

Constructive Resilience¹

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The purpose of Divine Revelation, asserts Bahá'u'lláh, is “to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly” (Kitáb-i-Íqán 240). Thus, Revelation has a twofold purpose: the first, to liberate humanity from the darkness of ignorance and guide it to the light of true understanding; the second, to ensure the peace and tranquility of mankind. One without the other will not work. The Universal House of Justice has expounded upon the interconnectedness of this twofold purpose of God. First, individuals recognize the station of Bahá'u'lláh. They then arise to serve the Cause of God and by doing so, their own transformation takes effect as they develop the capacities latent within them. They also develop habits and attitudes that make them able to persevere and be more effective in contributing their share to an ever-advancing civilization.

Bringing together material and spiritual civilization is not an easy job. It is a task that lies beyond the comprehension and ability of any ordinary human being, whether acting alone or

together. Who, then, can do this work and how will Bahá'u'lláh's exalted purpose for humankind be realized? Bahá'u'lláh says that if it be God's pleasure, God Himself could render the Cause victorious through the power of a single divine Word. Should this be His intention, individuals of indomitable strength could appear to achieve victory. However, due to God's loving providence and wisdom, it has been ordained that complete victory can only be achieved through speech and utterance, and by the endeavors of His ordinary servants here on earth. One of the early believers, who was deeply affected by the majesty and power of Bahá'u'lláh, writes that once, when in His presence:

I said to myself: What a pity! If only the kings of the world could recognize Him and arise to serve Him, both the Cause and the believers would be exalted in this day. The following day when we attained His presence, Bahá'u'lláh turned His face to me and addressed the following words to me with infinite charm and loving-kindness. He said “If the kings and rulers of the world had embraced the Faith in this day, you people could never have found an entry into this exalted Court. You could never have had the opportunity to attain Our presence, nor could you ever have acquired the privilege of hearing the words of the Lord of Mankind. Of course, the time will come when the kings

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and rulers of the world will become believers, and the Cause of God will be glorified outwardly. But this will happen after the meek and lowly ones of the earth have won this inestimable bounty.” (Taherzadeh, *Revelation* 160)

Bahá'u'lláh, in His emphatic promise of ultimate triumph, also states that God will “provide all the means by which” His purpose “can be established” (*Gleanings* 34:5). What are these means? I will mention a few.

First is the spiritual energy needed to create a renewed civilization. Just as the animating energies of the springtime penetrate the core of all material things and create the conditions for new life, the creative Words of the Manifestations of God influence hearts and souls and revolutionize human society. The irresistible spiritual forces of integration released by the Manifestations break down manmade barriers to progress, and thereby bring forth new potentialities for creating a new race of humanity and establishing a new civilization. The workings of these spiritual energies can be discerned in both integrative and disintegrative processes.

Bahá'u'lláh has also revealed teachings, principles, concepts, and methods that shape the framework for building that divine civilization, which is the integrative process. At the core of His Revelation, He has established His Covenant, a line of succession and spiritual guidance that preserves the unity of the Faith and ultimately of

humanity. The Covenant is a means to protect and advance the process of creating a just and peaceful global society. An inseparable part of His Covenant is His Administrative Order, which provides a pattern of governance that is unfailingly coherent with His purpose: “Indeed, the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh has been and will continue to be the inviolable guarantor of the invincibility of the Cause and its divinely-ordained institutions and the means of the fulfillment of Bahá'u'lláh's Words” (Taherzadeh, *Child* 41).

In addition, Bahá'u'lláh has provided for the continuation of Divine guidance to humanity throughout His Dispensation—an indispensable means by which the fulfillment of His purpose is ensured. To this end, Bahá'u'lláh has given us two divinely-guided Centers of Authority: One is the “Book,” which comprises the Writings of the Manifestations of God for this day (the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh) and the interpretations of His two authorized Interpreters (Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi); the other is the Universal House of Justice. This unique institution—which, in a world where human knowledge is mutable and progressive, is invested with the sacred authority to decide on whatever is not in the Book—has also been charged, among other duties, with the responsibility for maintaining the integrity and flexibility of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, managing the affairs of the Faith, and guiding the Bahá'í community.

Divine assistance, Bahá'u'lláh assures us, will also enable human beings

to undertake tasks that would otherwise require superhuman effort and therefore seem impossible to attain. The history of our Faith abounds with stories of victories that can only be attributed to the operation of Divine assistance: from the undaunted courage exhibited by the believers in the earliest days of the Cause in Persia, the land of its birth; to the intrepid spirit of the pioneers from East and West, who spread the Faith's teachings to the farthest corners of the globe; to the exuberant community-building efforts we witness in this very day.

In reviewing the factors ensuring ultimate success, the nature of the Cause of God itself must be examined. Bahá'u'lláh asserts that His Revelation is established upon an unassailable foundation that the storms of human strife are powerless to undermine, and whose structure the fanciful theories of human beings cannot succeed in damaging. We all know these words with which Bahá'u'lláh, referring to Himself, proclaims: "Should they cast Him into a fire kindled on the continent, He will assuredly rear His head in the midmost heart of the ocean... and if they cast Him into a darksome pit, they will find Him seated on earth's loftiest heights" (*Summons* 160). In other words, the DNA of the Cause of God is such that it cannot be destroyed; it cannot be derailed; it cannot be stopped from achieving its objectives.

What, then, should be our attitude, mindset, and approach to our individual and collective services in the path

of civilization-building? The lives of the Twin Manifestations of God for this age, the life of the Center of the Covenant, and of the beloved Guardian, comprise sources of inspiration for us all. The spirit of determination demonstrated by the early believers in both the East and the West are also invaluable in this regard. We witness this spirit in over 5,000 clusters worldwide and the efforts of many individuals and groups of Bahá'ís who are trying to contribute to a more just and united society. Through community-building, we are learning how to translate the teachings of the Faith into reality, a process which requires individual and collective acts of service and sacrifice. A review of the history of the Bahá'í community of Iran where, over the past 175 years, the believers have been subjected to injustice and oppression, can also prove instructive. I will focus on this review, but first we need to dedicate a few words to the nature of opposition to the Faith in that country.

For centuries, the Shi'a mullahs had been struggling to gain power in Iran. Depending on the strength of the central government of the day, they played different roles in running the country and in shaping Iranian culture. Many were also interested in advancing their own personal power and authority. From the rise of the Báb to the present day, the clerical establishment has viewed the Faith as a challenge to essential Shi'a doctrines and to their own interests. As Shoghi Effendi noted about the early days of the Báb's Dispensation: "Fearful,

envious, thoroughly angered, the mullahs were beginning to perceive the seriousness of their position" (*God Passes By* 11) as they foresaw not only the waning of their influence, but also the end of their power. The House of Justice has explained that the clergy recognized in Bahá'u'lláh the Voice of a coming society of justice and enlightenment in which they will have no place, and this is the fundamental reason why they so desperately opposed Bahá'u'lláh (26 November 2003).

As self-proclaimed enemies of the Faith, the mullahs have used not only their pulpits and assumed moral authority over their congregations, but also, whenever they could, the machinery of government to implement their plans to persecute the Bahá'ís. Across various periods of history, they have employed diverse approaches in their efforts against the Bahá'í community. During the rule of the Qajar Dynasty (1794-1925), the clerical establishment had significant influence. It therefore comes as no surprise that in the decades following the proclamation of the Báb (1844), until the overthrow of the Qajar Dynasty in 1925, the mullahs instigated virulent and ongoing attacks on Bahá'ís in cities and villages across the nation. They spread disinformation and distorted the facts of history, playing on an ill-informed population's ingrained prejudices and widespread enslavement to conspiracy theories. They deliberately ignored the Bahá'ís' loyalty to their country and their sincere

efforts to contribute to its advancement and, instead, propagated slander against them.

During the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979), the government purportedly followed a system in accord with secular ideas of freedom of worship, and the Bahá'ís were able to exercise a few of their basic rights. However, as the power struggle between the Shah and the mullahs went on, Bahá'ís were often used as a scapegoat, suffering a great deal of discrimination and injustice.

In 1979, with the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini and his clergy came to power with specific political, social and religious goals. Key among these goals was (and is) systemic opposition to the Bahá'í community. This makes Iran, at present, the only country in the world with a government-sponsored plan against the Faith. So extensive is this plan that it would be difficult, in this short space, to make even a cursory review of all the repressive activities in which the government is engaged. Suffice it to say that the overall aim of the government, as blatantly stated in its official documents, is the eradication of the Bahá'í community in Iran and discrediting of the Bahá'ís outside Iran (Dugal). This aim is being pursued vigorously through a multidimensional plan, notwithstanding, among other things, its high cost to the nation in both material and moral terms.

The first decade of the revolution witnessed hundreds of killings and thousands of arrests within the

Iranian Bahá'í community. Bahá'í institutions were banned. A massive and ever-expanding anti-Bahá'í propaganda machine began demonizing the Bahá'ís, and it continues to this very day, some forty years later. Bahá'í holy places and cemeteries have been destroyed across Iran. Efforts aimed at the economic strangulation of the Bahá'ís were initiated from the outset and still continue. The believers are prevented from teaching or studying in any university or other institution of higher learning in the country. A large amount of wealth belonging to both the Bahá'í community, as well as individual Bahá'ís, has been confiscated.

The manner in which the believers in the Cradle of the Faith have responded to this opposition has been described by the Universal House of Justice as “constructive resilience.” A letter written on its behalf to the friends in Iran praises them for striving to transcend the opposition “with that same constructive resilience that characterized” the actions of the early believers when responding “to the duplicity of their detractors” (9 September 2007).

The term “constructive resilience” was first used by the Universal House of Justice with a specific meaning in mind, and I would like to share with you my personal understanding of that meaning. Before I do so, let me provide a brief caveat. Members of the Bahá'í Faith do not claim to be the first group or community to have responded benignly to injustice or to remain loyal

citizens while suffering at the hands of an oppressive regime. Instead, constructive resilience refers to how the Bahá'ís in Iran have continued to grow community life and stay empowered, even while being deprived of fundamental civil liberties and human rights.

The Iranian Bahá'ís are systematically modeling community-building at the grassroots level, a response demonstrated by Bahá'u'lláh during His exile to Baghdad. Little by little, He guided the believers in exemplifying such kindness and virtuous comportment that they won the hearts of the citizenry, even to the point of gaining the trust of the official representatives of the Ottoman government.

In light of this background, let me begin by first simply defining resilience itself. According to the common understandings of the term, resilience is the capacity to recover from difficulties; elasticity and toughness are often mentioned in this regard. In psychological terms, resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, or significant sources of stress.

Many among the survivors of injustice, who number in the millions today, demonstrate resilience and achieve positive results. But the response to injustice and oppression also varies considerably among peoples. It ranges from submission and acceptance, to protest, resistance, open confrontation, and, at times, even violence. In some cases, those affected lose confidence in their perception of themselves and their own strength. They

become drained of that spirit of initiative so integral to human nature, and can be reduced to the level of objects and passive victims of their rulers' decree. Indeed, some who are exposed to sustained oppression can become so conditioned that, in their turn, should the opportunity offer itself, they accept the prevailing norms and take actions that are not in harmony with the very reasons for which they were persecuted. If they eventually come to power, these oppressed groups can easily fall into the same behaviors as their former oppressors. And the cycle goes on.

Constructive resilience is different. In the case of the Bahá'ís of Iran, it does not consist of submission or passive and patient acceptance of injustice. Neither does it rely on believing in some mysterious power that—disconnected from their actions—will free them from the chains of oppression. Instead, constructive resilience is an energetic and purposeful response that is coherent with the very aim of the Faith: unity. For the Bahá'ís of Iran, it constitutes a non-adversarial, violence-free, but dynamic approach to creating patterns of social engagement that move away from contention. At the same time, community members are vigorously pursuing every possible legal avenue available to correct and remedy the prevailing injustice.

Acting within the central tenets of the Faith, constructive resilience requires that members of the Faith avoid compromising their beliefs and adherence to the Teachings. They must not

deviate, even slightly, from the essence of the Faith's spirit. It implies that they remain undisturbed by the prevailing chaos in the world but rather that they see in it great opportunities to promote the Divine Teachings, and labor with steadfastness within this disorder, with the aim of growing their spiritual capacity, serving others, and promoting human oneness. Such a spirit of constructive resilience fosters a process through which individuals and communities are preserved from spiritual corrosion. It provides resources that enable the friends to free their hearts from resentment and to act with magnanimity toward those who have taken part in their mistreatment. Promoting constructive resilience certainly does not constitute a criticism or belittlement of those who fight injustice using confrontation and other means. Rather, it is an approach that the Bahá'ís are committed to, inspired by Divine Teachings and having positive and practical results. The spirit of constructive resilience can be discerned in every aspect of the Bahá'í community in Iran.

One such example concerns the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). Immediately following the 1979 Revolution, the doors of Iran's institutions of higher education were utterly closed to Bahá'í students and professors. Over several years, extensive efforts to explore possible solutions with Muslim officials proved futile. By the late 1980s, it had become obvious that Bahá'ís would not be allowed to enroll in Iranian universities

without denying their faith. Therefore, the community made informal arrangements to use the volunteer services of dismissed Bahá'í professors who would teach Bahá'í youth deprived of university coursework. Individual families offered their homes for classes and laboratories. The Bahá'ís did not seek to publicize this initiative, so as to avoid provoking the authorities. The BIHE was not presented as a “win” over the oppressor nor was it portrayed as retaliation. Rather, it was a thoughtful and quiet act of collective self-empowerment and moral imagination.

The aim of the BIHE was and remains to nurture the intellectual faculties of youth and to prepare them for service to their society. Despite enormous political pressure, the Bahá'ís of Iran took fate into their own hands. Their youth did not accede to being deprived of higher education and the community found resources, knowledge, and space to cultivate their innate gifts. The BIHE has withstood the Iranian government's ongoing efforts to shut it down, and continues to operate under harsh, fearful conditions. It has produced thousands of graduates in a number of fields, some of whom have been able to continue their education in more than ninety accredited universities around the world.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the BIHE and Bahá'ís around the world are proud of what the believers in Iran have achieved. Expressing its joy at the operation of the BIHE, the

House of Justice writes: “Perhaps the most compelling and clear example of your constructive resilience is evident currently in your earnest striving for knowledge, in your commitment to the loftiest values of faith and reason which the Cause inculcates, and in your perseverance in pursuit of higher education.” In that same letter, it attributes this success to the friends being “well aware of [their] mission” (29 January 2014).

In addition to educational repression, the Bahá'ís of Iran have also faced tremendous difficulties as a result of the government's banning of the Bahá'í leadership and community institutions. Some politicians imagined that the imposition of such a ban in 1983 and the imprisonment of the Yárán² in 2008 would cause the believers to lose direction and hope, and that it would eventually cause the general weakening of the Bahá'í community. But the Bahá'ís trusted the Divine Will and held firm to the belief that all that transpires serves the Cause of God, as long as they adhere to Bahá'í principles. The community stood firm and did not allow

² This term refers to seven Bahá'í leaders, six of whom were arrested on 14 May 2008 at their homes in Tehran. The seventh, Mahvash Sabet, was arrested on 5 March 2008 while on a trip to Mashhad. The seven formed the entire membership of the now-disbanded group known as the “Yárán” or “Friends in Iran,” tending to the spiritual and social needs of the 300,000-member Bahá'í community of that country.

apprehension and anxiety to take root, nor tests to perturb their hearts. They realized that the door to attend to their individual and collective affairs is still open through consultation amongst families and in small groups. Relying on the power of divine assistance, they remained engaged in the field of service and managed their affairs with moral rectitude. They carried out their spiritual obligations with steadfastness, devotion, and wisdom, and worked ever harder to maintain a vibrant community life. So exemplary was their response to this persecution that, in 2016, on the occasion of the eighth anniversary of the imprisonment of the Yárán, the House of Justice remarked:

You of course know full well that the purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is to bring about a civilization that is neither of the East nor of the West, a civilization based on coherence between the material and the spiritual needs of humankind. You also know that recognizing Him marks the commencement of a commitment to dedicate one's personal and family life to contributing to the establishment of that civilization. You are well aware that the fulfilment of this goal is facilitated through the activities and the maturation of the three protagonists in the advancement of civilization: the individual, the community, and the institutions. Even as every living and active

organism seeks to maintain its integrity and compensate for the loss of a part, when the darkness of injustice resulted in the closure of the Bahá'í administrative institutions in your land, you—both as a community and as individuals, the other two protagonists—sustained by the creative power of the Covenant, succeeded in compensating for this temporary loss. (12 May 2016)

In an effort to weaken the community, the Iranian government still exerts every effort to create a gap between the believers and the Universal House of Justice. Many stories tell of their failure. Let me share one. First, I must mention that the Bahá'í prisoners, when answering their interrogators, often explain the philosophy behind their actions as a way to prove their innocence. Many of the interrogators apparently become affected by the sincerity and the compelling nature of these explanations.

For instance, one Bahá'í was arrested for having served as a teacher of Bahá'í children's classes and the interrogator began his questioning of the believer harshly. But when he learned the reasons for educating children with spiritual values, he actually asked if and how he could send his own children to these classes. At the same time, there are also those interrogators who try to avoid the challenge altogether. They wish to bypass the inconvenience of convincing their supervisors of the innocence

of Bahá'ís, and ask the detainees not to explain their philosophies during interrogation. On one occasion, one of these interrogators—who did not want to be caught in a philosophical discussion with his Bahá'í prisoner—approached his task in this manner:

“Respond to my questions without any explanation: answer me with a yes or no.” The Bahá'í agreed and the interrogator said: “I have two questions for you. Are you a Bahá'í? And do you obey the instructions of the House of Justice?” The Bahá'í said that the answer to both questions was “no.” The interrogator, who was surprised, asked, “How come?” The Bahá'í answered, “So you want me to explain,” and went on to say, “To be a true Bahá'í is the desire of my heart. All my life I have been striving to be a Bahá'í. I only hope that, by the grace of Bahá'u'lláh, I will succeed. But I do not consider myself worthy of being called a Bahá'í. As for your second question: If I were obeying fully the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, you should have been a Bahá'í by now, as that Body continuously emphasizes the importance of sharing the Message of Bahá'u'lláh as part of our efforts to build a better world.”³

3 This and following examples are my personal recollections from letters that were sent to the Bahá'í World Centre.

Economic strangulation is a third tactic used by the government of Iran as a way to weaken the spirit of the Bahá'í community. It began with thousands of Bahá'í employees being expelled from all government-related offices and entities. Following this complete debarment from government or government-related employment, the authorities turned their attention to the private sector, resorting to various methods aimed at severely limiting the economic activities of Bahá'ís business owners and entrepreneurs.

In recent years, many Bahá'ís have faced a new problem: When they close their shops in observance of a Bahá'í Holy Day, the authorities seal off their businesses and threaten to withdraw their business permits. Efforts locally, nationally, and internationally to bring this economic apartheid to an end have been ongoing since the onset of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. But in facing this persecution with a spirit of constructive resilience, the Bahá'ís, far from resorting to common disruptive responses, creatively find ways to continue earning a livelihood. For example, an automobile mechanic whose shop was sealed because he closed it for a Bahá'í holy day, began repairing his customers' cars at a lower cost on the street in front of his shop. Naturally, his business boomed. A few weeks later, the government unsealed his shop. The Iranian Bahá'í community has always found ways and means of assisting those in need.

A fourth strategy of the Iranian government in its efforts to demoralize

the Bahá'ís is to evoke prejudice and spread slander about them among the masses, hoping to deter Bahá'ís from taking an active role in society. At times, the authorities openly demand that the believers not associate with their Muslim friends and neighbors. Their aim is to exclude Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority from meaningful social discourse, barring Bahá'ís from promoting the wellbeing of the wider community. Notwithstanding these constraints, the Bahá'ís remain determined to live purposeful lives in their society. In a letter sent to the Bahá'í World Centre, a young Iranian wrote:

I am a 24-year-old student. A few years ago I had a very bad traffic accident. A man who was not involved in the accident brought me to hospital and stayed patiently until I was safely in the hands of medical staff. He then left. I was very impressed with his kindness. Before he left I asked his name so that I could thank him when I left the hospital. He said there was no need to know his name. However, he did say "I am a Bahá'í, and we are all humans and supposed to assist each other." He kissed my face and left and I had no idea who he was. This shook me and I decided to study the Bahá'í Faith. No one was able to give me a book. I went to the internet and found an address. A kind lady from abroad sent me materials and accompanied me for two years. I am now

a Bahá'í and my heart is illumined with the light of Bahá'u'lláh. But I want to be able to say Bahá'í prayers in the company of other believers. Please tell me, what can I do?

A story contained in another letter reports what a cleric shared during one of his sermons:

One day I noted that a certain person (with an Islamic name) who had regularly attended my sermons, was no longer coming. I waited for a few months and there was no sign of him. I asked someone to look for him. This person reported to me as follows: One day I saw the person in the street. He was very different in his outlook. "I called him by the name I knew him. But he said "I am not so and so. I am now so (a modern Iranian name)." I asked him, "What has happened to you?" He replied: "Do you remember the day when you and I in the company of the cleric got stuck on the road outside Tehran because our car had run out of fuel? Do you remember how many people, all supposedly Muslim, we stopped and asked for help and nobody responded? Do you remember that a lady stopped on her own to see if we needed help? Do you remember that she gave us fuel and did not accept any payment for it and at the end she gave us her business card? I followed up with her

and later on learned that she is a Bahá'í. With her kind behavior I was encouraged to investigate her faith and I am a Bahá'í now."

If there is one area of activity that the government wants to see completely stopped, it is the sharing of Bahá'í principles with Muslim people and conducting activities related to the institute process and community-building.⁴ Since the government is aware that Iranian citizens are more eager to learn about the Faith, it tries to counteract this receptiveness by spreading false information about the Bahá'ís and preventing Bahá'ís from openly correcting this misinformation. Likewise, Bahá'ís understand that engaging in collective teaching plans and other activities that are part of Bahá'í community life elsewhere in the world are not appropriate in Iran under the present conditions. Nevertheless, the Bahá'ís in Iran do their best to teach the Faith while taking into account local realities.

Thus, on the one hand, they do not accept being deprived of their individual expression of faith or contributing to the betterment of the world. On the other hand, they do not teach or openly share Bahá'í ideas in public places, at school, or at work. Whatever they do is done with wisdom and consideration

4 The institute process includes activities aimed at assisting interested individuals to enhance their capacities for involvement in community building efforts and participation in constructive discourses of society.

of local culture and conditions. It is largely through their actions and comportment that they defend their Faith against misrepresentation.

An important characteristic of the way the Iranian Bahá'ís are facing all these tests is a certain spirit of contentment and conviction. They painstakingly make ongoing petitions to government institutions at various levels, as well as to individuals of influence in order to end this unjust discrimination against them. Not receiving a favorable solution, they seek assistance for the defense of their rights from their spiritual sisters and brothers, as well as Bahá'í institutions in other countries. Not relying on others to act first, they patiently and creatively continue their efforts to find peaceful solutions at home. Their aim is to live as contributing members of their society, and to fulfill their spiritual obligations. Furthermore, they pursue these paths of service with an exemplary spirit of love for their country and friendship for their compatriots. They see in all of this an opportunity for spiritual growth and the enlightening influence of the Cause of God.

As one demonstration of this unconquerable spirit, a few years into their imprisonment, the Yárán sent a message to the Universal House of Justice. They respectfully asked the Bahá'ís of the world to refrain from praying for the Yárán's release. Why? Because they could see with their own eyes that doors were being opened for the progress of the Faith as a result of their imprisonment. The spirit of

the members of the Yárán at the time of their release, following ten years of harsh and unjust imprisonment, was a testimony to this magnanimity. One of the Yárán, when discharged from prison, said: "I do not remember during these years talking to anyone about animosity, hate, or grudges.... I was never thinking of revenge or fighting anyone or rising up against any group. I was constantly thinking of equipping myself with spiritual power and energy" (Sabet).

There are also stories telling of the spirit of joy that many of the friends try to maintain, even in the harshest conditions in prison. In brief, over the course of the past 175 years of unremitting oppression, the Bahá'ís of Iran have steadily increased their clarity of vision about the mission of Bahá'u'lláh and their role in it. They have retained a confident mastery of their moral purpose. They have learned to nourish an abiding love for their fellow citizens and for the land in which they suffer so greatly. It is, therefore, an immense joy to observe a positive sea change in the attitude of many Iranian people toward the Faith and the Bahá'ís.

The spiritual energies released by so great a number of sacrifices offered in the path of God, as well as the efforts of both Bahá'ís and members of the larger community elsewhere in the world to arise to defend their rights, have no doubt significantly contributed to the realization of these signal accomplishments. The Bahá'ís of Iran often say that they owe this success to

Divine assistance and to their wholehearted obedience to the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

In this process, the Bahá'ís have further developed a number of capacities: the capacity to hold fervently to one's faith and to maintain certitude in the Manifestation of God for this age; the ability to frame events historically within the processes of integration and disintegration; the wisdom to cultivate a deeper understanding of the vision that Bahá'u'lláh has given to the world of the oneness of humanity and of a just society; and the courage to enact this vision by following an all-encompassing, coherent, and practical Plan, a path through which every individual can contribute to the establishment of that just society. Through hardship, the Bahá'ís of Iran can perceive the bankruptcy of the material world, humbly beseech Him for Divine assistance, place complete reliance on Him and endure difficulties in His path with unfailing and legendary patience. Through a lack of freedom, they have developed the strength to fulfill the daily necessities of life, survive oppression, and exhibit courage in the face of hatred. Their unwavering determination to seek justice with quiet fortitude demonstrates the will and the discipline required to live a purposeful life. Ultimately, the Bahá'ís of Iran have learned to experience the deep joy and comfort that arises from service to others and to God. Are not all of these among the very capacities and abilities that, in our prayers, we beseech God to help us develop?

Moving from the spirit of constructive resilience demonstrated by the Bahá'ís of Iran, let us look at the larger global context. The rest of humanity is also being battered by forces of oppression, whether generated from the depths of religious, racial, and gender-based intolerance, or from the onslaught of rampant materialism. "What 'oppression' is more grievous," Bahá'u'lláh asks, "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?" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 31).

The fact is that the act of living in a society engulfed in materialistic philosophies and entangled in outmoded traditions and assumptions is not without its own tests for the Bahá'ís. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that the believers in the West would experience mental tests so as to purify them and enable them to achieve their Divinely-conferred potential as a force for change in the world:

And yet, how often we seem to forget the clear and repeated warnings of our beloved Master, who, in particular during the concluding years of His mission on earth, laid stress on the "severe mental tests" that would inevitably sweep over His loved ones of the West—tests that would purge, purify and prepare them for their noble mission in life. (Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 50)

No matter where we live, nurturing spiritual capacities, approaches, and habits of thought is necessary to strengthening our own spirit of constructive resilience. As we strive for the betterment of the world, the messages of the House of Justice addressed to the Bahá'ís of Iran over the past few years identify some such capacities. We live at a time when the vision of Bahá'u'lláh challenges many of the assumptions that shape contemporary discourse. In a letter addressed to the Bahá'ís of the World, the Universal House of Justice states:

Today the world is assailed by an array of destructive forces. Materialism, rooted in the West, has now spread to every corner of the planet, breeding, in the name of a strong global economy and human welfare, a culture of consumerism. It skillfully and ingeniously promotes a habit of consumption that seeks to satisfy the vilest and most selfish desires, while encouraging the expenditure of wealth so as to prolong and exacerbate social conflict. How vain and foolish a worldview! And meanwhile, a rising tide of fundamentalism, bringing with it an exceedingly narrow understanding of religion and spirituality, continues to gather strength, threatening to engulf humanity in rigid dogmatism. In its most extreme form, it conditions the resolution of the problems of the world upon the occurrence of events derived

from illogical and superstitious notions. It professes to uphold virtue yet, in practice, perpetuates oppression and greed. Among the deplorable results of the operation of such forces are a deepening confusion on the part of young people everywhere, a sense of hopelessness in the ranks of those who would drive progress, and the emergence of a myriad social maladies. (20 October 2008)

Growing numbers of people grapple with how to advance social change in the face of political disorder and mounting injustice. They wonder how to respond to our global interconnectedness, which demands new approaches that build rather than erode social cohesion. As a result, questioning prevailing assumptions, established paradigms, and common wisdom is, in the sight of many, a necessity. In the same letter, the House of Justice appeals to us to be conscious that the continued strengthening of our community-building efforts will be matched by a further decline in the old world order, and to be on our guard lest the development of capacity in the community not keep pace with the rise in receptivity of a disillusioned humanity. The House of Justice expresses confidence that such developments in the world will cause the believers in every land to reflect on the lamentable condition of the present order, will reinforce in them the conviction that material and spiritual civilization must be advanced together, and will remind Bahá'ís that

it is they who have the responsibility to champion this mighty task.

The experience of Bahá'ís everywhere in the past few decades attests that, with the help of Divine assistance and under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, they are indeed capable of initiating, under any circumstances, a sustainable and expandable framework for social change, and of inviting large numbers of people to contribute to this effort. As part of our constructive resilience, we need to further strengthen ourselves to remain unaffected by the negative forces of society and to avoid the temptation to give into pressures to adopt the prevailing materialistic assumptions.

Guided by the House of Justice, we must develop a deeper understanding of the Bahá'í approach to answer the ills of humanity, firmly adhere to Bahá'í principles, and resist the impulse to defend prevailing ideas that are popular in the wider society only because it seems expedient in the moment. We must further consolidate our capacity to realize that only through sacrificial efforts and collaboration with like-minded people can world chaos and confusion be remedied and rebalanced. Bahá'u'lláh's advice to one of the believers is profoundly relevant in this respect: "Sharp must be thy sight, O Dhabíh, and adamant thy soul and brass-like thy feet, if thou wishest to be unshaken by the assaults of the selfish desires that whisper in men's breasts. This is the firm injunction which the Pen of the Most Great Name hath, by virtue of the Will of

the Ancient King, been moved to reveal” (*Gleanings* 115:13).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá likewise says:

The beloved of the Lord must stand fixed as the mountains, firm as impregnable walls. Unmoved must they remain by even the direst adversities, ungrieved by the worst of disasters. Let them cling to the hem of Almighty God, and put their faith in the Beauty of the Most High; let them lean on the unfailing help that cometh from the Ancient Kingdom, and depend on the care and protection of the generous Lord. . . . Let them rise up to serve their Lord and do all in their power to scatter His breathings of holiness far and wide. Let them be a mighty fortress to defend His Faith, an impregnable citadel for the hosts of the Ancient Beauty. Let them faithfully guard the edifice of the Cause of God from every side; let them become the bright stars of His luminous skies. (*Selections* 10)

And, finally, Shoghi Effendi gives us this insight into how to respond to the confusions of today’s world:

We must expect these things: It is becoming evident that the world is not yet through with its labor, the New Age not yet fully born, real Peace not yet right around the corner. We must have no illusions about how much depends

on us and our success or failure. All humanity is disturbed and suffering and confused; we cannot expect to not be disturbed and not to suffer—but we don’t have to be confused. On the contrary, confidence and assurance, hope and optimism are our prerogative. The successful carrying out of our various Plans is the greatest sign we can give of our faith and inner assurance, and the best way we can help our fellow-men out of their confusion and difficulties (*Unfolding Destiny* 225).

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