

# Faith in Action: Reflections on Constructive Resilience from Nicaragua

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On 29 July 2003, thousands of unemployed farmworkers and their families who had been evicted from coffee estates in the province of Matagalpa, Nicaragua, joined a peaceful march. “The March of the Hungry,” as they named their public demonstration, was not hyperbole. In 2001, global coffee prices had plummeted to record lows, leaving millions of rural people without sufficient income or resources to survive. In Nicaragua, this crisis impacted some 100,000 people, most intensely, landless farmworkers. Unable to remain on plantations foreclosed upon by banks and unwilling to illegally squat, evicted farmworkers in Matagalpa built makeshift economic refugee camps which housed an estimated seven thousand people by 2003. These encampments, coordinated by homeless families themselves, lined the roads heading north. For three years these encampments were a constant reminder of the economic devastation and mass unemployment precipitated by the coffee crisis and the inability or unwillingness of the government to respond to their most basic needs.

The March of the Hungry, as the farmworkers said, drew needed attention to their suffering and called for the government to fulfill its modest promise to provide suitable land for cultivation on the now idle estates where many had lived and worked their entire lives. The march, and the movement which spawned it, was distinctive. Composed entirely of homeless and landless farmworkers, led by women, and inclusive of children, both march and movement were intentionally non-violent. Just a decade earlier Nicaragua had emerged from a devastating civil war which had ripped the country apart. The very region from which the marchers were requesting land was one of the primary arenas of the war. This history shaped perceptions of the people of the region. While national and international newspapers offered sympathetic stories, in national opinion and gossip circles commentators offered deeply prejudiced and racist views toward the marchers, calling them opportunists, criminal, lazy, ignorant, and undeserving of special concern. Many passed judgment on their morality and motives. Indeed, in many ways their long suffering and the limited options before them to express their grievances—necessitating that they take to the road to make their plight visible—were intimately tied to the prejudice against them and other poor people of indigenous descent in Central Nicaragua.<sup>1</sup>

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1 As noted in this special issue of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, the discourse of constructive resilience has led in some cases to consultation about what

On July 30, I rode by bus to Matagalpa to learn more about the marchers. I encountered them as they were setting up camp for the night on a hillside pass called Cerro Largo (Long Hill), located to the south of the city of Matagalpa. Coordinators had made the thoughtful decision to end the day's march at noon, following the death of an infant from a fever and of an elderly man from dehydration and exhaustion that morning. It was a grim scene. I arrived at lunchtime when groups had gathered to eat around communal pots of donated rice. Entire families had been brought along, children in tow. The heavy rain was unrelenting. The

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constitutes constructive forms of social action in the face of oppression. While this is certainly worthwhile from the standpoint of individual and collective moral decision-making, it is not the intention of this paper to evaluate or judge the form of action taken, nor to evaluate the efficacy of particular tactics or strategies. Indeed, it is my observation that such judgements tend to offer an analysis of an isolated episode of action in the lives of protagonists, present reductionist accounts of movements that narrow them down to their dominant discourses, and limit our ability to understand the nuanced attitudes, beliefs and intentions of people to overcome oppression. In other words, as a writer, I do not intend to present my account here as a judgement on specific tactics or strategies employed by oppressed groups. I have learned, however, that there is much to gain about the role of faith in social action by direct observation and deepening analysis with protagonists of what might be characterized as social movements.

marchers were in mourning and visibly exhausted. All were concerned about the poor and deteriorating weather conditions. Throngs of people, unprepared for the rain, stretched from the foreground to the horizon in the scene before me. Crowds of people stood, sat, or slept on the side of the road, still many kilometers away from their intended destination.

As I walked among the marchers, I noticed a group of families who appeared to need more shelter. There I met Soledad, the mother of three teenage boys. I asked her why she had joined the march. At that time, I knew little of what was transpiring, the history that preceded it, or the goals that had inspired the march. Soledad's voice was soft but earnest: "Because we exist," she said. I squatted down to hear her more clearly. The cold rain began to pound harder against the tarp above our heads, nearly drowning out her voice:

We have been abandoned, but we still exist. The workers, the *campesinas*, the people of the countryside. Where we live, it is just a little place, but there are many hungry people there. There are many communities just like ours where the children are malnourished, without homes and sick. We have been forgotten but we exist. We will continue on with God by our side.

Fifteen years after I met Soledad at Cerro Largo, I joined a collective of

Bahá'í scholars engaging, from our varied fields, in a discourse on constructive resilience which was initiated by the Universal House of Justice in a series of letters to the Bahá'ís of Iran. The concept was introduced as a way to describe the spiritual qualities, community agency, and creative action of Iranian Bahá'ís who were facing relentless persecution (Universal House of Justice, 9 Sept. 2007). More recently, constructive resilience was also invoked by the Universal House of Justice to describe African American Bahá'ís laboring for unity in the context of long histories of racial oppression in the United States (4 Feb. 2018). Some of the questions we explored together included: What might it mean to do scholarship in light of spiritual qualities associated with constructive resilience? What might the concept of constructive resilience ask of us as scholars concerned with social, economic, or environmental justice? How might attention to constructive resilience transform our practice of inquiry and contribute to knowledge production?

During my reflection on the discourse around constructive resilience, my thoughts have often returned to Soledad and the story of landless workers in Nicaragua. As Paul Lample writes in *Revelation and Social Reality*, “a Bahá'í life is not lived in isolation. It is forged in active engagement with the world, working with others and contributing to the advancement of society” (3). My experience and engagement with Soledad and the landless

workers movement has offered me a means of reflection on how, as scholars, we might extend our learning about the spiritual qualities embodied in the notion of constructive resilience. Soledad was not a Bahá'í, and to my knowledge, none of the members of the March of the Hungry or their communities were members of the Bahá'í Faith. I met Soledad just a few years after becoming acquainted with the Bahá'í Faith myself. Our encounter at the march, therefore, mingled with my own deepening understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Like many who encounter the Sacred Writings, I was learning to walk a newfound spiritual path and to see the world with new eyes. What I learned from Soledad, what I witnessed in her community, had a profound effect on my understanding of the life of the spirit and the nature of spiritually informed scholarship.

In this brief essay I draw upon my long-term research with the landless workers movement in Nicaragua to make several observations on the discourse of constructive resilience. While constructive resilience has largely been applied to understanding how Bahá'í communities negotiate life under oppression, I first consider how it also invites a posture of learning on research about other social movements seeking to overcome oppression. As evidenced in this issue, constructive resilience is a deeply personal expression of faith and a form of constructive action that shapes individual lives and communities. As such, I posit that the practices of accompaniment—an approach to

research which calls for immersive participation and observation over a long period—can provide a means through which to study different manifestations of constructive resilience, at various scales, in a diverse range of social movements.

#### FAITH AND SOCIAL ACTION

The role of faith in social action has been central to our exploration of constructive resilience over the past few years. Faith often plays a critical role in motivating, sustaining, and giving moral direction to individuals and communities seeking to overcome oppression. Some movements come into being precisely because some spirit of faith in creating a different future has been enkindled, a moral charge has been felt and acted upon, or an injustice has been experienced and inspired social action. Yet, faith is not one of the primary concerns of scholarship on social action. Faith is often narrowly described in literature on social action in terms of simple group identification in relation to a particular religious sect or spiritual ideology. In other cases, faith might be described as optimism or hope for a brighter future, or an enduring belief that “we shall overcome.” Faith plays an animating role in how people envision themselves and their spiritual and material reality. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers a distinctive perspective on faith. He states: “By faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds” (*Tablets* 549). Here faith might be observed as taking

on a metaphysical dimension as conscious faith in God and the practice of that faith through action. Yet, this translation of metaphysical faith into action might also be observed socially. In other words, through the faithful actions of people, good deeds might enact practical worlds that draw the attention of others who might witness and become inspired in their own faith, in humanity or in God. This kind of faith in action might also inspire more faithful action. Faith therefore is not a passive, individual spiritual and moral feeling that is only rooted in consciousness; faith as it is translated into good deeds might also be understood as productive and can take on active social dimensions that affect a wider moral field that can reach the scale of entire communities.

Yet, people can also lose faith in God, themselves, others, religion, organization or the moral charge of a movement. Faith can wax and wane, thereby affecting social action or leading to a deviation from principle. The loss of faith may be caused by a variety of factors. In some cases, it might be by the immoral actions of leaders or organizations, or the failure of one or another tactic or strategy to achieve a promised goal. Yet, in many other cases, losing faith can come from the unrelenting persecution by more powerful groups against those who attempt to change their situation. Over time people lose hope and the lights of faith are smothered. Commitments to principles slip. Division and discord disrupt existing solidarities. Hopelessness grows

from an individual experience into a collective social feeling that change is impossible or that non-violent or other forms of constructive action are not enough.

Not long after I met Soledad, the Universal House of Justice penned a letter to the Bahá'ís of Iran admiring their “confident mastery” of “moral purpose” and their love, sacrifice, and service to the people of their homeland in the face of decades of deliberate oppression. Their words of admiration were complemented by a conceptualization of oppression which drew attention to both its material and spiritual dimensions:

The victims of injustice today number in countless millions. Each year, the agendas of the human rights organizations are overwhelmed by appeals from spokespersons for oppressed minorities of every type—religious, ethnic, social and national. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh, “Justice is in this day bewailing its plight, and Equity groaneth beneath the yoke of oppression.” What has more alarmed perceptive observers of such situations than even the physical and material anguish caused is the spiritual damage done to the victims. Deliberate oppression aims at dehumanizing those whom it subjugates and at de-legitimizing them as members of society, entitled to neither rights nor consideration. Where such conditions persist over any length of time, many

of those affected lose confidence in their own perception of themselves. Inexorably, they become drained of that spirit of initiative that is integral to human nature and are reduced to the level of objects to be dealt with as their rulers decide. Indeed, some who are exposed to sustained oppression can become so conditioned to a culture of brutalization that they, in their turn, are ready to commit violence against others, should the opportunity offer itself. (26 Nov. 2003)

In this passage, the Universal House of Justice describes the widespread experience of oppression around the world, the material harm it inflicts, the dehumanization it effects, and the marginalization it causes by preventing full participation in society with “rights and consideration.” Additionally, the Universal House of Justice calls specific and distinctive attention to oppression’s spiritual dimensions, which quash individual and collective initiative, objectify and brutalize human beings, and incubate the cultures of violence that can result from long histories of exposure to such objectification and brutalization.

After offering these insights on the nature of oppression, the Universal House of Justice then continues by posing a series of questions to the Iranian Bahá'ís who have experienced such oppression:

What is it then . . . that has preserved you from spiritual corrosion

of this nature? Where have you found the resources to free your hearts from resentment and to act with magnanimity toward those who have taken part in your mistreatment? How is it that, after a century and more of unremitting persecution—and the calculated attempt at genocide of these past 25 years—you still retain both a confident mastery of your moral purpose and an abiding love for the land in which you have suffered so greatly? (26 Nov. 2003)

These questions invited consideration of how the Iranian Bahá'ís overcome the brutalizing effects of oppression without responding in equal measure and of the role that spiritual resources, a sense of moral purpose, love, and solidarity play in their persistent efforts to contribute to the advancement of initiatives serving their communities, such as expanding educational opportunities for women and girls, supporting access to higher education, and fostering economic cooperation. Rather than losing faith in the potential for social transformation, they have kept their faith alive and channeled it into constructive action.

Faith, as the Universal House of Justice's messages suggest, plays a clear and significant role in shaping both the consciousness and action of the Iranian Bahá'ís and, in later letters, the Bahá'ís in the United States advancing race unity. Faith in the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, in their moral purpose, and in the guidance of the Central

Figures and institutions—including the Universal House of Justice—enables individual Bahá'ís to express confidence, strengthens their resolve to be magnanimous, and helps fortify them in the face of oppressive forces that might otherwise cause them to “lose confidence in their own perceptions of themselves” or become “drained” of the “spirit of initiative.” Yet, beyond the individual, this faith is also visible in practice at the scale of the wider collective or community. There is a communal sense of faith that is nourished by witnessing the sacrifices and commitments—faith in action—performed by groups of individuals.

Starting with our first encounter in 2003, Soledad introduced me to some of these very same expressions of constructive resilience and gave it meaningful expression. As I conversed with her, I often asked these questions: Why had the movement pursued a non-violent path when armed struggle over land had been the previous path? What shielded them from bitterness? How could she “free her heart from resentment” and maintain “abiding love” for the people in her country when her past experience had been so treacherous? Counter to the prejudice heaped against them, the earnest determination through which marchers like Soledad pursued their goals was impressive to those who visited the camps. Soledad said to me years later that she often prayed that “God would touch the hearts” of those who held prejudice against them, including the political and landed elites, who were not only



an impediment to their modest goals but were also responsible for the systemic oppression they experienced. Her faith, fortitude, and perseverance, viewed from the standpoint of a witness to her oppression, bespoke a kind of spiritual power that was difficult to dismiss. Indeed, perhaps the only way for the elites to deny her and her kindred was—as she bore witness—to abandon her, to try and erase her from memory, to marginalize her from view, to deny her existence. The ruling elites tried this strategy, yet they could not snuff out the light of her spirit.

#### ACCOMPANIMENT

My relationship with Soledad taught me that connecting deeply with people participating in social action to overcome oppression matters. I say this not only from the standpoint of scholarly interpretation but also from the standpoint of spiritual insight. Spiritual qualities are expressed by people living and negotiating social realities in different material contexts. Since constructive resilience concerns faith and is principally expressed in the spiritual qualities and actions of individuals and communities experiencing oppression, it is important therefore to get below the surface text of a particular movement and accompany people struggling to overcome oppression. While movement leaders, organizations, and discourses are important in understanding the dominant frames of social action and movement formation in any given instance, movements are also

composed of individuals, institutions, and communities in all of their complexity. While a movement may appear to be a coherent whole, there may be considerable differences within it that shape its discourses, approaches, and outcomes. For this reason, it is critical to use care in making sense of movements based solely on the dominant public discourses that define them.

The practice of accompaniment, I urge, can enable scholars to prioritize inquiry over judgment, and illumination over reductionist accounts of social action. As my colleague and friend Daniel Renfrew writes, ethnography as a form of accompaniment can lead to “the deceptively simple act of forging empathetic understandings of the complexity of local social worlds” (167). Rather than a snapshot or snap judgment, a longer exposure through a relationship of accompaniment guided by empathy can yield critical insights into the elements of context that illumine why and how protagonists of movements engage in social action. Such a humble posture of inquiry is particularly important when we are *not* members of that particular oppressed group pursuing a path of social action to address injustice. As bystanders or outside observers, we may be swayed by discourse, imagery, and ideas that aim to represent movements as a totality or to reduce people to pawns or objects within an elaborate chess match with a clear endgame.

For the next five years after our encounter at Cerro Largo, I would visit Soledad in her home to meet her family

and to listen to her stories of struggle and survival. Unwilling to see her as simply a pawn swept up in a mass movement, I wanted to understand what motivated her, the challenges she faced, her life story, and what kind of future she wanted for herself, her family, and her community. During this period, the state ultimately responded to their petitions and provided land to the evicted and unemployed farmworker communities. This was the first time Soledad and her family had experienced economic autonomy, and for many of the people it was the first in their lives that they were truly working for themselves. The warm welcome she offered when I visited her led me to return again and again. As my visits continued and my conversations extended with Soledad, her family, community, and many other neighboring communities, a more nuanced picture emerged of the landless workers movement, the crises that prefigured it, and the long struggle ahead for its protagonists as they tried to forge a life of dignity and overcome oppression. I learned about the trail of injustice experienced by other landless and poor rural people who are treated either instrumentally or as an afterthought in economic decision-making.

In those years, as I observed the communities attempt to work through these challenging questions, I would learn about Soledad's commitment to social transformation, her contributions to provisioning meals for children across several communities, and her work with her husband to form an

agricultural cooperative and to lift up the economic capacity of other members of their community. In other words, I did not learn about that vision she had on the road at Cerro Largo. To gain that understanding of Soledad's faith in social transformation would require a deeper commitment to listening and learning. These visits not only deepened my relationship with Soledad, her family, and community; her spiritual qualities also inspired me and taught me a great deal about responsibility as a person and humility as a scholar. I learned how she came to live as a worker on the estate property in Matagalpa and the sense of powerlessness she felt to the whims of the landowner, the state, and the political parties, which had each made claims to the land she and her family worked for their livelihood. I learned about the devastation of the civil war and the violence that left deep wounds of trauma in families and the community. I learned about her sense of economic vulnerability as a woman in a household, community, and movement where men often control resources and decision-making processes. I learned about the central role of women in guiding the non-violent approach of the landless workers movement. Yet, I also learned from her about the internal challenges in her family and in the community where she lived. I learned about the continued pressures from land grabbers coveting their land, the difficulties of economic cooperation in an environment beset by competition, and the real fear she and her family felt about losing those



small resources which they had gained. Faith in God, through all of these conversations, shaped the contours of her commentaries and maintained, always on the horizon, a sense of meaning in her struggle and hope for the future.

#### CONCLUSION

Constructive resilience is a deeply personal expression of faith and a form of social action that shapes individual lives and communities. People who are engaged in diverse movements, spiritual traditions, and material contexts offer unique insights into the fortitude, hope, and perseverance necessary to keep the faith and continue to believe in and work for a future free from oppression. Soledad provides one example of how faith plays a central role in one's life and struggle. In these years of working alongside people like her, I have learned that the practice of accompaniment can provide a means through which to study different manifestations of constructive resilience in a diverse range of social movements. Accompaniment, as a methodological commitment, invites a humble posture of learning about people and movements as they seek to overcome oppression. Through accompaniment we can come to understand and empathize with the nuanced lived experiences of people who take up social action, their motivations, their struggles, and their achievements. Long-term accompaniment also challenges what it means to study a movement whose work is still in progress, much like the Bahá'í

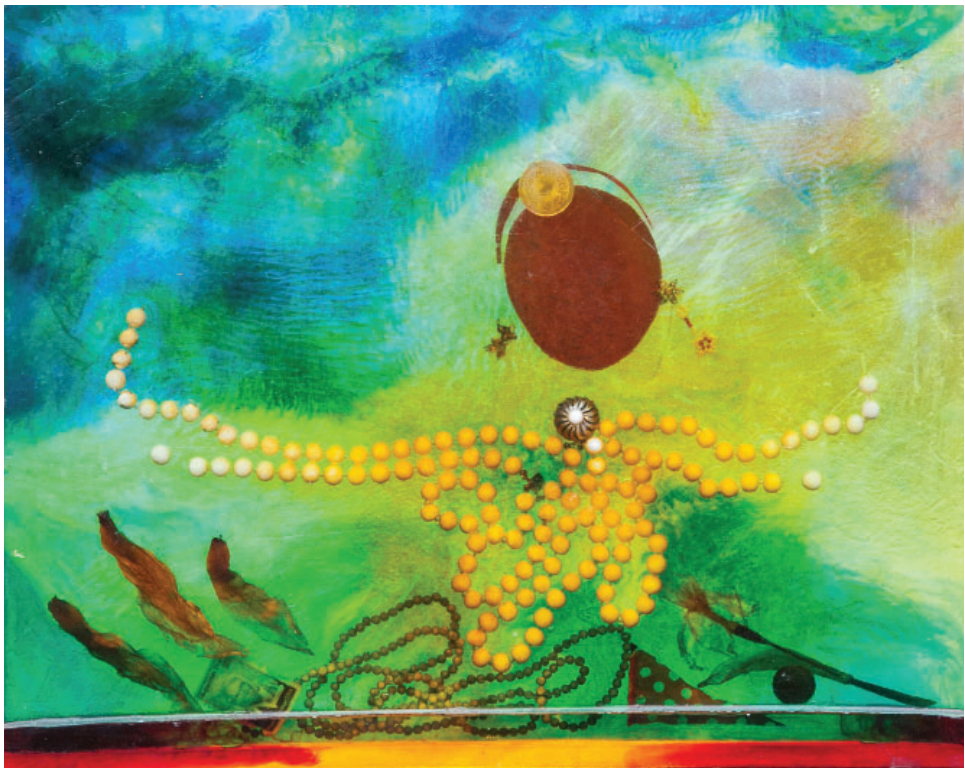
communities around the world, who aspire to build societies founded on justice, equity, and unity.

Bahá'ís understand that, in their own efforts, both urgent action and long-term commitments are necessary to overcome oppression, and they realize that the ends of these constant efforts will not materialize quickly. Many movements to end oppression around the world realize these same truths. People of faith press on with the realization that they may never witness the just world that they are struggling to birth. There is recognition that principles are paramount, mistakes will be made along the way, and action and reflection will be necessary for the process of learning and growing. To this end, it is notable that the Universal House of Justice frames all its messages referencing constructive resilience in encouraging and empathetic tones, and that it writes words which remind those who are struggling that their labor is not in vain, that there is a deeper moral reason for persisting that exceeds the short-term gains of any particular material strategic goal. Its praise is not directed to victories that have been "won" nor to some task that has been achieved or completed. Rather, in its letters, the Universal House of Justice recognizes the admirable spiritual qualities of its readers, and they uplift the aspirations, goals, and constructive forms of action performed by individuals and communities that seek to serve society and build a better world amidst oppression. As scholars, these expressions of faith in our

readers, recognition of constructive projects, and accompaniment in the path of social action are also lessons to learn from and live by.

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