

# From the Editor's Desk

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## REFLECTIONS ON A DECADE OF LEARNING FOR THE ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

On 24 July 2013, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada received a message written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice regarding the role of the Association for Bahá'í Studies with respect to “the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community and its greater involvement in the life of society.” To mark the ten-year anniversary of that letter, on 24 July 2023 the ABS shared a retrospective with the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada outlining some of the Association's key developments over the last ten years in response to the invitation of the Universal House of Justice to help build “the capacity of the friends to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society” (24 July 2013), and highlighting some of the objects of learning it envisions shaping its next steps during the Nine Year Plan. This document was the fruit of extensive consultation within and between the ABS Executive Committee, its subcommittees, and other close collaborators. We are excited to be able to share this retrospective document in this issue of *The Journal of Bahá'í*

*Studies*, and hope that it can broaden and deepen the Bahá'í community's understanding of the range of activities and initiatives that ABS is undertaking.

As a complement to the comprehensive overview provided by the retrospective, we are pleased to be publishing Jordan van Rijn's “Learning to Sift: Reflections on Ten Years of Engaging with the Economics Discourse,” which highlights a particular example of one of the processes ABS has been learning about over the past decade. Van Rijn reflects on the experience of a small group of friends who strove to answer the call of the Universal House of Justice for “Bahá'ís who are involved in various disciplines [...] to earnestly strive to reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work” (24 July 2013 letter). Embarking on this journey in a learning mode, the group gained increasing insight, through cycles of action, reflection, consultation and study, into how to examine certain discourses within the discipline of economics from a Bahá'í perspective. Their efforts are, of course, only one illustration of what such work can look like: since 2013, those helping to advance learning as part of ABS' collaborative initiatives have accumulated a wealth of experiences, large and small, as documented in the retrospective. Yet the value of reflecting on a specific example is well illustrated by “Learning to Sift,” which presents the group's learning with both humility and insight.

With respect to the work of the *Journal* within the ABS ecosystem, one

of the emerging areas of learning highlighted in the retrospective concerns “a collaborative review process, in which a qualified peer reviewer consults with the author on how to strengthen his or her article” (20). It is fitting that, in the same issue in which the retrospective is featured, we can bring to you the first paper to be published having gone through a process of collaborative review. The *Journal* has traditionally employed a double-blind peer review process, a model that has its strengths for certain kinds of scholarly works, and will still be employed where appropriate. However, as an increasing number of scholarly publications turn to more open review processes, centering on a conversation between author and reviewers, it seems timely for the *Journal* to learn about how the unique potential of consultation, which “bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude,” can be applied within the context of scholarly review (*Compilation on Consultation* 3). While our experience in this area is nascent, insights have already emerged around the capacity of collaborative review to foster a spirit of genuine accompaniment in scholarship. Where blind peer review can sometimes risk elevating a reviewer’s interests or opinions to a standard for the author to meet, collaborative review facilitates the development of a shared vision, in which author and reviewer see themselves as part of a team, jointly pursuing excellence.

The fruit of this first collaborative review is Nooshfar Afnan’s

“Encouragement of the Arts During the Ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: The Services of Master Calligrapher Mishkín-Qalam.” Afnan explores the life and work of the celebrated calligrapher from the perspective of what these can teach us about the nature of art, and its role in the individual’s spiritual development and the life of the community. A particular focus is on the relationship between Mishkín-Qalam and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who encouraged the artist in his craft, and provided him the opportunity to make a distinctive artistic contribution to some of the signal accomplishments of the Master’s ministry. As the Bahá’í community continues to develop its understanding of the role of the arts in community building, social action, and contribution to discourses, Afnan’s paper provides rich insights for all of us, whether we consider ourselves artists or not.

In addition to the examples of Mishkín-Qalam’s work found within the article, the cover of this issue features one of his exquisite calligraphic birds, formed from an invocation of the Greatest Name of God and holding in its grasp the text of a tablet of Bahá’u’lláh.

We are also pleased to be publishing a beautiful artistic work in a different modality, in Terry Ofner’s poem “Words in Solstice Time” and Raymond Hudson’s “Homeward Bound” and “At the Grave of the King and Beloved of Martyrs.”