false perception that industrialization would be the source of prosperity for modern society. Nations have prioritized the provision of services for industry and urban areas over the provision of services for rural areas, and populations have also expended family resources in a way that sent educated family members into urban areas, further diminishing rural communities. The pursuit of a vision of modernity based on the minority of the human race that drew its livelihood from industrial work and exchange in cities inevitably led to problems, because it ignored the principle that we are part of one organic whole which is the human race. "A social order structured to meet the needs of one group at the expense of another results in injustice and oppression."¹³⁵ Economic planning needs to be oriented to farmers because, until quite recently, they had been the majority and agriculture still provides the best option for secure subsistence for the majority of the population. 'Abdu'l-Bahá made this point in 1912:

The question of economics must commence with the farmer and then be extended to the other classes inasmuch as the number of farmers is greater than all other classes, many many times greater.

Therefore, it is fitting that the economic problem be first solved with the farmer, for the farmer is the first active agent in the body politic.¹³⁶

If laws, tax codes, and the provision of social services followed this logic, small farmers would not have the problems they face in the present.

More than a century of systematic de-valuing of rural economies has created a web of social structures that makes small-scale agriculture unproductive, and pushes people out of rural communities and into urban slums. Protest that brings attention to this situation is not enough. Changing the structures that disadvantage farmers will take a long time, and it will have to occur at every level—with changes in thinking, law, policy, the allocation of resources, and with changes in how people interact with each other. A commitment to the oneness of humankind motivates people to try to move societies in a way that redresses wrongs done to farmers, and unity inside rural communities and between farmers and townspeople alleviates some elements of suffering. Consultation enables people to seek solutions together, and local institutions like Bahá'í elected councils provide a machinery to implement those plans. The efforts of Bahá'í communities to ensure that children, youth and adults are educated contributes to the revitalization of

rural communities. Baha'u'llah's definition of justice—that we choose for others what we choose for ourselves—sets a standard for the alleviation of rural poverty which is comprehensive and enduring.

Injustice comes to our attention in an immediate and dramatic way when governments fail to conduct transparent elections, or overtly oppress a minority group. The actions taken by the Bahá'í community in response to the modern persecution of Iranian Bahá'ís demonstrates the potential of responding to ill-treatment in a positive way.¹³⁷ In 1955, the Faith was outlawed in Iran, its activities were banned, all the administrative headquarters of Bahá'í communities were seized, and Bahá'í properties, including holy places, were destroyed. Bahá'í homes and productive resources such as farms and shops were attacked and looted and a family of seven was hacked to death. In response, more than a thousand Bahá'í groups and assemblies contacted the Iranian government and the Sháh, respectfully appealing for an end to the persecution. The Secretary General of the United Nations, relevant U.N. organisations and member-states also received appeals. Shoghi Effendi asked every Bahá'í group and Assembly in the United States “to address telegraphically President Eisenhower, appealing for his intervention for protection from further massacres of our offenseless, law-abiding co-religionists in Iran and the safeguard of their human rights.”¹³⁸ These measures effectively curbed the persecution until the Iranian revolution, more than twenty years later. When Iranians overthrew the Sháh in 1979, conservative religious forces used incitement to persecute the Bahá'ís as one way to consolidate their grip on power. Over the next few years, the revolutionary government executed more than 200 Bahá'ís, mobs ransacked hundreds of homes, and, by government decree, all Bahá'ís lost their rights to education and employment. The Bahá'í community relied on the strategies it had used in the 1950s—appealing for fairness from authorities in Iran, and asking national and international leaders to intervene on behalf of the Bahá'ís. They attempted to document the banning of the Faith, the imprisonment and execution of Bahá'í leaders and the attacks on families in a way that expressed a recognition of the humanity of their persecutors. Although the Faith remained banned and Bahá'ís were not allowed to elect their councils on the national or local levels, the international condemnation of the persecution seemed to have an effect, as the number of executions decreased over time and Bahá'ís were able to practice their faith quietly.

A further wave of persecution in the first decade of the 21st century led again to the imprisonment of the appointed leaders of the Bahá'í community, and a greater curtailment of organised community life. Once more, the Bahá'í community sought to publicize the persecution without vilifying the perpetrators. It asked governments and international institutions to intercede with the Iranian government. People in Iran have noticed that Bahá'ís continue to express love for Iran and confidence in the possibility of justice, in the face of a well-organised, systematic plan to deprive Bahá'ís of education, livelihoods, leadership, and any form of public expression of their Faith. As a result, according to the Universal House of Justice, “increasing numbers have become aware of the destructive effects of religious prejudice on efforts to build a progressive society and are determined to promote a culture founded on the high ideal of unity in diversity.”¹³⁹ The Universal House of Justice has asked the Bahá'ís of Iran to respond to the ill-treatment they receive in a way that benefits the entire society:

Remain confident that your steadfastness in the face of countless struggles and your sacrifices to advance the interests of your country will not be forgotten by your compatriots and will be rewarded by God. Strive, then, with constancy and steadfastness, with joy and radiance, to fulfil your spiritual obligations. In all matters extend support and encouragement to one another and spare no effort in strengthening the foundations of unity within your community. Persevere with sincerity and earnestness to secure your rights through recourse to the law, and deal with those who oppress you with loving kindness, with patience and forbearance, and counter their insults with words of peace and affection. Continue to strive in the arena of service to your homeland, and through your participation in

constructive discourse with your neighbours, co-workers, friends and acquaintances, play a decisive role in society's progress.¹⁴⁰

The Universal House of Justice encouraged the Bahá'í community to be confident, to make use of consultation, to promote education informally since Bahá'ís were not allowed to attend universities, and to seek ways to promote the equality of women and men. Their focus was to be on how they could contribute to the well-being of the whole society, and not on how they had been wronged.

The need to free ourselves from the burden of armed conflict is one of the great problems facing the human race. A widespread longing to repudiate war was evident in 2003 when 6 to 8 million people in up to 60 nations participated in coordinated anti-war demonstrations over two days in February.¹⁴¹ On the one hand, their effort was inspiring; that so many people could speak with one voice, expressing their desire to prevent an invasion of Iraq, offers a glimpse of the world's people uniting in thought and acting on a common vision of humanity's future. On the other hand, their inability to influence the course of events poignantly demonstrated that without a positive plan of action, the raised voices of millions cannot create a peaceful world. The way forward for humanity, according to the Universal House of Justice, is a process of learning about our collective capacity through the instrumentality of consultation. The crowning stage, the peak of this process of learning, will be the convocation of the gathering called for by Bahá'u'lláh, Who said:

The time must come when the imperative necessity for the holding of a vast, an all-embracing assemblage of men will be universally realized. The rulers and kings of the earth must needs attend it, and, participating in its deliberations, must consider such ways and means as will lay the foundations of the world's Great Peace amongst men.¹⁴²

This gathering, which will mark the dawning of the maturity of the human race, will be characterised by consultation among the world's leaders. Consultation is also the means through which humanity mobilizes the will to want this gathering and to make it happen. The will of peoples and nations to gather to create peace requires an awareness of human capacity which consultation will develop. It requires a movement from conjecture—that perhaps, maybe, it might be possible that we could stop being aggressive—to certitude about our ability to create and live in a world characterised by peace. The Universal House of Justice stated that the attempt to achieve peace through the consultative action proposed by Bahá'u'lláh would have a powerful effect. “The very attempt to achieve peace through the consultative action he proposed can release such a salutary spirit among the peoples of the earth that no power could resist the final, triumphal outcome.”¹⁴³

The persistent, systematic action of ordinary people as well as diplomats will bring this about. We will mobilize the will to act through candid, dispassionate, and cordial consultation, followed by action on the results of the consultation, and humanity's effort to do this will release the spiritual force necessary for its accomplishment. “Whether peace is to be reached only after unimaginable horrors precipitated by humanity's stubborn clinging to old patterns of behaviour, or is to be embraced now by an act of consultative will, is the choice before all who inhabit the earth.”¹⁴⁴ All human beings are capable of engaging in conversations in homes, in devotional gatherings, study circles, and in other situations, that lead to a growing awareness of humanity's capacity to create peace. All human beings are capable of raising awareness of possibilities that mobilize the will of more and more people to long for and ask for a gathering of rulers to set the terms of world order. In 1987, writing through its Secretariat, the Universal House of Justice explained that Bahá'í communities contribute to the transitions envisioned in *The Promise of World Peace* by “engaging people from all walks of life in discussions on peace” which imbue populations with hope and a sense of personal commitment.¹⁴⁵ Spiritual education contributes to this process because the paralysis of our collective will emerges from our collective lack of understanding of human capacity,

which is held in place by the materialistic ideologies and structures that surround us. “It is here that the ground must be cleared for the building of a new world fit for our descendants.”¹⁴⁶ Through systematic learning and consultation, we, the human race, can overcome our ignorance, and our subjugation to materialism and oppression, and learn to articulate our desire for a new order.

Farmers need a fair share of their nations’ resources, people need functional and transparent political structures and guarantees of their rights, and the people of the world need the benefit of effective global institutions. Recognizing that world-encompassing structures of governance, finance, and security will bend and change in response to the united, loving voices of the people of the world articulating their desire for justice gives every individual a clear and significant role. Our effort to learn about human reality is a contribution. Our efforts to draw others into a process of building nurturing communities focussed on developing the capacities of children, youth, and adults is a contribution. “Until the nerves and arteries of the nation stir into life, every measure that is attempted will prove vain; for the people are as the human body, and determination and the will to struggle are as the soul, and a soulless body does not move.”¹⁴⁷

We participate in building the foundation of a just world order in the way we raise our children and the way we interact with neighbours, co-workers and friends. Of course, systematic efforts are more effective than random ones, and the core activities of Bahá’í communities all contribute concretely to the process of raising the awareness that will give humanity the confidence to demand the restructuring of world institutions that will move us forward.

We need to understand the organic character of this process. It has many, many stages, and we will be developing skills along the way. We do not need to be concerned that some future task will overwhelm us, because we are not there yet. Because this is an organic growth process, being involved is critical for our own spiritual health and for the health of others. Every part is contributing to every other part. We may not perceive the value of our own contributions, but others will depend upon them. Study circles and children’s classes create awareness of human reality; they develop the skills of perception and understanding that humanity needs. Devotional gatherings offered to whole communities are a way of rehabilitating people’s understanding of the true nature of religion. Junior youth groups channel the energy of the young towards service to humanity.

The Bahá’í community’s confidence in humanity’s capacity to create justice, and our vision of how it will happen, will help to strengthen the vision, understanding, and commitment of people in the towns and cities in which we live. Knowing who we are, knowing what God wants for us, knowing how to draw people into the endeavour of fulfilling Bahá’u’lláh’s intentions, allows us to take the actions that contribute to creating good governance, peace and prosperity in villages, towns and cities.

“Soon,” according to Bahá’u’lláh, “will the present day Order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead.” And in another passage He states, “By Myself, the day is approaching when We will have rolled up the world and all that is therein, and spread out a new Order in its stead. He, verily, is powerful over all things.”¹⁴⁸ The new world order that will soon be spread out is not a carpet that the Hand of God rolls out. It is a complex, tightly woven pattern of human interactions, and we are the material that is knotted together in that new world order. We combine together in the institutions Bahá’u’lláh has ordained, in a tightly-woven pattern of our love for each other, our attempts to manifest the oneness of humanity, and our efforts to learn and to teach.

Chapter Five

Faith in Action

THE WORLD WE INHABIT IS DARK WITH INJUSTICE.

The structures of society embody divisions among nations, classes, and peoples made by tyrants who consolidated their power by distorting reality. Our economic structures have created unimaginable wealth for a few, and immiseration for the majority. Endemic corruption and partisan fighting undermine good government in many nations. The blatant suffering caused by violent conflicts, by hunger and disease, and by manufactured hatreds are part of the oppression humanity experiences. Even worse is our perception that these conditions are natural—that different ethnic groups and religious communities have always fought each other, that competition among self-interested economic actors is the best strategy for prosperity, that nation-states are the safest basis for international order. Our ideas trap us in a world characterised by injustice, and most oppressive of all is the belief that there is nothing we can do to change it.

According to Bahá'u'lláh, religion is a lamp and justice is the light of that lamp. When religion loses its force, justice deteriorates. Every kind of injustice we experience in the present has its origins in a failure to comprehend, and act on, the true spiritual reality of human beings which religion upholds. The illumination of faith and the love of God could burn away the divisions and hatreds among people, bind together economic producers and consumers in mutually-beneficial relationships, and inspire the respect and care for others which is the basis of good government. But without the lamp, there is no light.

In truth, religion is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world, for the fear of God impelleth man to hold fast to that which is good, and shun all evil. Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquillity and peace cease to shine.¹⁴⁹

Living in the chaos and confusion of societies that have turned away from religion, it is difficult for us to recognize the role that religion potentially has in creating justice, and the role we potentially have as people who can act on faith. The despair, apathy and powerlessness in the face of injustice that people feel is itself a manifestation of the dimming of the light of religion.

We learn to walk the path of justice explored in this book when we truly grasp the power of faith in action. In Chapter One, we considered Bahá'u'lláh's statement that He has given humanity the capacity to transform injustice into justice:

Justice is, in this day, bewailing its plight, and Equity groaneth beneath the yoke of oppression. The thick clouds of tyranny have darkened the face of the earth, and enveloped its peoples. Through the movement of Our Pen of glory We have, at the bidding of the omnipotent Ordainer, breathed a new life into every human frame, and instilled into every word a fresh potency. All created things proclaim the evidences of this world-wide regeneration. This is the most great, the most joyful tidings imparted by the Pen of this wronged One to mankind. Wherefore fear ye, O My well-beloved ones? Who is it that can dismay you? A touch of moisture sufficeth to dissolve the hardened clay out of which this perverse generation is molded. The mere act of your gathering together is enough to scatter the forces of these vain and worthless people.¹⁵⁰

This important passage from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh describes how true religion creates justice. Part of this is the way a common faith unites people and organises them to achieve challenging goals. On a

deeper level, the Words spoken by God's Messengers release a creative power into the world.¹⁵¹ Bahá'u'lláh's revelation revitalizes all humanity, and actions stimulated by the Word of God—even "the mere act" of gathering together—dissolves the hardened clay of unjust social structures and habits.

In order to effectively use the power God has given us to establish justice on earth, we have to understand the reality of religion. It is easy to think of religion as the churches, mosques, and temples that we see around us, without recognizing that religion is really something more—it is "capable of profoundly influencing the structure of social relationships."¹⁵² It is possible to love God, and strive to be obedient, without seeing the real implications of faith. What we need to know about ourselves to create world-encompassing social structures characterised by justice is locked away from us by the materialism of our habits of thought. 'Abdu'l-Bahá described these conditions in one of His talks in New York in 1912. He said:

Consider to what a remarkable extent the spirituality of people has been overcome by materialism so that spiritual susceptibility seems to have vanished, divine civilization become decadent, and guidance and knowledge of God no longer remain. All are submerged in the sea of materialism.

Although some attend churches and temples of worship and devotion, it is in accordance with the traditions and imitations of their fathers and not for the investigation of reality. . . . They are holding to certain imitations which have descended to them from their fathers and ancestors. . . . the darkness of imitations encompasses the world.¹⁵³

Religion has become something people have, like a possession, or something people belong to, like a club, or something they do with their time, like working in their garden. It is true that the actions which express our faith do draw our souls closer to God and our hearts closer to each other, and make us happy. But religion is much, much more than something we do for ourselves because we like the experience.

Religion is a force that illuminates and transforms every aspect of reality. It creates order in the world. "Whatever is sent down from the heaven of the Will of God is the means for the establishment of order in the world and the instrument for promoting unity and fellowship among its peoples."¹⁵⁴ True religion is an encompassing reality—the blessings of God constantly surround us, and the intentions of God shape our reality, beyond our conscious awareness. As we saw in Chapter One, each Messenger from God releases a power into the world. The Word of God is more than the actual words of God's Messengers, which people read in scripture.

The Word of God is the king of words and its pervasive influence is incalculable. It hath ever dominated and will continue to dominate the realm of being. The Word is the master key for the whole world, inasmuch as through its potency the doors of the hearts of men, which in reality are the doors of heaven, are unlocked.¹⁵⁵

The Word of God, Bahá'u'lláh explains in another passage, is "the Cause of the entire creation," "the Command of God which pervadeth all created things" and "God's all-pervasive grace, from which all grace doth emanate."¹⁵⁶ The Word of God is both the intentions of the Messengers of God, voiced in their speech, and the power given to human beings by God to accomplish those intentions. Bahá'u'lláh wrote of *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, that "it hath encompassed all men ere their recognition of it."¹⁵⁷ We can most fully manifest the great capacity God has bestowed on us by trying to align ourselves with the Word of God. When we allow imitation of the past and the pervasive materialism of modern society to limit our view of religion, we impoverish ourselves in the context of abundant spiritual gifts. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains,

The Sun of Truth has risen above the world but we are ensnared in the dark of our imaginings. The waters of the Most Great Sea are surging all around us, while we are parched and weak with thirst. The divine bread is coming down from heaven, and yet we grope and stumble in a famine-stricken land.¹⁵⁸

As we saw in Chapter Three, a long process of turning away from God in a context of tremendous technological, economic, and social upheaval led to the acceptance of the belief that human beings are merely bundles of desires that must be met. The self-interest and self-absorption which modern society encourages cuts people off from awareness of their spiritual reality. When people's practice of religion is only empty forms, they may not experience spiritual transformation or see it in others. It becomes easy for people to believe that human beings are fundamentally selfish, that people will always try to take advantage of each other, and that conflict is inevitable. It is true that human beings have the capacity to be selfish—it is part of our nature and we see it all around us. In fact, human beings are capable of turning towards God or of turning away. We can manifest selfish qualities or we can manifest spiritual ones. The contribution religion makes to humanity is that it “reaches to the roots of motivation.” When it is faithful “to the spirit and example” of the Messengers of God, “it has awakened in whole populations capacities to love, to forgive, to create, to dare greatly, to overcome prejudice, to sacrifice for the common good and to discipline the impulses of animal instinct.”¹⁵⁹ To move towards justice, human beings need to believe that a just society is possible. To believe that it is possible, people need to see the spiritual capacities which religion can evoke. Educating our own souls, and learning together with others to express our collective potential are the actions that make that possible.

True religion is constantly changing. Gathering in hallowed spaces and repeating the rituals practiced by generations before us is imitation of the past, not the dynamic, enlivening force that religion is intended to be. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained this in 1912:

Creation is the expression of motion. Motion is life. A moving object is a living object, whereas that which is motionless and inert is as dead. All created forms are progressive in their planes, or kingdoms of existence, under the stimulus of the power or spirit of life. The universal energy is dynamic. Nothing is stationary in the material world of outer phenomena or in the inner world of intellect and consciousness. Religion is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive. If it be without motion and non-progressive, it is without the divine life; it is dead.¹⁶⁰

The succession of Messengers of God, including Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, causes change and vitality in religion, but a religious community must also make an effort to learn, to grow, and to change. As we saw in Chapters Two and Four, Bahá'í communities try to organise themselves around learning because learning is the process which frees human beings from oppression. It leads us to a recognition of the capacities God has given us, enables us to leave behind the false perceptions which rationalize inequity and gives people the means to find solutions to the problems they confront. Bahá'í communities are trying to develop skills in collective learning, so that we can become more vital, dynamic, and responsive to opportunities and needs inside our communities and in the society around us. We manifest the new life that Bahá'u'lláh has breathed into every human frame through our collective efforts to generate, apply, and diffuse knowledge. The positive powers that build justice come into being through practice, through action in the world, and making an effort to learn from those actions.

Faith in action builds communities. It causes the circle of people who believe that Bahá'u'lláh is a Messenger of God to grow larger. More profoundly, it leads to the establishment of justice as this is the goal of our actions as followers of Bahá'u'lláh. Talking to youth about their aspirations can be the beginning of new junior youth groups. Having conversations with people about spiritual subjects enables us to connect to people who sincerely long to serve humanity. When those people participate in study circles, and start devotional gatherings, the result is not just that the Bahá'í activities are more dynamic and the community is growing larger. The force that must multiply and build to overcome injustice in the world is humanity's ability to see ourselves as part of one united, connected whole that is the human race. We must nurture the

spiritual connections which become manifest in new kinds of relationships among people and, eventually, in new social institutions. We must allow the Word of God to take root in us, and create capacities we otherwise could not develop. Justice is built from all of the activities Bahá'í communities undertake together, because the tools humanity needs will come from a renewal of our understanding of the reality and power of religion. To re-establish people's understanding that a connection to the Divine shapes societies is to re-open the possibility that people can create justice. The Universal House of Justice described the complex and dynamic process through which Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation effects "profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society":

The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá'í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.¹⁶¹

Bahá'u'lláh's mission is to create a civilization characterised by a level of justice that the human race has not yet experienced—in the present, we can be agents of that transformation by visiting each other in homes to discuss spiritual reality, holding devotional gatherings, and studying together. The path towards that justice includes junior youth consulting about service and children memorizing the Word of God. It includes children's teachers, junior youth animators and friends working together in neighbourhoods and villages sacrificing, consulting, and striving to learn how to advance the plan for the human race that Bahá'u'lláh, God's most recent Messenger, has brought.

The Universal House of Justice stressed the importance of recognizing the true meaning of our actions at a historic moment in modern history. Addressing the followers of Bahá'u'lláh who had gathered from all over the world to observe the opening of the terraces leading from the port of Haifa to the Shrine of the Báb and to the top of Mount Carmel, the Universal House of Justice contrasted the resplendent achievement of the Bahá'í community with the manifest suffering of humanity. Bringing justice to the world, the House of Justice emphasized, is the purpose that all our activities are intended to serve:

Reflection on what the Bahá'í community has accomplished throws into heartbreaking perspective the suffering and deprivation engulfing the great majority of our fellow human beings. It is necessary that it should do so, because the effect is to open our minds and souls to vital implications of the mission Bahá'u'lláh has laid on us. "Know thou of a truth," He declares, "these great oppressions that have befallen the world are preparing it for the advent of the Most Great Justice." "God be praised!" 'Abdu'l-Bahá adds, "The sun of justice hath risen above the horizon of Bahá'u'lláh. For in His Tablets the foundations of such a justice have been laid as no mind hath, from the beginning of creation, conceived." In the final analysis, it is this Divine purpose that all our activities are intended to serve, and we will advance this purpose to the degree that we understand what is at stake in the efforts we are making to teach the Faith, to establish and consolidate its institutions, and to intensify the influence it is exerting in the life of society.

Humanity's crying need will not be met by a struggle among competing ambitions or by protest against one or another of the countless wrongs afflicting a desperate age. It calls, rather, for a fundamental change of consciousness, for a wholehearted embrace of Bahá'u'lláh's teaching that the time has come when each human being on earth must learn to accept responsibility for the welfare of the entire human family. Commitment to this revolutionizing principle will increasingly empower individual believers and Bahá'í

institutions alike in awakening others to the Day of God and to the latent spiritual and moral capacities that can change this world into another world.¹⁶²

The more we understand the connections between our efforts to put faith into action and the process of overcoming injustice in the world, the more effective we will be.

The path to justice is a straight path. It has been laid out by Bahá'u'lláh. We are walking that path together, and the whole intention of God's Revelation is that we will arrive.

PART II

BAHÁ'Í WRITINGS ON JUSTICE

1. Justice as a Human Capacity

Justice is an ornament of the soul

Whatever betide us, we beseech Thine ancient forgiveness, and seek Thine all-pervasive grace. Our hope is that Thou wilt deny no one Thy grace, and wilt deprive no soul of the ornament of fairness and justice.

Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh, p. 246

Say: "O God, my God! Attire mine head with the crown of justice, and my temple with the ornament of equity. Thou, verily, art the Possessor of all gifts and bounties."

Justice and equity are twin Guardians that watch over men. From them are revealed such blessed and perspicuous words as are the cause of the well-being of the world and the protection of the nations.

Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, pp. 12-13

Say: Let truthfulness and courtesy be your adorning. Suffer not yourselves to be deprived of the robe of forbearance and justice, that the sweet savors of holiness may be wafted from your hearts upon all created things. Say: Beware, O people of Bahá, lest ye walk in the ways of them whose words differ from their deeds. Strive that ye may be enabled to manifest to the peoples of the earth the signs of God, and to mirror forth His commandments. Let your acts be a guide unto all mankind, for the professions of most men, be they high or low, differ from their conduct. It is through your deeds that ye can distinguish yourselves from others. Through them the brightness of your light can be shed upon the whole earth.

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 305

...if a soul is endowed with the attributes of true faith and characterized with spiritual qualities he will become to all mankind an emblem of the outstretched mercies of God. For the attributes of the people of faith are justice and fair-mindedness; forbearance and compassion and generosity; consideration for others; candor, trustworthiness, and loyalty; love and loving-kindness; devotion and determination and humanity. If therefore an individual is truly righteous, he will avail himself of all those means which will attract the hearts of men, and through the attributes of God he will draw them to the straight path of faith and cause them to drink from the river of everlasting life.

Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, pp. 55-56

Why should man, who is endowed with the sense of justice and sensibilities of conscience, be willing that one of the members of the human family should be rated and considered as subordinate?

Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 108

In the same way, knowledge is a quality of man, and so is ignorance; truthfulness is a quality of man; so is falsehood; trustworthiness and treachery, justice and injustice, are qualities of man, and so forth. Briefly, all the perfections and virtues, and all the vices, are qualities of man.

Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 236

No one would contend that you are alone in the ordeals you are enduring. The victims of injustice today number in countless millions. Each year, the agendas of the human rights organizations are overwhelmed by appeals from spokespersons for oppressed minorities of every type—religious, ethnic, social and national. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh, "Justice is in this day bewailing its plight, and Equity groaneth beneath the yoke of oppression." What has more alarmed perceptive observers of such situations than even the physical and material anguish caused is the spiritual damage done to the victims. Deliberate oppression

aims at dehumanizing those whom it subjugates and at de-legitimizing them as members of society, entitled to neither rights nor consideration. Where such conditions persist over any length of time, many of those affected lose confidence in their own perception of themselves. Inexorably, they become drained of that spirit of initiative that is integral to human nature and are reduced to the level of objects to be dealt with as their rulers decide. Indeed, some who are exposed to sustained oppression can become so conditioned to a culture of brutalization that they, in their turn, are ready to commit violence against others, should the opportunity offer itself.

The Universal House of Justice, 26 November 2003, To the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the Cradle of the Faith

Justice requires seeing with one's own eyes

O SON OF SPIRIT!

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.

Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words, Arabic #2

The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye.

Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 156

He hath extended assistance to every wayfarer, hath graciously responded to every petitioner and granted admittance to every seeker after truth. In this Day the Straight Path is made manifest, the Balance of divine justice is set and the light of the sun of His bounty is resplendent, yet the oppressive darkness of the people of tyranny hath, even as clouds, intervened and caused a grievous obstruction between the Day-Star of heavenly grace and the people of the world. Blessed is he who hath rent the intervening veils asunder and is illumined by the radiant light of divine Revelation.

Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 255-56

Exert yourselves that ye may attain this transcendent and most sublime station, the station that can insure the protection and security of all mankind. This goal excelleth every other goal, and this aspiration is the monarch of all aspirations. So long, however, as the thick clouds of oppression, which obscure the daystar of justice, remain undispelled, it would be difficult for the glory of this station to be unveiled to men's eyes.

Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, pp. 14-15

"In the estimation of God," He states, "all men are equal. There is no distinction or preference for any soul, in the realm of His justice and equity."

Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted by Shoghi Effendi, The Advent of Divine Justice, p. 37

The world that Bahá'í youth are inheriting is one in which the distribution of educational, economic and other basic opportunities is grossly unjust. Bahá'í youth must not be daunted by such barriers.

Their challenge is to understand the real condition of humanity and to forge among themselves enduring spiritual bonds that free them not only from racial and national divisions but also from those

created by social and material conditions, and that will fit them to carry forward the great trust reposed in them.

The Universal House of Justice, 24 May 2001, To the Believers Gathered for the Events Marking the Completion of the Projects on Mount Carmel

Only if you perceive honor and nobility in every human being— this independent of wealth or poverty— will you be able to champion the cause of justice.

The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2008

Justice requires choosing for others what we choose for ourselves

The word of God which the Supreme Pen hath recorded on the third leaf of the Most Exalted Paradise is this: O son of man! If thine eyes be turned towards mercy, forsake the things that profit thee and cleave unto that which will profit mankind. And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbor that which thou choosest for thyself. Humility exalteth man to the heaven of glory and power, whilst pride abaseth him to the depths of wretchedness and degradation.

Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 64

And finally We beseech God, exalted be His glory, to enable thee to aid His Faith and turn towards His justice, that thou mayest judge between the people even as thou wouldst judge between thine own kindred, and mayest choose for them that which thou choosest for thine own self.

Bahá'u'lláh, The Summons of the Lord of Hosts, p. 137

The friends of God must be adorned with the ornament of justice, equity, kindness and love. As they do not allow themselves to be the object of cruelty and transgression, in like manner they should not allow such tyranny to visit the handmaidens of God.

Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Women, reprinted in The Compilation of Compilations, Vol 2, #2145

Be fair to yourselves and to others, that the evidences of justice may be revealed, through your deeds, among Our faithful servants. Beware lest ye encroach upon the substance of your neighbor. Prove yourselves worthy of his trust and confidence in you, and withhold not from the poor the gifts which the grace of God hath bestowed upon you. He, verily, shall recompense the charitable, and doubly repay them for what they have bestowed. No God is there but Him. All creation and its empire are His. He bestoweth His gifts on whom He will, and from whom He will He withholdeth them. He is the Great Giver, the Most Generous, the Benevolent.

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 278

In such a question moderation is preferable. It lies in the capitalists' being moderate in the acquisition of their profits, and in their having a consideration for the welfare of the poor and needy—that is to say, that the workmen and artisans receive a fixed and established daily wage—and have a share in the general profits of the factory.

It would be well, with regard to the common rights of manufacturers, workmen and artisans, that laws be established, giving moderate profits to manufacturers, and to workmen the necessary means of existence and security for the future. Thus when they become feeble and cease working, get old and helpless, or leave behind children under age, they and their children will not be annihilated by excess of poverty. And it is from the income of the factory itself, to which they have a right, that they will derive a share, however small, toward their livelihood.

Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, pp. 275-76

Justice is a powerful force

Justice is a powerful force. It is, above all else, the conqueror of the citadels of the hearts and souls of men, and the revealer of the secrets of the world of being, and the standard-bearer of love and bounty.

Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 32

The light of men is Justice. Quench it not with the contrary winds of oppression and tyranny. The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men. The ocean of divine wisdom surgeth within this exalted word, while the books of the world cannot contain its inner significance. Were mankind to be adorned with this raiment, they would behold the day-star of the utterance, 'On that day God will satisfy everyone out of His abundance,'¹⁶³ shining resplendent above the horizon of the world. Appreciate ye the value of this utterance; it is a noble fruit that the Tree of the Pen of Glory hath yielded. Happy is the man that giveth ear unto it and observeth its precepts. Verily I say, whatever is sent down from the heaven of the Will of God is the means for the establishment of order in the world and the instrument for promoting unity and fellowship among its peoples. Thus hath the Tongue of this Wronged One spoken from His Most Great Prison.

The word of God which the Supreme Pen hath recorded on the seventh leaf of the Most Exalted Paradise is this: O ye men of wisdom among nations! Shut your eyes to estrangement, then fix your gaze upon unity. Cleave tenaciously unto that which will lead to the well-being and tranquility of all mankind. This span of earth is but one homeland and one habitation. It behoveth you to abandon vainglory which causeth alienation and to set your hearts on whatever will ensure harmony. In the estimation of the people of Bahá man's glory lieth in his knowledge, his upright conduct, his praiseworthy character, his wisdom, and not in his nationality or rank. O people of the earth! Appreciate the value of this heavenly word. Indeed it may be likened unto a ship for the ocean of knowledge and a shining luminary for the realm of perception.

Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 66-68

Justice and equity are twin Guardians that watch over men. From them are revealed such blessed and perspicuous words as are the cause of the well-being of the world and the protection of the nations.

Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 12

No power on earth can prevail against the armies of justice, and every citadel must fall before them; for men willingly go down under the triumphant strokes of this decisive blade, and desolate places bloom and flourish under the trappings of this host. There are two mighty banners which, when they cast their shadow across the crown of any king, will cause the influence of his government quickly and easily to penetrate the whole earth, even as if it were the light of the sun: the first of these two banners is wisdom; the second is justice. Against these two most potent forces, the iron hills cannot prevail, and Alexander's wall will break before them.

Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 69

Justice transforms society

Behold the disturbances which, for many a long year, have afflicted the earth, and the perturbation that hath seized its peoples. It hath either been ravaged by war, or tormented by sudden and unforeseen calamities. Though the world is encompassed with misery and distress, yet no man hath paused to reflect what the cause or source of that may be. Whenever the True Counselor uttered a word in admonishment, lo, they all denounced Him as a mover of mischief and rejected His claim. How bewildering, how confusing is such behavior! No two men can be found who may be said to be outwardly and inwardly united. The evidences of discord and malice are apparent everywhere, though all were made for harmony and union.

The Great Being saith: O well-beloved ones! The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. We cherish the hope that the light of justice may shine upon the world and sanctify it from tyranny. If the rulers and kings of the earth, the symbols of the power of God, exalted be His glory, arise and resolve to dedicate themselves to whatever will promote the highest interests of the whole of humanity, the reign of justice will assuredly be established amongst the children of men, and the effulgence of its light will envelop the whole earth. The Great Being saith: The structure of world stability and order hath been reared upon, and will continue to be sustained by, the twin pillars of reward and punishment. . . . In another passage He hath written: Take heed, O concourse of the rulers of the world! There is no force on earth that can equal in its conquering power the force of justice and wisdom. . . . Blessed is the king who marcheth with the ensign of wisdom unfurled before him, and the battalions of justice massed in his rear. He verily is the ornament that adorneth the brow of peace and the countenance of security. There can be no doubt whatever that if the daystar of justice, which the clouds of tyranny have obscured, were to shed its light upon men, the face of the earth would be completely transformed.

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 218-19

"Soon," He predicts, "will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead." "After a time," He also has written, "all the governments on earth will change. Oppression will envelop the world. And following a universal convulsion, the sun of justice will rise from the horizon of the unseen realm."

Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day is Come, pp. 116-17

Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation. He discerneth the truth in all things, through the guidance of Him Who is the All-Seeing. The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. Thus warneth you He Who is the All-Knowing. If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation. Meditate on this, O people, and be not of them that wander distraught in the wilderness of error. The day is approaching when its flame will devour the cities, when the Tongue of Grandeur will proclaim: "The Kingdom is God's, the Almighty, the All-Praised!"

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 342

Among the results of the manifestation of spiritual forces will be that the human world will adapt itself to a new social form, the justice of God will become manifest throughout human affairs, and human equality will be universally established. The poor will receive a great bestowal, and the rich attain eternal happiness. For although at the present time the rich enjoy the greatest luxury and comfort, they are nevertheless deprived of eternal happiness; for eternal happiness is contingent upon giving, and the poor are everywhere in the state of abject need. Through the manifestation of God's great equity the poor of the world will be rewarded and assisted fully, and there will be a readjustment in the economic conditions of mankind so that in the future there will not be the abnormally rich nor the abject poor. The rich will enjoy the privilege of this new economic condition as well as the poor, for owing to certain provisions and restrictions they will not be able to accumulate so much as to be burdened by its management, while the poor will be relieved from the stress of want and misery. The rich will enjoy his palace, and the poor will have his comfortable cottage.

The essence of the matter is that divine justice will become manifest in human conditions and affairs, and all mankind will find comfort and enjoyment in life. It is not meant that all will be equal, for inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature. Necessarily there will be rich people and also those who will be in want of their livelihood, but in the aggregate community there will be equalization and readjustment

of values and interests. In the future there will be no very rich nor extremely poor. There will be an equilibrium of interests, and a condition will be established which will make both rich and poor comfortable and content. This will be an eternal and blessed outcome of the glorious twentieth century which will be realized universally. The significance of it is that the glad tidings of great joy revealed in the promises of the Holy Books will be fulfilled.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 131

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples. A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth. A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system. A mechanism of world intercommunication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvelous swiftness and perfect regularity. A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate. A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue. A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind. In such a world society, science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will cooperate, and will harmoniously develop. The press will, under such a system, while giving full scope to the expression of the diversified views and convictions of mankind, cease to be mischievously manipulated by vested interests, whether private or public, and will be liberated from the influence of contending governments and peoples. The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated.

National rivalries, hatreds, and intrigues will cease, and racial animosity and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding and cooperation. The causes of religious strife will be permanently removed, economic barriers and restrictions will be completely abolished, and the inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated. Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear. The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of the entire human race.

A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources, blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West, liberated from the curse of war and its miseries, and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on

the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation—such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving.

Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 203-04

In the light of the Teachings, therefore, Bahá'ís should feel an obligation to be actively engaged in the process of the transformation of society.

The Universal House of Justice, 27 November 2001, To an individual

Those who serve in these settings, both local inhabitants and visiting teachers, would rightly view their work in terms of community building. . . a process that seeks to raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social, and intellectual development. . . . Within this context, receptivity manifests itself in a willingness to participate in the process of community building set in motion by the core activities. . . . (T)he task before the friends this coming year is to teach within one or more receptive populations, employing a direct method in their exposition of the fundamentals of their Faith, and find those souls longing to shed the lethargy imposed on them by society and work alongside one another in their neighbourhoods and villages to begin a process of collective transformation.

The Universal House of Justice, To the Bahá'ís of the World, Riqvân 2010

Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society. "Is not the object of every Revelation", He Himself proclaims, "to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?" The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá'í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.

The Universal House of Justice, To the Bahá'ís of the World, Riqvân 2010

Justice means to regard the world as a human body

The second attribute of perfection is justice and impartiality. This means to have no regard for one's own personal benefits and selfish advantages, and to carry out the laws of God without the slightest concern for anything else. It means to see one's self as only one of the servants of God, the All-Possessing, and except for aspiring to spiritual distinction, never attempting to be singled out from the others. It means to consider the welfare of the community as one's own. It means, in brief, to regard humanity as a single individual, and one's own self as a member of that corporeal form, and to know of a certainty that if pain or injury afflicts any member of that body, it must inevitably result in suffering for all the rest.

Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 39

The issue of social justice is, as you know, central to the Bahá'í Revelation. In addressing the elected representatives of the world's people, Bahá'u'lláh sets out the context that must frame any effort to understand His Teachings on the subject: "Regard the world as the human body which, though at its creation whole and perfect, hath been afflicted . . . with grave disorders and maladies." The analogy is called on again in the well-known Tablet that denounces in severe language the ruinous consequences of

meddling by the worldly-wise in matters that require a universal perspective, a perspective ultimately dependent on spiritual regeneration:

They that are intoxicated by self-conceit have interposed themselves between it [the human race] and the Divine and infallible Physician. Witness how they have entangled all men, themselves included, in the mesh of their devices. They can neither discover the cause of the disease, nor have they any knowledge of the remedy.

Central to such passages is the principle that not only are humanity's talents and capacities shared by all its members, but its problems and afflictions likewise ultimately affect all. Whether in sickness or health, the human family constitutes a single species, and the condition of any part of it cannot be intelligently considered in isolation from this systemic oneness. As the present state of the world illustrates all too clearly, attempts by the leadership of society to proceed otherwise is merely to exacerbate the problems.

Though the world is encompassed with misery and distress, yet no man hath paused to reflect what the cause or source of that may be. . . . The Great Being saith: O well-beloved ones! The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. We cherish the hope that the light of justice may shine upon the world and sanctify it from tyranny. If the rulers and kings of the earth, the symbols of the power of God, exalted be His glory, arise and resolve to dedicate themselves to whatever will promote the highest interests of the whole of humanity, the reign of justice will assuredly be established amongst the children of men, and the effulgence of its light will envelop the whole earth.

The Universal House of Justice, 27 November 2001, To an Individual

The distinctive nature of their approach is to avoid conflict and the contest for power while striving to unite people in the search for underlying moral and spiritual principles and for practical measures that can lead to the just resolution of the problems afflicting society. Bahá'ís perceive humanity as a single body. All are inseparably bound to one another. A social order structured to meet the needs of one group at the expense of another results in injustice and oppression. Instead, the best interest of each component part is achieved by considering its needs in the context of the well-being of the whole.

Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 23 December 2008, To an Individual

Reflection on what the Bahá'í community has accomplished throws into heartbreaking perspective the suffering and deprivation engulfing the great majority of our fellow human beings. It is necessary that it should do so, because the effect is to open our minds and souls to vital implications of the mission Bahá'u'lláh has laid on us. "Know thou of a truth," He declares, "these great oppressions that have befallen the world are preparing it for the advent of the Most Great Justice." "God be praised!" 'Abdu'l-Bahá adds, "The sun of justice hath risen above the horizon of Bahá'u'lláh. For in His Tablets the foundations of such a justice have been laid as no mind hath, from the beginning of creation, conceived." In the final analysis, it is this Divine purpose that all our activities are intended to serve, and we will advance this purpose to the degree that we understand what is at stake in the efforts we are making to teach the Faith, to establish and consolidate its institutions, and to intensify the influence it is exerting in the life of society.

Humanity's crying need will not be met by a struggle among competing ambitions or by protest against one or another of the countless wrongs afflicting a desperate age. It calls, rather, for a fundamental change of consciousness, for a wholehearted embrace of Bahá'u'lláh's teaching that the time has come when each human being on earth must learn to accept responsibility for the welfare of the entire human family. Commitment to this revolutionizing principle will increasingly empower individual believers and Bahá'í institutions alike in awakening others to the Day of God and to the latent spiritual and moral capacities that

can change this world into another world. We demonstrate this commitment, Shoghi Effendi tells us, by our rectitude of conduct towards others, by the discipline of our own natures, and by our complete freedom from the prejudices that cripple collective action in the society around us and frustrate positive impulses towards change.

The Universal House of Justice, 24 May 2001, To the Believers Gathered for the Events Marking the Completion of the Projects on Mount Carmel

2. The Instruments of Justice

Sacrifice of self

Say: Because He bore injustice, justice hath appeared on earth, and because He accepted abasement, the majesty of God hath shone forth amidst mankind.

Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 76

Consider: who is to be preferred, he who preserveth his body, his life and his possessions or the one who surrendereth his all in the path of God? Judge thou fairly and be not of the unjust. Take fast hold of justice and adhere unto equity that perchance thou mayest not, for selfish motives, use religion as a snare, nor disregard the truth for the sake of gold.

Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 42-43

Beware lest thou be led to connive at injustice. Set thy heart firmly upon justice, and alter not the Cause of God, and be of them whose eyes are directed towards the things that have been revealed in His Book. Follow not, under any condition, the promptings of thine evil desires. Keep thou the law of God, thy Lord, the Beneficent, the Ancient of Days.

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 230-31

Cleave ye to your own devices, and cast behind your backs the precepts of God? Ye, indeed, have wronged your own selves and others. Would that ye could perceive it! Say: If your rules and principles be founded on justice, why is it, then, that ye follow those which accord with your corrupt inclinations and reject such as conflict with your desires? By what right claim ye, then, to judge fairly between men?

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 124

Again, is there any deed in the world that would be nobler than service to the common good? Is there any greater blessing conceivable for a man, than that he should become the cause of the education, the development, the prosperity and honor of his fellow-creatures? No, by the Lord God! The highest righteousness of all is for blessed souls to take hold of the hands of the helpless and deliver them out of their ignorance and abasement and poverty, and with pure motives, and only for the sake of God, to arise and energetically devote themselves to the service of the masses, forgetting their own worldly advantage and working only to serve the general good. "They prefer them before themselves, though poverty be their own lot.¹⁶⁴" "The best of men are those who serve the people; the worst of men are those who harm the people."

Glory be to God! What an extraordinary situation now obtains, when no one, hearing a claim advanced, asks himself what the speaker's real motive might be, and what selfish purpose he might not have hidden behind the mask of words. You find, for example, that an individual seeking to further his own petty and personal concerns, will block the advancement of an entire people. To turn his own water mill, he will let the farms and fields of all the others parch and wither. To maintain his own leadership, he will everlastingly direct the masses toward that prejudice and fanaticism which subvert the very base of civilization.

What emerged, instead, through the single-minded exploitation of Iran’s petroleum resources, was wealth on an almost unimaginable scale. In the absence of anything resembling a system of social justice, the chief effect was to vastly enrich a privileged and self-serving minority, while leaving the mass of the population little better off than they had been before. Treasured cultural symbols and the heroic episodes of a glorious past were resurrected merely to decorate the monumental vulgarity of a society whose moral foundations were built on the shifting sands of ambition and appetite. Protest, even the mildest and most reasonable, was smothered by a secret police unconstrained by any constitutional oversight.

In 1979 the Iranian people threw off this despotism and swept its counterfeit claims to modernity into history’s dustbin. Their revolution was the achievement of the combined forces of many groups, but its driving force was the ideals of Islam. In place of wanton self-indulgence, people were promised lives of dignity and decency. Gross inequities of class and wealth would be overcome by the spirit of brotherhood enjoined by God. The natural resources with which providence has endowed so fortunate a land were declared to be the patrimony of the entire Iranian people, to be used to provide universal employment and education.

The Universal House of Justice, 26 November 2003, To the Followers of Bahá’u’lláh in the Cradle of the Faith

Religion

Know thou that they who are truly wise have likened the world unto the human temple. As the body of man needeth a garment to clothe it, so the body of mankind must needs be adorned with the mantle of justice and wisdom. Its robe is the Revelation vouchsafed unto it by God. Whenever this robe hath fulfilled its purpose, the Almighty will assuredly renew it. For every age requireth a fresh measure of the light of God.

Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, p. 81

Religion is, verily, the chief instrument for the establishment of order in the world, and of tranquillity amongst its peoples. The weakening of the pillars of religion hath strengthened the foolish, and emboldened them, and made them more arrogant. Verily I say: The greater the decline of religion, the more grievous the waywardness of the ungodly. This cannot but lead in the end to chaos and confusion. Hear Me, O men of insight, and be warned, ye who are endued with discernment! It is Our hope that thou wilt hear with attentive ears the things We have mentioned unto thee, that perchance thou mayest turn men away from the things they possess to the things that God possesseth. We entreat God to deliver the light of equity and the sun of justice from the thick clouds of waywardness, and cause them to shine forth upon men. No light can compare with the light of justice. The establishment of order in the world and the tranquillity of the nations depend upon it.

Bahá’u’lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, pp. 28-29

The springtime for earthly trees occurreth once every year, while the one for human trees appeareth in the Days of God—exalted be His glory. Were the trees of men’s lives to be adorned in this divine Springtime with the fruits that have been mentioned, the effulgence of the light of Justice would, of a certainty, illumine all the dwellers of the earth and everyone would abide in tranquillity and contentment beneath the sheltering shadow of Him Who is the Object of all mankind. The Water for these trees is the living water of the sacred Words uttered by the Beloved of the world. In one instant are such trees planted and in the next their branches shall, through the outpourings of the showers of divine mercy, have reached the skies.

Bahá’u’lláh, Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh, p. 257

In truth, religion is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world, for the fear of God impelleth man to hold fast to that which is good, and shun all evil. Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquillity and peace cease to shine.

Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 125

Know verily that the essence of justice and the source thereof are both embodied in the ordinances prescribed by Him Who is the Manifestation of the Self of God amongst men, if ye be of them that recognize this truth. He doth verily incarnate the highest, the infallible standard of justice unto all creation. Were His law to be such as to strike terror into the hearts of all that are in heaven and on earth, that law is naught but manifest justice. The fears and agitation which the revelation of this law provokes in men's hearts should indeed be likened to the cries of the suckling babe weaned from his mother's milk, if ye be of them that perceive. Were men to discover the motivating purpose of God's Revelation, they would assuredly cast away their fears, and, with hearts filled with gratitude, rejoice with exceeding gladness.

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 175

Religion must be the cause of love. Religion must be the cause of justice, for the wisdom of the Manifestations of God is directed toward the establishing of the bond of a love which is indissoluble.

The bonds which hold together the body politic are not sufficient. These bonds may be mentioned—for instance, the bond of patriotism. This is evidently not a sufficient bond, for how often it happens that people of the same nation wage civil war amongst themselves. The bond of fellowship may be racial, but history proves this is not sufficiently strong, for tremendous wars have broken out between peoples of the same racial lineage. Again, the bond holding men together may be political. How often it happens that the diplomacy of nations makes a treaty of peace one day and on the morrow a declaration of war! It is historically evident and manifest that these bonds are not self-sufficient.

The real bond of integrity is religious in character, for religion indicates the oneness of the world of humanity. Religion serves the world of morality. Religion purifies the hearts. Religion impels men to achieve praiseworthy deeds. Religion becomes the cause of love in human hearts, for religion is a divine foundation, the foundation ever-conducive to life. The teachings of God are the source of illumination to the people of the world. Religion is ever constructive, not destructive.

Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 344

At the very core of the aims of the Faith are the establishment of justice and unity in the world, the removal of prejudice and enmity from among all people, the awakening of compassion and understanding in the hearts of all men and women, and the raising of all souls to a new level of spirituality and behavior through the vitalizing influence of divine Revelation. The course set forth by Bahá'u'lláh for the attainment of these aims is the double task of simultaneously building an ideal society and perfecting the behavior of individuals. For this dual and reciprocal transformation He has not only revealed laws, principles and truths attuned to the needs of this age, but has established the very nucleus and pattern of those institutions which are to evolve into the structure of the divinely purposed world society.

The Universal House of Justice, 10 December 1992, Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith: A Compilation

One of the signs of the breakdown of society in all parts of the world is the erosion of trust and collaboration between the individual and the institutions of governance. In many nations the electoral process has become discredited because of endemic corruption. Contributing to the widening distrust of so

vital a process are the influence on the outcome from vested interests having access to lavish funds, the restrictions on freedom of choice inherent in the party system, and the distortion in public perception of the candidates by the bias expressed in the media. Apathy, alienation, and disillusionment are a consequence, too, as is a growing sense of despair of the unlikelihood that the most capable citizens will emerge to deal with the manifold problems of a defective social order. Evident everywhere is a yearning for institutions which will dispense justice, dispel oppression, and foster an enduring unity between the disparate elements of society.

The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh is the divinely ordained system for which nations and peoples so desperately search. Hailed by the Báb in the Persian Bayán, its foundational features prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, this Order is without precedent in human history for its standard of justice and its commitment to the practical realization of the oneness of mankind, as well as for its capacity to promote change and the advancement of world civilization. It provides the means by which the Divine Will illumines the path of human progress and guides the eventual establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

The Universal House of Justice, 25 March 2007, To the Bahá'ís of the World

Reward and punishment

The Great Being saith: The structure of world stability and order hath been reared upon, and will continue to be sustained by, the twin pillars of reward and punishment. And in another connection He hath uttered the following in the eloquent tongue: Justice hath a mighty force at its command. It is none other than reward and punishment for the deeds of men. By the power of this force the tabernacle of order is established throughout the world, causing the wicked to restrain their natures for fear of punishment.

Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 164

O people of God! That which traineth the world is Justice, for it is upheld by two pillars, reward and punishment. These two pillars are the sources of life to the world.

Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 27

Be united, O kings of the earth, for thereby will the tempest of discord be stilled amongst you, and your peoples find rest, if ye be of them that comprehend. Should any one among you take up arms against another, rise ye all against him, for this is naught but manifest justice.

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 254

Responsible government

Hearken ye, O Rulers of America and the Presidents of the Republics therein, unto that which the Dove is warbling on the Branch of Eternity: "There is none other God but Me, the Ever-Abiding, the Forgiving, the All-Bountiful." Adorn ye the temple of dominion with the ornament of justice and of the fear of God, and its head with the crown of the remembrance of your Lord, the Creator of the heavens... Bind ye the broken with the hands of justice, and crush the oppressor who flourisheth with the rod of the commandments of your Lord, the Ordainer, the All-Wise.

Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 52

If the rulers and kings of the earth, the symbols of the power of God, exalted be His glory, arise and resolve to dedicate themselves to whatever will promote the highest interests of the whole of humanity, the reign of justice will assuredly be established amongst the children of men, and the effulgence of its light will envelop the whole earth.

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 218-19

If ye stay not the hand of the oppressor, if ye fail to safeguard the rights of the downtrodden, what right have ye then to vaunt yourselves among men? What is it of which ye can rightly boast? Is it on your food and your drink that ye pride yourselves, on the riches ye lay up in your treasuries, on the diversity and the cost of the ornaments with which ye deck yourselves? If true glory were to consist in the possession of such perishable things, then the earth on which ye walk must needs vaunt itself over you, because it supplieth you, and bestoweth upon you, these very things, by the decree of the Almighty. . . . For is it not your clear duty to restrain the tyranny of the oppressor, and to deal equitably with your subjects, that your high sense of justice may be fully demonstrated to all mankind?

God hath committed into your hands the reins of the government of the people, that ye may rule with justice over them, safeguard the rights of the downtrodden, and punish the wrongdoers.

Bahá'u'lláh, The Summons of the Lord of Hosts, pp. 189-93

Observe, O King, with thine inmost heart and with thy whole being, the precepts of God, and walk not in the paths of the oppressor. Seize thou, and hold firmly within the grasp of thy might, the reins of the affairs of thy people, and examine in person whatever pertaineth unto them. Let nothing escape thee, for therein lieth the highest good.

Bahá'u'lláh, The Summons of the Lord of Hosts, p. 210

Compose your differences and reduce your armaments, that the burden of your expenditures may be lightened, and that your minds and hearts may be tranquillized. Heal the dissensions that divide you, and ye will no longer be in need of any armaments except what the protection of your cities and territories demandeth. Fear ye God, and take heed not to outstrip the bounds of moderation and be numbered among the extravagant.

We have learned that ye are increasing your outlay every year, and are laying the burden thereof on your subjects. This, verily, is more than they can bear, and is a grievous injustice. Decide ye justly between men, O kings, and be ye the emblems of justice amongst them. This, if ye judge fairly, is the thing that behoveth you, and beseemeth your station.

Beware not to deal unjustly with anyone that appealeth to you and entereth beneath your shadow. Walk ye in the fear of God, and be ye of them that lead a godly life. Rest not on your power, your armies, and treasures. Put your whole trust and confidence in God, Who hath created you, and seek ye His help in all your affairs. Succour cometh from Him alone. He succoureth whom He willeth with the hosts of the heavens and of the earth.

Know ye that the poor are the trust of God in your midst. Watch that ye betray not His trust, that ye deal not unjustly with them and that ye walk not in the ways of the treacherous. Ye will most certainly be called upon to answer for His trust on the day when the Balance of Justice shall be set, the day when unto everyone shall be rendered his due, when the doings of all men, be they rich or poor, shall be weighed.

Bahá'u'lláh, The Summons of the Lord of Hosts, pp. 188-89

We pray God—exalted be His glory—and cherish the hope that He may graciously assist the manifestations of affluence and power and the daysprings of sovereignty and glory, the kings of the earth—may God aid them through His strengthening grace—to establish the Lesser Peace. This, indeed, is the greatest means for insuring the tranquillity of the nations. It is incumbent upon the Sovereigns of the world—may God assist them—unitedly to hold fast unto this Peace, which is the chief instrument for the protection of all mankind. It is Our hope that they will arise to achieve what will be conducive to the well-being of man. It is their duty to convene an all-inclusive assembly, which either they themselves or their ministers will attend,

and to enforce whatever measures are required to establish unity and concord amongst men. They must put away the weapons of war, and turn to the instruments of universal reconstruction. Should one king rise up against another, all the other kings must arise to deter him. Arms and armaments will, then, be no more needed beyond that which is necessary to insure the internal security of their respective countries. If they attain unto this all-surpassing blessing, the people of each nation will pursue, with tranquillity and contentment, their own occupations, and the groanings and lamentations of most men would be silenced. . . . In this land, every time men are conscripted for the army, a great terror seizeth the people. Every nation augmenteth, each year, its forces, for their ministers of war are insatiable in their desire to add fresh recruits to their battalions. We have learned that the government of Persia— may God assist them—have, likewise decided to reinforce their army. In the opinion of this Wronged One a force of one hundred thousand fully-equipped and well-disciplined men would suffice. We hope that thou wilt cause the light of justice to shine more brightly.

By the righteousness of God! Justice is a powerful force. It is, above all else, the conqueror of the citadels of the hearts and souls of men, and the revealer of the secrets of the world of being, and the standard-bearer of love and bounty.

Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, pp. 30-32

Overstep not the bounds of moderation, and deal justly with them that serve thee. Bestow upon them according to their needs, and not to the extent that will enable them to lay up riches for themselves, to deck their persons, to embellish their homes, to acquire the things that are of no benefit unto them, and to be numbered with the extravagant. Deal with them with undeviating justice, so that none among them may either suffer want, or be pampered with luxuries. This is but manifest justice.

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 235

Beware, O King, that thou gather not around thee such ministers as follow the desires of a corrupt inclination, as have cast behind their backs that which hath been committed into their hands and manifestly betrayed their trust. Be bounteous to others as God hath been bounteous to thee, and abandon not the interests of thy people to the mercy of such ministers as these. Lay not aside the fear of God, and be thou of them that act uprightly. Gather around thee those ministers from whom thou canst perceive the fragrance of faith and of justice, and take thou counsel with them, and choose whatever is best in thy sight, and be of them that act generously.

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 232

Then comes the station of those just kings whose fame as protectors of the people and dispensers of Divine justice has filled the world, whose name as powerful champions of the people's rights has echoed through creation. These give no thought to amassing enormous fortunes for themselves; they believe, rather, that their own wealth lies in enriching their subjects. To them, if every individual citizen has affluence and ease, the royal coffers are full. They take no pride in gold and silver, but rather in their enlightenment and their determination to achieve the universal good.

Next in rank are those eminent and honorable ministers of state and representatives, who place the will of God above their own, and whose administrative skill and wisdom in the conduct of their office raises the science of government to new heights of perfection. They shine in the learned world like lamps of knowledge; their thinking, their attitudes and their acts demonstrate their patriotism and their concern for the country's advancement. Content with a modest stipend, they consecrate their days and nights to the execution of important duties and the devising of methods to insure the progress of the people.

Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, pp. 20-21

But the principal cause of these difficulties lies in the laws of the present civilization; for they lead to a small number of individuals accumulating incomparable fortunes, beyond their needs, while the greater number remain destitute, stripped and in the greatest misery. This is contrary to justice, to humanity, to equity; it is the height of iniquity, the opposite to what causes divine satisfaction.

This contrast is peculiar to the world of man: with other creatures—that is to say, with nearly all animals—there is a kind of justice and equality. Thus equality exists in a shepherd's flock and in a herd of deer in the country. Likewise, among the birds of the prairie, of the plain, of the hills or of the orchard, and among every kind of animal some kind of equality prevails. With them such a difference in the means of existence is not to be found; so they live in the most complete peace and joy.

It is quite otherwise with the human species, which persists in the greatest error, and in absolute iniquity. Consider an individual who has amassed treasures by colonizing a country for his profit: he has obtained an incomparable fortune and has secured profits and incomes which flow like a river, while a hundred thousand unfortunate people, weak and powerless, are in need of a mouthful of bread. There is neither equality nor benevolence. So you see that general peace and joy are destroyed, and the welfare of humanity is negated to such an extent as to make fruitless the lives of many. For fortune, honors, commerce, industry are in the hands of some industrialists, while other people are submitted to quite a series of difficulties and to limitless troubles: they have neither advantages, nor profits, nor comforts, nor peace.

Then rules and laws should be established to regulate the excessive fortunes of certain private individuals and meet the needs of millions of the poor masses; thus a certain moderation would be obtained. However, absolute equality is just as impossible, for absolute equality in fortunes, honors, commerce, agriculture, industry would end in disorderliness, in chaos, in disorganization of the means of existence, and in universal disappointment: the order of the community would be quite destroyed. Thus difficulties will also arise when unjustified equality is imposed. It is, therefore, preferable for moderation to be established by means of laws and regulations to hinder the constitution of the excessive fortunes of certain individuals, and to protect the essential needs of the masses. For instance, the manufacturers and the industrialists heap up a treasure each day, and the poor artisans do not gain their daily sustenance: that is the height of iniquity, and no just man can accept it. . . .

When matters will be thus fixed, the owner of the factory will no longer put aside daily a treasure which he has absolutely no need of (for, if the fortune is disproportionate, the capitalist succumbs under a formidable burden and gets into the greatest difficulties and troubles; the administration of an excessive fortune is very difficult and exhausts man's natural strength). And the workmen and artisans will no longer be in the greatest misery and want; they will no longer be submitted to the worst privations at the end of their life.

It is, then, clear and evident that the repartition of excessive fortunes among a small number of individuals, while the masses are in need, is an iniquity and an injustice. . . .

Good God! Is it possible that, seeing one of his fellow-creatures starving, destitute of everything, a man can rest and live comfortably in his luxurious mansion? He who meets another in the greatest misery, can he enjoy his fortune?

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, pp. 273-76

It is unquestionable that the object in establishing parliaments is to bring about justice and righteousness, but everything hinges on the efforts of the elected representatives. If their intention is sincere, desirable results and unforeseen improvements will be forthcoming; if not, it is certain that the whole thing will be

meaningless, the country will come to a standstill and public affairs will continuously deteriorate. "I see a thousand builders unequal to one subverter; what then of the one builder who is followed by a thousand subverters?" . . . In the present writer's view it would be preferable if the election of nonpermanent members of consultative assemblies in sovereign states should be dependent on the will and choice of the people. For elected representatives will on this account be somewhat inclined to exercise justice, lest their reputation suffer and they fall into disfavor with the public.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 23

Education

Be ye warned, O men of understanding. It ill beseemeth the station of man to commit tyranny; rather it behoveth him to observe equity and be attired with the raiment of justice under all conditions. Beseech ye the One true God that He may, through the power of the hand of loving-kindness and spiritual education, purge and purify certain souls from the defilement of evil passions and corrupt desires, that they may arise and unloose their tongues for the sake of God, that perchance the evidences of injustice may be blotted out and the splendour of the light of justice may shed its radiance upon the whole world. The people are ignorant, and they stand in need of those who will expound the truth.

Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 170-71

Close investigation will show that the primary cause of oppression and injustice, of unrighteousness, irregularity and disorder, is the people's lack of religious faith and the fact that they are uneducated. When, for example, the people are genuinely religious and are literate and well-schooled, and a difficulty presents itself, they can apply to the local authorities; if they do not meet with justice and secure their rights and if they see that the conduct of the local government is incompatible with the Divine good pleasure and the king's justice, they can then take their case to higher courts and describe the deviation of the local administration from the spiritual law. Those courts can then send for the local records of the case and in this way justice will be done. At present, however, because of their inadequate schooling, most of the population lack even the vocabulary to explain what they want.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 18

The primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education. It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward. The principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples is ignorance. Today the mass of the people are uninformed even as to ordinary affairs, how much less do they grasp the core of the important problems and complex needs of the time. It is therefore urgent that beneficial articles and books be written, clearly and definitely establishing what the present-day requirements of the people are, and what will conduce to the happiness and advancement of society. These should be published and spread throughout the nation, so that at least the leaders among the people should become, to some degree, awakened, and arise to exert themselves along those lines which will lead to their abiding honor. The publication of high thoughts is the dynamic power in the arteries of life; it is the very soul of the world. Thoughts are a boundless sea, and the effects and varying conditions of existence are as the separate forms and individual limits of the waves; not until the sea boils up will the waves rise and scatter their pearls of knowledge on the shore of life. . . .

Public opinion must be directed toward whatever is worthy of this day, and this is impossible except through the use of adequate arguments and the adducing of clear, comprehensive and conclusive proofs. For the helpless masses know nothing of the world, and while there is no doubt that they seek and long for their own happiness, yet ignorance like a heavy veil shuts them away from it.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, pp. 109-10

Today we have closed our eyes to every righteous act and have sacrificed the abiding happiness of society to our own transitory profit. We regard fanaticism and zealotry as redounding to our credit and honor, and not content with this, we denounce one another and plot each other's ruin, and whenever we wish to put on a show of wisdom and learning, of virtue and godliness, we set about mocking and reviling this one and that. . . . With words such as these they assault the minds of the helpless masses and disturb the hearts of the already bewildered poor, who know nothing of the true state of affairs and the real basis for all such talk, and remain completely unaware of the fact that a thousand selfish purposes are concealed behind the supposedly religious eloquence of certain individuals. They imagine that speakers of this type are motivated by virtuous zeal, when the truth is that such individuals keep up a great hue and cry because they see their own personal ruin in the welfare of the masses, and believe that if the people's eyes are opened, their own light will go out. Only the keenest insight will detect the fact that if the hearts of these individuals were really impelled by righteousness and the fear of God, the fragrance of it would, like musk, be spreading everywhere. Nothing in the world can ever be supported by words alone.

Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, pp. 55-58

Yet you cannot remain aloof and insensitive to the suffering of your people. Decades of hardship have prepared each of you to stand as a beacon of strength in the circle of your family and friends, your neighbours and acquaintances, radiating hope and compassion to all those in need. Keep alive in your hearts the feeling of confidence that the future of Iran holds bright promise, the certitude that the light of knowledge will inevitably dispel the clouds of ignorance, the conviction that concern for justice will protect the nation from falling prey to calumny, and the belief that love will ultimately conquer hatred and enmity. You have demonstrated in the example of your lives that the proper response to oppression is neither to succumb in resignation nor to take on the characteristics of the oppressor. The victim of oppression can transcend it through an inner strength that shields the soul from bitterness and hatred and which sustains consistent, principled action.

The Universal House of Justice, 23 June 2009, To the Bahá'ís of Iran

Let no one fail to appreciate the possibilities thus created. Passivity is bred by the forces of society today. A desire to be entertained is nurtured from childhood, with increasing efficiency, cultivating generations willing to be led by whoever proves skilful at appealing to superficial emotions. Even in many educational systems students are treated as though they were receptacles designed to receive information. That the Bahá'í world has succeeded in developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service—supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment and avoiding the tendency to divide the believers into categories such as deepened and uninformed—is an accomplishment of enormous proportions. And therein lie the dynamics of an irrepressible movement.

The Universal House of Justice, To the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván 2010

This evolution in collective consciousness is discernable in the growing frequency with which the word “accompany” appears in conversations among the friends, a word that is being endowed with new meaning as it is integrated into the common vocabulary of the Bahá'í community. It signals the significant strengthening 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, which the Guardian states is the primary mission of the Faith. Such an approach offers a striking contrast to the spiritually bankrupt and moribund ways of an old social order that so often seeks to harness human energy through domination, through greed, through guilt or through manipulation. . . . 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.

The Universal House of Justice, To the Bahá'ís of the World, Rīḍván 2010

The perpetuation of ignorance is a most grievous form of oppression; it reinforces the many walls of prejudice that stand as barriers to the realization of the oneness of humankind, at once the goal and operating principle of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities. Justice demands universal participation. Thus, while social action may involve the provision of goods and services in some form, its primary concern must be to build capacity within a given population to participate in creating a better world. Social change is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another. The scope and complexity of social action must be commensurate with the human resources available in a village or neighbourhood to carry it forward. Efforts best begin, then, on a modest scale and grow organically as capacity within the population develops. Capacity rises to new levels, of course, as the protagonists of social change learn to apply with increasing effectiveness elements of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, together with the contents and methods of science, to their social reality.

The Universal House of Justice, To the Bahá'ís of the World, Rīḍván 2010

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NOTES

- [←1] See Mikael Eriksson and Peter Wallensteen, "Patterns of major armed conflicts, 1990-2003". A major armed conflict is one in which 1,000 people or more have died in one year.
- [←2] Ernest Harsch, "Child labour," p. 14.
- [←3] Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Arabic #2.
- [←4] Bahá'u'lláh, *Trustworthiness: a Cardinal Bahá'í Virtue* reprinted in *Compilation of Compilations*, Vol 2, #2032.
- [←5] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 1.
- [←6] "We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions." Shoghi Effendi through his Secretary, *Conservation of the Earth's Resources* in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 1, #102.
- [←7] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp. 10, 66, 105-07, 109-10.
- [←8] Ibid., pp. 27, 58, 60, 72, 74, 80-81, 94-98.
- [←9] Ibid., pp. 18, 60-62.
- [←10] Ibid., pp. 97, 104, 107-08, 110-12.
- [←11] Hooper C. Dunbar, *Forces of Our Time*.
- [←12] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 354.
- [←13] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 300.
- [←14] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 103.
- [←15] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 26-7; *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 157; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 259; *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp. 56-57, 103-04.
- [←16] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 363.
- [←17] *Being Maasai: Ethnicity and Identity in East Africa* explains this historical dynamic for Kenya; Jean-Pierre Chrétien's *The Great Lakes of Africa: Two Thousand Years of History* is one among many works that describes the origins of ethnic differentiation in the region.
- [←18] Wangari Maathai, p. 202.
- [←19] Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*.
- [←20] Richard M. Eaton, *Temple Desecration and Muslim States in Medieval India*, p. 80.
- [←21]

Richard W. Thomas' *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress* provides a concise, comprehensive overview of this process; June Manning Thomas' *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* documents race at work in the planning of one U.S. city.

- [←22] Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 30.
- [←23] UNU-WIDER, "Pioneering Study Shows Richest Two Percent Own Half World Wealth."
- [←24] Nelson Mandela, "Make Poverty History".
- [←25] The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace*, paragraph 40.
- [←26] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 344.
- [←27] Bahá'u'lláh stated, "is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's universal Manifestations would be apparent." *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp. 240-41.
- [←28] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 92-93.
- [←29] The Universal House of Justice, 21 April 2010, paragraph 5.
- [←30] The Universal House of Justice, 21 April 2008.
- [←31] Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 186.
- [←32] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 29-30.
- [←33] The Universal House of Justice, 21 April 2010, paragraph 6.
- [←34] The Universal House of Justice, 21 April 2009.
- [←35] Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 16.
- [←36] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 157.
- [←37] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- [←38] Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, p. 137.
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- [←88] *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- [←89] *Ibid.*, p. 172. My interpretation of Adam Smith here differs from that presented by Farhad Rassekh in “The Bahá’í Faith and the Market Economy.” As a historian, I focus on Smith in the context of his time, while Rassekh evaluates Smith’s place in the formation of current economic theory.
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- [←116] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 39.
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About the Author

Holly Hanson is the daughter of a Marxist sociologist and a radical social reformer who raised her to believe that the purpose of life is to strive to create justice. She became a Bahá'í as a secondary school student in Colorado in the western United States, and began a path of learning about the power of communities during a year of service in the Bahá'í community of Kenya. After attending Brown University and the University of Wisconsin, she had the opportunity to participate in the activities of the Bahá'í community of Ibadan, Nigeria for 3 years. Her book *Social and Economic Development: A Bahá'í Approach* described the patterns of activity around the world she learned about in her service on the Office of Statistics and the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel from 1982 to 1989. In 1990 she began graduate study in history at the University of Florida in order to learn more about the social forces which constrain or enable human progress, and she has taught African history at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts since 1997. She spends part of every year in Uganda, which she first visited researching her book *Landed Obligation: The Practice of Power in Buganda*, and where she contributes to the work of the Kimanya Ng'eyo Educational Foundation, as well as continuing to research Ugandan history. Holly Hanson is the mother of Rebecca Margaret Vick and Corin Olinga Rezaie.