

From the Editor's Desk

JOHN S. HATCHER

THE FIRE OF A SEVERE ORDEAL

The authoritative texts of the Bahá'í Faith frequently allude to the axiom that suffering is one important means by which we attain spiritual development. Of course, when we are in the midst of pain or despair—whether from physical or mental difficulties—we may find little solace from such an assurance. Indeed, we might well feel tempted to sacrifice a bit of growth for the surcease of our pain, grief, or sorrow.

But if we apply this principle to our physical experience, we may be better able to appreciate the logic underlying this verity and thereby become empowered to endure nobly whatever difficulties come our way in this earthly journey. For example, if we wish to improve ourselves physically—especially if we are trying to condition ourselves for some strenuous athletic activity—we know that while our mental attitude is extremely valuable if we are to succeed, it is equally important that we begin stressing our muscles and endurance by degrees in preparation for this endeavor. In effect, the hardship or stress we impose on our body and our psyche—if undertaken wisely and with a unified vision of purpose—will likely empower us

to accomplish even the weightiest of tasks.

But uninvited oppression from without—especially when it originates from various forms of injustice or deprivation—becomes empowering only if we perceive that some long-term benefit will be derived from our courage in withstanding nobly the trials and tribulations coming our way. In the midst of such oppression, we may soon come to realize that the major source of forbearance on our part—whether individually or as a social collective—are our shared values coupled with a vision of a felicitous outcome should we endure, persevere, and ultimately thrive. And certainly the most unifying and empowering source of individual and collective perseverance is a coherent view of some ultimate victory that can be attained if we are willing to sacrifice temporary comfort for long-term achievement.

It is in the context of a discourse regarding the interplay between oppression and empowerment that the first two articles in this issue find their place. More particularly, these articles respond to the sorts of oppression that presently constitute a global epidemic. In part, the logical underpinning of these presentations play off the many forewarnings in the Bahá'í Writings that such travails must necessarily precede, and prepare humanity to accept, the salutary solutions to injustice and oppression provided in the blueprint for social order that are so precisely set forth in the revealed guidance of Bahá'u'lláh's writings.

As Bahá'u'lláh foretold, we find ourselves in the midst of disorder and bloodshed as never before, whether individually or as a body politic. From the years of slaughter among multiple warring factions in Syria, to the bloodthirsty and inhuman fanaticism of ISIS, Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda—and countless other sources of terrorism, anarchism, and nihilism—the world is awash with the blood and tears of people of every color, gender, age, culture and religion, peoples and families who seek nothing more than some degree of security and sanity.

More rapidly than ever, the peoples of the world are coming to recognize the urgency of a coherent international response to tribulations that threaten every fiber of stability we might have once thought secure. What is equally obvious is that, if left unchecked, these same forces of oppression are capable of bringing closure to the possibility of all further human advancement.

For those who have studied what the Bahá'í texts have to say about this period and these conditions in which we find ourselves, none of these events are surprising—neither their causes, their gravity, nor the foreshadowing of an ultimately felicitous outcome. The Bahá'í texts promise that not only is this oppression ultimately leading us to the formation of a global commonwealth capable of securing an enduring peace, but also that nothing less than this perilous time and these intensifying trials and pernicious wars are capable of instigating and sustaining planetary unity in the form of a

collaborative governance upheld by a system of collective justice. In short, Bahá'ís believe that a federation of governments constituting a global commonwealth will be the long-range outcome of all that presently seems so chaotic and replete with injustice.

Shoghi Effendi compares this time and the ordeals we are facing to the violent turmoil of the American Civil War, without which, he asserts, the diversity of peoples and states could never have become forged into the American Republic: “Could anything less than the fire of a civil war with all its violence and vicissitudes—a war that nearly rent the great American Republic—have welded the states, not only into a Union of independent units, but into a Nation, in spite of all the ethnic differences that characterized its component parts?” (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 45).

Shoghi Effendi's allusion to this long and violent conflict is clearly not intended to theorize that the forces of oppression are a desirable or necessary prerequisite for bringing about justice and peace. Rather his point seems to be that when the course of human events leads us into an inescapable morass of turmoil, oppression, and conflict, the cleansing and unifying effects of our collective suffering and disorder may be a necessary tool for simultaneously deterring aggressors and unifying and empowering the oppressed:

That nothing short of the fire of a severe ordeal, unparalleled in

its intensity, can fuse and weld the discordant entities that constitute the elements of present-day civilization, into the integral components of the world commonwealth of the future, is a truth which future events will increasingly demonstrate....

Nothing but a fiery ordeal, out of which humanity will emerge, chastened and prepared, can succeed in implanting that sense of responsibility which the leaders of a new-born age must arise to shoulder. (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 45)

Of course, it is equally true that Bahá'u'lláh has devised in His own guidance—and through His continuous, infallible inspiration of the Universal House of Justice—specific plans and programs whereby humankind can lay the foundations for a sustainable framework to embrace, nurture, and empower the fractured body of an oppressed human race.

The first of the articles touching on this perspective—a transcript of the Balyuzi lecture presented at the 2015 annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies—is titled “Striving for Human Rights in an Age of Religious Extremism,” a piece by noted scholar Nazila Ghanea. Focused on what is presently one of the most glaring sources of human oppression—religious fanaticism—this discourse demonstrates that the same force capable of unifying hearts can, when perverted by those who use it to pursue personal power, become the root cause

of a raging pestilential fire capable of untold destruction.

Similarly, the article “From Oppression to Empowerment” by renowned author Nader Saiedi demonstrates the strategic relationship between oppression and empowerment. In one sense, this discussion portrays a process similar to Newton's third law of motion, in that the greater the force of oppression, the greater the empowerment that will result when, in time, those being oppressed will become united and react. As the article sets forth, this empowerment is most especially sustained when there is the spirit and reinforcement of Bahá'u'lláh's successively more wide-reaching declarations of His revealed guidance to bring about a just and enduring world polity.

The other two articles are focused on a more poetic view of religion. One piece, by Amrollah Hemmat, discusses the symbolic or metaphorical expression of the Manifestation of God as expressed in Chinese religious symbolism; and the second offers a frank and intimate interview with noted Bahá'í poet Roger White about his life and work.

Finally, we include two poems which deal very poignantly with this same theme of responding to oppression. The first “Once More Tomorrow” by Julio Savi portrays a response to the Paris bombing of November 13, 2015. The second poem, “Crossroads” by Shirin Sabri, employs a biblical allusion to the heroic character of Ruth to represent the vital and inescapable role that choice plays in the course of our lives.