

Reflections

ELHAM AFNAN

I attended my first ABS conference when I was new to Canada, and the Association itself was also new. In the late spring of 1981, five years after it was first established, the Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith had just undergone a name change and become the Association for Bahá'í Studies. My parents, both devoted Bahá'í scholars, encouraged me and my brother to read and study the Writings and to take part in conferences. As a high school student, and a fairly diffident one, I did not yet have much to contribute, but I was inspired by the presentations at my first ABS conference and others that followed.

The Eleventh Annual Conference in London, Ontario, held in 1986, remains a highlight in my memories of that period of my life. By then, I was a university student. I had been a member of the Campus Association for Bahá'í Studies at McMaster University and gained some experience in trying to promote Bahá'í scholarship on campus. Inspired by *The Promise of World Peace*, which was at the heart of the conference that year, I decided to write my bachelor's thesis on a comparison of modern utopian and dystopian thought with the Bahá'í vision of the destiny of humanity. This marked the beginning of a lifelong interest in utopian thinking, which I was later able to examine more deeply in

my doctoral dissertation. I realized in time that the topic was vaster and more complex than suggested by my initial foray into it, but I considered it a great honor when my paper on the subject was published in the first volume of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* in 1989.¹ Even more importantly, the project—and the encouragement I received from the *Journal*—awakened in me the joy that comes with the effort to correlate the Bahá'í teachings to contemporary thought. This joy has been rekindled in me over the years whenever I have made space for it in my life.

Although my involvement with the Association has been regrettably sporadic, it has always been meaningful to me. Among other things, it has enabled me to share some thoughts on the place of literary studies within the field of Bahá'í Studies. This is an area that is undervalued in society generally, and perhaps also within the Bahá'í community. However, I firmly believe that the study of literature offers important insights into human life and the life of society, enabling us to better read our realities. It can also help us acquire knowledge, skills, and approaches that are valuable for the study of the Sacred Writings. At the same time, the vision of the Faith sheds a unique light on the questions with which good literature grapples: the purpose of life, the truth of human nature, the relationship

1 Elham Afnan, "The Good of the World and the Happiness of the Nations: A Study of Modern Utopian and Dystopian Literature." *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 1, no. 4.

between the individual and society, the tension between unity and diversity, and many others.

The message of the Universal House of Justice dated 24 July 2013 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada was released at a time when I was serving at the Bahá'í World Centre. Through my service, I had the privilege of coming into contact with many friends who were—and still are—actively involved in translating the guidance in that message into action, both in their individual academic endeavors and in their contributions to the Association. I have witnessed the increasing efforts among Bahá'í academics to learn—just as the Bahá'í community more generally is learning—about the relationship between study and action, accompanying one another in service, and finding coherence in different areas of endeavor. It has been encouraging to see how the Association, guided by the message, has brought its work ever closer to the conceptual framework of the global Plans of the Faith, for example through the development of collaborative initiatives such as reading groups and thematic seminars, and the expansion and enhancement of the Association's publications. It is also gratifying, as I reminisce about the start of my own involvement with the Association, to see that an ever-increasing number of young students and scholars of the Faith are contributing to its work. May we all be enabled to fulfill the hope of the House of Justice and “wholeheartedly address a wide range of intellectual challenges, overcome all pitfalls

and obstacles, and render service for the betterment of the world” (24 July 2013).

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Humble, Patient, Lovingly Accompanied Efforts

JULIA BERGER

Soon after formally joining the Bahá'í community as an undergraduate student in 1994, ABS was one of the first venues where I saw the Bahá'í Faith come alive: so many Bahá'ís in one place, exploring a breadth of social, historical, practical, and professional themes, trying to bring the light of the Revelation to questions emerging from their respective fields of endeavor. Twenty years later, as a PhD student in Religious Studies, ABS continued to be a wellspring of inspiration, where I could learn from others more advanced in their studies and understanding of the Faith; I continued to benefit from caring mentors, colleagues and—at this early stage—the accompaniment of other scholars exploring the implications of an evolving “conceptual framework” that the House of Justice had introduced to the Bahá'í community. I was beginning to grasp, and to experience, what it meant to be a religious community in a humble posture of learning.

Several years later, when I began to serve on the ABS Executive Committee, that mode of learning came into sharp relief. It was reflected in the humility that friends (distinguished

in their respective fields) brought to the consultations, an orientation towards experimentation, a courage to examine long-standing practices and to consider how these needed to evolve in response to needs and exigencies, a sensitivity to how these changes may be received by the Bahá'í community, an unwavering grounding in the guidance of the Universal House of Justice—and, always necessary, a sense of humor to lighten the weighty tasks before us.

During my service with ABS, I witnessed organic development in a way I hadn't seen before, as we grappled with the question: what does it look like for the structures of the Association to evolve as needs and capacities grow? What we see today in the nearly twenty in-depth, interactive, ABS seminars on themes including consciousness, media, health, education, technology, and political science, which are engaging several hundred scholars, professionals, and community leaders, started out some years ago as small “fishbowl conversations” at the ABS conference. In these humble settings, the Association tried to create a space for more dynamic, interactive learning spaces—moving beyond a panelist-audience format to explore how consultation and reflection could catalyze exploration, knowledge-generation and collective learning. From year to year, approaches were refined, ideas were clarified, our understanding of the conceptual framework grew with experience and a larger group of friends were engaged in learning processes. A Committee for Collaborative Initiatives was formed to

systematize learning from these efforts and to accompany a growing body of facilitators.

I recall also the complex task before the Executive Committee of trying to reimagine the Annual ABS Conference. How, we asked ourselves, could we create a learning space that didn't reify the prevailing modes of academic conferences and their approach to knowledge generation—often characterized by passive audiences, a sharp division between “experts” and attendees, one-off encounters, and a prevalence of materialist worldviews, even as much impressive and worthwhile research was being brought to light? How could the practices of consultation, action-reflection, accompaniment, universal participation, organic growth, and collaboration between individuals-communities-institutions all be brought to bear on the role and structure of the Conference? At the same time, how could we engage the Bahá'í community in this evolution? There were many differing views in our consultations about how to proceed as we earnestly, in our own ways, strove to advance our understanding of the guidance and its implications, lovingly and patiently accompanied by the National Spiritual Assemblies of Canada and the United States.

As I look back at the trajectory of the Association, from my earliest experiences in 1995 to the upcoming 50th anniversary conference, I am amazed by not only the pace and ingenuity of ABS' evolution but perhaps even more so by the processes that have

animated it. Keen attention to growing insights—from Institute processes, from the humble experiences of community-building endeavors, from the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, from the diplomatic efforts of the Bahá'í International Community, and from a growing body of experience of Bahá'ís across diverse professions and academic fields—has been paired with the tireless efforts to advance understanding of the guidance and the application of an evolving framework for collective learning. I would be remiss not to mention the lifelong friendships that have emerged from my experiences, and wonderful memories of shared hotel rooms, late-night consultations, and endless games of salad bowl that brought us to stitches.

Today, I write from the perspective of one serving as a Curriculum Development Specialist at the Wilmette Institute, which earlier this year was awarded accreditation as a higher learning institution with the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC) and earned recognition from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). As the Institute's Bahá'í-inspired courses in social transformation are offered to students in a growing number of universities, it is inspiring to look to the trajectory of the Association for Bahá'í Studies to remember how humble, patient, lovingly accompanied efforts—rooted in a vision of human nobility, unity and justice—can guide us to opportunities and capacities we could have scarcely imagined.

To “Hear the Hidden Truths...”— Learning of a Life of a Life of Learning

JORDAN BIGHORN

In August of 2023, surrounded by the sweltering summer heat of Atlanta, Georgia, cooled by the air-conditioned plenary ballroom of the Crowne Plaza, and awe-struck by the coalescence of memory and dream, I found myself on stage, offering greetings and welcome on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, to the participants of the 47th annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS).

Just three months prior, I had stood before the delegates of the 73rd National Convention of the Bahá'ís of Canada as a newly elected member of that country's National Assembly, floating in reflection of the many strands of my life-story that, over the past twenty years, had been slowly woven into a pattern of sacrifice, service, and longing for further clarity and understanding of God's divine tapestry. In fact, it could be said that that pattern began to emerge in 2003 at the 27th ABS annual conference.

*glory, and this cannot be attained
save through the knowledge of
His Divine Manifestation.*¹

It is a truly difficult, terribly exciting, and a potentially “unauthorized” endeavor to reflect on a journey whilst the wayfarer is still desperately navigating the path ahead. It calls to mind the tragic tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, two lovers emerging out of the darkness of the underworld into the light of the outer world; I pray that I have journeyed far enough into the light of knowledge so as not to turn my head and slip back into the dark of ignorance.

Fortunately, an immediate feature of my journey has been far more individuals, experiences, blessings and opportunities than one sole Eurydice. In fact, a pre-strand of my life-story began in Atlanta some fifty years prior to the 2023 annual conference, where my mother suffered birth and separation by adoption from my older half-brother, while simultaneously beginning a journey of reunion with her Best Beloved via a fortuitous meeting with local Bahá'ís. Unlike the conclusion of most Greek tragedies, she turned back, only to see her first born fade into his adoptive family, but she then turned forward and fixed her gaze on Bahá'u'lláh, such that she eventually reunited with her son, as all things return to oneness on His path.

*The source of all learning is the
knowledge of God, exalted be His*

1 Bahá'u'lláh, in *Bahá'í Sacred Writings* 8:19.

*True loss is for him whose days
have been spent in utter ignorance
of his self.*²

My parents, Jacob and Deloria Bighorn, are true educators. My father followed a path of academic teaching to support students in classroom settings, and my mother followed a path of relational teaching to support students in counselling sessions. With Masters degrees and an unruly rivalry between their interstate undergraduate alma maters, my parents established a foundation, horizon, and skyline of learning metrics, objectives, and expectations of the power of education. They taught from their heart and soul, leaving the mind and body to discover hidden meaning, interconnect with the environment, ultimately offering true accompaniment for students to determine their own reading of reality.

The methodology they employed to maintain balance between the spiritual coherence and material contrast of the self as it develops knowledge and identity was the symphonic harmonization between Indigenous Knowledge Systems of creation and the Written Word of God. To draw on the 2013 Universal House of Justice letter to ABS, the interplay between a ceremonial approach to lesson planning while finding flickers of reflection throughout the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, is akin to “a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities...which

becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates.”³ For an Indigenous people and culture whose learning environment for millennia moved, breathed, lived, and died in direct relationship with its students, it is little wonder that after being mandated for the past 150 years to learn while sitting in chairs behind desks, separated from the matrix of creation in the form of industrialized education, the most natural recourse would be to shift that learning environment towards the realm of relationship between human beings, as the world's people continued to arrive on the shores of North America.

*The essence of all that We have
revealed for thee is Justice, is for
man to free himself from idle fancy
and imitation, discern with the
eye of oneness His glorious handi-
work, and look into all things with
a searching eye.*⁴

In the years leading up to the 2003 ABS annual conference, it could be said that I did not seek to free myself from idle fancy and imitation. Rather, pursuing a university degree and employment still presented a solid path forward. I was not aware of the Association, its history, activities, let alone annual conferences, but thanks to shifts and alignment in the environment, an opportunity would arise to both apply and be awarded the inaugural Tawacin Waste

2 Bahá'u'lláh, in *Bahá'í Sacred Writings* 8:22.

3 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 24 July 2013.

4 Bahá'u'lláh, in *Bahá'í Sacred Writings* 8:23.

Win Indigenous scholarship in honor of Patricia Locke. I was also invited to present on a topic of interest. My mother still delights in recounting how, during my preparations, I called her in a flurry with the question, “Mom! I need you to tell me everything you know about the Covenant.”

The beloved Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, spoke of “the power of the Holy Spirit which is manifest and quickening”⁵ humanity. One experience that certainly facilitated such movement was the scholarship award ceremony orchestrated, fought for, maintained, and delivered by Indigenous Bahá’í matriarchs, including my mother. While the women pronounced to the audience the ceremonial aspects of the scholarship and an Indigenous methodology of honoring, other notable men provided support, with Mr. Stephen Birkland, then Continental Counsellor, presenting the award. In that moment, placed between representatives of true spiritual mothers and fathers, it was as though I was born again. I may never fully understand what happened that weekend in 2003, but by the time I arrived back at my apartment in Seattle, Washington, I knew I had lost all interest in imitation and seemingly had no time for idleness.

*True remembrance is to make mention of the Lord, the All-Praised, and forget aught else beside Him.*⁶

5 Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *The Power of Divine Assistance* ¶ 84.

6 Bahá’u’lláh, in *Bahá’í Sacred Writings* 8:7.

By the time the 2004 annual conference arrived—after a year of reading, reflecting, searching, and serving—I was ready to share what I had learned. Oddly enough, that conference proved to be the occasion for a different kind of ceremonial birth: a chance meeting between sessions with a former schoolmate who would ultimately become my wife. In keeping with non-imitation and anti-idleness, prior to attending the conference I had concluded that I no longer needed to seek a helpmate, and that were it to ever happen, that it would be she who would initiate the process. I found strength and certitude to later accept her proposal, thanks to factors including our meeting at ABS, which to date had endeavored to follow a strict path of learning in its own right, seeking those similar horizons and skylines as guided by the Universal House of Justice and supported by the two National Assemblies of Canada and the United States. Between the two conferences, I found a personal means to transform a learning “conceptual framework” into a matrix of knowledge generation to “systematically investigate reality to achieve reliable results and sound conclusions.”⁷ Consequently, Meleyna and I married in 2006.

As one might expect, refocusing on a new growing family, burgeoning career, and other opportunities of service demanded attention and action which kept me away from ABS for almost

7 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 24 July 2013.

ten years—which brings me back to 2023. To look back, once again, invites analogy to Orpheus and Eurydice. Even at this stage, I am unsure how and what to describe when surveying the extraordinary chain of events that has continued to provide a deep sense of certainty and calm throughout my life since the 2003 ABS conference in San Francisco. Truly, however, I can find no sure step but to begin with my mother.

Every human being is preceded by their mother. She is the portal between one matrix and another, and in my experience not only has my mother provided that in body, but more so in spirit. From her attachment to the Faith in her youth, to her long-suffering journey to find her first born, to her constant preparation of places, opportunities, and experiences for me to learn and grow from far beyond my childhood and public education, she has always been there when I would “take my first steps.”

Leading up to Ridván 2023, my mother requested resignation from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada due to advanced age and the impacts of health on her capacity to fully carry out her service. That same year, Mr. Stephen Birkland also requested resignation from the Universal House of Justice. Both requests were granted, and a few short months after the Universal House of Justice was elected in April 2023 followed by National Assembly in May, there we all were, stage side in Atlanta for the 47th ABS annual conference, some twenty years after my mother

and Mr. Birkland accompanied me from one plane of existence to another on that same conference stage in 2003.

*O Lord, help Thou Thy loved ones to acquire knowledge and the sciences and arts, and to unravel the secrets that are treasured up in the inmost reality of all created beings. Make them to hear the hidden truths that are written and embedded in the heart of all that is. Make them to be ensigns of guidance amongst all creatures, and piercing rays of the mind shedding forth their light in this, the “first life”. Make them to be leaders unto Thee, guides unto Thy path, runners urging men on to Thy Kingdom.*⁸

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8 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Additional Tablets*.

A Vision of What a Bahá'í Life Could Encompass

GEOFFREY CAMERON

I attended my first ABS conferences with my father when I was in high school and in the early years of university. What I remember most clearly was being inspired by presenters who shared a unique perspective on their fields of study. I could see that they were applying Bahá'í principles to the issues, questions, and approaches of their areas of expertise, and this allowed them to say something interesting and distinctive. They were psychologists, political theorists, and lawyers, and the annual conference provided a venue for others to learn how they were correlating ideas from the Bahá'í teachings to their research and professional lives. Attending these conferences expanded my vision of what a Bahá'í life could encompass: not only service to my community, but a way of thinking about and relating to a body of knowledge.

As an undergraduate, I began to view my university as a place where I could do something similar. The ABS, at that time, supported Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies in Canada, and I was eager to help create a student group that could promote the study of the history, teachings, and philosophy of the Bahá'í Faith. There were a handful

of Bahá'í students on campus, and we established a student organization that could promote Bahá'í scholarship alongside campus-based devotional gatherings and study circles. We began by inviting guest speakers who would share a Bahá'í perspective on social issues, and this would attract dozens of our classmates. Eventually, we took turns organizing discussions where we tried to apply Bahá'í principles to the questions of our disciplines, sharing our insights with other members of the student club. One summer we even organized a weekend-long Bahá'í studies conference at the university where we invited Bahá'í academics to give talks and presentations. The support and encouragement of ABS helped us to develop these initiatives, and they formed a central part of my undergraduate education.

During this time, the framework for action was in its early stages of development in Canada, and it helped to root me in the life of the local community where I studied. However, the ABS and our Campus Association for Bahá'í Studies fostered another level of coherence by helping me to guard against fragmenting the ideas I was studying from the beliefs that shaped the rest of my life. Undergraduate studies can be exhilarating and confusing, both socially and intellectually. There are powerful forces competing for the attention and allegiance of young people, and my exposure to and engagement with Bahá'í scholarship helped to guide my thinking and choices throughout university—at a

time when the undergraduate seminars of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) were not yet offered.

Indeed, today there are an expanding number of agencies and initiatives that are helping to enrich the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community. The development of the institute process, the seminars offered by ISGP, the content generated by Offices of External Affairs, materials created by Bahá'í-inspired organizations and more have dramatically expanded the ideas and resources available to those participating in academic and public discourses.

However, the Association for Bahá'í Studies continues to pursue a unique and essential mission, as described by the Universal House of Justice: to create “specialized settings” to “promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines” (24 July 2013). This is the kind of work that ABS has been pursuing since its inception. It has created spaces – ranging from conferences and seminars to workshops and reading groups—that allow people to explore the relationship of the Bahá'í teachings to a wide range of interests. Several years ago, I collaborated with several friends to organize a seminar before the annual conference where we could discuss an emerging academic and public discourse around liberalism and post-liberalism. Some of us were academics, others were not, some were political philosophers by training, others were not; however, we were able to spend two days together trying to sift through some of the ideas published by prominent thinkers and weigh them

against the principles of the Faith. This kind of activity has become more central to the work of ABS and I think it has proven to be deeply enriching to those who have participated in it. ABS continues to help people of all ages encounter the ideas that shape our world in a context where the Bahá'í teachings can illuminate their value and application.

At some point during my undergraduate studies, someone gave me a box of old ABS publications – including what was called the *Bahá'í Studies Notebook*, a predecessor publication to *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*. I found a copy that included an article written by my father on “The Role of Nutrition in Health and Disease,” published in 1985. He was a young doctor who was trying to correlate the Bahá'í teachings on health and healing with a public discourse on nutrition, in light of scientific and medical evidence. The publication was his attempt to seek out an intellectual coherence between science and religion, and between his profession and his beliefs. More than forty years later, I have made my own efforts to do something similar in relation to my own field of study. What connects us is a long-standing institution, built through the devoted efforts of countless people and guided over the decades by the Universal House of Justice and two National Spiritual Assemblies. The ABS remains, after these many years, a unique and valuable agency that welcomes every inquiring mind into an examination of the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and the fields of human knowledge and endeavor.

Fostering a Practice of Accompaniment in the Social Sciences

CHARLES V. CARNEGIE

I started attending ABS conferences in the 1990s as a junior faculty member, happy to be in a place where one could meet and freely converse with other up and coming and more seasoned Bahá'í scholars about the Faith and about correlating its teachings with contemporary thought. In my experience, ABS gatherings fostered an environment of encouragement that offered a refreshing contrast from that of so many academic conferences where people of faith are made to feel muzzled by a mandatory secularism that rules talk of religion out of bounds, and where snide and sometimes unkind speech and an ever-present spirit of competition among scholars-on-the-make tend to create an all-pervasive sense of anxiety.

Of course, a primary aim of the Association from its inception has been to establish Bahá'í Studies as a legitimate and worthwhile field of academic inquiry. Considering this, ABS conferences have in some respects been modeled on their academic disciplinary counterparts and shared several of the features and aims of other academic conferences. Like them, the annual ABS conference was structured around simultaneous, themed breakout panel

sessions; there were literature displays featuring the Association's journal and other recent scholarly publications; and the meetings offered opportunities for social networking and gathering outside of the formal program. The annual conference sought to highlight the various areas of inquiry within the broad field of Bahá'í studies, and to recognize distinguished scholarship through the keynote Hasan Baluzi Lecture and various plenary panels.

As supportive and encouraging as the annual conferences were, their episodic, discontinuous character did not adequately allow for the sustained development of collaborative scholarly projects or the systematic nurturing over time of young Bahá'í scholars. One way in which the Association attempted, back then, to meet these needs was to encourage and support the formation of specialized working groups around particular disciplinary or applied areas of interest. And, in the ensuing decades at the level of the international Bahá'í community, the development of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity has contributed considerably towards nurturing and building a community of discourse among undergraduate and graduate students.

Part of the challenge facing the development of new traditions of scholarship deeply informed by Bahá'í principles and ideas is that certain common processes and practices embedded in the formative scholarly traditions dominant in the world are so strikingly at variance with Bahá'í ideals. Whereas

dominant modes of scholarly practice are often infused with the spirit of competition, structured around controversy, and propelled by advocates grouped into opposing camps, Bahá'ís—guided by the overarching and urgent aim of contributing to the oneness and betterment of mankind—are motivated and more inclined to seek points of unity and to strive to arrive at shared understandings.

In the social sciences and in my own field of sociocultural anthropology, the training of graduate students has tended to be more individualized than collaborative, as have professional research and publication. Ironically, scholarship is perhaps more individually centered in these disciplines whose focus is the study of human society, than it is in the natural sciences, where researchers often work together in teams across different institutions or in a single lab, and publications frequently have several authors. Moreover, as in other fields of study, the social sciences have encouraged and been advanced through disciplinary specialization and sub-specialization. Undoubtedly, this paradigmatic emphasis on specialization and individuated knowledge production has shifted somewhat in anthropology in recent decades, in response to insights from feminism and other influences. Anthropologists and other social scientists are now actively involved in several of the areas of interdisciplinary inquiry that have emerged and taken center stage in the academy, and many employ more collaborative methods, such as participatory action

research. However, the dominant model persists.

It has been especially heartening, then, to see the varied ways in which ABS has sought systematically over the past decade or so to nurture a collaborative process of learning both within and beyond the annual conference. Among the ways in which it is doing so are through reading groups that focus on particular texts or topics over an extended period, and seminars that bring together specialists from within a discipline and adjacent fields as well as other interested non-specialists to inquire more intensively into a given question or theme over two or three days. These settings provide opportunities and a context for scholars who have been trained in particular fields and pursued research along narrow corridors of specialization to accompany each other and those from other fields to (re)examine foundational texts and consider their implications—in light of Bahá'í ideas—for urgent questions affecting contemporary society. And with the technological capacity to have people join such discussions from locations across the globe, the reach of some of these online forums now allows for far more diverse participation. Happily, these efforts are preparing growing numbers of participants from the Association's broader membership to engage more confidently in the discourses of society, and they are also bearing fruit in jointly authored publications, some of which can be seen in recent issues of *The Journal for Bahá'í Studies*.

Every Moment Is a Fresh Beginning

ROSHAN DANESH

I first heard of the ABS long before knowing what it was.

I was three years old when the ABS was founded in 1975. From those early childhood years I recall hearing the words “Association for Bahá’í Studies” as part of the adult conversations that would take place around me at home. My father, Hossain Danesh, and my uncle, William Hatcher, along with many others, were involved in the founding of the ABS. They often engaged in, sometimes loud, frequently dynamic conversations about any number of Bahá’í-related topics. I remember Bahá’í studies coming up a lot, though I had no idea what that meant.

As I got older, the ABS remained one of the two integral Bahá’í-related venues that structured my life. The other was Ballet Shayda, my mother Michele’s dance company, which was being built up at the same time as the ABS. Bahá’í life involved being around dance studios and performances, or on the periphery of talks, symposiums or conferences related to Bahá’í studies.

When I was seven or eight I distinctly remember being dragged around the campus of the University of Ottawa by Dad, in frigid winter conditions, looking at possible offices for the ABS. In 1981, the ABS headquarters

on the campus was purchased by the Canadian Bahá’í community, where it remains today.

I share these memory fragments only as a reminder that, as is attributed to T.S. Eliot, “every moment is a fresh beginning.” As the Bahá’í community formed the ABS in the 1970s it was, as is the case with so many Bahá’í endeavors, an audacious act, made in full expectancy that the ABS would change, evolve, and look very different in the future. Just as we know the Bahá’í Administrative Order at one time was “rudimentary” and “embryonic” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 314) and remains in the midst of ongoing evolution, Bahá’í studies, and entities such as ABS that foster and support it, are never static.

I have experienced this inevitability of change in my own interaction with ABS since those childhood days, which has included serving on and off over two decades as the Editor of *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies*, as a member of the *Journal*’s Editorial Board, and on the Executive Committee of the ABS. While there have been ebbs and flows, and frustrations, struggles and successes, certain directions of change are clear.

One of the most pronounced changes I have observed has been an exploration of the ways in which the progressive evolution of ideas is an embedded phenomenon—that knowledge generation occurs through particular forms of interaction with, and not in separation from, community, social, and cultural forces.

This change is expressed in many visible ways: a growing focus on more experiential and participatory learning in conferences and symposiums; greater methodological experimentation in how research and knowledge generation may occur in group settings and collective ways; and a greater focus on scholarship that explores the intersection of Bahá'í ideas with social discourses and processes of change.

But, of course, being committed to the inevitability of change, as the Bahá'í Faith is, means always striving to look around the corner at what comes next.

In a world in deepening crisis, where the forces of both pulling together and pulling apart are daily intensifying, a challenge for Bahá'í studies, and the Bahá'í community, will be to increasingly research and provide knowledge of how to translate the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh into tangible solutions to the daily suffering, conflicts, and instability suffered by the mass of humanity. To further and more holistically embrace the ideal that the pursuit of knowledge is a moral obligation to humanity and that “scientific thought and its creation is the common and shared heritage of mankind” (Salam).

In practice, this will involve the ABS building upon the shifts that are already occurring through the exploration of the embedded nature of scholarship. This will include evolving approaches to the study of the Bahá'í Faith that are increasingly layered, plural, and able to be applied by peoples and communities in an active way that

addresses the fissures and flailing embroiling humanity.

In doing this, we must remember always that our efforts at any moment in time are just that—efforts at a moment in time. As we continue to evolve the ABS in the years and decades ahead, we must do so with the humility of knowing that today's ABS will not be tomorrow's; just as the embryonic ABS I naively observed as a child is not the same as the ABS of today.

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Growing Up in the Shadow of the Bomb

STEPHEN R. FRIBERG

I grew up, almost literally, in the shadow of the bomb. Trinity Site—where the world’s first atomic device was detonated—lay just thirty miles from where I lived at New Mexico Tech in Socorro. Neighbors of ours had worked at Los Alamos National Laboratory, some 150 miles to the north, contributing to the construction of that first device. Sandia Base in Albuquerque stockpiled nuclear weapons inside a hollowed-out mountain, a fact that made us acutely aware of our status as a potential first-strike target. Warplanes routinely traced the length of the Rio Grande valley overhead, a steady reminder of the age we lived in.

It was not the bomb, however, that first drew me toward physics—it was lightning. The desert storms near my home were powerful and close, and a young person caught outdoors before a thunderstorm had good reason to be cautious. The physicists studying those same storms from purpose-built structures on campus and in the mountains did not share that vulnerability. Science, I came to appreciate, offered something genuinely useful: understanding, protection, and control.

A complicating question arose during the Vietnam War years. Physics

was big science, and big science was entangled with weapons development—including weapons of the kind tested not far from where I had grown up. To pursue physics, it seemed to me then, was to accept some degree of involvement with the military-industrial complex. That prospect weighed on me considerably. It put my intended path in doubt and left me uncertain about which direction to take.

What followed was a period of exploration. I looked seriously into the world’s major religions, spent time in a mountain cave, attended yoga classes, read Nietzsche, and hitchhiked across the country. In time, I came across Bahá’ís and declared my belief. I found in the Bahá’í Faith a perspective I had not anticipated: that work carried out in a spirit of service is itself a form of worship, and that science and religion are not in conflict but naturally harmonious. I returned to school—and to physics.

The culture of science that I grew up in and was privileged to participate in was, in many ways, the fullest flowering of Western European culture. In it, men and increasingly women pursued truth in ways that honored the Enlightenment’s ideals of knowledge and rational endeavor. Truth obtained through the clash of differing opinions, and the hard-won knowledge derived from rigorous experimentation, were the bedrock of scientific practice. And it worked whatever your culture, age, or sex. It was a force that unified people across the world. And it gave rise to the technologies that have reconfigured the

way most of us live. To be a scientist in the second half of the 20th century was truly delightful.

While “big physics”—as embodied by nuclear bomb development at Los Alamos National Laboratory—was a dominant force in science when I was beginning my career, there were other emerging trends. One was the exploration of spiritual and philosophical perspectives within science exemplified by books like *The Tao of Physics*. Published in 1975, this bestseller challenged the materialist assumptions of Western thought. Two others were the emergence of semiconductor technologies and the development of personal computers. Another was the growth of laser research and interest in photonic quantum effects—a field where I worked. In New Mexico and elsewhere, there was growing interest in solar energy. In the Bahá'í world, William Hatcher wrote important articles, beginning in 1969, on the harmony of science and religion.

ABS was a wonderful venue to explore this kind of thinking. Having grown up on a campus where discussion of religion was frowned upon and science was the standard of inquiry, I found the Association for Bahá'í Studies to be not only a place to meet like-minded people and exchange ideas, but also a “life support system” for those of us from a secular background. Special Interest Groups formed under the aegis of ABS were especially valuable from that and other perspectives. As was the case in science, opportunities for discussion, shared dinners,

and question-and-answer sessions advanced the formation of communities of similarly interested people—a necessary component of the generation of new knowledge. Plenary talks at ABS Conferences—often by members of the Continental Board of Counsellors or of the Universal House of Justice—were widely anticipated and well attended.

My own contributions to ABS have been varied. I had the privilege of joining William Hatcher and several others to start the ABS Science and Religion Special Interest Group (SIG), which held its first session at the 12th Annual ABS Conference in 1987 at Princeton University. After finishing a postdoc at Bell Labs in New Jersey, I started a research career in 1989 at Nippon Telegraph and Telephone (NTT), one of Japan's largest companies. In 1991, with assistance from Hossain Danesh, then chairman of the Executive Committee of the Association for Bahá'í Studies–North America (ABS-NA), I helped found the Association for Bahá'í Studies–Japan. The Association was an affiliate, proceeding along the same lines as ABS-NA but on a reduced scale. Like ABS-NA, it held annual conferences, featured invited speakers and talks by distinguished visitors, and presented music and arts programs (including a Bahá'í tea ceremony and a memorable *koto* performance by a concert-hall artist). Like ABS-NA, ABS-Japan provided a way for members of the Japanese Bahá'í community and others to come together, establishing a sense of togetherness and fostering an exchange of ideas.

Back in North America, I also served as a member of the ABS Executive Committee for several years, received the ABS-NA Award for Excellence in 2006, and have worked with several colleagues to teach the Science, Religion, and the Bahá'í Faith course at the Wilmette Institute (and now at the Corinne True Center for Bahá'í History) for the past fourteen years—an experience informed by, and informing, my ongoing participation in ABS spaces devoted to exploring the topic of science and religion.

THE PURSUIT OF THE HARMONY OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

I would like to close by sharing several thoughts and conclusions arrived at over many years and offered here in no particular order.

One conclusion, which I think of as having particular relevance now, is the need to advance the process of attracting increasing numbers of speakers and participants who are not Bahá'ís in our activities. This is both to provide opportunities for discourse and to better “read reality” in these challenging times. We tried to have non-Bahá'í speakers and participants in North America in the 2000s and the 2010s and achieved some success in that regard, but it didn't last. The Association of the Friends of Persian Culture conference, now in its thirty-sixth year, is a successful example of bringing together Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í speakers and participants. Much could be learned from their experience.

One historic limitation of the ABS that we are increasingly moving past is that it was mainly a single annual conference. There was a time when there were regional ABS conferences—we had some delightful ones in the Northern California Bay Area after the turn of the century—but they were discontinued when their supporting personnel were needed for large North American conferences. For a long time, putting on a single major annual conference seemed to preclude other activities. Fortunately, that is no longer the case.

The nature of ABS and its conferences began to shift following the 24 July 2013 letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada regarding the role of the Association for Bahá'í Studies. This letter sparked widespread reflection on the role of the ABS in developing an evolving conceptual framework for engaging in social action, public discourse, and the promotion of learning. Much of the highly laudable work now undertaken under the auspices of the ABS stems from a continued and dedicated engagement with the guidance set forth in this letter.

One particular change stands out. For a long time, much of the content of the annual conferences was provided by talks presented by Special Interest Groups (SIGs). These SIGs contributed much of the vitality of ABS conferences, but too often they were abandoned to their own devices. The signs now are that this is no longer the

case: the Association has dedicated itself to systematically learning how to support groups that share specific interests, with new approaches being actively explored.

A small but notable sign of evolution in the conference is worth mentioning: poster sessions—long neglected but especially valuable for students—seem at last to be gaining ground.

Another big win is the continuing vitality of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*. Kudos are certainly in order for the growing richness of the conversations and scholarly discourse that is being nourished within its pages.

Finally, the role of the affiliates, and the need for their support and nourishment, remains an aspect of the ABS endeavor little known in North America. Fresh thinking about the relationship between the affiliates and ABS-NA is in order.

The question of the relationship between science and religion that captivated me in my youth continues to do so. ABS continues to be a most useful forum for building on the richness of that relationship.



Kevin Locke presenting, accompanied by his flute, at the 15th annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1990, Atlanta, Georgia

Tapping into a Need

ABDU'L-MISSAGH
GHADIRIAN

It was 1976. The CN Tower had just opened in Toronto. Montreal was hosting the Summer Olympics. South of the border, Jimmy Carter was elected president. A 7.3 magnitude earthquake rocked Turkey. The movie *Rocky* was released. Israel carried out the Entebbe Raid, rescuing hostages in Uganda. In China, Mao Tse Tung died and there was a massive earthquake in Tangshan. The Bahá'í Faith was in the midst of a Five-Year Plan whose focus was massive expansion, consolidation of local communities and developing the distinctive character of Bahá'í life. And in that same year, several young researchers, including myself, determined to found an association to further a goal articulated by the Guardian: that the friends should acquire a deep, intellectual understanding of the teachings to address the needs of the modern world.

With the blessing of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, we established the "Canadian Association for Studies on the Baha'i Faith." Our areas of interest were diverse. A glance at the titles of articles in the first volume of "Bahá'í Studies" (in 1976) reveals that diversity: "Apathy and Violence" by Hossein Danesh, "La réalité du monde extérieur et l'existence de Dieu" by Luc Dion, "Auguste

Forel: His Life and Enlightenment" by myself, "Science and the Bahá'í Faith" by William Hatcher, "The Missionary as Historian" by Douglas Martin, and "The Function of Revelation in Artistic Expression" by Otto Donald Rogers.

Our goal was twofold: to support those already engaged in research by providing a platform to share their work with the generality of the Bahá'í population and other like-minded friends, and to encourage others, especially the younger generations, to engage in research that combined spirituality and science/the arts. The Association's conferences grew in popularity over the years, attracting friends from all over North America and beyond. Not long after the Association was founded, the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States joined Canada's in sponsoring this endeavor. Eventually, independent branches appeared in many parts of the world. It was clear that this Association had tapped into a need.

At the outset, this need was met by providing opportunities for scholars and students to speak and publish their work. The existence of the conference and the *Journal* encouraged the Bahá'í friends to do research with the aim of correlating the beliefs of the Faith "with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world" (Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation on Scholarship*, 21 October 1943 to an individual believer). Administrative structures were created to enable both platforms to develop, and they evolved as time went on. Conferences gradually included

workshops where more scholars and researchers could present, and prizes were given in various categories. Since the landmark letter of the Universal House of Justice in 2013 regarding the Association for Bahá'í Studies, not only have conferences developed much further, but other spaces have been created to enable all those involved in various fields of research to collaborate and share throughout the year. As to *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, the format we know today is the result of much experimentation including eclectic volumes like the first one described above as well as single topic or single author issues.

Contributing to content, both as a conference presenter and as a writer, has enabled many budding scholars to sharpen their skills and to go on to produce noteworthy fruits in their chosen fields. I use my own path as an example. From the article mentioned above and another, "Count Leo Tolstoy and His Appreciation of the Baha'í Faith" published in 1979, about historical figures whose ideas aligned with the Faith, I went on to focus on matters pertaining to the relationship between medicine and spirituality. An article entitled "Alzheimer's Disease: Eclipse before Sunset" published in 1989 in the *Journal* eventually grew into a book by the same name. Some twenty-five years later, in 2015, I explored depression, including its spiritual aspects, in "Depression: Biological, Psychosocial and Spiritual Dimensions." I remember that in 2014 at an ABS conference, still a researcher at heart, I presented the results to date from a course on Spirituality and Ethics in Medicine which I developed at McGill University. An expanded discourse on that subject is also about to be published in book form.

Briefly, the Association for Bahá'í Studies has been a part of my professional and Bahá'í activity for most of my life and I owe so much to it. For, after all, where else can one find such a topnotch venue or journal in which one can present ideas that link science and spirituality?



Panel by the Bahá'í International Health Agency, Vancouver, University of British Columbia, 1985.
Standing: Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian

Reflections on My Forty-year Association with the Association

DUNCAN HANKS

After completing my undergraduate degree from Western University in the spring of 1984, I drove non-stop to my family home in Winnipeg. I arrived in the wee hours of the morning. The following day my father woke me up saying the Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly was calling. I wasn't sure I knew what a National Spiritual Assembly was, and knew nothing of its Secretary. The Secretary apologized, saying he had hoped to speak with me before I left London, Ontario to drive to Winnipeg, but had missed his opportunity. He then explained that I was supposed to report to the Centre for Bahá'í Studies at 34 Copernicus Street, in Ottawa, to offer a year or two of service at the Association for Bahá'í Studies. I didn't know enough to question. So, as I hadn't unpacked my car, I borrowed my father's Esso credit card and drove to Ottawa. I reported to the Centre for Bahá'í Studies where they knew nothing about me, or my year of service. And thus, a year of service began, a stepping stone to a life of service.

By the time I arrived at the Centre for Bahá'í Studies in Ottawa, the Association had ten years of

experience. During my period of service, I had the privilege to be mentored by many keen and enthusiastic Bahá'í academics, including members of the executive committee. I also had the privilege of serving with several other young Bahá'ís whose dedication and commitment to their service established a pattern that still inspires me today. And while none of the youth serving at the Centre for Bahá'í Studies at that time were engaged in anything academic or scholarly themselves, the trust given them and the demands and expectations placed upon their shoulders inspired a belief that they had a role to play in shaping this emerging Bahá'í organization.

At the start of the Five Year Plan in 1974, the Universal House of Justice called upon Canada to "cultivate opportunities for formal presentations, courses and lectureships on the Bahá'í Faith in Canadian universities and other institutions of higher learning." In 1975, the National Spiritual Assembly created the Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith. In 1981, its mandate was refreshed "to expand and intensify the teaching of the Faith in Canadian Institutions of higher learning" and its name was changed to the Association for Bahá'í Studies. This was the orientation I was given when I arrived.

Among my first assignments was to research campus club constitutions from universities and colleges across Canada and draft what became the first template for the constitution of a Campus Association for Bahá'í Studies

(CABS). I was also asked to follow the learning and development of CABS across the country for many years. The CABS model was never formally adopted in the United States, where Bahá'í clubs continued to be the primary approach. In 1984, ten CABS were established and within a decade that number grew to forty-eight. As changes in the landscape and orientation of university policies towards campus clubs and their membership shifted, so did the understanding of the Association with regards to CABS. Moving away from a centralized model to align with the emerging framework for action and devolution of responsibility towards the grassroots in the context of building vibrant communities, CABS across Canada started to operate differently. Students on campuses across North America continued to organize Bahá'í clubs on campus, operating with an increasingly outward looking orientation that welcomed students and faculty of all or no Faiths to participate.

Over the decades, Bahá'í Clubs at universities organized a wide range of teaching and proclamation activities designed to increase the visibility of the Bahá'í Faith and to relate its teachings to important issues on campus and in the wider society. This has included the organization of presentations, lectures, symposia, forums, and firesides, as well as directly supporting local, regional, and national conferences. CABS and Bahá'í clubs support community building activities through the promotion of devotional gatherings and study circles on campus, galvanizing support

for the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP), and assisting with national speaker tours called for by the Association or National Assembly. Historically, they have also supported many external affairs campaigns—such as those advocating for human rights and the right to education in Iran. Beyond public engagement, CABS and Bahá'í clubs integrated their work into university environments by gifting Bahá'í literature to libraries, engaging in academic course and curriculum development, and running mentorship programs. Many CABS sustained outreach through electronic newsletters, websites, social events, and sports or cultural activities, alongside periodic deepening sessions and social action. My understanding is that the learning of Bahá'í campus clubs continues to evolve. This advancement includes their engagement with collaborative inquiry through the Association's thematic seminars and reading groups that help connect students with each other and with professional and academic mentors in their respective fields. Increased collaboration with the ISGP is also reframing the efforts of Bahá'ís on campus. The challenge of introducing Bahá'í content and encouraging the creation of university courses related to studies on the Bahá'í Faith is ongoing.

Another aspect of my service was to provide support to a growing number of international affiliates of the Association. During the early years, the Association's executive committee accompanied the establishment of Associations for Bahá'í Studies

in five continents. It also established professional interest seminars creating unique learning opportunities in various disciplines. Eventually, the geographic mandate of the Association was defined as North America, allowing affiliates to operate with a greater degree of autonomy. And the professional interest seminars matured into thematic seminars that foster more collaborative inquiry.

While serving at the Centre for Bahá'í Studies, I was supervised by an extraordinarily gifted editor-in-chief, who taught me how to help edit proceedings from the first Symposium on the Bahá'í Faith and Islam (1984) and the Marxist-Bahá'í Dialogue (1986). I became an in-house specialist on diacritics using Unicode characters to represent Arabic script in Latin Letters. These academic seminars were early efforts by the Association to establish the Bahá'í Faith as an important area of academic inquiry, exploring and clarifying the Bahá'í position and understanding, and differentiating it from other religions and traditional belief systems or ideologies. This learning, and that of producing the Bahá'í Studies series—the precursor to the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* (1988)—required a continuous effort to solicit content for publication. This area of the Association's learning continues to evolve, with the engagement of academics, scholars and practitioners from the wider society in all of the Association's areas of work. A natural next step for publishing came about in the 1990s through the Association's partnership with Wilfred Laurier

University Press to publish the *Bahá'í Studies* series of monographs on the study of the Sacred Texts, the principles and history of the Bahá'í religion, the development of the Bahá'í community, and the application of Bahá'í teachings to the contemporary needs of humanity.

Among the prominent features of the Association for Bahá'ís Studies is its annual conference. These too continue to undergo transformation. I helped organize five annual conferences on a wide diversity of themes. I was expected to travel and negotiate with venues, sign contracts, facilitate all conference logistics, set up and advise local teams to assist with planning and volunteers, prepare promotional materials, draft correspondence, and speak with Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í presenters to accurately relay the vision and objectives of the conference. And of course, it was understood that the conferences needed to be delivered on time and on budget.

Like most initiatives of the Association, over the years the annual conferences have steadily evolved. They have gradually moved away from a forum for independent Bahá'í academics to present scholarly works or areas of investigation, to approaches that support and sustain collaborative research and learning. In essence, the Association's annual conference and professional interest groups have been learning about moving away from Bahá'í scholarship as the academic study of the Bahá'í Faith where scholars and academic present their findings, towards a more deliberate process of collective learning around the application

of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation in practice. Along this journey, the Association has continued to strengthen its practice of inviting non-Bahá'í scholars, academics, thinkers and practitioners to enrich the community's understanding of various themes. While the executive committee and conference program committees ensure the coherence of the program, the Association's executive committee and senior staff truly empower its staff and volunteers to assume complex responsibilities. And while many mistakes are made—and I know this from personal experience—capacity is built. The capacities I developed coordinating the annual conferences of the Association enabled my service to countless other conferences and learning events as an organizer, producer, presenter, and advisor.

The Association itself operates within the ecosystem of learning of the global Bahá'í Community. As such, the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and national institutions has continuously shaped and informed the work of the Association. In its 23 July 2013 letter about the Association, the Universal House of Justice challenged the Association to reimagine its role. One simple illustration of this process involves how the Association reimaged the protagonists engaged in Bahá'ís studies. From its inception, the Association was a membership organization open to academics and professionals. For many years, the Association managed various categories of membership, charging fees. I had a role in maintaining these

membership categories, promoting membership campaigns and ensuring annual subscription goals were met. While this approach provided necessary financial resources, it was met with confusion by many friends who felt that the Association was somehow restricting its membership to formal academics or professionals. By removing the concept of membership, the Association began operating more as a cooperative effort wherein anyone aspiring to translate the Revelation into action was involved in Bahá'í scholarship. By removing the concept of paid tiers each with its own benefits, the Association freed itself from an operational obligation that required it to deliver some perceived benefit to its members on a regular basis, such as a regular newsletter or a quarterly publication of the *Bahá'í Studies* or *Journal for Bahá'í Studies*. The shift taking place was about moving the understanding of Bahá'í studies and scholarship away from something that a privileged or elite group of people were involved with, to an appreciation that every person has a role to play in the generation of knowledge and the betterment of the world, through service. As such, participatory or collaborative learning approaches have been introduced to the Association, entirely coherent with the global process of learning of the Bahá'í community.

There were many other functions and roles youth on a period of service provided the Association for Bahá'í Studies. This included being active members in their local communities.

The range of work-related tasks included cleaning and maintaining the Centre for Bahá'í Studies, drafting correspondence, assisting with publications, writing newsletters, shipping, logistical and secretarial support, and representation at meetings and conferences. But among the most enjoyable aspects was the privilege to meet and be mentored by so many truly gifted friends including many Hands of the Cause of God, members of senior elected and appointed Institutions, academics from around the world, and friends from coast to coast to coast.

The Association brings people together and creates a unique environment within which to learn and serve. In my case, I could never have imagined that the fateful call in 1984 inviting me to render a year or two of service starting at the Association for Bahá'í Studies heralded a rite of passage to a life of service. For the past four decades, I have had the bounty of serving the Faith and its Institutions internationally, continentally, nationally and locally. Much of the capacity developed early in my path of service enabled me to serve in countless spaces and in many representational and logistical roles. Many of those early mentors I met became my friends and colleagues, and continued to provide loving support and constant encouragement over the years. I am eternally grateful for how I was inspired to answer that first phone call to serve the Association for Bahá'í Studies, for it forever impacted my path of service.



Panel by the Bahá'í Institute for Environmental Design at the 12th annual conference, Princeton, New Jersey, 1987.

Sitting on the far left: Architect Fariborz Sahba

A Responsibility that All Must Shoulder

HOLLY HANSON

An increasingly collective approach to the generation of knowledge has emerged over the decades in which I have had the gift of participating in the Association for Bahá'í Studies, and this advance has brought new challenges into focus. The vectors of learning have changed from mostly lecturers informing listeners to also including groups exploring questions together. This has happened both at the annual conference and in groups that met online and sometimes in person. Thinking with others at ABS venues—as listener, lecturer, and group participant—has sharpened my history research and deepened my contributions to communities, and I am confident that many others have had the same experience. Even though we are at the beginning of a path of discovering how Bahá'u'lláh intends for a future civilization to generate knowledge, the efforts made by participants in the spaces created by the ABS have already yielded results. Trying things out and learning from our actions, which the Universal House of Justice emphasized in its 2013 letter to the Association, has been essential, because the goal—a pattern of knowledge-generation characterized by universal participation that recognizes the

synergies of religion and science—is so far from the way our world is currently organized. In one group in which I have been involved, that path of learning has required finding ways to focus the members of a group who bring a wide range of experiences to the enquiry, and discovering how to identify and then to rigorously pursue truly productive questions.

What does the generation of knowledge look like when everyone is involved in it, but some areas of enquiry require decades of training? This is one of the fundamental, unsolved questions of modernity: the spread of schooling and the popularization of the scientific method yielded the innovations that started the industrial revolution, but the threat to the existing social order posed by educated masses led to the separation of theoretical and applied knowledge, and experts began to dominate knowledge generation. A path towards the resolution of this problem is inherent in the call of the Universal House of Justice that knowledge generation is “a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization” (27 December 2017). The worldwide endeavor of community-building provides an example of very large numbers participating, making observations and reaching conclusions based on experience, asking intentional questions and learning from the results.

A key element of what makes this work is shared experience: hundreds of thousands of people are pursuing common objectives using a common

set of tools.” Citizen science” is the name for large scale collective generation of knowledge built on shared experience in the natural sciences. In the humanities it is sometimes called “digital public humanities.” Tens of thousands of people making environmental observations, or hundreds correcting AI generated typescripts of medieval manuscripts show the synergies that can emerge when both human-scale observation and sophisticated forms of measurement are valued. This kind of endeavor requires a shared experience to study and ways to study it together.

One ABS group enquiry that I was involved in for several years emerged from an online group that read Thomas Piketty’s *Capitalism in the 21st Century* and then other works on economic inequality. From this shared beginning the group evolved in several directions. One strand of that group eventually focused on something that was a shared experience for the participants and others to whom they hoped to be useful: the contents of a first-year economics course. Another strand created a common experience by bringing people together to read descriptions—not analyses—of functioning economies. Reading books and articles together had allowed us to deepen our bonds as a group, but we needed to find further arenas for shared observation to move toward the possibility of knowledge generation.

The strand that began to read descriptions of economies yielded one of the most profound experiences of intellectual enquiry of my life. We realized,

in one of the periodic reflections of the economic inequality reading group, that no common vocabulary existed for capturing the social reality we were trying to understand. Neo-classical economists used one set of terms to perceive what they thought was important, Marxist economists used a different set of terms and a different set of concepts, and when we read ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the economy, we used a whole different set of terms and concepts. We decided to try to begin at the beginning of science, by making observations using a structured set of questions. In the document we prepared we explained our aspiration: “we are striving for a common language that will allow us to think with one mind, using words that all of us understand, and do not have assumptions about economic processes encoded in them.” There is not enough space to describe this language here, though perhaps it can be said that the language helped us to clearly see the conspicuous elements—such as actors, objects and places—as well as the tacit forces and spaces that shape economic systems. Through it we were able to see how economic forces coincide or conflict with spiritual forces, leading to an analytical framework and method we could all share. We thought of it as an evolving heuristic that would allow us to build a shared understanding of the nature of economy in all its relevant dimensions.

The materials we read over two days at the 2016 ABS conference were all chosen because they were rich descriptions of economic exchange, which

would allow us to do the very basic scientific step of observation alluded to above. In later meetings we continued to search for, and analyze, similar materials. The conversations could be dynamic and profound, although not everyone's cup of tea. Identifying a set of useful, open questions, asking them systematically, and reflecting on the results led the group who stayed with the enquiry towards questions beyond the landscape of our disciplinary training. For example, do patterns of economic exchange that give human beings agency need to operate at a scale at which people have real social relationships? Could it be that the spiritual energy and moral discipline that come from faith are necessary for economies to function in a way that fosters vital communities? If so, how much of our perceptions of economies are actually observations concerning the consequences of irreligion? The experience of this group was that the advice of the Universal House of Justice—to ask questions, to act systematically, and to reflect—led us in a quite productive direction.

Finally, when I look back at a quarter-century of participation in the activities of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, I think of the kindness, generosity, and very real sacrifice of the staff and the members of the Executive Committee. You prepared the intellectual/spiritual feast, we came and were nourished. Thank you for all you have done that has enabled us to learn and to grow. We are grateful.



Holly Hanson (left) and Kim Naqvi (right) facilitate a workshop on contributing to academic and professional discourses, 36th annual conference, Montreal, Quebec, 2012

The Effects of the Association for Bahá'í Studies on My Academic Career

JOHN SOUTHALL HATCHER

Because the individuals who initiated the Canadian Association for Studies in the Bahá'í Faith (CASBF, the precursor of the Association for Bahá'í Studies) were dear friends—my brother William Hatcher, Hossain Danesh, Doug Martin—I was well aware of the effort that went into the creation of a scholarly institution devoted to cultivating intellectual and academic pursuits, as requested by a call from the Universal House of Justice. It was at this same time, in the summer of 1975, that I was inspired to apply the scholarly tools I had spent virtually a decade and three degrees developing to a subject that, since becoming a Bahá'í in 1960, had become most dear to my heart and mind.

The inspiration came to me as suddenly as Paul's experience of enlightenment on the road to Damascus. I paused outside the library as I realized that, should I desire it, I could now study and write about whatever was most dear to me and possibly useful to others as well. For me, that subject was the Bahá'í Faith, but not in any ordinary sense. It struck me that rather than

following the dictates and demands of others, I could apply all the tools and discipline I had acquired in writing scholarly articles while acquiring my BA, MA, and PhD degrees to studying the Bahá'í teachings, theories, and texts.

Underlying the impetus for this sudden transformation was my awareness that now there existed an institution and a publication that just might find value in such work. For example, in addition to the annual conferences held in Canada, CASBF had begun publishing monographs, the second of which had been my brother's work *The Science of Religion*.

And so it was that without expectation of any reward from the university, I began that summer what would be the first major work among the twenty-seven books I would go on to write about Bahá'í studies. The course I set that summer would also lead to service on the CASBF Executive Committee, to some thirteen years as editor of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, and now to service as editor of ABSP (Association for Bahá'í Studies Publishing, a division of ABS dedicated to publishing books related to Bahá'í studies).

Not that the sheer number of works or years of service were what I had aspired to or envisioned in the summer of 1976. That precious summer I spent every morning (I'm a morning writer) at the keyboard alone (except for my cat who enjoyed the warmth and hum of the electric typewriter). But the driving force for this endeavor was the realization, the sudden certitude and

conviction that, like Paul, I could ask whatever question occurred to me, and if I searched the Bahá'í Writings and with sufficient creativity and focus, the answer would inevitably become clear to me.

This realization never, ever waned. And it was but the first step in my ongoing journey to becoming an avid student of Bahá'í Studies, for so it can now be designated after a half century of scholars, like myself, devoting their time to investigating the theology, ontology, history, and framework of the Bahá'í Faith. And even so has my confidence grown that Bahá'í Studies, as a body of learning unto itself, will continue to evolve in the future.

But what was the result of that first step? For days and more, I pondered what was the question I might ask for which I needed an answer. It had to be a query that was not patently obvious; since I had first approached the Bahá'í Writings in 1958, I had tested their logic, assaulted their theories and doctrines, and not once had I found them wanting. So the question had to be something challenging and different.

Finally, the question appeared to me one night as I lay on my bed studying the Writings. And once it occurred to me, I could think of nothing else, even though it was so obvious I found it strange it had not occurred to me before. It went something like this: If we are essentially spiritual beings and destined to end up transitioning to the placeless realm of pure spirit after this mortal coil, why had God in all His purposeful creation decided it would

be beneficial for us to begin our lives with the distracting illusion that we are physical beings? Or asked more simply, why did the Creator deem it needful to create a physical dimension to reality at all?

And that's how I spent the summer of 1976. And when it was done, I submitted my fifty-page reflection to CASBF that it might possibly qualify for presentation at the Second Annual Conference, which was to be held during that Christmas break in Bolton, Ontario. The talk, entitled "The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality," was accepted, was presented, and—I don't mind saying—was a hit! The talk became Volume 3 (1977) of the annual monographs and my life has never been the same since, though CASBF has changed remarkably in the half century since then. The name has changed to befit its expanded audience. Where the third conference had about 150 attendees, over 2,000 people attended the most recent conference in 2025. Instead of a monograph once a year, the Association for Bahá'í Studies publishes a widely respected quarterly, *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, and the organization supports and fosters a number of other important endeavors.

But this reflection is hardly about a single summer, however life-changing that work turned out to be. It seemed whatever question I dared pose to the Bahá'í texts only begot more questions. And I now realize that questions about God and His plan for us—individually and collectively—are endless. I also realized that I have found

no greater joy in my life than studying these questions, combing through the Bahá'í Writings for answers, and sharing what I discover with other equally curious souls.

Yet an article or two was hardly all that the Association for Bahá'í Studies inspired in my life. Since its inception fifty years ago, it has been the inspiration for some of my most creative writing and thinking. Beginning with that summer's transformative experience, in addition to the aforementioned twenty-seven books (several of which have been translated into other languages), I have written tens of articles, a multitude of poems, and given numerous talks and other presentations on the Bahá'í Faith.

But my participation in this stellar organization consisted of more than contributing books, articles, poems and such. The opportunity to serve as editor of the *Journal* and of ABSP—helping to provide an outlet for the creative scholarly work of Bahá'í scholars—is not only a wonderful culmination of all the opportunities to serve that this organization has offered me. For it is my belief that in the fifty years since the Universal House of Justice inspired three Canadian scholars to undertake this venture, the Association for Bahá'í Studies has, more than anything else, helped in a most impactful manner to establish Bahá'í Studies as a field of study unto itself.

The importance of this accomplishment—which is and will continue to be an ongoing effort—has to do with the fact that until the emergence of Bahá'í

Studies as a global academic field of endeavor, most Bahá'í scholars were faced with having to disguise their work in the field of Bahá'í thought in order for their work to become accepted, recognized, and published.

Or if they dared find a non-Bahá'í publisher to accept their work, they had to approach Bahá'í theories of reality, of history, and of human purpose, not as fact, not as if the author actually believed all this to be true and valid, but from a distance, as if to avow the legitimacy of the Bahá'í Faith and its teachings would characterize them and their work as belonging to the field of religious polemics rather than scholarship. And if they were aspiring to succeed in academia, such a label was lethal, an almost certain path to obscurity.

There is still much that needs to be done to advance Bahá'í Studies in the minds of scholars and academics so that this attitude can be completely uprooted and discarded. But before such a desired destiny can take place in the minds and scholarship of those who are not Bahá'ís, it must first take firm hold in the hearts and minds of Bahá'í scholars themselves who must show the same sort of daring and fearlessness in their own way that the Dawn-Breakers demonstrated so dramatically with their own life's blood during the heroic age of the Bahá'í Faith.

That summer when I decided where I wanted to focus my own academic work, I did not yet have tenure. I had a contract with the University of Oklahoma Press to devise a three-volume compendium of Old and Middle

English literature. But after two years of working day and night on this project, I realized that completing this work would require every spare minute of my life for years to come. What I also realized was that even were I successful, I would in some distant future possibly acquire the accolades of a relatively small cadre of medievalists, whose company, I had discovered at the various conferences I had attended, offered me but little joy. Thus I would have spent the better part of my academic career, in preparation for which I had spent years and degrees accomplishing what I thought I was supposed to (according to objectives others had established without consulting me).

But education, study, enlightenment, and really hard work should bring joy and, most important of all, freedom—freedom of thought, freedom to dare, and freedom to share the pearls of wisdom by diving deep and prying open those rough, crude shells of foreclosure. Yet the path I chose that summer has—through hard work and a great deal of good fortune—blessed me with jewels I treasure and the opportunity to set my mind free to meander wheresoever the Holy Spirit might inspire me to go. And thus far, I have found delight in each foray into the unknown, the placeless, the limpid streams of untrammelled imagination. So, as I approach the end of my life's journey, why should I cease now just when the world is quickly beginning to understand the wisdom in Bahá'u'lláh's framework for a global polity?



John S. Hatcher delivering the Balyuzi Lecture at the 29th annual conference, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2005

Mutual Accompaniment on an Academic Path

MICHAEL KARLBERG and
DERIK SMITH

Over the past decade, the Association for Bahá'í Studies has been fostering processes of collaborative learning, mutual accompaniment, and capacity building among academics and professionals seeking to make distinctive contributions to the evolution of thought and practice in their fields. In the brief essay that follows, we reflect on how the Association has supported our own development in this regard, and how we have woven our involvement with the Association into the fabric of our engagement with colleagues from the wider society and our contributions to prevalent academic discourses.

We completed our doctoral studies in 2000 and 2004, respectively. This was before training institutes were well established across North America, before the current framework for action had crystallized around the Bahá'í world, and before the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) began offering seminars to university students and graduates. As Bahá'ís, trying to embark on an academic career at that time felt like wandering alone in the wilderness.

The Association for Bahá'í Studies existed then, but it was not yet able to foster robust processes of collective learning and mutual accompaniment. This was, in part, because these capacities had not yet been systematically developed across the North American Bahá'í community. In the decade that followed, however, the community was strengthening these capacities through training institutes, community building endeavors, and the first ISGP seminars.

On 24 July 2013, the Universal House of Justice offered guidance about the next stage in the development of the Association—guidance that accounted for the emergent capacities alluded to above. In the decade that followed, the Association began systematically learning how to foster collective efforts to read the discourse in a given academic or professional field, to analyze prevalent conceptions and underlying assumptions in a discourse, to consult about potential contributions to it, to test those contributions in various academic and professional spaces, to reflect on insights gained, and to sustain this approach over time.

One early effort to adopt this approach began in the months leading up to the Association's annual conference in 2017. One of us organized a panel exploring the academic implications of a concept—*constructive resilience*—that the Universal House of Justice had employed in a number of recent letters. This panel set in motion a process of collective learning involving a growing number of people, which continues to this day. The first steps on this path

of learning were a series of seminars on this theme. Early fruits of that process were shared in a special issue of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* in 2020 (vol. 30, no. 3).

As this process continued to unfold, substantive contributions to discourse were shared at several academic conferences, at a United Nations symposium, and in other academic and professional spaces concerned with processes of social change. New relationships were thus formed, and conversations advanced with actors from the wider society. Content that was emerging from these processes was also being tested in university classes on a number of campuses. And all of this occurred in parallel with additional ABS reading groups and seminars, which were enriched by growing numbers of participants who were experienced with the training institute process and the ISGP seminars.

In 2022, an article that emerged from this process was published online in *The Bahá'í World*, titled “The Pursuit of Social Justice.” The same year, a co-authored chapter was also published in a Routledge volume. The chapter’s title was “Responding to Injustice with Constructive Agency.” And this set us on a course to co-author a book in the hope of making an even more substantive contribution to the prevailing discourse on social justice.

That book—titled *Rethinking Social Justice*—has been accepted for publication in 2026 by a leading academic press. In it we trace the evolution of modern thought regarding the *ends* of

social justice and the *means* for pursuing it, and we offer a fresh perspective on both that is informed by the decade-long process alluded to above.

On the question of *ends*, we advance the thesis that diverse aspirations for social justice all orient toward the common horizon of *contributive justice*. We conceptualize contributive justice as a set of social conditions that enable every individual and group to develop their latent potentialities and thereby contribute to the flourishing of the entire social body, from which their own flourishing ultimately derives. Stated another way, contributive justice is achieved through social conditions that enable every soul to actualize their two-fold moral purpose. Some of these conditions may manifest differently in different cultural contexts. Nonetheless, such conditions can be understood as latent social possibilities—or affordances—that can be collectively discerned and acted upon through processes of moral empowerment, in efforts to advance toward them.

On the question of *means*, we advance the thesis that, though contentious means may still have a role to play in the pursuit of social justice, they have reached a point of diminishing returns. Therefore, within the broad ecology of movements for social justice across the planet, we need to begin centering radical forms of constructive agency as a primary means. We use the word *radical* according to its original meaning, which pertains to *root* causes. *Radical constructive agency* thus refers to the collective work of building new social

realities capable of supplanting anachronistic ones—new social realities that address the root causes of injustice and oppression. Stated another way, radical constructive agency is a means of releasing those society-building powers that are latent in the human spirit.

The reasoning and evidence we offer in support of these arguments are impossible to summarize in this brief essay. Suffice it to say that in the process leading up to the manuscript we were able to test and hone aspects of these arguments, and the language we were using to advance them, by workshopping ideas with hundreds of people over a number of years. This occurred through spaces within the Association for Bahá'í Studies, from conference panels to reading groups to seminars. It also occurred through spaces in the wider society, from academic conference presentations to university classroom discussions.

Once we had a draft of the manuscript, a number of individuals offered generous and valuable feedback on specific parts of it. A complete draft was then the focus of a two-day lab space held at the Association's 2025 annual conference. A further refined version of the manuscript was subsequently explored at a two-day outward-oriented colloquia hosted by the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies at the University of San Diego, which was attended by prominent scholars of social movement studies and nonviolent social change. And we have plans to continue engaging others with these ideas once the book is published.

We have tried to narrate salient features of this process not to draw attention to ourselves, but to illustrate the capacities for collaborative learning, mutual accompaniment, and capacity building that are steadily being strengthened within the Association and across the broader ecosystem of learning that includes training institutes, ISGP seminars, external affairs efforts, and other related endeavors. Perhaps the most significant feature of this process is the way our efforts within the Association and other arenas of learning have been woven together seamlessly with our professional efforts to contribute to prevalent academic discourses in the wider society. Participating in the Association and these other arenas of activity is not a retreat from our responsibilities to contribute to the evolution of thought in the wider society. On the contrary, the processes now being fostered across this entire ecosystem of learning are increasingly supporting the development and refinement of our contributions to prevalent discourses.

A growing number of people are beginning to understand and engage the Association with this understanding. We hope our brief narrative will inspire others to do the same. But a word of caution is in order. The Association is not an administrative entity that will do this work for us. It is a voluntary association of individuals learning to take purposeful initiative within a gradually emerging framework. This framework builds on habits of mind and collective practices fostered by our

training institutes and reinforced by ISGP seminars and other endeavors. And it beckons us—especially those who have been trained in these ways and are now entering academic fields and professions—to advance together on a path of learning and capacity building. Thus, in the aforementioned letter, we read that

The House of Justice looks to rising generations of Bahá'ís to wholeheartedly address a wide range of intellectual challenges, overcome all pitfalls and obstacles, and render service for the betterment of the world. In the decades ahead, then, a host of believers will enter diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavour. To this arena, pregnant with possibilities, the Association for Bahá'í Studies can offer an important contribution. (Universal House of Justice, 24 July 2013)

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In Quest of Polaris

NAVA KAVELIN

Most of us are searching for a guiding light to orient and illuminate our way. What will become the North Star of our lives? Which lodestar will orient the direction of our careers? For many Bahá'ís, the answer can feel pre-determined: service. We know from the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the voluminous scriptures in our Revelation, that the purpose of our lives—to know and to worship God—cannot be fulfilled without service. What may be less clear is what particular form our service will take—whether it will unfold mostly in the family, professional, or community arena. And how to achieve coherence among the three may feel like the most challenging question of all.

For most of my twenties and thirties, I was committed to a career path that was, in itself, an obvious form of service. I began my professional life with a four-year period of full-time service at the Bahá'í World Centre, followed by a period of pioneering in China, and when I eventually made my way back to the Western hemisphere, it was as a teacher.

When the opportunity to serve full time in the United States, at the Bahá'í International Community's United Nations Office, presented itself, I did not hesitate to apply. The true North on my life's compass had always been service.

But as a child, I loved to perform. I had secret dreams of becoming an actress—so secret that if any member of my family were to read this, it would come as a revelation to them. I guarded that aspiration and eventually buried it in middle school, deciding it wasn't "servicey" enough. After that, I began to daydream about what it might be like to be a broadcast journalist, a way to "perform" while doing something that seemed more obviously laudable to my fourteen-year old brain. I held onto that aspiration throughout all of high school and then changed my mind during senior year, deciding that teaching was the most noble path of service I could pursue, and one that I would probably enjoy.

I got a Bachelors Degree in English with a focus on Creative Writing and a Masters of Arts in Teaching. But the period of full-time service in the Holy Land that followed, which included eighteen months with the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, began to shake up some of my thinking. While it was true that teaching was in and of itself a service-oriented profession, the state of education in our country (in most countries, perhaps) was grave. Segregation was somehow more alive now than it had been in the late 1960s—not enforced by law anymore, but by zip codes, district lines, housing prices, and the quiet machinery of de facto separation.

And so the question before me began to change, from the relative simplicity of "Which profession is most clearly a form of service?" to "How

does one read the needs of a particular field, discern its possibilities and distortions, and then learn to contribute to its transformation?" I did not yet have language for that question, but I had begun to sense that service was not only a matter of choosing the "right" arena. It was also a matter of learning how to think, act, and collaborate within *any* arena in light of a larger vision.

These new questions also left me in search of a new North Star. *Service* was simply too broad.

In my quest for my own personal Polaris, I traveled many paths. *Perhaps I could have more influence on my field as a school administrator.* I got a job as a middle school director. The politics and bureaucracy of the position were so personally crushing to me that I quit not one but two jobs in the same twelve-month period. *Ok, school administration is not for me.*

I prayed fervently one night asking the Blessed Beauty to literally "pluck me out of my current arena and plant me somewhere new. I know I'm on the wrong path." The next day I got a phone call inviting me to apply for the role of Senior Researcher and Writer at the Bahá'í International Community's United Nations office. Someone at the World Centre had recommended me. I knew with certainty I would get the job; it was an answered prayer. Besides, wouldn't I have an even greater influence on the field of education by contributing to the discourse about it?

While the job was in itself a dream come true—one I had never known to dream—it wasn't permanent. The

role had a term limit, and as mine approached I wondered curiously (sometimes anxiously) what I would do next. I still hadn't quite found my Polaris, though I knew I really loved contributing to discourse. A bonus of my role at the BIC was that it included a field research component that allowed me to participate in several of the professional working group seminars organized by the Association for Bahá'í Studies.

I did not arrive at these seminars and working groups looking for a new vocation. But I sure found one.

At first, I understood these spaces as an extension of the work I was already doing: participating in discourses, refining thought, learning how insights from the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh could come to bear on the many questions facing humanity. But over time, I began to see that these seminars were not merely places where ideas were exchanged. They were environments in which a distinct culture of learning was being built.

Across the variety of spaces I attended, certain hallmarks were unmistakable. People sat in circles, not as a formality, but because the arrangement reflected a shared ownership over the investigation at hand. Expertise was present, but rarely performed. Even those who carried deep knowledge in a particular field seemed to offer it with humility, aware that no one person possessed the whole picture. Participants came not simply to be intellectually stimulated, but to ask how their work, their professions, their capacities, and their lives might contribute to the

constructive forces of society. There was an emerging willingness to band together—to test whether the emergent powers of a team thinking and working in lockstep could become transformative in a field.

This atmosphere was unlike most professional or academic spaces I had previously encountered. It was also distinct from the Bahá'í spaces I was used to. We were drawing on the Revelation, but we were also drawing on the body of scholarship and knowledge from our fields. To see the practical marriage of the two was thrilling. It was also more demanding: a disciplined attempt to bring knowledge and practice into closer relationship. It asked of us not only what we thought, but how we were applying insights into our field. Were we inviting collaborators into our circles of trust? Were we mapping our fields to identify the forces shaping them—the assumptions, incentives, narratives, and structures that either advanced or hindered the well-being of humanity? Were we learning to speak in the language of our professions while remaining rooted in the logic of the Revelation? Were we content to critique society from a distance, or were we willing to enter its spaces, build capacity, and contribute, however modestly, to their transformation?

Among the many working groups I encountered, one began to draw my attention with unexpected force: media.

This surprised me. I had no formal background in the field. My work at the BIC was grounded in writing, research, and engagement with a variety

of discourses unfolding in the hallowed halls of the United Nations. But Providence has a way of opening a door before we are even aware we are walking through it. Around that same time, the BIC began considering how it might use the medium of film to translate some of its conceptual contributions into a more accessible and emotionally resonant form. I became part of a team learning about short film, and eventually, a feature film.

A creative energy I had never quite accessed before began to emerge, and I found myself ravenous to learn everything I could about filmmaking, screenwriting, directing, and producing. It was not simply the excitement of discovering a new craft. It was the sense that media—so often treated as entertainment, distraction, or commerce—could also become a profound instrument for discourse. Through story, image, character, and tone, one could ask questions and offer insights into the human condition that might never be reached through argument alone.

The ABS seminar spaces became the soil in which this passion could grow. Exclusively through relationships formed in those spaces, I found collaborators for the BIC's film projects. I began to see how a field as powerful and fraught as media might be approached through the same conceptual framework I had experienced in other working groups.

One memory stands out with particular clarity.

I was on a long drive from Brooklyn, New York, to Eliot, Maine, to attend

an ABS Media Professional Working Group seminar at Green Acre Baha'i School. Over the course of that seven-hour drive, a conversation unfolded that would eventually alter the direction of my life. A fellow traveler spoke candidly about his frustrations with his career in media, his aspirations, and his longing to have the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh bear more profoundly on his work. He, too, was in quest of a North Star. I shared, in turn, some of the heavy and often depressing insights I had been encountering about the undeniable impact of much contemporary media on women and girls. We spoke not abstractly, but personally: about conscience, responsibility, possibility, and the longing to build something different.

At the time, it was only a conversation. But in retrospect, I can see that a seed was planted on that drive. Years later, that seed would blossom into Ninth Mode, the production company I co-founded with Penn Badgley.

On our visit to a second media seminar in Santa Cruz, California, we met Chelsea Allen. She became the third partner in our company.

Since establishing Ninth Mode, we have drawn heavily on the concepts and questions first encountered in those early seminar spaces. We have been learning, haltingly and imperfectly, what it means to be a production company oriented toward contributing to the discourses of society through media. We are also trying to understand what it means to be actors within the discourse on media itself—to offer

our best, however modest, contribution to the shaping of an industry whose influence on human consciousness is difficult to overstate.

This has required experimentation and creativity. It has also required detachment from results. The habits of the entertainment industry often pull in the direction of urgency, ego, competition, and outcome. The habits of a Bahá'í learning environment pull in another direction: toward process, consultation, coherence, service, and humility. Trying to hold those two realities together has become one of the central tensions and opportunities of my professional life.

At Ninth Mode, our efforts have taken different forms. We have held short-term seminars for Bahá'ís looking to hone in on particular questions in media, such as whether it is possible to tell a compelling story that does not center conflict. We have gathered hybrid groups of Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í media professionals to think about the future of media and our role in constructing it. We have attempted to create ongoing, long-term spaces where people can think, learn, and eventually act together.

We have not mastered this. Maintaining momentum in these groups has proven challenging. The demands of professional life are real. The culture of the industry is powerful. The translation of aspiration into sustained collective practice is difficult. But the effort continues, and perhaps that is part of the point. The working group model did not teach me to expect

instant transformation. It taught me to value disciplined, patient, collective learning over time.

Even now, we are pursuing this work through a two-pronged approach. One member of our company will be spearheading a local media effort for Bahá'ís in Los Angeles, while another will be helping to develop a national, interfaith effort focused on the role of faith in media. These efforts are still emerging, still fragile, and in need of refinement. But they are animated by the same question that first took root for me in ABS spaces: what would it mean to approach media as a contribution to discourse?

That question has become a kind of guiding light.

Whatever projects we develop, whatever conversations we convene, whatever experiments we undertake, we return to the question. Media as contribution to discourse. Not media as moralizing. Not media as propaganda. Not media as a vehicle for self-expression alone. But media as a way of participating in humanity's search for meaning, justice, beauty, and collective maturity.

The ABS seminars and working groups did not simply give me ideas. They offered a pattern. They showed me what it can look like when people gather around a field of human endeavor with seriousness, humility, and hope.

More than any single professional shift, what remains with me is the experience of a learning environment in which thought and action, individual

capacity and collective endeavor, excellence and humility, could all be brought into relationship.

The working group seminars also helped me find the Polaris on my life's compass.



Derik Smith presenting as part of the young scholar plenary panel,
27th annual conference, San Francisco, California, 2003



Ruha Benjamin presenting as part of the young scholar plenary panel,
27th annual conference, San Francisco, California, 2003

Living Forwards, Understanding Backwards

NEIL MACMILLAN

The Danish philosopher Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, a contemporary of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, famously said, “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.”

Thus, in response to a request to contribute a personal reflection to this special commemorative issue of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, I gladly accepted because much of my life from 1996 to 2004 involved helping to coordinate the activities of the Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies (CABS).

Although this involvement became increasingly onerous in the context of other life obligations and I was very relieved when the ABS Executive Committee eventually released me from this service, I have very positive memories of those times, especially since, as a would-be philosopher of knowledge, I am very much at home on university and college campuses and really enjoyed getting to know Bahá'í students across Canada.

During the time I was involved with the CABS, our most ambitious undertaking was to organize a cross-Canada tour by William Hatcher on the theme of logical proofs of the existence of God. This tour was extremely

successful, entailing visits to perhaps as many as thirty university campuses.

In those years what became a four-member National CABS Coordinating Committee worked with enthusiastic and highly motivated Bahá'í students at campuses across the country, many of whom earned their spurs as CABS members before going on to distinguished service in other spheres of Bahá'í administration. Indeed, the students attending CABS activities at the time included a young man, who joined the Bahá'í community in Ottawa in the late 1990s and is now a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors for the Americas!

One particular challenge in our work was the prescription in the model CABS Constitution that each campus association operate under the jurisdiction of the Local Spiritual Assembly in the city where its university was located, while at the same time operating under the student association guidelines of its university—a requirement that entailed extensive communication with these jurisdictional assemblies, some of which did not fully grasp the niceties of CABS functioning as opposed to teaching the Bahá'í Faith on university campuses.

A second challenge arose as CABS members grappled with the relationship between the longstanding focus on Bahá'í scholarship and a new focus on the training institute. This differentiation was alluded to by the Universal House of Justice to in its letter of 24 July 2013 about ABS to the National

Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada:

In 1996, the Bahá'í world began to focus on a prodigious effort to better understand and systematize its work of expansion and consolidation, of growth and community building . . . The Association for Bahá'í Studies, meanwhile, continued to address certain areas that are complementary to the activities unfolding within the recent series of Plans.

Another challenge was that the ABS Executive Committee, which included members from Alaska and the United States was charged with supervising and fostering Canadian campus associations, whereas Bahá'í campus clubs in the US operated under the National Spiritual Assembly's National Youth Committee.

I do not know how these conflicts were eventually resolved, but it now seems that only a few CABS are still functioning in Canada with ABS no longer playing a coordinating role.

Nonetheless, as ABS continues to learn how to foster Bahá'í scholarship through collaborative groups centered on shared areas of interest and scholarship, it may be that its new approach will infuse new energy into Bahá'ís on campus, leading to new forms of association in what are still important centres of social and intellectual life.

Although no longer involved with Bahá'í or Bahá'í-inspired activities on university or college campuses, I

continue to be happily connected with ABS, especially in terms of its role, as formulated by the Universal House of Justice in its 24 July 2013 letter, in empowering Bahá'ís to contribute to “the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present.”

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At Fifty: Toward an Outward-Facing Vision for Bahá'í Studies

HODA MAHMOUDI

The Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS) has played a vital role in the development of Bahá'í scholarship and in shaping the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community. For five decades, the Association has helped cultivate an internal framework through which the community could reflect on the nature, purpose, and methods of Bahá'í studies. This foundational work has been essential. It strengthened intellectual life within the community and clarified how scholarship can serve the Cause.

Yet the present moment calls for more.

As the worldwide Bahá'í community advances the Nine-Year Plan, the House of Justice reminds us that the current Plan is part of a “series of Plans comprising a challenge, spanning no less than a generation, that will carry the Bahá'í world across the threshold of its third century” (28 November 2023). That third century begins in 2044. The scope of this generational undertaking demands that Bahá'í scholarship rise to a new level of responsibility and engagement.

To grasp both the opportunities and the challenges before the Bahá'í world, and the specific role of ABS

in advancing the Plan, it is essential to situate the Bahá'í teachings within a broader framework of social change and historical process. This perspective situates Bahá'í action within a dynamic understanding of spiritual and social transformation, one that operates across multiple levels of human experience and shapes individual character, patterns of community life, and the evolution of institutions and nations. Responding to this call requires attention not only to internal Bahá'í community processes, but also to the broader forces shaping the world today. To illuminate both the extent of this effort and the challenges facing the worldwide Bahá'í community, the House of Justice explains:

The determined efforts to gain a fuller understanding of, and to live in accordance with, Bahá'u'lláh's teachings take place within the larger context of the twofold process of disintegration and integration described by Shoghi Effendi. Attaining the objective of the current series of Plans—the release of ever-increasing measures of the society-building power of the Faith—calls for an ability to read the reality of society as it responds to, and is shaped by, these twin processes. (28 November 2023)

Developments within ABS over the past decade reflect the Association's understanding that this task cannot be fulfilled through inward-looking discourse alone. It requires Bahá'í

scholarship to interpret contemporary crises—moral fragmentation, systemic inequality, racism, the inequality of women and men, environmental degradation, failures of governance, and the urgent search for peace—by drawing upon both the spiritual resources of the Faith and the best insights of contemporary academic and professional thought. The challenges facing humanity demand rigorous, sustained engagement with scholars, practitioners, and institutions across disciplines and cultures.

At this stage in its development, Bahá'í studies must function as a bridge. It must connect the principles of Bahá'u'lláh with the strongest currents of contemporary scholarship and practice. And, of course, this bridge is not one-directional. Bahá'í ideas are not merely to be “applied” to external debates. They must enter into genuine intellectual exchange—tested, refined, clarified, and deepened through serious engagement with the best available knowledge across fields.

This outward-facing orientation has required a decisive shift in posture. Bahá'í scholarship cannot appear self-contained, self-validating, or prematurely confident in possessing ready-made answers to humanity's most complex problems. Such an approach would undermine credibility and limit influence. Instead, scholarship must be marked by intellectual humility, methodological rigor, conceptual clarity, and a disciplined willingness to grapple with complexity. In any academic publication that draws

on Bahá'í ideas and principles, authors should assume that their audience is largely unfamiliar with the Bahá'í perspective, the teachings, and the far-reaching vision of Bahá'u'lláh's dispensation. This requires language, tone, and arguments that are accessible to readers who may not yet understand why the Bahá'í Faith advances the vision it does. Likewise, by tapping into the best knowledge generated by outside scholars, Bahá'í studies can more fully understand Bahá'í principles and how they must be applied in order to advance positive social change, such as achieving the equality of women, eliminating racial and other forms of prejudice, a different approach to global governance and leadership, and promoting economic well-being and other social concerns. The aim is not to impose a framework, but to illuminate pathways for shared inquiry and collective problem-solving.

A central requirement of this new phase is the development of a genuinely hybrid model of scholarship. This model integrates the internal rigor of Bahá'í study with the insights, methods, empirical findings, and theoretical advances of broader academic and professional communities. Hybrid scholarship does more than defend Bahá'í principles; it demonstrates their explanatory power and practical relevance in dialogue with contemporary knowledge. It shows how Bahá'í concepts—such as the oneness of humanity, the harmony of science and religion, consultative governance, and the moral foundations of unity—offer integrative

lenses capable of clarifying both the limitations and possibilities of existing approaches.

Importantly, this model requires recognizing that many scholars who do not identify as Bahá'í are producing work that powerfully illuminates principles central to the Bahá'í teachings—sometimes with greater analytical precision and empirical grounding than is found within explicitly Bahá'í discourse. Their contributions are not peripheral. They are indispensable partners in the generation of knowledge. Intellectual integrity demands that Bahá'í scholars learn from them, collaborate with them, and allow their own assumptions to be challenged in the process.

For outward engagement to be credible, Bahá'í scholarship must resist reducing the teachings to slogans, formulaic solutions, or abstract ideals detached from lived reality. Serious scholarship demands careful attention to evidence, historical context, competing interpretations, and practical consequences. It requires openness to critique, readiness to revise assumptions, and the discipline to follow arguments wherever they lead. Only through such rigor can Bahá'í studies contribute meaningfully to addressing deep-rooted social problems.

Participation in global intellectual life also requires writing with broader audiences in mind. To contribute effectively to major discourses shaping contemporary society, Bahá'í scholars must engage prevailing debates in their own terms—demonstrating familiarity with disciplinary norms, conceptual

frameworks, and cultural contexts. This includes the humility to allow ideas inspired by the Bahá'í teachings to circulate within wider scholarly and professional arenas without always being explicitly labeled as “Bahá'í.” The goal is not attribution for its own sake, but the genuine diffusion of insights that advance collective understanding and social progress.

The first fifty years of the Association for Bahá'í Studies testify to the importance of careful internal reflection, but has also laid a strong foundation for outward engagement. My own experience within ABS offers a small illustration of how this formative role has unfolded in practice. During my early years as a young academic in the early 1980s, ABS served as a proving ground for learning how to correlate the Bahá'í teachings with contemporary thought. It provided an environment where questions could be explored openly and where emerging scholars could test ideas, refine approaches, and learn how to think across intellectual and spiritual traditions. For many of us, ABS was not simply a conference; it was a laboratory for developing habits of inquiry, consultation, and collaboration that would shape our scholarly paths for decades.

Over the years, my involvement deepened through opportunities to contribute to the life of the Association. I presented numerous papers and participated in sessions that explored complex and sensitive issues. Many of them are published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*. For several years, I

organized workshops on the equality of women and men. Another year, I organized a panel discussion on mixed marriages from the lens of academic literature and the Bahá'í writings. For a number of years, I also had the privilege of coordinating special sessions on the equality of women and men. These gatherings brought together diverse voices and perspectives and exposed me to many insightful presentations that helped expand my understanding of how Bahá'í principles could inform scholarly and social discourse.

Experiences such as these illustrate the vital role ABS has played in nurturing intellectual capacity within the Bahá'í community. They also underscore why the present moment represents a natural next step. The habits of inquiry, collaboration, and reflection cultivated over decades are proving to be a solid foundation for a more outward-facing engagement with the wider world of scholarship and practice, building on a shift that has already been underway and developing over time. Increasingly, individuals and groups are learning to engage thoughtfully with existing academic discourses in their respective fields and to invite participation from those outside the Bahá'í community into ABS spaces, thereby broadening the scope and impact of these efforts.

The next fifty years require a widening of horizons: a decisive turn toward rigorous global engagement, sustained interdisciplinary collaboration, and confident participation in the world's most consequential intellectual

conversations. Rooted firmly in the teachings yet fully conversant with contemporary knowledge, Bahá'í studies can help release ever-greater measures of the society-building power of the Faith.

The task ahead is demanding. It calls for discipline, sustained effort, humility, and courage—the courage to enter conversations where Bahá'í perspectives are one voice among many. Yet it is precisely through such engagement that Bahá'í scholarship fulfills its highest purpose: not merely deepening understanding within the community but contributing meaningfully to humanity's collective effort to generate knowledge, confront injustice, and advance the well-being and peace of the world.

Finding Our Own Voice

YMASUMAC

MARAÑON DAVIS

I remember being fifteen years old, seeking to understand my role in the world: What would be my contribution? I could feel myself on a quest as my capacity to express myself continued to grow. Somehow an issue of the *Journal of the Association of Bahá'í Studies* made its way to my hands. I remember perusing it and feeling drawn to participate in this way, to share understandings growing within me, to offer ideas to a collective where others leaned in and desired to learn with me. My father, of Quechua Indigenous ancestry from Bolivia in the Andes mountains, impressed upon me the importance of offering gratitude for my ancestors—mis abuelas—for the sacrifices they made, by the work and efforts I would engage in during my time in this world. On Sundays, my mother, of English and Irish ancestry, would take me to the Bahá'í Youth Workshop led by Oscar DeGruy and Renee Dixon where we would spend our time learning about our spiritual ancestry through *The Dawn-Breakers*, and about the “most challenging issue” through study of *The Advent of Divine Justice*. We would then apply the spiritual principles we were learning about through artistic expression, which we

would share with others. I didn't know it then, but I was in search of being with others in thinking deeply about our reality. The deep-layered thinking of ABS and the Bahá'í Youth Workshop were attractive to me and would prove foundational to the development of my voice.

I grew up feeling in-between, learning to stand between the strength and beauty of both my father's Indigenous understandings that grounded me in relationships and my mother's adventurous spirit coming from her hardy New England pilgrim culture. The Bahá'í Faith anchored me in spiritual principles that allowed me to stand within the powerful forces swirling in each of my inherited cultural understandings and history. I sought two spaces to ground these principles: the grassroots and academia. ABS provided me with an important learning space in my academic journey, a space where I could directly engage Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and bring in meaningful experiences I was having at the grassroots. In many ways ABS and I were coming of age in our learning together.

My first presentation with ABS would be years later when I was working in education, primarily (at the time) in educational technology. During this time in my life and career I was deeply concerned with the voice and role of Indigenous and Latine communities in the field of educational technology. I saw their ability to create strong learning spaces through their collaborative capacities and their history of justice-oriented efforts and longed

to see education learn from them in meaningful ways. At the same time, the Universal House of Justice was guiding the Bahá'í community towards a new understanding of learning through the framework of collective action and learning as a mode of operation. ABS gave me an opportunity to practice bringing these two parts of my life more closely in relationship. One of my first presentations at an ABS conference was titled "Creating Active Agents of Change,"¹ where I was able to share what I was learning in educational technology, the inequities I saw, and the deeper call to humanity to engage all knowledge systems to make the world anew. As we were recognizing in the Bahá'í community, "every individual will, to a greater or lesser degree, contribute to the emergence of the world civilization towards which humanity is irresistibly moving" (Bahá'í International Community 2014), I longed to find a way to integrate this more thoughtfully into my learning in educational technology. Being able to present at ABS gave me an opportunity to engage the teachings and learnings from the Bahá'í community with my professional and academic discourses. However, like me, ABS was also trying to find its own voice among the powerful changes the Universal House of Justice was guiding through the framework for collective action. This first presentation was at a conference very

much like all other conferences—some keynote speakers elevated for the understandings they brought, followed by breakout sessions. The cultural tempo and experience of the conference reflected that of the dominant culture of the United States, with other knowledge systems marginalized, unintentionally in ABS' case.

Over the next few years ABS and I would undergo some profound changes, remaining at a bit of a distance from each other, again unintentionally. I was remaking myself in a way as I left working in K12 after twenty years and began a new road of growth both professionally and personally as an educational consultant. I was deeply engaged in the learning processes of community building locally in my cluster, serving on the area teaching committee and actively learning how to learn with my community and our friends in our neighborhoods and community-wide. ABS stayed on my radar, though I wasn't sure how to re-engage in this new "mode of learning." ABS would soon prove once again to be an important place to learn about that integration, with Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation casting its powerful light through which I would thread new understandings.

An important experience I had with ABS came shortly before I began my doctoral studies. I attended an ABS conference where my soul sister, Ruha Benjamin, was the keynote speaker. Seeing Ruha on stage as a keynote, speaking of the most challenging issue, threading her academic studies with Bahá'í teachings and grassroots

1 Association for Bahá'í Studies 41st Annual Conference, 11 August 2017, Orange County, California.

understandings, was deeply impactful for me. I felt the important voice of my elders from the Black community through Ruha finally take a central role in a conference that represented Bahá'í studies. It was empowering. While the rest of the conference was much the same, I left feeling like maybe a change was possible. I left feeling proud of ABS. I knew something beautiful was coming, and I was ready.

I had an opportunity to serve as part of the Wilmette Institute's (WI) curriculum development team at a time when it too was re-envisioning itself in light of the learning happening globally with the Ruhi Institute, and the guiding light of the Universal House of Justice. Drawing from the community building efforts, the WI team desired to learn how to design a pedagogy that was centered in the framework for collective learning, and with learning as its mode of operation as defined by the Universal House of Justice. After a year and a half we had developed and implemented a pedagogy through a few courses we created. The WI team decided it was time to share what we were learning. Once again, ABS became that important space for sharing what I was learning at the grassroots through Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and academia. What I didn't expect was how this conference would also be distinctly different. ABS was undergoing its own transformative processes. This conference was held in Atlanta and the strength of the Black Bahá'í community was present. It was powerful. The devotional opening of the conference,

the evening artistic renditions, all centered and reflected the knowledge and understandings most especially of the Black community. It was beautiful. I also felt that in my workshop I was sharing something grounded in a deep, systematic process of learning gifted to us by the Universal House of Justice through the framework for collective learning. I was grateful.

ABS and I were coming of age. Whereas before I would struggle, straddling both sides of who I was, I now felt I was finding a more coherent voice that could sit back on principles I was exploring within specific contexts. I also didn't have to sacrifice any of my Indigenous-Latine understandings; they were a part of the coherent whole I was sharing. This conference felt similar. ABS was also responding to the call to integrate all knowledge systems within a process of learning, and the conference felt like it showcased a coherent effort of this learning. We, ABS and I, continued in our own spheres to deepen our learning processes within our own contexts. My doctoral studies in Education for Social Justice confirmed so much of the efforts and struggles of my life. Indigenous scholars, through their careful, meaningful and sacrificial work, upheld Indigenous Knowledge Systems as valid understandings which could stand on their own. Indigenous scholars recognized that learning and knowledge for Indigenous people is deeply related to and interconnected with the spirit realm and our ancestors, affirming my father's teachings to me.

Most impactful were the understandings advanced by Indigenous scholars, to name only a few: Hunkapa Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr. and Muscogee scholar Daniel Wildcat, who along with other scholars recognized Spirit as the power moving through specific land contexts giving them their own personality (Deloria and Wildcat). Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who recognized that knowledge was lovingly given to us by our ancestors from the spirit realm (Simpson). In this in-between space I continually draw from Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, an Aymara scholar from the Andes mountains who identified Ch'ixi, as a powerful place where two distinct entities meet, intermingle and yet never lose their individual essence (Cusicanqui). These scholarly confirmations gave language and clarity to what I had always known. I was no longer straddling between worlds, I was connecting points into a coherent whole.

Our learning at the Wilmette Institute with our Bahá'í inspired pedagogy continued to strengthen and we decided to once again bring our learning to ABS. This time the call from ABS encouraged creative presentations where, as with the last conference, we saw ourselves more in conversation with participants as opposed to the traditional format of presenter and attendees. This was an important shift for ABS and one that I deeply appreciated as it reflected what I was also learning through my grassroots engagement and continued affirmation in my way of being as an Indigenous Latine scholar.

While I never felt the Bahá'í Writings denied my Indigenous understandings or ways of being, I didn't have a way before to learn with others collectively through Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation while standing fully within them. The Universal House of Justice and the sacrifices of Indigenous scholars changed that for me. ABS gave me a space to share this learning with others, while maintaining a continued posture of learning, as they too were reflecting on the same framework for collective action through their own transformative processes. With encouragement from ABS and our director, the curriculum development team decided to present within our pedagogy through experiential learning. It stretched us as a team to trust our pedagogical process, inviting ABS to do the same. They did. It was an affirming experience, one that we could see impacted participants, us as a team, and—we hoped—ABS. At this same conference in Calgary, Canada, ABS sat closer in relationship with the Indigenous community through the welcome by Chief Troy Bossman Knowlton of the Blackfoot Ancestral Territory, to one of the keynote addresses by my Indigenous brother Jordan Bighorn. During his address, in which he centered Indigenous Knowledge Systems, an Indigenous sister from Greenland and I were sitting in the same row. While we didn't "know" each other, we held hands and cried throughout Jordan's talk. We felt seen and heard.

I sit back reflecting on the journey of that intense and purposeful

fifteen-year-old who never gave up on standing in-between, something I felt called to do rather than to “choose” one side. How could I choose only one of my ancestors, when they all made efforts? I am grateful institutions like ABS exist which, while responding to the transformative call from the Universal House of Justice, gave space for folks like me to practice sharing the insights from my own response as I learn to contribute more effectively in academic and professional discourses. I imagine we will continue to grow together, becoming two old friends worn through with the beautiful and intense processes of transformation, hoping to become something new.

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Jacqueline Left-Hand Bull during her plenary presentation at the 34th annual conference, Vancouver, British Columbia, 2010



Pierre-Yves Mocquais facilitates a workshop on contributing to academic and professional discourses, 36th annual conference, Montreal, Quebec, 2012

Strengthening the Intellectual Life of the Bahá'í Community

PIERRE-YVES MOCQUAIS

My growth as a Bahá'í and my career as an academic are inseparable from my association with the Association for Bahá'í Studies over the past nearly forty years. What the ABS at fifty means to me can only be expressed in the context of my early personal spiritual and intellectual evolution and how it has contributed to what I am today.

The late 1960s and 1970s were a period of great intellectual fermentation in France as the post second world war generation came of age, attempted to make sense of its angst and searched for meaning. It was a period of creativity and renewal, but also of fragmentation and incoherence. In part as a product of these concurrent movements I remained for many years in a state of intellectual dichotomy. As the events of May 1968 erupted, as students in Paris built barricades with cobblestones, occupied La Sorbonne, belatedly “Never work” and proclaimed that education led to idiocy, I was finishing high school in a small backwater city of eastern France and preparing myself to enter university. For the past three years I had been a boarder at a college whose very progressive values of education and learning were largely

influenced by the Jesuits. It was the off-the-beaten-path ideals of that Catholic institution and its reputation for intellectual dauntlessness that had led my father, a staunch atheist, to enroll me in it. Philosophy—taught by a cassock-wearing professor who insisted that all religions conveyed basically identical messages that humanity took great pain to distort—occupied a central place in my learning. The works of Montaigne, Rousseau, Voltaire and Diderot as well as Kant and Spinoza shaped my initial thinking, and my idea of God, at the very time that I was desperately trying to become a Marxist. Not because I particularly believed in Marxism, but because it was the thing to do then if you wanted to fit in—even in a Catholic school! But, then, how do you reconcile venturing on to such an intellectual path while holding, as I did, a deep-seated belief in God?

For me, the answer lay for a time in simultaneously rejecting religious practice and embracing structuralism (that of Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault or Lacan); then I attempted to reconcile my own views and belief system with the renewal of Marxist philosophy by the likes of Althusser or Deleuze or the postmodernist thinking of Lyotard as they seem to offer a reassuring framework and to give some order and meaning to the prevailing chaos. Not that I ever fully adopted the principles of their thinking. There was always something off, so to speak, which stopped me halfway through my investigation—hence the ongoing dichotomy! There were many seductive

concepts and ideas, no doubt, such as the centrality of language as a unique human phenomenon and semiotic system or the concepts of textual analysis proposed by Kristeva, Todorov or Genette that excitedly captured my attention. But then, irremediably, something happened that destabilized the entire shaky intellectual edifice I thought I was starting to construct and shattered whatever intellectual certainties I had developed. Derrida's "deconstructionism," for instance, provided an initial fascination, but then made me lose my bearings because it meant that one could not hold on to any truth or absolute. I hung on to Foucault, though, throughout, because there was in the evolution of his thought process something that touched me, or troubled me—that is, when I understood him! But he seemed to be able to navigate the intellectual quagmire in a way that appealed to me. Later, as I advanced in my university studies in France and then in Canada and obtained my first university appointment at the University of Regina, I would start to drift toward intellectuals who had developed a thinking anchored in an ontology of human history—Levinas of course, and then especially Paul Ricoeur whose writing touched on the spiritual and moved me deeply.

Then, in 1984, I became a Bahá'í in Regina, Saskatchewan, somehow as far removed geographically as possible from what I thought was the world center of intellectual life—and everything fell into place. Spiritually first, with the illumination provided by the

idea of progressive revelation, and then intellectually, when I attended the conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies held at Princeton in 1987. For the first time I felt a sense of personal harmony! The conference was entitled "Converging Realities" and purported to bring together science, humanities and religion—a correlation which, since my teens, I had confusedly been struggling to make without success. It was as if my mind was being rearranged, my intellectual hypotheses swept and dusted, and as I was listening to Hossain Danesh, June Thomas, Ervin Laszlo, Karl Pribram, Douglas Martin, Farzam Arbab, Otto Donald Rogers, William Hatcher and others, my spiritual and intellectual yearnings were being united. Little did I know! I was about to embark on a journey that would leave me largely breathless.

Within a year, I was appointed to the Executive Committee of the ABS and to the Editorial Committee of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, the latter of which, to my great puzzlement, I still serve on thirty-eight years later. Then, as I was serving the Auxiliary Board for Protection starting in 1993 and becoming quickly acquainted with the complex and fraught interactions between scholarship and the Covenant in some parts of the North American Bahá'í community, I was asked to provide support and help guide the Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies (CABS). This were probably the most fulfilling aspect of my service with the ABS. As I met and interacted with groups of Bahá'í university students

and their friends across Canada, I remember feeling a sense of awe. They were focused on serving the Cause and were determined to contribute to the progress of human civilization by allowing their relationship to the Covenant and a deep sense of service to direct and shape their lives and professional endeavors. They did struggle, though, in their attempts to reconcile the prevalent academic narratives and the nascent discourses associated with their understanding of the Revelation and its impact on the advancement of human civilization and on their own spiritual and intellectual life. The programs of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity would contribute to settling their disquiet in much more effective ways than I ever did.

As annual conferences of the ABS took place along established academic patterns, as *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* struggled to garner enough material to respect its publication schedule, the Executive Committee was straining to redefine the mission of ABS and, by extension, of JBS. The paradigm shift created by the Universal House of Justice with the launch of the Institute process in 1996 and, by the end of the 1990s, the struggles confronting some in the exercise of Bahá'í scholarship in this new context, had led to a deep questioning of the model so far espoused by the ABS. In 2007, after a hiatus of a few years in the early 2000s while I served my third term as a Member of the Auxiliary Board, I had been reappointed to the Executive Committee of the ABS and to serve as

its Academic Director. The Executive Committee embarked on a process of reflection and consultation that resulted in a request to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada to seek guidance from the Universal House of Justice. The guidance came in a letter from the Supreme Body dated 24 July 2013 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada that not only allowed the ABS to move beyond the anxious questioning of its role, but started a process of reconciliation, with itself and with the place of the ABS in the transformative processes engineered by the Universal House of Justice. The ABS needed to actively play its part in the prosecution of the Plans.

In that letter, the retrospective that the Universal House of Justice gave on what had been the work of the ABS since its establishment in 1975 provided the Executive Committee with a welcome reassurance that the ABS had not been idle and had not erred, that it had fostered “appreciation for the importance of personal study of the Revelation, correlating the teachings with contemporary thought, [and] defending the Cause.” On a personal level, it set my mind at rest that, in my specific responsibilities with Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies, I had contributed to “encouraging young believers in their academic pursuits,” to protecting their efforts and to raising capacity. However, it also confirmed that the issue facing the ABS was the need to move beyond “providing a forum for Bahá'í academics

to collaborate with one another,” that it was not a question of choosing between existing academic models and a prototype of Bahá'í scholarship that had yet to be defined, but to engage in a new process of development of ABS that would contribute to the reinforcement of the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community in the context of the core objectives of expansion and consolidation.

Central to the Executive Committee's newfound ability to shift toward a process of renewal was the enlightening appreciation of “the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates” through which “the generation and application of knowledge” could take place. Up to this time, the ABS had been struggling with what it increasingly perceived as the generation of discreet finite products, whether annual conferences or *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* issues, disconnected from a real developmental intellectual process. The “notion of an evolving conceptual framework” allowed the Executive Committee to start shifting its understanding of the role of the ABS in the overall perspective of the society building process of expansion and consolidation. By calling on a “unity of thought around essential concepts” and the exploration of “fresh approaches with some simple steps that can grow in complexity” by providing specific dynamic components and mechanisms of the “evolving conceptual framework,”

the letter actually liberated the ABS from patterns of thought that, heretofore, limited the scope of its action.

In 2014, the time had come for a fresh team to guide the evolution of ABS and, from somewhat of a distance, I have followed with growing admiration how, through reading and working groups and seminars, with an annual conference fully integrated in the process, it is strengthening the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community.

Bridging Worlds: Indigenous Bahá'í Perspectives and the Expanding Discourse of the Association for Bahá'í Studies

MICHAEL A. ORONA

There is a particular kind of intellectual homecoming that occurs when a scholar finds a community that does not merely tolerate the full range of their commitments but actively invites them into conversation with one another. For me, sustained engagement with the Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS) has been precisely that: a space where my Indigenous ancestry, professional formation as a diplomat and international relations scholar, and my spiritual orientation as a Bahá'í have not been compartmentalized or sequenced but can operate simultaneously and in mutual reinforcement—in a word, flourish. The contributions this engagement has helped me develop are, I believe, both substantive and structural: substantive in that ABS has provided a platform and an intellectually engaged audience welcoming perspectives that remain underrepresented in both Bahá'í and secular academic discourse, and structural in that the Association's

evolving culture has helped me understand how to bridge communities of knowledge that rarely speak to one another.

My academic and professional work has long sat at the intersection of Indigenous agency, international relations, and what might be called the ethics of encounter—the question of how peoples, legal systems, spirituality, and epistemology meet and transform one another. For most of my career at the U.S. Department of State, including my tenure as the first Senior Advisor for International Indigenous Issues, that work necessarily operated within frameworks not of my own design: international law, multilateral diplomacy, and the procedural architecture of institutions like the United Nations. Those frameworks are valuable, but they carry embedded assumptions—about who constitutes a legitimate actor, what forms of knowledge are admissible as evidence, and what counts as progress—that frequently render Indigenous experience peripheral or legible only through translation. ABS has been one of the rare spaces that invited me to probe the boundaries of those assumptions rather than labor within their constraints.

The Bahá'í Faith's core commitments—to the oneness of humanity, to the harmony of science and religion, to the elimination of prejudice—provide not merely a spiritual foundation but an epistemological one. They invite a mode of inquiry that takes seriously the full range of human experience as a source of insight, including the

experiential and spiritual knowledge that Indigenous communities have developed and transmitted across generations. What ABS has helped me to do, over years of engagement, is to articulate that invitation with greater precision and to test it against the realities of Indigenous life in the twenty-first century. The Association's scholarly community has provided a forum in which the question of what Bahá'í principles mean *for* and *within* Indigenous contexts is not merely tolerated as a niche concern but treated as genuinely generative—a question that illuminates the principles themselves, not merely their application.

This is important to name explicitly, because it has not always been the default posture of scholarly discourse. The history of religious communities' engagement with Indigenous peoples globally is, like most history at that intersection, complicated. One of the most meaningful aspects of ABS's evolution over the past five years has been a growing institutional willingness to recognize that Indigenous voices within the Bahá'í community bring not just demographic diversity but epistemic distinctiveness, spiritual perspectives shaped by relationships to land, community, and time that challenge and enrich society.

My presentation at the 2024 ABS annual conference in Atlanta was, for me, a distillation of much of this work. The presentation examined "A Shared Humanity between African Americans and Indigenous Peoples"—a history of convergence, solidarity, and

sometimes painful complexity that mainstream historiography has consistently underexamined. Drawing on archival sources, Indigenous oral tradition, and the Baha'i framework for unity underscored that the relational and spiritual dimensions of Black and Indigenous engagement offer unique resources and perspectives that we are only beginning to understand. The Bahá'í principles, intertwined with the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, were not a decorative frame for the presentation—they were the foundation, helping to articulate why the recovery of this shared history matters and what it reveals about the conditions under which genuine unity and lasting change becomes possible.

The reaction to that presentation within the ABS community reflected something important about the Association's growth. The questions that followed were the kind of cross-disciplinary exchange, and intergenerational dialogue, that rarely occur in academic settings where these types of presentations and discussions are siloed. ABS provided the architecture for that exchange, and it is increasingly providing it with intention. That represents a genuine institutional achievement, one that has direct implications for the quality and reach of what ABS members, including myself, can produce.

The broader contribution I believe Indigenous Bahá'í perspectives are positioned to make—and that ABS is increasingly positioned to amplify—is to the question of what a just

and sustainable global order requires. The dominant frameworks of international relations, international law, and establishment of multinational organizations were established without Indigenous peoples as authors, and they carry the marks of that exclusion in their foundational assumptions. ABS has been, and continues to be, one of the spaces where that case can be made with full intellectual seriousness and received by an audience genuinely equipped to engage with its spiritual as well as analytical dimensions. It has also been, increasingly, a space where Indigenous Bahá'ís themselves are present as contributors, shaping the questions that get asked rather than simply answering those posed by others. That shift is among the most significant developments in the Association's recent evolution, and it is one I intend to continue supporting through sustained engagement, future presentations, and collaborative work with ABS members.

The convergence of Indigenous traditional knowledge, Bahá'í principles, and rigorous scholarship is not easily institutionalized. It demands a certain tolerance for methodological plurality and for the humility of recognizing that the frameworks we bring to inquiry are themselves in need of continual examination. ABS, at its best, preserves and animates that space. My engagement with the Association represents one dimension of a broader commitment to contribute, however modestly, to the scholarship and genuine dialogue that positions the relationship between

Indigenous spiritual wisdom and global discourse not as supplementary but as indispensable.



Young scholars panel at the 28th annual conference, Calgary, Alberta, 2004.
From left to right: Laura Samaroo, Cindy Poitras-Farahani, Lisa Dufraimont, and Shahla Ali



Red Grammer and John Davey-Hatcher lead the children classes in a musical devotional
on the plenary stage at the close of the 30th annual conference.
San Francisco, California, 2006

Reflections on My Association with ABS

MICHAEL L. PENN

My association with ABS began during my doctoral training in clinical and experimental psychopathology nearly forty years ago. At that time, I was a newly declared Bahá'í and one of only a handful of African-American men being trained in this field. In the early years I felt isolated and alone in the classrooms, labs, and clinical spaces where I worked. The cause of my isolation was not race, but a radical difference in worldview that had been awakened and nurtured by my encounter with ABS-related scholars who were beginning to articulate the teachings of the Faith—not so much in the form of religious exegesis or apologetics, but in a manner consistent with contemporary theory and research in psychology, psychiatry, neuroscience and the emerging field of philosophy of mind. My most recent book, *Our Common Humanity: Reflections on the Reclamation of the Human Spirit* (George Ronald, 2023), which seeks to give a rational, Bahá'í-inspired account of what might be meant by the human spirit, represents a kind of flourishing of these newly awakened capacities that have been nurtured by ABS over the years.

I should note that I entered the study and treatment of psychopathology

because I had been interested in exploring the dynamic relationship between the human brain and nervous system and what the philosophers had long referred to as the human mind and spirit. My feeling was that an integration of these epistemic systems would render clinicians better able to treat the trauma-related disorders that we were seeing in the clinic.

Having been oriented to the field using mammalian animal models that served as analogues of the human nervous system, my peers and I were being trained in the deployment of tightly controlled experiments in the hope of identifying some of the necessary and sufficient causes of non-organic depression and hopelessness in humans. My specific work sought to specify those conditions that tend to transform stressful experiences into traumatic ones and are thus most likely to contribute to the development of depression, demoralization, anhedonia or hopelessness. In the early 1990s, when my studies were moving out of the lab and into the everyday lives of human beings, research was beginning to show that stress is paradoxical. On one hand exposure to it can render sufferers anxious, angry, hopeless and depressed, and on the other hand, such exposure can contribute to the development of resilience, mental alertness, compassion, and radical transformations in one's values and aspirations. It was becoming clear that among the factors that seemed to make a difference in determining whether stress would be pathogenic or growth-inducing were

deeply held beliefs about the wisdom, meaningfulness or purposefulness of any suffering that is perceived to be beyond the sufferer's control. This work thus led to explorations into the role of cognitive schemas, interpretive frameworks, and worldviews on mental health under conditions of acute and/or chronic stress. Bahá'í-inspired psychiatrists, such as Dr. Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian, had been writing about these things in a variety of outlets from a spiritual point of view and discourse of this sort was also present in the work and lectures of some of the founders of ABS, such as Dr. Hossain Danesh.

In addition to reading the work of others whose training had prepared them to integrate various systems of thought with the insights contained in the Bahá'í writings, I began to work alongside Bahá'í-inspired researchers and theorists in a variety of fields who were endeavoring to expand understanding of the guidance coming from the Universal House of Justice designed to empower the friends of Iran to not only endure suffering, but also to translate their suffering into opportunities to be of service to the society that sought their destruction. The scholarship undertaken as part of an ABS working group that included Michael Karlberg, Elizabeth De Souza, Derik Smith, Layli Maparyan, Sahar Sattarzadeh, Caitlyn Bolton, Bradley Wilson, and Holly Hanson led to the publication of a special edition of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* in the Fall of 2020 dedicated to the notion of "constructive resilience" which had appeared in many letters

written by the Universal House of Justice addressed to the long suffering friends of Iran—many of whom had endured more than decades of relentless persecution without giving in to despair. In that volume, each of us set out to try to say something about the nature and transformative power of constructive resilience from the perspective of our distinct disciplines. In this way we sought to introduce the concept into the broader discourse on non-adversarial processes of social change.

In addition to its impact on my own intellectual and spiritual development, association with ABS has enriched my ability to see the relevance of the work that I had been carrying out in the lab to the processes of community development that have begun to emerge in Bahá'í communities around the world. Indeed, during the 47th Annual Conference of the Association, I was given the opportunity to share remarks on a project that I have been working on that explores what it might mean for a human life to matter. This work seeks to better understand how young people might come to the belief that their lives matter and is designed to explore the impact of such a belief on young peoples' psychological, behavioral, and spiritual health. The hope was to bring this work into closer alignment with the vision that animates the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programs that flourish under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice in many parts of the world.

In summary, the opportunities to learn and contribute as a member of the

Association of Bahá'í Studies have been integral to my development as a student of psychology and a practitioner of the Bahá'í Faith. I am thus grateful to the founders of ABS, as well as to those who have labored so assiduously over the past fifty years to ensure that the Association will not only survive but will continue to expand the reach and influence of its important work. As it looks to the future, I would like to encourage ABS to continue to provide an important and sustained place for the arts at its annual conferences—insofar as the blending of academic discourse with artist expression that nurtures and sustains aesthetic sensibilities renders the atmosphere that permeates the ABS conference truly unique. We might even invite the arts to play important roles in the beginning of many of the workshops that follow the plenary talks. In this way, ABS can nurture artistic talent and demonstrate its confidence in the role of the artist in promoting the advancement of knowledge and learning during this new cycle of growth.



Professor Michael Penn presenting as part of the
Bahá'í Association of Mental Health Professionals
at the 27th annual conference, San Francisco, California, 2003



Marvin "Doc" Holladay (far right) and his jazz ensemble perform at the gala concert during the 15th annual conference in Atlanta, Georgia, 1990



Hip-hop duo Nabil & Karim performing at the 33rd annual conference in Washington, District of Columbia, 2009

My Experience with ABS

ANNE GORDON PERRY

It is hard to put into words what ABS has meant to me, as it has played a generative and profound role in my life since its early years; I have attended at least forty-six of the conferences held in its fifty-year history and been involved with it in various ways between conferences. As a presenter, I gained experience with public speaking and performance arts; as a writer, had works published in its journal. As the coordinator of the Arts SIG (Special Interest Group) for several decades, I planned seminars, exhibits, helped with devotions, created slides to be projected during conferences, sponsored late-night open mic sessions, edited and published an arts journal, *ORISON*, and maintained connection with people around the world. As an audience member and reader, I imbibed many stellar presentations, performances, and publications.

During my graduate school years, college teaching years, and research projects, ABS served as an encouraging institution fostering academic rigor—a motivator. I helped plan smaller ABS-affiliated conferences at Green Acre and in Texas. In the last few years, I have served the Arts Working Group by hosting seminars and reading groups and offering presentations, both online and at conferences. I cannot

imagine my life without the presence of ABS or overstate its effect upon me.

I found the work of ABS enticing because it embraced three primary interests and passions: scholarship in general, a platform for the arts and for artists, and studies related to the Bahá'í Faith, particularly its history. Early on, I recognized that ABS viewed scholarship broadly and included various modes of learning, including those represented by Indigenous cultures. I witnessed how the arts provided connective tissue as well as content, as we collectively explored and experienced different avenues of expression. I appreciated the diversity and inclusion ABS embraced, reflecting elements and stages of growth essential for human evolution and parallel with aims of the Bahá'í Faith.

It would be impossible to think about ABS without remembering the Canadian poet, Roger White. One of Roger's greatest hopes was to see the arts utilized in the service of the Faith and the Faith's increased respect for the artist in society. One of my personal highlights occurred when Roger and I performed his works together on the main stage and received a standing ovation. Another highlight was when I performed my monologue on Sarah Farmer. A third was showing our film, *Luminous Journey: 'Abdu'l-Bahá in America, 1912*, to an ABS audience. In some years, a group of us collaborated to present poetry and dramatic biographical tributes. All of these experiences represent victories and moments of fulfillment.

I have been continually grateful for ABS' inclusion of the arts. It is not a superficial relationship, but one built on vision and depth, from the earliest days of the first conferences in Ottawa. Some years have been more arts-inclusive than others, depending on the local organizing committee, with the high point being the conference in Edmonton when Andrew Pemberton Piggot and others coordinated an arts aspect before every session, including all of the breakouts. We artists were treated royally from the moment of initial correspondence, and upon arrival were greeted and led to a special room where we could meet, rehearse, and store our equipment. That was the year the conference participants physically got up and danced through the ballroom in a conga line at the end of one evening, to the astonishment of many long-time ABS members. In general, I found that Canada, especially, has proved a hospitable ground for the flourishing of the arts.

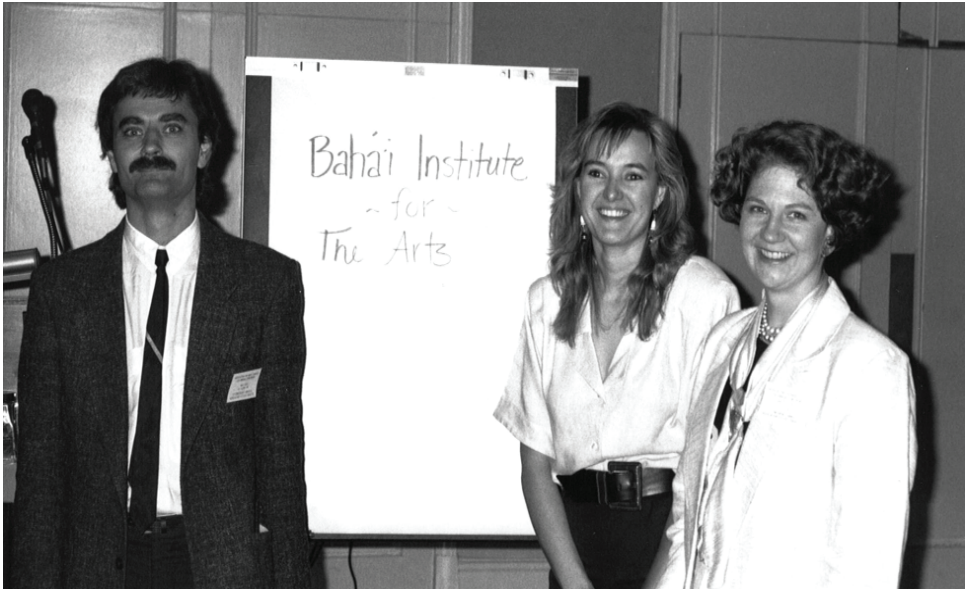
Through ABS, I have witnessed creative Bahá'ís developing and sharing their talents in numerous genres. This takes courage, but the significance extends way beyond the personal, for it foreshadows a time, as the *Guardian* predicts, when the Faith will spread like wildfire through the arts.

One less positive memory is worth mentioning—not to be critical, but to draw an instructive contrast with the Association's overall warm and understanding attitude towards the arts. At this conference, conversely, the MC announced, "The conference

is over for the day. But anyone wishing to be entertained by some music may come back for the evening." No introduction of the MC or performers for the evening. Few arts-related offerings. No special greeting for the artists. Unconscious marginalization. This stood out to me precisely because it was more typical of attitudes toward the arts in wider society—the arts as entertainment, as extra, as that which happens in the after-hour, the artist as loafer or fool—than of the culture that has been built at ABS conferences. Yet out of this experience, I wrote the following:

But the history of culture proves this attitude flawed—artistic achievements reflecting the human experience through art mediums are central to our evolution. Arts take us across borders, carry us beyond the boundaries of our selves, enriching our souls, transforming our lives. Think of the poverty of a world without music. . . . The arts and artists need strategies for their protection and development. They can produce extraordinary results, but this requires extraordinary efforts and means. It takes teamwork; it takes respect for people gifted in creativity and insight. Art facilitates emotive and spiritual depth, which, when combined with the high-mindedness that the Bahá'í Faith naturally fosters, will do much to change our hearts and effect change in the world. We have only to gain from our growth and development in this arena.

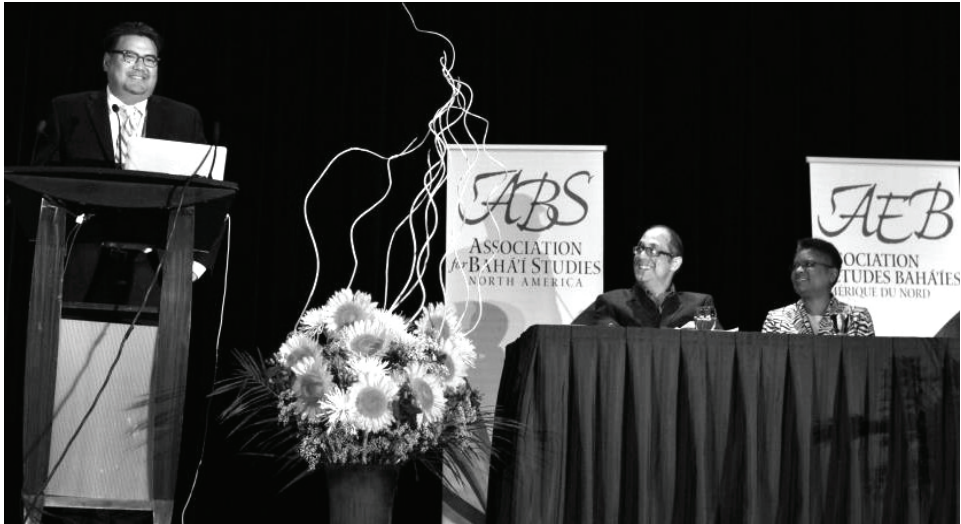
Even my challenges through ABS have led to affirmations and a recommitment to excellence, to striving, to persevering. Having joined ABS as a “life” member, I intend to continue my association, for life.



Representatives of the Bahá'í Institute for the Arts at the 13th annual conference, Ottawa, Ontario, 1988. Far right: Anne Perry



Jordan Bighorn (foreground) receives the Tawacin Waste Win Patricia Locke Scholarship Award at the 27th annual conference, San Francisco, California, 2003



Plenary panel on social action for social change at the 36th annual conference,
Montreal, Quebec, 2012.

Left to right: Chief Douglas White III, Kwulasultun, Roshan Danesh, June Manning Thomas



Nanabah Bulman presenting as part of the plenary panel "From Oppression to Empowerment"
at the 39th annual conference, Anaheim, California, 2015.

Co-panelists are Marilyn Calderon, Eric Dozier, Louis Venters, and Payam Akhavan

Personal Reflection

MARTHA SCHWEITZ

Looking back on my service on the Executive Committee from 2001 to 2020, my most cherished memories are of the intense collaboration with dear souls—fellow members of the EC and of the felicitously-named Committee for Collaborative Initiatives, Parvin and Nilufar, and so many others. We shared aspirations, hopes and dreams, challenges and roadblocks, new adventures, and visions of what *might* be possible *if only* The intensity of weekend-long consultations and of the conferences themselves seemed to weld us into something that was hard to describe to others. I was in awe of the palpable loving care and concern and generosity of spirit of the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada as an institution, and of the members themselves, and overwhelmed with gratitude for the wisdom and guidance of the Universal House of Justice in its 24 July 2013 letter and other communications. I cannot overstate how much I value this gift of experience, these relationships forged in trials of heart and mind as well as profound confirmations, and all I discovered in those years.

That first decade was one of a fair amount of tumult, along with important progress and consolidation, all as so profoundly described and analyzed in the ABS 50th Anniversary Retrospective. We were still dealing

with the fallout from the challenges in Bahá'í Studies that seemed to come to a head in the '90s. The compilations on *Scholarship* and on *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith* were our guiding light. The series of global Plans of the Faith launched in 1996 was still young, and the understanding of, and experience with, the rapidly developing framework of the Plans and the institute process itself were highly uneven across North America. This impacted (read: buffeted) ABS in various ways. We heard it all: from “Now that we have the Ruhi courses, why are we still talking about scholarship?” to “Those Plans have nothing to do with ABS—full steam ahead, same as always!” And everything in-between. In time, and with constant reassurance and guidance from the National Spiritual Assembly, we all learned. Things were changing. Change is hard. But also full of promise that eventually the sun will break through.

The sunlight started to appear with early conversations and seminars on “coherence” among community building, engaging in discourse, and social action, followed by the Universal House of Justice letter of 4 January 2009 regarding the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning in Australia, the seminal Riḍván Message of 2010 introducing into the Plans “social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society,” and then the letter of 28 December 2010. “Engaging in discourse”: ABS would have a home, a mission, a way to understand its role within the larger picture of the Bahá'í

community's purpose and development. When the 2013 letter arrived, we were exhilarated and not a little bit overwhelmed. But with continual support and direction from the National Spiritual Assembly, from ever-so-kind visiting House of Justice members and other wise souls, and more letters of guidance, good stuff happened and ABS took a quantum leap forward. Do read the Retrospective!

I will close with a story, because it has a moral. My ABS journey began in 1993 when my family was pioneering in Japan and I was serving as a professor of international law at a university in Kyushu. Dear Bahá'í friends had just inaugurated ABS Japan and were starting to hold annual conferences in Tokyo. Having just read Holly Hanson's book, *Social and Economic Development: A Bahá'í Approach*, and thrilled to see the connections with what I was teaching and researching, I presented a (clearly entry-level) paper at the ABS Japan conference on Bahá'í communities in relation to development theory. The next day Pierre-Yves Mocquais, who was attending as a keynote speaker, asked if I would prepare a paper on the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, just recently first published in English, to present at the forthcoming ABS symposium on the Aqdas in Montreal, in place of Udo Schaefer who for some reason had to cancel. Say WHAT?!

I will never know what angel with a sense of humor moved Pierre-Yves to suggest this, but I will be forever grateful to both of them. Pierre-Yves wisely placed some guardrails around

this endeavor, arranging for me to send drafts for review to Amin Banani, bless his soul. After some months of reading and falling in love with the Aqdas, a paper was finally born, presented in Montreal, and eventually published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*.¹ And I was hooked. On ABS and everything it stands for and strives for. I presented at a couple of other North American ABS conferences and then, upon moving back from Japan, was appointed to the Executive Committee.

The moral is this: If you see someone trying to take even a little bit of initiative, give them the benefit of the doubt and give them a challenge. Accompany them. Ask them to do something they may think is outrageous. Hopefully you won't be sorry—and they will discover a cherished path of service.

1 Martha Schweitz, "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Bahá'í Law, Legitimacy and World Order." *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1994, pp. 35–39. doi: 10.31581/jbs-6.1.3(1994).

A Reflection

DAVID SMITH

As it happens, Meim and I were at the inaugural ABS policy conference held in late January 1976 in Ottawa, called for by the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada in order to discuss a response to the call, in a letter from the Universal House of Justice, to cultivate “opportunities for formal presentation, courses and lectureships on the Bahá’í Faith in Canadian universities and other institutions of higher learning” (qtd. in Filson 194). There were twenty or so participants at the meeting being chaired by Alex Frame. Among them were Hossain Danesh, William S. Hatcher, Glen Eyford, Douglas Martin, Gerald Filson, Peter Morgan and many others excited to explore the letter and submit to the National Spiritual Assembly a recommendation for an implementation plan. The consultation was free flowing, lively, and inspiring. None of us could have known what the future would hold but there were eagerness and excitement to provide a response—and to act—as soon as feasible. The Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá’í Faith was then born, to later be renamed as the Association for Bahá’í Studies—North America.

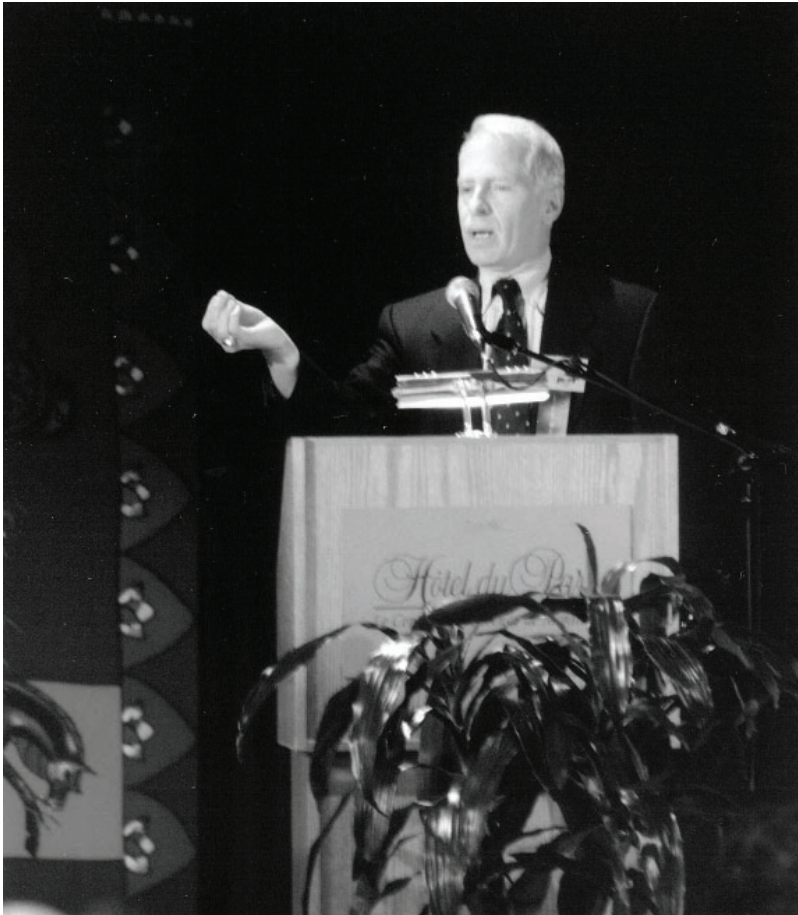
Meim and I were also at the first annual meeting of the Association, which was held in 1976 at Cedar Glen, a United Church of Canada retreat site in Ontario. Prior to this

inaugural meeting, I had decided to submit a piece—“The Bahá’í Faith and Lifestyle Modification,” a rather poorly constructed research paper, in my opinion—on the Bahá’í community’s core knowledge and community function. I was helped immensely by Dr. Peter Morgan in reviewing the data and providing the statistical analysis. To my delight, the paper was one of the seven papers presented at that conference, and the love and kindness of those gathered (about ninety-five from all over Canada) was reflected in the wonderful response and discussion of the paper by so many forgiving souls. The whole conference was a joy and the future of the Association looked promising and exciting.

The years since have shown how the Association has matured in response to the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and the eagerness of all to explore a vision of scholarship like never before seen. Meim and I have had the joy of being at all the Association’s annual conferences and have seen the growth of this vital agency of learning. Now, with ongoing learning and study groups in a multitude of disciplines, the ABS is clearly taking superb responsibility and initiative in exploring the application of the Bahá’í Teachings to the learning of the peoples of the world. It is wonderful to think back to the inaugural consultation in Ottawa and see what has happened in such a short time. Much has been learned, much has been done, and there is so much more to do. The future of the ABS looks very bright.

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David Smith at the 22nd annual conference,
Montreal, Quebec, 1998

None of Us Really Knew What Bahá'í Studies Was

ROBERT STOCKMAN

The first Bahá'í Studies conference I attended was in Ottawa in 1980, when the Canadian Association for the Studies of the Baha'i Faith (as it was then known) was only a few years old. I had completed research on the history of the Bahá'í Faith in Rhode Island, where I was living at the time, and I won some sort of award from the Association for the work. Unfortunately, my presentation ran rather long and I spoke so fast that it was hard for them to translate it into French quickly enough! It wasn't my most successful presentation.

In those days, the Association's annual conferences were attended by several hundred people. The early meetings that I attended were in Ottawa. They were immensely exciting because I met many other young Bahá'ís interested in studying the Faith deeply and intellectually. That was a much rarer experience in those days than it is today, with all the webinars, web firesides, and hundreds of books on aspects of the Faith now available. In 1980, only a handful of books about the Faith came out every year and people generally bought and read most of them. So the Association's conferences were held in a very different context

than they are today. None of us really knew what Bahá'í Studies was but we were happy to explore all the different possible aspects of it.

In the 1980s, the Association was presided over by the avuncular Hossain Danesh. Hossain lived in Ottawa and the headquarters of the Association was there, so he was deeply involved in its operation day by day. He was an idea-a-minute kind of man; he liked to think big and he always had a lot of good ideas for the Association to pursue. The other intellectual innovators were Douglas Martin, then secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, and William Hatcher, who was also Hossain's brother-in-law. The three of them had a great impact on the Association's early development.

I was appointed to the Executive Committee of the Association in September 1990. At that time, the committee was a very large and rather unwieldy body of twelve to fifteen members, more or less equally divided between the United States and Canada, with one Alaskan member as well. It was such a large committee that it was difficult to get things done. Later, the membership of the committee was decreased. As the size of the conferences grew, we faced many exciting challenges.

One of the highlights of my experience at ABS conferences was meeting Richard St. Barbe Baker. He attended an early conference in Ottawa and Christine Zerbinus, who was the full-time Secretary of the Association, invited me and a young woman who had

won an award to have lunch with her and Baker. This was only a year or so before he passed away, but he was filled with energy. He told us many amusing and amazing stories about his life, all of which later appeared in Paul Hanley's biography of him. Meeting him was quite an experience. I also recall an Association conference dedicated to Shoghi Effendi where several Hands of the Cause of God spoke about the Guardian and his many accomplishments. It was a particularly memorable event.



Robert Stockman's chairing the Study of Religion sessions at the 27th annual conference,
San Francisco, California, 2003

Exploring Dimensions of Racial Justice

JUNE MANNING THOMAS

The Association has functioned as an extraordinary institution for fifty years. In honor of that, I'd like to summarize how ABS affected my personal growth and development, via three themes: inspiration, support, and linkage with allied souls.

INSPIRATION

My first ABS conference took place in 1984, in Ottawa, and centered on the theme: "The Vision of Shoghi Effendi." At that time, I was a young associate professor, working in a field—urban planning—with little or no legacy of Bahá'í-centered scholarship, or of interest in the African American experience. I remember regretting, during this period of life, the lack of role models—Bahá'í and otherwise—for my own scholarship. Yet ABS gathered, into national and regional conferences, people who were open to the contributions of all peoples of the world, and who inspired us toward excellence in our disciplines but also in our knowledge of the Faith and its implications for our fields.

ABS later bound nineteen conference papers into a book, entitled *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi*. The essays

it contains reveal a wonderful confluence. The presenters included Hands of the Cause 'Alí-Akbar Furútan, Zikru'llah Khadem, John Robarts, and 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá, an impressive list indeed. Where else on this continent could one travel to hear such luminaries? Also listed were role models such as Ann Boyles, Hossain Danesh, William S. Hatcher, Nathan Rutstein, and Richard W. Thomas, my own dear husband. This convocation suggested that a Bahá'í identity as a scholar was possible, that one could study a specific field and yet stay connected to insights from the Revelation.¹

The conference of 1986, held in London, Ontario, was memorable in a different way. Hand of the Cause Rúhíyyih Khánum gave the keynote

1 ABS helped clarify the nature of Bahá'í scholarship in part by sharing guidance from the Universal House of Justice on this subject. This guidance evolved over the years, but particularly noteworthy for this narrative is its letter of 19 October 1993, which warned against using the term "Bahá'í scholarship" as an exclusionary category: "The House of Justice wishes to avoid use of the terms 'Bahá'í scholarship' and 'Bahá'í scholars' in an exclusive sense, which would effectively establish a demarcation between those admitted into this category and those denied entrance to it. It is clear that such terms are relative, and that what is a worthy scholarly endeavor by a Bahá'í, when compared to the activities of those with whom he is in contact, may well be regarded as of vastly lesser significance when measured against the accomplishments of the outstanding scholars which the Faith has produced."

address. The Association had beforehand asked me to join her for lunch and then “introduce” her to the audience for her talk—as if she needed an introduction! This brought me, a relatively young academic, into contact with Shoghi Effendi’s widow, the inspiring author of his seminal biography, *The Priceless Pearl*. During our lunch, she spoke cogently of the guidance Shoghi Effendi had given her, as a teenaged Canadian, about what she should study in school and how she should approach her own education. Her frank comments urging humility have stayed with me for many years.

Throughout those years, extraordinary speakers and writers, through both conferences and written materials such as *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, led many of us along the pathway towards scholarship. ABS’s provision of this form of inspiration has continued for decades, as it brings together an evolving community of Bahá'í leaders of thought.

SUPPORT

Stimulated by such inspiration, it became easier to think of ways to apply Bahá'í principles of scholarship to our own fields of endeavor. Many of us began soon after leaving these conferences to think about ways we could write our own papers, conduct our own research, give our own presentations. The fact that ABS often opened up the conference to proposals for papers or workshops heightened the sense of possibility.

Even so, a certain amount of support was necessary. For those of us in academia, papers, journal articles, and books are the tools of survival, but someone has to accept and publish these. We could work on material that reflected our own efforts to pursue true scholarship but we needed some venue in which to offer this. The venues organized by ABS were an important source of support and confirmation.

In my case, for some years I wondered what possible contribution I could make to the body of written work by Bahá'ís that would relate to my academic field of urban planning. This yearning arose from seeing people from fields as diverse as agriculture, law, business, and medicine striving to draw implications for humanity from the Revelation and sharing these in ABS sessions and publications.

The successive inspiration provided by ABS concerning Shoghi Effendi—including the 1984 conference proceedings mentioned above, plus contact with Rúhíyyih Khánúm—burrowed into my psyche. Several years after those conferences, Hossein Danesh asked me to present a paper at the Bahá'í-inspired Landegg Academy in Switzerland. As if a lightbulb went off in my head, my response to him was that I would write a paper about “Shoghi Effendi as planner.” This paper focused on the strategies the Guardian used to ensure the success of the global plans, and this way of thinking was an extension of my own field’s explorations of successful strategic planning. Finally, a yearned-for connection had emerged!

It soon became clear that a book project was in order, but this was an intimidating step. ABS consented to publish the extended work as a book, *Planning Progress: Lessons from Shoghi Effendi*. The editorial support and mentorship offered by the editorial board and especially by Christina Zerbinis, ABS staffer at that time, was first-rate by any standard. This was the ultimate expression of an organization's support: willingness to nurture an author's work on the journey to publication, publish it, and then disseminate it, all of which ABS did.

This feeling of support was surely true for many people. ABS is perhaps the cradle of Bahá'í scholarship for the North American continent. Even during the height of the COVID pandemic, ABS's online conferences illustrated the value of continued support for disparate efforts to shine the light of guidance onto our varied fields of work and study.

LINKAGES

ABS has played another critical role by linking people together. Implicit in the narrative above is the reality of some isolation for Bahá'ís and likeminded individuals, not only in academic settings but also in other fields and professions. ABS served as an essential gathering place to meet people in similar fields, or in allied or similar professions, or sharing the same interests. We gathered in breakout sessions but also in special interest groups, seminars, special editions of publications, and other venues.

Two examples in my own experience concern the built environment and racial unity. Over the years, at several conferences starting at least with the 1990 Atlanta conference, continuing with the 1996 Edmonton conference, and even more recently in Atlanta and elsewhere, small groups of urban planners, architects, housing experts, and others have gathered at conferences and in reading groups to share ideas. Another topic is racial unity, supported by ABS conference workshops dating from the mid-1980s to the 1990, "Models of Racial Unity" and beyond, with the issuance of several ABS publications, such as Richard W. Thomas's *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress*. The *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* has published articles related to race and racism, including some of my own work. The 2021 creation of ABS's Africana Studies Working Group continued that tradition of centered fellowship; and allowed participants to explore together a critical dimension of racial justice.

A third point of collaboration concerned the concept of "constructive resilience," a term used in the House of Justice's guidance to the persevering Bahá'ís of Iran, but broadly applicable to other challenging situations. Michael Karlberg helped to organize a wonderful seminar on this concept in the summer of 2018, at the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee. This gathering led to presentations at that summer's ABS conference as well as a special issue of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* and,

subsequently, Karlberg's book, *Constructing Social Reality*. Later, that seminar experience helped me envision a theoretical approach to a book, a community history of school desegregation of the South, that is now published.

In conclusion, these are just a few examples of how ABS has affected my own attempts at scholarship. This essay focuses on ABS as a source of inspiration, support, and linkage, but all of its efforts reflected the steady guidance that the Universal House of Justice offered ABS. At critical points in its history, ABS has applied this guidance in several ways, through dissemination, by shaping its own work agenda, and by refining its programs. Such actions have allowed ABS to help many people, including myself, aim to journey toward the station of true Bahá'í scholarship.



Participants in the "Constructive Resilience" seminar
Highlander Research and Education Center, New Market, Tennessee, June 2018

My Personal Journey with the Association for Bahá'í Studies

RICHARD W. THOMAS

While I can't remember exactly when my personal journey with ABS began, I do remember how excited my wife June and I were attending and participating in some of its events beginning in the 1980s. In November 1984 I was privileged to participate in the 9th annual ABS conference on the theme of "The Vision of Shoghi Effendi." I delivered a paper entitled: "A Review of Shoghi Effendi's Vision of the Future as Expressed in *The Advent of Divine Justice*."

Being in the company of spiritual giants, including several Hands of the Cause and Bahá'í scholars, filled me with fear and awe! Some of these precious souls played a major role in my spiritual and personal journey. Others were in the wings waiting to assist me in the future as models and tutors as I struggled to become a Bahá'í-inspired scholar.

Being appointed to serve on the Executive Committee of the ABS came both as a great surprise and profound honor. Once again, I found myself in the company of spiritual giants and Bahá'í scholars, but this time was different: I was participating on a committee alongside several individuals who

had known me since the early 1960s, during the period when I was working to reconcile my then-radical Black identity with my developing spiritual Bahá'í identity.

Of the few members of the Executive Committee that I had known during those early days, Douglas Martin had the most influence on my early Bahá'í spiritual development. His visits to Detroit and encouraging talks to Bahá'í youth—especially Black Bahá'í youth facing the daily humiliation of white racism—had a lasting impression on us. He soon became our Canadian Bahá'í champion! I can still remember the precious moments discussing racial issues in the United States in his apartment. I was therefore delighted to attend my first Executive Committee meeting and see Douglas Martin, whom I have long admired.

Along with Douglas Martin, there were two other members of the committee that I had met years earlier: William S. Hatcher and Michael Rochester. All three welcomed me as a younger spiritual brother. Adding to the joy of serving with old friends were the equally joyful moments of meeting many new and remarkable colleagues, including Hossain Danesh and Christine Zerbinis, with whom I shared several years of collaboration. Both in their individual ways contributed immensely to my spiritual and intellectual development.

Hossain Danesh's leadership and Bahá'í-inspired scholarship provided me with a model of how Bahá'ís could use their academic training to

contribute to the betterment of society. His book, *The Violence-Free Society: A Gift for our Children*, affected me deeply. I read it during a time when Detroit African American neighborhoods, including ones where I was reared and relatives still lived, were experiencing decades of teenage violence.

I will never forget my dearly beloved Bahá'í sister Christine Zerbinis of the ABS editorial board who demonstrated remarkable patience and guidance throughout the critical stages of my journey in completing the two editions of my book, *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress*. In particular, Christine played a key role in preparing the first edition of the book for the ABS conference mentioned below. She will always have a special place in my heart for her long and devoted service to those of us embarking on the long journey of Bahá'í and Bahá'í-inspired scholarship.

The pioneering efforts of the ABS to enter the rarified world of academia occurred during the same period when some Bahá'í scholars of color and women were also engaged in similar efforts in those academic worlds. Some of us were engaged in promoting both our racial and gender perspectives as well as our Bahá'í-inspired perspectives in our respective academic fields. The ABS provided us with an intellectual laboratory to discuss these perspectives, so we were better equipped to engage in public and academic discourses.

I remember with great fondness how my decades-long association with

ABS inspired me to engage in Bahá'í-inspired scholarship, especially in the field of race relations. In November 1990, ABS released the first edition of my book, *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress*, as a special conference edition for the 15th Annual ABS Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, themed “Bahá'í Model of Racial Equality and Unity.”

The ABS' support and publication of the book provided me with the opportunity to share with colleagues and students a Bahá'í-inspired scholarly approach to the history of race relations in the United States. After over fifteen years of teaching race relations using traditional historical texts that rarely focused on the oneness of humanity or racial unity, I was able to incorporate Bahá'í-inspired perspectives into my courses and share the book with colleagues, all due to the ABS!

When the first edition sold out, ABS encouraged me to write a revised edition, which was published in July 1993. This encouragement meant a lot to me. It demonstrated ABS' support for the serious study of race relations within and outside the Bahá'í community, and—of particular import—within the ABS community of scholars. The publication of the book enabled me to give lectures and conduct workshops with Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í gatherings.

On one occasion, the Australian National Spiritual Assembly invited me to lead multiple workshops and group sessions, during which the book was showcased and available for purchase. A distinguished sociologist wrote the

introduction to the book, which acquainted him with an ABS publication focused on Bahá'í-inspired race relations scholarship. Additionally, this served as his introduction to the broader Bahá'í community's longstanding dedication to racial unity.

Being invited to deliver the Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture at the 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Bahá'í Studies in June 1999 was the highest honor of my personal journey with the ABS. Once again, my beloved ABS colleagues demonstrated their support for my Bahá'í-inspired scholarship in the field of race relations. The topic of my lecture, "The State of Race Relations within the American Bahá'í Community: Progress, Challenges and Future Directions," reflected my decades-long commitment to addressing race relations in the Bahá'í community.



Richard Thomas presenting at the 23rd annual conference,
Phoenix, Arizona, 1999



Hand of the Cause of God Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum (middle), member of the Universal House of Justice Ali Nakhjavani (right) and his wife Violette Nakhjavani (left) at the 11th annual conference in London, Ontario, 1986



June Manning Thomas' plenary presentation at the 38th annual conference, Toronto, Ontario, 2014

Striving to Eliminate Prejudice

NEGIN R. TOOSI

When I was in high school, I spent my Friday nights with a group of youth reading and discussing the writings of Shoghi Effendi. We had a blast. The cadence, the complexity, and the precision of his words were formative to my young mind. I remember being particularly struck by the section of *The Advent of Divine Justice*, his 1938 letter to the American Bahá'í community, where he described racial prejudice as “the most vital and challenging issue” and emphasized the need for the Bahá'í community to eradicate it. In my daily life as a young person in Texas, I could see the continuing suffering that prejudice caused, and I interpreted the Guardian's words as an outstanding responsibility placed upon our community.

A few years later, in a college course on social psychology, I was thrilled to realize that there was a whole academic field that focused on the topic of prejudice. I joined a psychology lab as an undergraduate research assistant and eventually completed a senior honors thesis on the topic of racial stereotypes evoked by physical movement—in other words, how racial stereotypes mean that a Black man reaching for his wallet gets perceived as reaching

for a weapon, often with tragic consequences. I poured a lot of energy into that honors project, working up to thirty-five hours a week to recruit participants, record the stimuli videos, run the study, analyze the data, and write the manuscript under the supervision of my advisor, Dr. Jennifer Eberhardt.

I presented the findings from my honors thesis (Toosi and Eberhardt) at the first Association for Bahá'í Studies conference I ever attended, a few months after I graduated college. Dr. Richard Thomas was there at the session, and he approached me afterward. With great warmth and enthusiasm, he encouraged me to keep doing the research, to keep studying not just the causes and consequences of racism, but even more importantly, the cures for it. He shared the insights from his work on the “Other Tradition” of racial amity in American history (Thomas) and his experiences with the Multi-Racial Unity Living Experience with Dr. Jeanne Gazel at Michigan State University. I kept that encouragement in my heart as I applied for, and eventually attended, graduate school.

As a graduate student, I continued to study issues related to race and other social identities. I built on research showing that racially diverse groups outperform racially homogenous groups in decision-making (Sommers) and found that, compared to all-White groups where men spoke much more than women, racially diverse groups demonstrated more gender equality in terms of speaking time and perceived persuasiveness (Toosi, Sommers, and

Ambady). My dissertation was about interracial interactions and the factors that shape outcomes in terms of explicit attitudes, observed behavior, emotional responses, and task performance. I was looking for what could make interracial interactions better instead of worse. Throughout this time and the years that followed, I tried to attend ABS conferences whenever the opportunity presented itself; I felt invigorated by these spaces, as well as by my interactions with the many inspiring people associated with the Association.

A few years ago, I was invited to participate in one of the ABS seminars bringing together scholars in related fields to reflect on questions of methodology. This introduced me to a number of new methodological approaches as well as to other Bahá'ís studying social science. The ongoing collaborations that have arisen from this experience are precious. One outgrowth of that seminar was the chance to help organize an ABS reading group with Michael Karlberg and Livia Dittmer on the topic of the psychology of social change. We identified some guiding questions to help us articulate a coherent theory of social change that clarifies the role that could be played by the individual, community, and institutions as protagonists, identified key readings from the fields of community psychology, social psychology, communication, sociology, and so on, and then invited people to join us. We ended up with a beautiful set of people participating, and as we met, the friends

suggested additional readings, and our list of discussion topics expanded.

Inspired by the enthusiasm and ideas we shared in this space, I considered how some of these ideas could be examined within my own research as well as teaching. In terms of research, I proposed and was awarded a grant to study novel educational interventions to reduce prejudice. In terms of teaching, many of the materials from the reading group ended up forming the core of a new course I developed for my university, called “Eliminating Prejudice.” Whereas most psychology departments offer a course on “Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Discrimination” which provides a great deal of information about the existence and persistence of racism, I created this course to offer students ways to develop their own capacities to take action to overcome the forces of prejudice. Each semester the class implements three to four projects to improve intergroup relations in our community. The title of the course was confirmed when I read this quote from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

The aim of the Bahá'ís is to raise aloft the banner of the world's Great Peace, to eradicate the foundations of war and conflict throughout all regions, to gather together all the divers nations and peoples beneath the single-hued Tabernacle of God, and *to eliminate prejudice*—whether racial, national, religious, sectarian, or political—from the face of the earth, so that all countries may

become as one country, all races as one race, and all nations as one nation. Thus may the world of creation attain unto peace and tranquillity. (*Additional Tablets*; emphasis added)

Throughout the past few decades, my interactions with ABS and the wonderful people associated with it have encouraged me to continue my academic work on the topic of racial prejudice and to bring a unique solutions-oriented approach to it.

Airport Marriott, San Francisco, CA. Breakout presentation.

Toosi, Negin R., Samuel R. Sommers, and Nalini Ambady. "Getting a Word in Group-wise: Effects of Racial Diversity on Gender Dynamics." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 48, no. 5, 2012, pp. 1150–1155. doi: 10.1016/j.jesp.2012.04.015.

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Deborah Kestin van den Hoonaard presenting remotely during the 45th annual conference, held virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021



Will van den Hoonaard delivers the Balyuzi Lecture at the 31st annual lecture, Mississauga, Ontario, 2007

Broadening the Scope and Appreciation of Various Academic Disciplines

DEBORAH K.

VAN DEN HOONAARD

Dear Friends:

I have participated in ABS' initiatives on and off over the years. I've never really been at the centre of the association but have delighted to see it mature and benefited from it.

In the early days, I was just beginning to take sociology and submitted a possible presentation comparing the socialization of Bahá'í and Catholic children through children's and Sunday school classes, respectively. In those days (mid-80s), the Association had very little familiarity with sociology and insisted that I remove the word socialization, a standard sociological concept, from the presentation as it sounded like brain-washing to the reviewers. In the decades since, ABS has broadened its scope and appreciation of various academic disciplines, which has been very heart-warming to see.

Bahá'í studies have never been at the centre of my work (although much of it has to do with issues around prejudice of various kinds), but I did serve on the editorial board of the *Journal*

for a while and came to appreciate the challenges it faced in attempting to construct a new kind of journal that was more open to less "academic" articles. It was a pleasure to serve during those years.

I remember that at one of ABS' annual conference, we were sitting in random groups for a discussion (I can't remember what about). As it turned out, the person I sat down next to was Catherine Bigonesse, one of the few other Bahá'í scholars I have known who studies aging from a social science perspective. Bringing together Bahá'ís with similar interests and approaches is one wonderful effect of ABS and its conferences.

In more recent years, as the House of Justice has focused on the importance of social discourse, I have benefited from the panels ABS organized at its conferences, which have impacted my own thinking. In addition, the online conference commemorating 100 years since the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a special treasure, and it led me to consider what His role as Exemplar had to teach us about how to be old and how to think about prejudice around aging, leading to an article that was later published in the *Journal*.

WILL C.

VAN DEN HOONAARD

Dear Friends and Colleagues:

Thank you for asking some of us to share our experiences with ABS. Of course it is a matter of joy to be associated with the activities of ABS.

It is interesting to note that the original mode of ABS has shifted away from scholarship that focused mainly on Bahá'í history related to the Middle East. I trust there is now a growth in the number of social scientists within ABS circles. At the same time, I hope we can see more publications stemming from a social-science perspective.

Reflecting on the influence of ABS on my own scholarship, I am pleased to confess that this scholarship has led me to publish books and articles on the advancement of women in various scientific fields, on ethics in research, and on the Bahá'í community. Those three areas have been a wonderful avenue for research and writing.

There are two other major influences that ABS exerted on my scholarship. They led me to work on *The Short Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith*. Between 1984 and 1995 the Bahá'í Publishing Trust of the United States National Spiritual Assembly focused its efforts to create an international Bahá'í encyclopedia. Those efforts have remained largely unknown even among many Bahá'í scholars, let alone among the broader audience. The aim of the Encyclopedia was create a one-million-word compilation, consisting

of close to 450 entries. The project was led by a group of Bahá'í scholars and perhaps some forty-five contributors. While it never reached publication, it was a major highlight in my academic life.

What also brought me enormous pleasure was to see the engagement of more of my family member in the activities of the ABS, especially our son Jordan who is nearly finished writing his PhD in Philosophy.

For all your influences on my scholarly life I am so very grateful.

With love,
Will

Making Space and Modelling Respect for Indigenous Voices

PATRICIA VERGE

I am honored to share a few reflections about my experience with the Association for Bahá'í Studies over several decades. I think metaphorically of ABS as a well-kept greenhouse or conservatory with moist and fragrant air, filled with diverse flourishing plants, each deriving nutrients from the environment, growing towards its fullest beauty and potential and contributing to the growth of others. The structure holds the possibility of continuous learning, adaptation and collaboration, with new plants introduced and new ways of cultivation tried.

As I have lived mostly in small Bahá'í communities, ABS conferences, recorded talks and publications have enriched and widened my learning. Much of that learning comes from the work ABS has done in Indigenous studies and reconciliation, such as talks by the following speakers, to name only a few: Jordan Bighorn, Roshan Danesh, Jacqueline Left Hand Bull, Louise Mandell (counsel on Delgamuukw Aboriginal title case in northwestern British Columbia), Michele McIsaac, Tara Nault, Louise Profeit-LeBlanc, Bob Watts, and Dr. Marie Wilson (Truth

and Reconciliation commissioner).

An early article in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, "Conversive Relationality in Bahá'í Scholarship: Centering the Sacred and Decentering the Self" by the late Dr. Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez, had a significant influence on me. She explains that in "conversive" writing (as differing from "discursive"), the emphasis is on the process, the relationship between the writer/scholar and the subject: "[I]t seems to me that Bahá'í scholars and writers have the responsibility to try to provide as many openings into their work as possible as a means of enabling their readers to approach, access, enter and engage with their writing" (9). She explored oral tradition and storytelling as examples of new models for scholars.

My background is in journalism, which in many cases focuses on "story" as well as facts. I have written three books about the intersection of the Bahá'í Faith and Indigenous peoples, and have been grateful to ABS for the opportunity to present three times at the annual conference and to contribute to a special edition of JBS on Indigenous subjects, with an article titled "A Personal Journey toward Reconciliation."

Jordan Bighorn, in his keynote session at the annual ABS conference in Calgary in 2025, pointed out the very low number of Indigenous people attending, either as participants or presenters. I hope with the new directions ABS is taking, based on the 24 July 2013 letter of the Universal House of

Justice, that its activities will become increasingly accessible and attractive to Indigenous peoples and safe spaces for them to share insights into the most pressing matters facing their communities and wider society.

My own service in the Bahá'í community has involved a decades-long relationship with a nearby community, the Iyarhe Nakoda, consisting of three Nations, the Bearspaw, Chiniki and Goodstoney. As well, members of our local Bahá'í community have been involved since its inception in 2023, with the creation of an Indigenous-led center in our town of some 38,000 people. Called Wazin Ichinabi Ti, "House of Oneness," a name chosen by Iyarhe Nakoda elders, it has given individuals experience participating in a form of social action and discourse, as well as enabling them to serve in various ways. It is a fledgling project, and we have been learning a great deal.

A wonderful part of any work in the field of reconciliation and building relationships and understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is that there is *always* an assumption of the reality of the spiritual, and of the oneness of humanity. For myself, this has been a great solace, as this field of service has brought much encounter with intergenerational trauma.

The late Murray Sinclair, chair of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in his memoir *Who We Are*, wrote:

Non-Indigenous peoples cannot answer Indigenous questions, but

they can help facilitate a path in understanding how connected, independent and human we all are and can be. In the same vein, non-Indigenous peoples don't know that their identities and cultures are partly created by their connections with Indigenous peoples, or that working with Indigenous communities is the most important journey Canada (and, frankly, the world) must take. That is why the creation of strong, healthy, and vibrant Indigenous communities is the only path to reconciliation for all peoples. (6)

What I would be so grateful to see ABS explore is how Bahá'u'lláh's teachings are contributing to the kinds of transformation Justice Sinclair envisages. I look forward to learning, for example, what youth who have frontline experience with the community building processes of the Faith in neighborhoods and villages with Indigenous people are beginning to witness. I would love to learn about decolonization, both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and for institutions, as well as lessons being learned in overcoming trauma.

As a cautionary note, I would like to share these sobering words of Murray Sinclair, in a media interview on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in 2021, about denialism in Canada:

The difficulty that Canada faces generally is that there is a group of

very vocal, very influential people in Canada, who hold significant positions of power who are working hard against reconciliation. People who are holding positions of privilege, who are benefitting from the riches of this country that have been taken away from Indigenous people . . . I said at the end of the TRC report getting to the truth was hard but getting to reconciliation will be harder because I knew that there would be people working very hard, very forcefully, even violently against reconciliation. . . . (qtd. in LeMay 149)

My own perspective is that, in this field of reconciliation so close to my heart, the role of ABS is more important than ever, by making space and modelling respect for Indigenous voices, and in educating a wide range of people in issues so important to the future of the human race.

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ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES
ASSOCIATION D'ÉTUDES BAHÁ'ÍES

Farzam Arbab (right) and Hossain Danesh (left) preside the morning plenary
at the 9th annual conference, Ottawa, Ontario, 1984



ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES
ASSOCIATION D'ÉTUDES BAHÁ'ÍES

Hands of the Cause of God, John Roberts (left) and Dhikrullah Khadem, (right), with Knight of Bahá'u'lláh Audrey Roberts, presenting at the 9th annual conference, Ottawa, Ontario, 1984

A More Profound Engagement with the “World of Ideas”

MATT WEINBERG

In reflecting on my history with the Association for Bahá'í Studies, I hadn't quite realized that this relationship has been ongoing for forty-four years, and in so many ways has meaningfully shaped my identity and journey as a follower of Bahá'u'lláh. That ABS has provided a profound vehicle for exploration of the vast ocean of His Revelation and the implications of that Revelation for social and spiritual transformation, there is no doubt. From my attendance at my first ABS conference in 1982, with the alluring theme “The Bahá'í Option,” to the stirring experience of hearing the great Ervin Lazlo in 1987 articulate the convergence between systems theory and Bahá'u'lláh's “law of oneness,” to the countless instances of distinguished Balyuzi lecturers and plenary speakers creatively correlating the Teachings with contemporary needs and dilemmas, it was ABS that again and again confirmed for me that it was only the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh that could serve as the “the promise, the reconciler, and the unifier of all religions,” (Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 112) and “the illumination of an entirely new way of life” (Universal House of Justice, 27 April 1995).

And given this confirmation, it is not surprising that my engagement with ABS—initially as an undergraduate and graduate student, and then through various phases of my professional life—moved from attendee to participant to presenter to reviewer to planner (as a member of the ABS Executive Committee!). ABS would not just let me be a passive beneficiary of its events and publications but inevitably made of me a protagonist in its broad enterprise of learning how to learn—specifically about how the truths of religion and the insights of science formed the substrate of a new conceptual framework for understanding and reshaping reality. As the Blessed Beauty averred, “A different Cause . . . hath appeared in this day and a different discourse is required.” Indeed, ABS' most distinguishing achievement thus far may be that it has served to identify, connect and elaborate the primary elements of this new discourse about humanity's essential purpose and direction—a holistic ensemble of principles, concepts, methodologies, models and insights flowing from both the light of spiritual perception and the lamp of reflective inquiry.

Any journey of course has moments of challenge and struggle, and the effort of so many associated with ABS to build an entity that has substantively and systematically enriched the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community is a story in and of itself. The multi-decade movement from inchoate and tentative categories of inquiry to the now fully fledged areas of collective research,

dialogue and learning across manifold disciplines, has demonstrated how an expanded notion of rationality encompassing mind and spirit is the sure compass for traversing “the way that leadeth to true felicity,” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Summons Súriy-i-Mulúk* ¶58) “the way of certitude and truth” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán*). With this maturation, new capabilities and possibilities for ABS can now be seen. Deeper and more profound engagement with the “world of ideas” is the inevitable destiny of a Faith defined by its commitment to “betterment of the world” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* XCII) And so to all involved with ABS as a vital agent of this project of human betterment, “Go thou straight on and persevere in His service.”

With gratitude and love,
Matt Weinberg

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