

Economics: a Study of the 1 March, 2017 Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World

This is a transcript of a video lecture by Wendi Momen for the Wilmette Institute's course *The Bahá'í Faith and Social Change* (Sept. - Oct., 2017).

The video presentation for this Unit 5, on Economics, is the letter of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world sent on the 1st of March, 2017. Now you may have studied this letter yourself, in your community, or at home, but I think it's worthwhile to look at it in some detail, to frame this particular unit as we are studying a whole range of topics with regard to economics, work, business, poverty eradication and wealth. Many of these subjects are touched upon in this letter. The letter begins:

"In an increasingly interconnected world, more light is being cast on the social conditions of every people, giving greater visibility to their circumstances. While there are developments that give hope, there is much that should weigh heavy on the conscience of the human race. Inequity, discrimination, and exploitation blight the life of humanity, seemingly immune to the treatments applied by political schemes of every hue. The economic impact of these afflictions has resulted in the prolonged suffering of so many, as well as in deep-seated, structural defects in society."

So let's just take a look at this paragraph. It talks about the economic impact of the afflictions that are assailing humanity on every side, and that there doesn't seem to be any treatment that can be provided via political schemes of - any particular scheme of a political party or a country - that will actually help. But it also makes some points about hope. First of all, it talks about an increasingly interconnected world, and because it's more interconnected, we're getting greater visibility on the circumstances of ordinary people. And there are some issues that provide hope. And we're going to look at some of what those are in a moment. The letter goes on:

"No one whose heart has been attracted to the teachings of the Blessed Beauty can remain unmoved by these consequences." Now the Blessed Beauty is Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. The letter continues: "The world is in great turmoil,' Baha'u'llah observes in the Lawḥ-i-Dunya, 'and the minds of its people are in a state of utter confusion. We entreat the Almighty that He may graciously illuminate them with the glory of His Justice, and enable them to discover that which will be profitable unto them at all times and under all conditions.'"

That's interesting, isn't it? Because this letter was written over a hundred years ago, in the Middle East, and Bahá'u'lláh is saying the world is in great turmoil and the minds of its peoples are in a state of utter confusion, well that could have been written yesterday, I think. Very applicable for the day in which we live. And the letter goes on:

“As the Baha’i community strives to contribute at the level of thought and action to the betterment of the world, the adverse conditions experienced by many populations will more and more demand its attention. The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbors, or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected.”

Then here I think we come to the heart of one of the main problems of the world today, and that is: many single people, or groups, only concern themselves with their own well-being, and they are not concerned with the well-being of others, and they are trying to earn money, make money, out of destroying the natural environment by a variety of means. And here we have the Universal House of Justice reminding us that the welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the rest of humanity, of all of it. And so it behooves all of us to make sure that we concern ourselves with not only our own well-being, but that of our neighbors, and that we also are not concerned just with our own economic gain, but with the way in which the planet is being affected by it.

“A stubborn obstruction, then, stands in the way of meaningful social progress: time and again, avarice and self-interest prevail at the expense of the common good. Unconscionable quantities of wealth are being amassed, and the instability this creates is made worse by how income and opportunity are spread so unevenly both between nations and within nations. But it need not be so.”

Now with regard to the course that we're presently undertaking on Social Change, one of the changes that's happened, over many many centuries, is this huge divide that's happened with regard to those who are most wealthy, and those who are the least wealthy, the very, very poor. And in very recent decades we've seen this unconscionable quantity of wealth being amassed by a very very few people, and that this has caused huge instability, we've seen it ourselves. And it's made worse because the world is so polarized, so divided, that people's individual income, their country's income, and the opportunities they have for work, for education, for advancement, are different in some countries - much better in some countries than

they are in others. And even within a country, in different sections, for whatever reason, whether it's because of tribal conflict or because of class separation, or because one part of the country is deemed to be untouchable, then these opportunities for progress, for income generation, for education, may be denied to people. But as the House of Justice says: It need not be so. The letter continues:

"However much such conditions are the outcome of history, they do not have to define the future, and even if current approaches to economic life satisfied humanity's stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples."

Now, we saw in Unit 3 how we are looking at the way in which humanity has moved from its childhood through its adolescence and is now at the beginning of its maturity. And if you like you can go back and refresh yourself at Unit 3, to remind yourself what that is about. That's part of our history. A lot of our history was bound up in the kinds of inequalities which the Universal House of Justice is speaking of in this letter. But those conditions, which may have been part of our history, or the outcome of our history, do not have to define the future, and even if current approaches to economic life satisfied humanity's stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity.

There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples. And I think that's a very interesting point, as many people believe that we are prisoners of our history, that our history tells us where we are going. You often hear people say: *"If you want to know where you're going, you have to know where you came from."* Well here's Bahá'u'lláh saying and the House of Justice saying the conditions of our history are indeed history, and we have the choice, the ability, the skills - and now we need to develop the attitudes - to define our future in a different way. And even if what we did in the past was useful in the past, it probably was, it brought us to a very high stage of development in certain aspects, nevertheless, those aspects of history are no longer adequate for the coming days, when we are going to reach our maturity. And therefore of course they're not going to be incredibly helpful to us, there's no justification for perpetuating them.

And that's just about everything: structures, rules, systems which are not serving the interests of all people. And we can recall that Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith said in his World Order letters in the 1930s that every system, every organization would need to change and alter. And here is the House of Justice reminding us again that that's going to have to happen as we go forward. The letter continues:

“The teachings of the Faith leave no room for doubt: there is an inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth and resources.”

This is very much in contrast to what many people think. Many governments think that the purpose of economics is simply to get the most wealth at the least cost, and preserve it for the people who can in their expectation, their understanding, use it best. And here the House of Justice is reminding us that there is an inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution and utilization of wealth and resources, and we need to remember I think, how that can be applied. The letter goes on:

“The stresses emerging out of the long-term process of transition from a divided world to a united one are being felt within international relations as much as in the deepening fractures that affect societies large and small. With prevailing modes of thought found to be badly wanting, the world is in desperate need of a shared ethic, a sure framework for addressing the crises that gather like storm clouds.”

This concept of the emergence from a long process of transition, from a world that is divided to one that will become united, is something which all of us are recognizing right now. Sometimes it seems as if we're going backwards in terms of our unity. Things that were true maybe a decade ago, seem to have fallen apart and the House of Justice mentions these deep fractures that affect societies large and small. Large and small countries, but even small villages are being affected by these processes and stresses that are part of that process of moving from one world that is very divided to one that is more united, in fact, completely united. And even our modes of thought - the way we think about things - are not helpful. And because of that the world needs a shared ethic, something that can certainly help us address the crises that are coming. The House of Justice continues:

“The vision of Baha’u’llah challenges many of the assumptions that are allowed to shape contemporary discourse—for instance, that self-interest, far from needing to be restrained, drives prosperity, and that progress depends upon its expression through relentless competition.”

Well, these are certainly concepts that many, many people have – not just about economics but about many aspects of life. Politics, the way that they consider education, the way that they consider – the way they just live their lives in terms of entertainment – that these are all about self-interest. *Me-First*, that seems to be one of the moral imperatives that many individuals, and even countries, hold. This increase that we've seen recently in nationalism is an example, it seems to me, of

what the House of Justice is saying there, and Bahá'u'lláh challenges these assumptions, challenges these concerns, saying that there is another way to think about the nature of the human being, the nature of how our prosperity is gained, how we become more prosperous. The House of Justice continues:

"To view the worth of an individual chiefly in terms of how much one can accumulate and how many goods one can consume relative to others is wholly alien to Baha'i thought. But neither are the teachings in sympathy with sweeping dismissals of wealth as inherently distasteful or immoral, and asceticism is prohibited."

Now this I think shows the balance that the Bahá'í Faith offers, a beautiful balance. On the one hand, to think of a person as more important, more significant, more wealthy, better, happier, just because they have a bigger house or a bigger car, many telephones, much food, and can entertain widely, opposed to others, is obviously incorrect. But similarly, it's also wrong to dismiss people who have wealth as being inherently distasteful, or that the act of having wealth is immoral in itself. And the House of Justice reminds us that asceticism - this staying aloof from the world - living in self-imposed poverty and pain and degradation - is also not accepted in the Bahá'í Faith, it is prohibited. So this balance between moderation - between having goods not being measured by them, not being counted as more important because of them, on the one hand, is balanced by also not thinking of them as being immoral, which you do hear quite a lot of people sometimes say.

And it reminds me of a story that people/characters in Monty Python, a TV program here in the United Kingdom a long time ago had. People talking to each other were competing: how badly off they were, how poor they were. And they'd worked themselves down to not living in a house at all, not living in a flat, but they're living in a cardboard box in the middle of the motorway. And one is saying "I lived in a cardboard box in the middle of the motorway" and the other one is saying "You lived in the cardboard box? We were killed in the cardboard box." And the next one saying "You were killed? We were killed every day in the box," and so on, just to show how ridiculous it is to compete in one's poverty, and asceticism as well. The House of Justice continues:

"Wealth must serve humanity. Its use must accord with spiritual principles; systems must be created in their light. And, in Baha'u'llah's memorable words, '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.'"

It's interesting, isn't it? Wealth must serve humanity, and must accord with spiritual principles. The ways we use it must accord with spiritual principles. The letter goes on:

"Although Baha'u'llah does not set out in His Revelation a detailed economic system, a constant theme throughout the entire corpus of His teachings is the reorganization of human society. Consideration of this theme inevitably gives rise to questions of economics. Of course, the future order conceived by Baha'u'llah is far beyond anything that can be imagined by the present generation. Nevertheless, its eventual emergence will depend on strenuous effort by His followers to put His teachings into effect today."

We know that Bahá'u'lláh has not set out an economic system, but the general principles that are required to create one in the future. And this course on Social Change, and this Unit on the economy, does not try to specify any particular outcome of what that economic system should look like. All we're trying to do is to see a few of its characteristics, a few of its principles, a few of the behaviors that we need to change, a few of the practices that we need to implement, in order for that system to emerge in the fullness of time. And that is part of the re-organization of human society, and part of what Bahá'ís and those who are friendly to the Bahá'í Faith, those who are community of interest, are trying to do - put the teachings that Bahá'u'lláh brought on these subjects into effect today. It's something about our personal life. The House of Justice continues:

"With this in mind, we hope that the comments below will stimulate thoughtful, ongoing reflection by the friends. The aim is to learn about how to participate in the material affairs of society in a way that is consistent with the divine precepts and how, in practical terms, collective prosperity can be advanced through justice and generosity, collaboration and mutual assistance."

And that ongoing reflection that the House of Justice mentions is one of the things that we're doing in this course, and in this Unit. Reflecting not only on this letter, but on all of the readings, and other videos that you've seen, with that particular objective of how to participate in the material affairs of the society in ways that are consistent with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. And how we can talk about these issues with others. And indeed that's one of our exercises that we do in this Unit, and in other Units, is how to not only reflect on these writings and these points, but also to discuss them with others, and to consider how we might more effectively relate them to each other, and the tools that we need to be able to do that. So the House of Justice says:

"Our call to examine the implications of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh for economic life is intended to reach Bahá'í institutions and communities but is directed more especially to the individual believer [well, that's you and me]. If a new model of community life, patterned on the teachings, is to

emerge, must not the company of the faithful demonstrate in their own lives the rectitude of conduct that is one of its most distinguishing features?"

Well I think we know the answer to that, don't we? The House of Justice says:

"Every choice a Bahá'í makes—as employee or employer, producer or consumer, borrower or lender, benefactor or beneficiary—leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfil those aims."

Every choice a Bahá'í makes leaves a trace. The House of Justice continues:

"Naturally, the friends habitually look to the teachings to set the standard to which to aspire. But the community's deepening engagement with society means that the economic dimension of social existence must receive ever more concentrated attention."

This refers to the recent developments in which the Bahá'í communities, especially those that have grown and have been involved with the Training Institute process, are becoming more and more involved with the society around them and becoming, as it says, more deeply engaged with it. And, we can think about the kinds of activities that we've been learning in our clusters, the kinds of training institute courses that we've been on, the way in which we're able now to offer a very small number of core activities - of children's classes, junior youth empowerment programs, devotional meetings, firesides and so forth in our communities - in which we're beginning to engage with our neighbors and perhaps the wider community of people on issues that are of importance to them and qualities that they need to develop, the capacity to develop - and, as we've been doing that, we've been able to reach out to larger and larger numbers of people with our experience, as well as with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. So the House of Justice continues:

"Particularly in clusters where the community-building process is beginning to embrace large numbers, the exhortations contained in the Bahá'í Writings should increasingly inform economic relationships within families, neighbourhoods, and peoples. Not content with whatever values prevail in the existing order that surrounds them, the friends everywhere should consider the application of the teachings to their lives and, using the opportunities their circumstances offer them, make their own individual and collective contributions to economic justice and social progress wherever they reside. Such efforts will add to a growing storehouse of knowledge in this regard."

So here the House of Justice is saying that particularly in those clusters where our community-building processes are beginning to attract a lot of people and involve a lot of people, then, the writings should increasingly inform the relationships that we have, within our families, in our neighborhoods, and among peoples - populations of peoples. And we shouldn't be content with the values that others hold, in the surrounding communities. We have already referred to those: the attitudes of me-first, of self-interest, of trying to accumulate more, that the more you can accumulate somehow makes you a better person, a more important person, a person who is particularly blessed, who should be perhaps listened to. Those are not the values that we Bahá'ís hold. And we should be also to consider how we can apply the teachings to our lives, making use of whatever opportunities we have before us, and that we should make our own individual - and our collective contribution - to economic justice, and social progress, wherever we reside.

How can we do that? What does that mean? We need to reflect on this, and this is really part of what this unit is about: learning how to reflect on these very suggestions, of how we can, ourselves, apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to our own lives, and we can try to make contributions to the economic justice and social progress of our communities. And of course when we do that, then we gain experience, we share that experience, and this creates knowledge. One of the things the House of Justice says is that the responsibility of every Bahá'í is to help create knowledge. The House of Justice goes on to say that:

"A foundational concept to explore in this context is the spiritual reality of man. In the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, the nobility inherent to every human being is unequivocally asserted; it is a fundamental tenet of Bahá'í belief, upon which hope for the future of humankind is built. The soul's capacity to manifest all the names and attributes of God—He Who is the Compassionate, the Bestower, the Bountiful—is repeatedly affirmed in the Writings."

What a beautiful concept, and one that's so uncommon today, in much of our societies in which we live. That spiritual reality of man, it's our nobility that's inherent in all of us, is asserted by the Bahá'í teachings, and that that nobility, and that spirituality, is the hope for the future of humanity, is an amazing concept. And the capacity that we have - that our soul has - to manifest all of the names of God, all of His attributes - and the House of Justice has picked out ones that are particularly concerned with economic well-being, economic progress.

The concepts that we need to have when we're thinking about how we behave - economically justly - how we behave to further the society's progress. They've chosen "the Compassionate, the Bestower, the Bountiful." These three qualities are particularly named. It's worth spending a few moments thinking about the implications of our capacity to manifest just those three concepts. The House of Justice continues:

"Economic life is an arena for the expression of honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, generosity, and other qualities of the spirit. The individual is not merely a self-interested economic unit, striving to claim an ever-greater share of the world's material resources. 'Man's merit lieth in service and virtue', Baha'u'llah avers, 'and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches.' And further: 'Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection, nor let your endeavours be spent in promoting your personal interest.' By consecrating oneself to the service of others, one finds meaning and purpose in life and contributes to the upliftment of society itself."

Isn't that an interesting way to think about economic life? And is it something that many people do right now? I'm not sure. That it's an arena for the expression of honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, generosity, and other qualities of the spirit. The economic life is an arena for that. There's a place where we can show these qualities, and to say that we're not just a self-interested economic unit, which is pretty much how people are defined in advertising, in sales pitches, in the media - as people who want-want-want, spend-spend-spend, to get-get-get. This is a very common sort of rubric of what the individual is.

And that we want to get as much as we can, accumulate as much as we can, have bigger, better, more, is the way that we're often as human beings depicted by others. But this is not the Bahá'í understanding of who the human being is. We're that *noble being*, and our merit is in serving others, and in expressing our virtues, and it's not in how much we own, how wealthy we are. And the idea that the wealth of our precious lives is something that we should not use to pursue evil or corrupt things, or to promote our own personal interests. And as we look around us we can see that that is for so many, exactly what they do do. If they have money, they spend it on unworthy ends. Not only individuals, but whole countries are doing that.

And I love this, that by consecrating oneself to the service of others, one finds meaning and purpose in life, and contributes to the upliftment of society itself. Think how many people say that they find their life without meaning, without purpose, when we know that the simple solution to that is to serve others. The House of Justice continues:

*"At the outset of His celebrated treatise *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 'Abdu'l-Baha states: 'And the honour and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to*

his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight."

I suppose that it would be absolutely remarkable if someone wrote about us after we'd passed to the Abha kingdom, that this person, that we, I, have become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage, to my fellow-men. I would like to be able to aspire to that and achieve that. The House of Justice continues:

"Viewed in this light, many seemingly ordinary economic activities gain new significance because of their potential to add to human welfare and prosperity. 'Every person must have an occupation, a trade or a craft,' explains the Master [that's 'Abdu'l-Bahá], 'so that he may carry other people's burdens, and not himself be a burden to others.'" The poor are urged by Baha'u'llah to 'exert themselves and strive to earn the means of livelihood', while they who are possessed of riches 'must have the utmost regard for the poor'. 'Wealth', 'Abdu'l-Baha has affirmed, 'is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes.'"

Again, this is the sort of rules that the Bahá'ís are playing by in terms of trying to add to human welfare and prosperity. And many of the things that we just do ordinarily become quite significant when they're viewed in the light of this carrying forward an ever-advancing civilization - one of the themes of this social change course of the Wilmette Institute.

Some of those ordinary things that we do is to have an occupation - a trade or a craft. Well, this is our job. This is where we go, this is what we do to earn money. These are the things that we do not only to earn money but also perhaps as part of our service to others. Perhaps we share: teaching other people how to do crafts. These are things that we can do, and Abdu'l-Bahá makes the point that we learn these things so that we can carry other people, when they need that, and not be a burden ourselves, to others. That we can support ourselves, and we can support others when they need supporting. And those who are without wealth, without means, are urged to exert themselves, to try - and to try to earn the means of livelihood. They need to strive, while the people who have wealth have to have the utmost regard for the poor. And 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains what that means. That wealth is good, *if* - and this is a condition He put on it - it's acquired by an individual's own efforts, and the grace of God. Things that we do, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry. So in these kinds of areas of work covers just about everything. And the other condition: *if* it be expended for philanthropic purposes.

So not just kept for ourselves, but used for the welfare of others. And the House of Justice goes on:

"At the same time, the Hidden Words [these are passages written by Bahá'u'lláh] is replete with warnings of its perilous allure, that wealth is a 'mighty barrier' between the believer and the proper Object of his adoration. [This is God, I believe, the proper object of his adoration.] No wonder, then, that Baha'u'llah extols the station of the wealthy one who is not hindered by riches from attaining the eternal kingdom; the splendour of such a soul 'shall illuminate the dwellers of heaven even as the sun enlightens the people of the earth!' 'Abdu'l-Bahá declares that 'if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this, and it would rank in the sight of God as the supreme achievement'. For wealth is most commendable 'provided the entire population is wealthy.'"

This paragraph has much to think about. The allure - perilous allure - of wealth, which is a barrier between ourselves and God. And the fact that a wealthy one who is not hindered by riches from attaining the eternal kingdom shall illuminate the dwellers of heaven. It's a very interesting concept worthy of some of the reflection that we'll be having during this unit. And then 'Abdu'l-Bahá is saying that if somebody resourceful and judicious should initiate some measures that would enrich many, many people - the masses of people - that there's no greater undertaking than this. And it would rank in the sight of God as the supreme achievement. That's also very interesting to think about, this philanthropy that we are to have if we are able to find ways to enrich the masses of people, lift them out of poverty.

In this unit we are going to be looking at some of the suggestions that the Bahá'í International Community has been putting forward to the United Nations and the assembled nations, for poverty eradication. The very first goal of the sustainable development goals in the Agenda for 2030, which we'll be looking at very briefly in this unit. And it's interesting, isn't it, that wealth is most commendable *provided the entire population is wealthy*. What I wonder does that mean? What does that kind of wealth consist of? We should reflect perhaps on that too. And the House of Justice goes on:

"Examining one's life to determine what is a necessity and then discharging with joy one's obligation in relation to the law of Huququ'lláh is an indispensable discipline to bring one's priorities into balance, purify whatever wealth one possesses, and ensure that the share which is the Right of God provides for the greater good. At all times, contentment and moderation,

benevolence and fellow feeling, sacrifice and reliance on the Almighty are qualities that befit the God-fearing soul."

Now in this unit we won't have time to consider Huququ'lláh, other than to just mention it here, that it is a discipline which brings our priorities into balance and makes our wealth pure. But these concepts that befit every soul - of contentment and moderation, benevolence and fellow feeling, sacrifice and reliance on the Almighty - these qualities of our soul are so useful when we're thinking about our economic life. And again, a cluster of qualities that we should think about in the course of our reflection during this unit. And the House of Justice continues:

"The forces of materialism promote a quite contrary line of thinking: that happiness comes from constant acquisition, that the more one has the better, that worry for the environment is for another day. These seductive messages fuel an increasingly entrenched sense of personal entitlement, which uses the language of justice and rights to disguise self-interest. Indifference to the hardship experienced by others becomes commonplace while entertainment and distracting amusements are voraciously consumed. The enervating influence of materialism seeps into every culture, and all Baha'is recognize that, unless they strive to remain conscious of its effects, they may to one degree or another unwittingly adopt its ways of seeing the world."

This paragraph has so many ideas in it - that the forces of materialism not only eat us up with greed... and thinking that happiness comes from getting more and more and more - but it also promotes a different line of thinking, which colors everything - the way we think about the world. The way we think about our money, the way we think about our work, the way in which we do our work, and the way we think of others.

And then this idea of the seductive messages. These seductive messages are all around us, that's why they're so seductive. We can't avoid them. And they tell us that we're entitled to more. We should have a better quality this and that. I should have more of that, I need to have more. And it actually uses that language of justice: *It's only right that I get my fair share. It's only right, I've worked long and hard. It's only right that I should have more than you, who hasn't done so much* - being used to disguise our own personal self-interest.

And I think one of the interesting things in this next sentence about entertainments that are so voraciously consumed... I edited a book in which one of the sentences has always stuck in my mind, in which it was stated that: *"In the Western world, we now spend considerably more on the entertainment of our adults than we do on the education of our children."* And that to me has been something that I've

thought about a lot – and tried to fix, in my own life. This innervating influence of materialism, this thing which is so debilitating, has been now seeped into every culture. Even the Bahá'ís themselves unless we are very proactive about it, we will also adopt its ways of seeing the world. The House of Justice continues:

"Parents must be acutely aware that, even when very young, children absorb the norms of their surroundings. The junior youth spiritual empowerment programme encourages thoughtful discernment at an age when the call of materialism grows more insistent. With the approach of adulthood comes a responsibility, shared by one's generation, not to allow worldly pursuits to blind one's eyes to injustice and privation. Over time, the qualities and attitudes nurtured by the courses of the training institute, through exposure to the Word of God, help individuals to see past the illusions that, at every stage of life, the world uses to pull attention away from service and towards the self. And ultimately, the systematic study of the Word of God and the exploration of its implications raises consciousness of the need to manage one's material affairs in keeping with the divine teachings."

This training institute helps us to see past those things that blind us, and create illusions - things that are not there - at every stage of life - and pulls us away from service and to the self. And the antidote for that is studying the words of God. This is so pertinent for ourselves today. We can see it all around: that the extremes of wealth and poverty are completely untenable. So few people own so much of the world's wealth. And the vast, vast vast majority of people have hardly anything at all. And those of us who are somewhere in between - we're beginning to realize that the order that we're seeing in front of us is falling apart, that the Old World Order is unsure of itself and it's rolling up with rapidity. And many of us question its values. The House of Justice concludes:

"The larger the presence of a Baha'i community in a population, the greater its responsibility to find ways of addressing the root causes of the poverty in its surroundings. Although the friends are at the early stages of learning about such work and of contributing to the related discourses, the community-building process of the Five Year Plan is creating everywhere the ideal environment in which to accrue knowledge and experience, gradually but consistently, about the higher purpose of economic activity. Against the background of the age-long work of erecting a divine civilization, may this exploration become a more pronounced feature of community life, institutional thought, and individual action in the years ahead." Signed: The Universal House of Justice.

So friends, we're at the early stage of learning about the work of finding out about the root causes of poverty in our surroundings, and how to address that. Early

stages of contributing to the discourses in this area. And yet, we're in the process of the Five Year Plan, which itself is creating the environment in which we can learn about these things, and get the experience, gradually but consistently. And one of the purposes of this course is to provide us a framework for looking a little bit at this subject in more detail, having an opportunity to look at the writings and the other documents that relate to this subject that are coming out of the Bahá'í International Community - that's part of the discourses of society - and to learn and gain our own knowledge about this, and to reflect with our friends and our family on some of these issues, and to try to apply in our own lives some of the principles, teachings, behaviors and practices, attitudes, that are reflected in the writings, so that we may make our contribution to the advancement of civilization.

This final slide provides some further resources for you to look at. Many of these are contained within our readings, but you might want to just look at some of these - some of them are readings, one of them is the website of *Ethical Business Building the Future*, which has been working on business and work for many years now. So take a look at some of these resources and enjoy the rest of Unit 5 of this course on Social Change, in the Wilmette Institute.

Resources (you can use the link, or copy and paste the URL)

[Social Action: A paper prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre](http://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/involvement-life-society/osed-2012-social-action) (26 November 2012)

<http://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/involvement-life-society/osed-2012-social-action>

[Initial considerations regarding the elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth](https://www.bic.org/statements/initial-considerations-regarding-elimination-extremes-poverty-and-wealth) (Baha'i International Community's contribution to the 50th Session of the United Nations Commission on Social Development—1 February 2012)

<https://www.bic.org/statements/initial-considerations-regarding-elimination-extremes-poverty-and-wealth>

[From Deficit to Abundance: Seeing Capacity for Meaningful Contribution in all Populations and People](https://www.bic.org/statements/deficit-abundance-seeing-capacity-meaningful-contribution-on-all-populations-and-people-0) (A statement of the Baha'i International Community to the 55th Session of the Commission for Social Development—1 February 2017)

<https://www.bic.org/statements/deficit-abundance-seeing-capacity-meaningful-contribution-on-all-populations-and-people-0>

[Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism](https://www.bic.org/statements/rethinking-prosperity-forging-alternatives-culture-consumerism) (Baha'i International Community's Contribution to the 18th Session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development—3 May 2010)

<https://www.bic.org/statements/rethinking-prosperity-forging-alternatives-culture-consumerism>

[Ethical Business Building the Future](http://ebbf.org/) <http://ebbf.org/>