

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

February 25, 2017

To the American Bahá'í community

Beloved Friends and Co-workers,

For the past several months, this Assembly has been deeply engaged in reflecting on both the condition of the society in which we live and serve and the profound responsibility we all bear to present the unifying teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to our fellow-citizens. The process has affirmed both the critical nature of this moment and the necessity of bold action to address the historic opportunity it presents.

At this pivotal juncture in our nation's history, our foremost responsibility is to everywhere affirm—in the Name of Bahá'u'lláh—the truth of the oneness of humanity in a manner that will have an impact for decades to come. We must accelerate our efforts to remove the stains of prejudice and injustice from the fabric of our society. As you take up this call with courage and zeal, we ask that you keep the following concepts in mind.

The tensions, divisions, and injustices that currently beset America are symptoms of a longstanding illness. The nation is afflicted with a deep spiritual disorder, manifest in rampant materialism, widespread moral decay, and a deeply ingrained racial prejudice. As a result, millions of our fellow Americans, subject to systemic injustices in many facets of life, are prevented from making their full contributions to society and of partaking fully in its benefits. No one is immune to this disorder—we are all members of this society and to some degree suffer the effects of its maladies. That we live in a critical time can be seen in the way essential questions of identity, social vision, and global relations are being raised to a degree not seen in decades. Increasing numbers of our fellow-citizens are actively in search of solutions both moral and practical to answer them.

The resolution to these challenges lies in recognizing and embracing the truth at the heart of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation—the incontrovertible truth that humanity is one. Ignorance of this truth—which embodies the very spirit of the Age—is itself a form of oppression, for without it, it is impossible to build a truly just and peaceful world.

The oneness of humanity is far more than a slogan or an abstract and unattainable ideal. It has profound implications for both personal behavior and for the way society is organized—challenging many current assumptions and revolutionizing our conceptions of the relationships that should exist between the individual, society, and its institutions. Awareness of the spiritual reality of human beings carries with it the moral requirement that all be given every opportunity to fulfill their potential and to contribute to the advancement of civilization. To this end, we have a twofold mission: to develop within our own community a pattern of life that increasingly reflects the spirit of the Bahá'í teachings, and to engage with others in a deliberate and collaborative effort to eradicate the ills afflicting our nation.

The teachings of the Bahá'í Faith instruct us to work to reshape society based on principles of love, inclusiveness, and reciprocity. This requires that our means be consistent with our ends—that is, by transcending current approaches that tend to divide people into contending groups, raising consciousness in such a way as to bring them together in the earnest and honest search for solutions. The language we use and the attitudes we take, while not ignoring the harsh realities that exist in the world, should appeal to the nobler aspirations of our fellow-citizens. They should reflect assurance that the vast majority of us sincerely desire justice, and must be unifying rather than divisive. Above all, our approach must be suffused with the spirit of the sacred Word, which grants us access to immense spiritual resources. Indeed, it is the one

power on earth that can transform the copper of human consciousness into the gold of spiritual perception and behavior.

We have inherited a priceless legacy of service spanning more than a century, originally set in motion by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself. In the past two decades especially, we have obtained important insights into how our combined and various efforts make for a coherent force for progress. The more we understand the framework of action given to us in the current Five Year Plan, the better we can appreciate that it is precisely suited to the needs of the time. We are rapidly gaining the ability to engage ever-greater numbers of individuals in the work of community building who, through a sustained and meaningful process of personal and social transformation, can join together in creating effective and lasting change. The process fosters the intellectual and spiritual capacities necessary to the complex and challenging task of creating a society founded on divine principles. Surely such a convergence of capacity and opportunity is nothing less than providential.

The task of transforming an entire society will require a many-faceted approach through which a pattern of life can emerge demonstrating the rich possibilities inherent in walking the spiritual path of love and service. The Universal House of Justice, without attempting to strictly define them, has stated that these possibilities can be considered as falling into the three broad categories of expansion and consolidation, social action, and engagement in the discourses of society. They emerge organically and coherently as a community rises from one level of advancement to the next. Experience has shown how, from the humblest beginnings, a pattern of community life that includes all three dimensions can develop. All three can be seen as mutually reinforcing elements of one process—a process that must be accelerated, for it will generate the consciousness necessary to apply in both word and deed the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to the challenges we face, not least of them the challenge of race relations. As it gains momentum, it will embrace vast numbers of people empowered to take charge of their own social and spiritual development and contribute their full share to a new way of life.

The activities at the core of our community life are the foundation for great social change. Simple as they might appear, they are, in reality, profound and revolutionary. This becomes clear as we observe systematically applied in action some of the capacities we are building through insights derived from Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Among them is the ability to engage in distinctive conversations of a spiritual character. We learn to converse with others about the fundamental purpose of life, the relationship of the soul with its Creator, and the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's advent and His teachings for our spiritual and social progress. We learn to create an atmosphere of reverence and devotion to God in the community, to foster a spirit of friendship and intimacy that transcends the barriers of race and class, to provide spiritual and moral education for young people, to share the lives and teachings of the Central Figures of the Faith with confidence and with sensitivity to varying situations. We also learn to walk with others on the spiritual path, in a humble posture of learning, engaging in individual and collective service for the betterment of the world. These are but a few of many examples. All these activities must increase and grow to embrace multitudes of individuals. In an ever-enlarging number of neighborhoods, for example, we will learn how best and most effectively to work among diverse populations and about the practical dimensions of interracial fellowship. Such activity—and the genuine friendships that result—will help to weaken and eventually uproot prejudice-tainted notions underlying our present social order, and can begin to undo racism in our society.

In the realm of social action, it is possible to observe the range of projects and activities that emerge organically from our community-building work and highlight those which tackle, directly or indirectly, situations with a bearing on race relations. We anticipate the emergence

of more such activities as we gain in experience and capacity, and as more people become empowered to serve. In the area of discourse, we can explore and develop a conversation with the wider society which, when added to the range of conversations already cultivated by the institute process, can assist our fellow citizens to abandon the language and practices in society that have resulted in an intractable divide, unite on the basis of commonly held ideals and principles, and work together for a social order free of prejudice and characterized by unity in diversity. Such conversations will naturally come about as we pursue the work of community building at the level of neighborhoods, as well as through a diverse array of personal contacts. We can also appreciate activities of the kind in which a host of individual Bahá'ís are engaged—whether with like-minded organizations or in their professions—encouraging more Bahá'ís to similarly take advantage of opportunities in the wider community. At every level, we have much to learn from others who are striving for the same goals and with whom we can join hands in this vital and foundational work. And, through our Office of Public Affairs, we are advancing this institution's involvement in the national discourse on race—drawing on insights from the various experiences of the friends and from our own previous efforts to offer a Bahá'í perspective. A process is already underway leading to a national race unity conference under the sponsorship of this Assembly, details of which will be announced in due course.

A key component of our approach is the spirit of learning. This begins with the realization that successfully giving form to the divine principles given to us by Bahá'u'lláh will require persistent effort over time. We will progress as we build on strengths that emerge through experience. If we study carefully the ways various communities are active in each one of the three broad areas of expansion and consolidation, social action, and engagement in the discourses of society, we can identify new insights and bring them to the attention of others so they can be established in more and more places. As we move forward, we will come to an increasingly profound appreciation of the rich potential inherent in this approach.

Unity and effectiveness in our work will evolve to the extent that we see our efforts as complementary and mutually enriching. By advancing energetically in all areas, we will apply our systematic approach to learning to such effect that one can envision how, in the decades ahead, Bahá'ís will contribute in an ever more effective way to the eventual eradication of racism in our country.

We take as inspiration for our service the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His visit to America more than a century ago. In clear and uncompromising terms, in private meetings and public assemblies, He raised the call of the oneness of humanity. He demonstrated fully, courageously, and consistently, whether openly in large gatherings or in the smallest personal acts, the implications of that spiritual truth, and challenged others to do the same. While acknowledging its marvelous material achievements and aspirations, He unhesitatingly warned of dire consequences to American society and to the cause of world peace if her peoples failed to live up to the truth of the oneness of humanity—especially in the relations between black and white. Above all, He stressed the central and unique role ordained for the American nation in the establishment of that universal peace anticipated by all the Prophets of past ages.

Dear friends! Let us follow His shining example with a sense of urgency and with determined focus. Let us consecrate ourselves to the creation of a world in which knowledge will be the province of all; where there are no limitations imposed upon a soul by virtue of race, gender, or creed; where the material and spiritual aspects of life are in harmony; and where all of the truths essential for human progress are held sacred. To do so will require great sacrifice, courage, and audacity. A rich tapestry of community life that increasingly reflects the sublime teachings of the

Blessed Beauty will not emerge of its own accord. The evils of racism, materialism, and moral decadence will be eradicated only by a love that is translated into action—such actions as deliberately going out of our way to befriend all, appreciating the indispensable contributions of all, and joining hands with all in the creation of a new world. We believe in the fundamental goodness and decency of the masses of our fellow-citizens. We are confident that Americans yearn as we do for spirituality, that they desire genuine justice and prosperity for everyone. We are assured that America's role on the world stage, however significant it has so far been, will in the future be more distinguished and praiseworthy, not because of any inherent superiority it now possesses but to the degree that its present gloom is dispelled by the Light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Surely we can, with God's assistance, and together with our sisters and brothers throughout the land, bear whatever pain and difficulties will be necessary to create a haven for a suffering and bewildered humanity.

"Address yourselves to the promotion of the well-being and tranquillity of the children of men," is Bahá'u'lláh's call to the peoples of the world. "Bend your minds and wills to the education of the peoples and kindreds of the earth, that haply the dissensions that divide it may, through the power of the Most Great Name, be blotted out from its face, and all mankind become the upholders of one Order, and the inhabitants of one City. Illumine and hallow your hearts; let them not be profaned by the thorns of hate or the thistles of malice. Ye dwell in one world, and have been created through the operation of one Will. Blessed is he who mingleth with all men in a spirit of utmost kindness and love." And, in another instance, He counsels: "It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action. . . . That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race. The Great Being saith: Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth. In another passage He hath proclaimed: It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."

He especially appeals to His followers to seize the chance to make their own vital contribution to the realization of humanity's destiny:

"O friends! Be not careless of the virtues with which ye have been endowed, neither be neglectful of your high destiny. Suffer not your labors to be wasted through the vain imaginations which certain hearts have devised. Ye are the stars of the heaven of understanding, the breeze that stirreth at the break of day, the soft-flowing waters upon which must depend the very life of all men, the letters inscribed upon His sacred scroll. With the utmost unity, and in a spirit of perfect fellowship, exert yourselves, that ye may be enabled to achieve that which beseemeth this Day of God."

In future communications, we will comment further on some of the themes touched on in this letter and will also share news of local and national developments. Be assured of the constancy of our prayers on your behalf. Our love for you is limitless, our gratitude to you is inexpressible, and our confidence in you knows no bounds.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

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