

From the Editor's Desk

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ACTION IN THE FORMATIVE AGE

The human imagination is easily captured by heroes. From a young age, many of us are raised on stories of extraordinary individuals, defined by the qualities of courage and persistence, who overcome daunting obstacles to change the circumstances around them. There is surely inspiration to be taken from such examples. For Bahá'ís, the fact that Shoghi Effendi named the first period of the history of the Faith “the Heroic Age” is proof enough of the power of heroic figures, like those whose stories he brought to us through his translation of *The Dawn-Breakers*, to inspire us today.

It is not surprising, then, that we look for heroes in the world around us, nor that we often imagine ourselves as heroes in our own stories. Yet in receiving and retelling hero stories, we may unconsciously fall into the prevalent approach of framing the hero's journey in terms of the other who must be overcome: some person or group to be resisted, opposed, and fought. “A story is only as good as its villain” may be good advice for fiction writers, but if we blindly regurgitate internalized narratives of “us” and “them” onto the world around us, we fail to find the true

transformative potential of the hero.

More than a century into the Formative Age of the Bahá'í Faith, we are learning a new kind of heroism, forged in “the arena of service” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 208). The contributions in this issue of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* invite us to take our place in this arena with respect to “most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community” (Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 33). While they speak directly to the North American experience, and particularly to issues of race and racial prejudice in the United States, they convey valuable insights for readers in all contexts.

Bahá'ís in America and beyond, whether at the forefront of working for the elimination of racial prejudice or approaching the issue for the first time, will want to study Paul Lample's “Exploring a Framework for the Elimination of Racial Prejudice in America” carefully.¹ At a time when so many, even when the best of intentions, are lured into oppositional forms of action that, while seeking to address the ills of society, simultaneously contribute to its deepening polarization, Lample invites us to rigorously consider the possibilities for true social transformation latent in an evolving framework for action grounded in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh—He Who “has drawn the circle of unity” and

1 At the request of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, this article is also being published separately in paperback and e-book formats.

“has made a design for the uniting of all the peoples, and for the gathering of them all under the shelter of the tent of universal unity” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 54). The potential of this approach is staggering:

this process will not place Bahá’ís at the sidelines of the work of addressing the problem of race in the wider society. Rather, it is the essential work that will ultimately help to lead the American nation out of its intractable impasse and endless conflict. If this work is pursued unrelentingly in the decades ahead, the Guardian’s high expectations for the Bahá’í community’s unique contribution to the elimination of racial prejudice in American society can ultimately be fulfilled in a manner that today can be only dimly imagined. (19)

“Exploring a Framework” contains too many insights to try to capture here, but something can be said about the picture Lample provides of the individual who contributes to this crucial work. She is not a singular visionary, but a collaborator working to build unity of vision (Lample 14). She does not look for human enemies to defy and defeat, but seeks opportunities to raise collective understanding and capacity to act, recognizing that “[t]he fate of all peoples is now inextricably bound together,” and that progress lies in the forging of just relationships between individuals, communities, and institutions (42). And she does not

act impulsively, and perhaps not even dramatically; she devotes herself to steady, patient, and faithful work within an evolving framework that enables systematic, organically growing action.

Derik Smith’s “The Framework for Action and the Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement” provides a striking complement to Lample’s thesis. Lest we find ourselves falling back into the dominant imaginary of social change, which tells us that meaningful progress in history has been driven by singular heroes who had the courage to stand against implacable foes, Smith uncovers the less-told story of the American Civil Rights Movement, in which many of the same principles and processes animating the Bahá’í community’s approach to social change today find their counterparts. This is a story of educational programs and capacity building, of the masses being painstakingly trained for service. In highlighting how crucial this systematic approach was to the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, Smith also helps us see how vital the Bahá’í community’s own systematic work within the framework for action will be to its mission, which is nothing less than “the transformation of the world” (Riđván 2018).

This issue also includes a review, by Michael L. Penn, of Yascha Mounk’s *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time*. Penn’s thoughtful appraisal of Mounk’s thesis is a valuable contribution in its own right to our thinking on the question of identity that has captured so great a portion of our collective imagination.

Scattered throughout the pages of the issue are historical photographs of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois, at progressive stages of construction, also featured on the cover photo captured with inimitable sensitivity by Farzam Sabetian.

We are also pleased to present two poems by Yahia Lababidi, "Wounded Healers" and "Inventory," each of which highlights the paradoxical quality of the true hero who achieves inner and outer transformation through learned selflessness. We offer this issue to all those who "work hard / in dark caves to carve / space for such a Light."