

# From the Editor's Desk

## THE EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

This issue of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* is the fruit of collaboration between nine authors, writing on the topic of constructive resilience. The development of this issue has been an experiment in collaborative processes of scholarship, and it stands as one early milestone in learning about this kind of collaboration. Before turning to the rich topic of constructive resilience itself, we wish to share with you, the *Journal's* readers, some of the broader context of collaborative work at the Association for Bahá'í Studies in general, and invite those interested in this area of learning to consider how they might contribute to it.

In its 24 July 2013 letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada on the topic of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, the Universal House of Justice highlighted the possibilities for the Association to foster a collaborative approach to scholarship. It advised that,

[f]or example, a number of small seminars could be held to assist individuals from certain professions or academic disciplines to examine some aspect of the discourse of their field. Specific topics could be selected, and a group of participants with experience could share

articles, prepare papers, and consult on contemporary perspectives and related Bahá'í concepts.

In our understanding, this encouragement of collaborative scholarly endeavors does not have a merely functional or pragmatic benefit. It is rooted in a particular conception of knowledge, namely, that an elicitive and reflexive mode of engaging with ideas creates insights, elucidates questions that are obscure, and generates understanding.

Indeed, this mode of engagement is integral to the language of Revelation itself in the Bahá'í Faith, where we often see the Voice of the Divine speaking to humanity about how humanity should communicate back to the Divine. How many times does Bahá'u'lláh instruct us to “Say...” when speaking to our Creator, before Himself responding in that Voice. If such an ethic of reciprocity animates our efforts to grapple with questions about the very purpose and truth of our existence, how much value it must also have as a method of engaging together in our quest to gain knowledge about the world around us.

It has been encouraging to see collaboration in this vein burgeon in the past few years throughout the Bahá'í world. The Association for Bahá'í Studies has striven to be a part of these efforts, designating a Committee for Collaborative Initiatives specifically to help support them. Working groups organized within professional and academic disciplines, as well as reading groups and cross-disciplinary seminars

devoted to specific topics, have been convened, in which participants are learning together. It is exciting to think of what these will yield in the future.

This issue of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* is another step in our journey of learning about collective processes of scholarship. Its nine essays are the product of a collaborative process, self-organized by the authors, that unfolded over a period of three years. In neither its process nor its substance is it an endpoint, but, as stated at the outset, a milestone, allowing us another opportunity to see what is being learned, and where the paths may lead next.

This issue also builds on recent efforts in the *Journal* to publish entire issues on single topics or themes, often dealing with questions of social change or racial justice. Examples include Volume 26, No. 3, centering on Indigenous experiences, and Volume 29, No. 1–2, on “the most challenging issue.” Those special issues also represented efforts to advance a more collaborative process in a range of ways, while addressing some of the challenges seen in contemporary scholarship. For example, Volume 26.3, with the guidance of an Indigenous guest editor, sought to uphold a standard of cultural humility and emphasize voices and experiences from which much must be learnt. It is our hope to continue that learning, including by building on the insight that has come through the development of the current issue.

Scholars' methodologies for generating insight and understanding are dynamic and fluid. No facet of human

endeavor, including the work of scholars, is untouched by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, under whose influence humanity's understandings of the activity of scholarship will continue to mature and evolve. As we share these reflections on the context and process through which this issue emerged, we invite readers, and those involved in collaborative processes of scholarship, to reflect on how we can continue to build on these efforts, and advance ever more effective, inclusive, and impactful practices. We welcome you to send us your thoughts, including ideas for collaborative initiatives, at [editor@bahaistudies.ca](mailto:editor@bahaistudies.ca).



Another area of learning that deserves particular attention pertains to the styles of writing found in this issue. Each essay in this collection is shorter than the typical *Journal* article, allowing a greater number of voices to contribute. Together, the essays present a stylistic continuum, from traditionally academic to personal and introspective. At its core, scholarship is a matter of generating and disseminating knowledge. Scholars who seek to share the knowledge generated by reflection on their own life experience must necessarily speak in a different voice from those studying phenomena outside themselves, if they are to do justice to their story. The *Journal* has previously welcomed submissions that sit at various places on this continuum as appropriate given their subject matter, and we look forward to publishing more work

in the future that can enrich our vision of the forms scholarship can take.

This collection of essays opens with “The Constructive Imaginary,” in which Michael Karlberg provides a fuller glimpse of the collaborative process that found expression in this issue of the *Journal*, and that will doubtless continue to bear fruit in the future. He also sketches a genealogy of the concept of constructive resilience, drawing connections both to academic schools of thought and to historical social expressions of the phenomenon, and emphasizes the urgency of drawing on these resources to help us “imagine and enact new possibilities in the pursuit of social change.”

The experience of African Americans and African-descended people more broadly is explored from a range of vantage points in a number of the essays in this issue. Michael Penn’s “Why Constructive Resilience? An Autobiographical Essay” interweaves the powerful examples of constructive resilience that the author has perceived in his own life with a psychological examination of the roots of hope and despair, shedding light on the poignant reality that “resilience does not only consist of the capacity to endure and survive stress; it is reflected in the powers and capacities that unfold as a result of exposure to it.” Elizabeth de Souza’s “Views from a Black Artist in the Century of Light” considers the unique, and vital, role of art in constructive resilience through an exploration of the life and works of the author’s father, McCleary “Bunch” Washington, who,

in the face of the challenges posed by a society that struggled to understand his three main strands of identity—artist, African American, and Bahá’í—was able to “resolve in his art what he could not in his life.” The experience of African American Bahá’ís, and the insight it can provide into the meaning of constructive resilience, is further explored in Derik Smith’s “New Black Power: Constructive Resilience and the Efforts of African American Bahá’ís,” which shows how these efforts can help us conceive of power itself in new and vital ways. Layli Maparyan’s “Africanity, Womanism, and Constructive Resilience: Some Reflections” locates a rich resource for helping us think about constructive resilience in “the cultural and cosmological wealth of African and African-descended people” and, in particular, in the everyday, problem-solving experiences of Black women, reminding us that however loud the narratives around conflict-based social change in our society, the peoples of the world have deep experience with constructive change.

Other essays in this issue use different lenses to consider the power and implications of constructive resilience. Sahar Sattarzadeh’s “When We Invisibilize Our Nobility...” invites us to consider the lens of domestic partner and gender-based violence, and how roles such as “victim” and “survivor” might be transcended as we learn to view others, and ourselves, as the noble beings Bahá’u’lláh reminds us we are. Caity Bolton’s “Community Agency and Islamic Education

in Contemporary Zanzibar” uses an ethnographic approach to illuminate the constructive potential of religiously grounded community initiatives for recognizing and addressing social harms. The role of faith is further explored in Bradley Wilson’s “Faith in Action: Reflections on Constructive Resilience from Nicaragua,” which illustrates how for landless farmworkers in Nicaragua, even under circumstances of crushing social and economic oppression, faith has remained a potent resource, motivating and empowering their movement for justice. Finally, with Holly Hanson’s “Vision and the Pursuit of Constructive Social Change,” we return to the question of imagination, and are reminded of the need to learn from the examples set by those who have trod, and continue to tread, the path of constructive resilience.

In the substance of the ideas it explores, this special issue of the *Journal* builds on what has come before, and helps set the stage for further work to come. The concept of constructive resilience, though not so named, has been showcased in previous *Journal* articles about the lived experiences of individuals and groups. For example, the accounts shared in Volume 26.3, highlighted constructive responses of Indigenous people, Bahá'ís and others, to the ongoing impacts of colonialism and systemic racism—from institutionalized oppression to unconscious attitudes. Some of these articles shared first-person stories and accounts of Indigenous people demonstrating constructive resilience. As highlighted in the “From the Editor’s Desk” prefacing

that issue, the work of eradicating racial injustice

requires the hard work of transforming mindsets and behaviors. It also necessitates that humankind discover and implement methods for reordering detrimental social and structural patterns and establishing collaborative relationships upheld by a collective vision of justice and fellowship at the levels of the neighborhood and community life. But this journey toward justice and unity is one of learning, trial and error, sacrifice, love, and pain.

As you read this collection of essays, we hope you will be impressed by the vital importance of all of us learning something about constructive resilience from those who have practiced it. Indigenous peoples, in North America and worldwide; the Iranian Bahá'í community and many other religious groups around the globe today and historically; the African American community, which is the focus of a number of contributions in this issue—these are a few examples of groups with deep, practical knowledge of constructive resilience. And, of course, there is much work to be done examining the relationship between constructive resilience and gender inequality in humanity’s history. It is amongst those who have borne and continue to bear the brunt of social injustice that the tool of constructive resilience has been forged, honed, tested, broken, and re-forged, again and again.

But today, all of us, to greater or lesser degrees, may have to learn about constructive resilience. The Universal House of Justice re-affirmed this reality in its 25 November 2020 letter on the occasion of the Day of the Covenant:

Your resilience and your unwavering commitment to the well-being of those around you, persistent through all difficulties, have filled us with tremendous hope. But it is no wonder that, in some other quarters, hope has become a depleted resource. There is a mounting realization on the part of the world's people that the decades ahead are set to bring with them challenges among the most daunting that the human family has ever had to face. The current global health crisis is but one such challenge, the ultimate severity of whose cost, both to lives and livelihoods, is yet unknown; your efforts to succour and support one another as well as your sisters and brothers in society at large will certainly need to be sustained, and in places expanded.

The reader may well wonder if they hear echoes in this message of Bahá'u'lláh's warning to humanity in the Hidden Words:

O ye peoples of the world!  
Know, verily, that an unforeseen calamity is following you, and that grievous retribution awaiteth you. Think not the deeds ye have

committed have been blotted from My sight. By My beauty! All your doings hath My Pen graven with open characters upon tablets of chrysolite.

It seems worth asking what the connection might be between the deeds committed by the peoples of the world and the promised calamity. It does not seem implausible that whatever difficulties humanity will collectively face in the next few decades, our own injustices will be at their root. And, in its death throes, the old world order will doubtless throw up new injustices and difficulties; who can hope to be untouched by them?

This may well be the time for us all to learn about constructive resilience. That learning will begin by listening to the hard-won wisdom of those for whom constructive resilience is an old friend.

For all of these reasons, we are pleased to present this issue on constructive resilience. We sincerely hope that our readers will draw inspiration both from the substance of these essays on constructive resilience, and from their illumination of the possibilities of collaborative scholarship. ABS is eager to offer support to anyone who has a vision for what future collaborative initiatives might look like. Meanwhile, the Association plans both to support future endeavors centered on learning about the process of collaborative scholarship, and to pursue what we can and must learn from the practice of constructive resilience by peoples all across the globe.