

Approach to Learning

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES¹

INTRODUCTION

This essay accompanies the 50th Anniversary Retrospective published in this volume. While the retrospective traces the Association's history from 1975 to the present, this essay focuses primarily on the period since 2013. It examines more closely how the Association has striven to understand and apply the guidance of the Universal House of Justice in its letter of 24 July 2013 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada. This letter marked a pivotal moment in the Association's development, recognizing its many contributions to that point and inviting it to conceive of its endeavors as a means of promoting learning among a wide range of participants on how to enhance their ability to contribute to the discourses of their academic and professional fields.

It is understood that contributing to a discourse means taking part in how a group of people thinks and talks about a given topic of common concern, such as economic inequality, climate

change, or health-care inequity, among many others. The Bahá'í community more broadly has given progressively greater attention to participation in such discourses. It works alongside like-minded individuals and organizations and, where possible, seeks to stimulate consultative processes and draw out underlying principles around which agreement and mutual understanding can be built. Such participation also involves examining the assumptions embedded within a given discourse, since these shape what is regarded as normal, natural, and possible, and thus enable or constrain thought, action, and social structures alike. Wherever they live, work, or study, believers strive to contribute to particular discourses a principled perspective shaped by Bahá'u'lláh's vast Revelation. Bahá'u'lláh asks, "Is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?"² The Association's work can be understood as fostering the development of a growing web of contributions aimed at realizing this transformative vision.

This essay explores how the Association has responded to the 2013 letter's invitation to promote learning about contributing to academic and professional discourses. It discusses the Association's mandate, the foundational principles and elements of the

1 Written in collaboration with the Executive Committee's subcommittees, staff, and other close collaborators.

2 Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*.

conceptual framework that guide its work, the dispositions these principles and elements have helped shape, and the Association's deepening understanding of the nature of scholarship and the broader generation of knowledge. It begins with an account of the 2013 letter itself and some of the key scholarly contributions in the first five years following its arrival that have informed the Association's understanding of its approach to learning. It is complemented by the companion essay in this volume, "Learning in Action: Insights from Collaborative Initiatives," which explores how this understanding is currently being put into practice and refined by various groups within the Association.

OVERVIEW OF THE 24 JULY 2013 MESSAGE

The letter opens by acknowledging the significant role the Association has played over nearly four decades. It notes that "since its establishment in North America in 1975, the Association for Bahá'í Studies has made a valued contribution to the development of the Bahá'í community," and that its activities have addressed a range of significant concerns, including "fostering appreciation for the importance of personal study of the Revelation, correlating the teachings with contemporary thought, defending the Cause, encouraging young believers in their academic pursuits," and "providing a forum for Bahá'í academics to collaborate with one another." This acknowledgment

situates the Association's history within the larger narrative of the Faith's intellectual development, affirming the value of what had been built over nearly four decades.

In view of the rich history and the learning generated to date, the House of Justice observes that Bahá'ís will increasingly become involved in the discourses of society, and suggests that it is "perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the friends to explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly interests that the endeavours of the Association for Bahá'í Studies can be conceived." The Association is thus being invited to understand itself not primarily as a scholarly society serving an academic constituency, but as an instrument for building the capacity of a wide range of believers to engage with the discourses of their fields. Central to this vision is 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." The letter further identifies learning in action as perhaps the most important of the insights that have contributed to the community's progress, explaining that "the friends participate in an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation in order to address obstacles and share successes, re-examine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time."

The letter's practical suggestions include holding small seminars to assist individuals from certain professions or

academic disciplines to examine some aspect of the discourse of their field; special interest groups having gatherings to intensify efforts; and reimagining existing activities such as the hosting of a large conference. Beyond these practical suggestions, the letter articulates a broader vision of how this work could be carried forward. 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,” noting that “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.” For the Executive Committee, these words constituted a charge to build on the Association’s rich history while learning to think and act in new ways.

The House of Justice provided additional guidance two years later. In its letter of 7 September 2015 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, it acknowledges the efforts to reorient the work of the Association and affirms the initiative to create mechanisms for individuals from similar disciplines to interact at the annual conference, encouraging them to explore thought in their field or profession in light of the Teachings, since this “holds greater promise than has thus far been realized and, accordingly, should be the focus of further exploration.” Among the aims identified is fostering wider

participation across a range of engagement—from those already seriously involved to those for whom such endeavors are relatively new—alongside contemplating opportunities beyond the annual conference for interested individuals to meet, reflect together, explore related themes, and for some to present their conclusions more formally, whether arrived at through individual or collaborative effort. It also notes the particular significance of the guidance regarding special interest groups in the 24 July 2013 letter. The Executive Committee understood this as a signal that the working group model, discussed in the 50th Retrospective, was on the right track, but that its fuller potential remained to be discovered.

FURTHER ARTICULATIONS OF THE APPROACH TO LEARNING

Following the 2013 letter, four authors in particular made significant contributions that would help the Association understand the implications of this guidance. Each approached the central question of what it means for Bahá’ís to engage seriously, humbly, and effectively with the intellectual life of society, informed by the evolving conceptual framework. Reading them in sequence gives a sense of how the conversation evolved in the years following the letter’s arrival. Each contribution is summarized briefly below.

HALEH ARBAB, "LEARNING TO READ SOCIAL REALITY IN THE LIGHT OF THE REVELATION."³

In this essay, Arbab addresses a fundamental challenge facing Bahá'í scholars: how to bring the insights of the Revelation to bear on social reality without retreating into internal community discourse or surrendering distinctive perspectives to prevailing academic paradigms. She argues that those engaged in such work should neither dismiss existing human knowledge nor uncritically accept it. Instead, Bahá'í scholarship involves combining full mastery of a field with the capacity to examine its underlying assumptions in the light of the Revelation. Referring to science and religion as "two complementary and overlapping systems of knowledge and practice," she argues for coherence rather than compartmentalization, refusing to separate the insights of the Faith from the practice of scholarship. Her central illustration concerns migration. Specifically, she explains that examining the global movement of populations through the lens of the oneness of humankind reveals patterns and cases—among them those who choose to remain in difficult conditions out of conviction—that purely materialistic frameworks entirely miss. The essay closes with

a methodological caution that runs through all of the work of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity: bringing the light of the Revelation to social inquiry requires immersion in the ocean of the Writings. Such immersion in turn requires far more than selecting a few passages from which formulaic answers can be derived.

PAUL LAMPLE, "TOWARD A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION."⁴

Lample responds directly to the 24 July 2013 letter's call to clarify the elements of an evolving conceptual framework. He refers to Shoghi Effendi's use of the term "framework" in relation to the Administrative Order of the Faith. In doing so, he situates the Association's challenge within the broader pattern of how the community has elaborated such a framework through the successive global Plans. He identifies three conceptual elements as central, namely, the nature of the quest for knowledge, the scope and limits of personal interpretation, and the implications of the harmony of science and religion. On each, he steers carefully between extremes, arguing that humility about the limitations of human understanding is the necessary foundation for the collective investigation of truth; that every believer has both the freedom and the obligation to study and share personal

3 Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture, 38th Annual Conference, Toronto, 2014. An edited transcript was published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 25, n. 3, 2015.

4 Plenary talk, 38th Annual Conference, Toronto, 2014. An edited transcript was published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 28, n. 3, 2018.

understanding without imposing it on others; and that the genuine complementarity between science and religion requires guarding against both naïve fundamentalism and philosophical materialism. To illustrate, Lample considers the question of evolution. He shows how Bahá'ís holding differing personal interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements on the subject might advance toward greater clarity through disciplined consultation. In this process, each view is offered as a contribution to a shared search for truth rather than as a position to be defended.

FARZAM ARBAB, "THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE OF THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY."⁵

This essay examines the intellectual vocation of the Bahá'í community. Arbab challenges what he calls the "simple narrative" of intellectual life, namely that Bahá'ís pursue education and then excel in their fields, gradually bringing their values to bear. He observes that this account, while valid, falls well short of what the moment demands. An analysis of what ails humanity cannot be limited to surface-level attitudinal, behavioral, and social problems, or even structural defects in the present order; it must diagnose and grapple with foundational defects in the knowledge

systems underpinning modern civilization itself. On this basis, he argues that the principle of the oneness of humankind demands not merely placing spiritualized individuals within existing structures, but organic change in those structures and in the knowledge systems that underpin them. Crucially, however, he insists that identifying the defects of the present order is only a first step. What is ultimately required is the generation of knowledge and a distinctive intellectuality capable of laying the intellectual foundations of a new civilization. He also discusses the natural sciences, affirming their significant contributions, while anticipating the eventual discrediting of philosophical materialism and the reductionist effort to explain consciousness, morality, and meaning solely in physical terms. He then identifies three enabling conditions for intellectual maturation: the courage to challenge reigning orthodoxies, a non-elitist culture that makes knowledge accessible to all, and a rigorous understanding of science and religion as complementary and overlapping systems of knowledge and practice. The essay closes on a note of genuine joy, pointing to the tens of thousands of youth engaged in community-building efforts as evidence that "the light of the desired intellectual life of the community has dawned."

5 Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture, 40th Annual Conference, Montreal, 2016. An edited transcript was published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 26, n. 4, 2016.

SHAHRIAR RAZAVI, "BAHÁ'Í PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE: SOME CONSIDERATIONS RELATED TO HISTORY, CONCEPTS, AND APPROACHES."⁶

In this essay, Razavi integrates historical perspective, conceptual analysis, and practical guidance about participating in public discourse. He opens with the foundational premise that Bahá'í engagement with public discourse is not a peripheral activity, but rather an expression of faith itself, animated by Bahá'u'lláh's injunction to be "anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in." The essay traces the arc of institutional engagement from Bahá'u'lláh's epistles to world leaders in the 1860s through to the establishment of the Office of Public Discourse at the Bahá'í World Centre in 2013. He pays special attention to the House of Justice's 1985 statement "The Promise of World Peace" as the defining modern model, observing that it galvanized Bahá'í communities worldwide by demonstrating how to raise discourse from narrow technical questions to the level of spiritual principle, and that its approach became the template for institutional contributions ever since. The essay's conceptual core discusses the elements of the Bahá'í

framework most relevant to public discourse. These include the oneness of humanity, unity as a prerequisite for progress, non-involvement in partisan politics, consultation as one of the principal means of reaching unity of thought, the unbiased investigation of reality, the spiritual nature of the human being, and the harmony of science and religion. Regarding consultation, Razavi explains that the goal is not to compromise, but rather to identify principles on which genuine agreement can be secured, elevating discourse to what is "immanent in human nature" and therefore universally resonant. The essay closes with a moving vignette from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's 1919 correspondence, in which He explains that Bahá'í commitment to peace is "a matter of religious belief and one of the eternal foundations of the Faith." This vignette crystallizes the essay's final claim that faith and public engagement are inseparable.

MANDATE

In the thirteen years since the 24 July 2013 message, the Association has progressively learned how to translate this guidance into action. To this end, it has benefited from the further guidance of 7 September 2015; the insights of Haleh Arbab, Paul Lample, Farzam Arbab, and Shahriar Razavi; the direct counsel of all four of these authors as well as Universal House of Justice members Stephen Birkland and Firaydoun Javaheri, all of whom have met with the Executive Committee

6 Originally presented as a plenary talk at the 39th Annual Conference, Orange County, 2015 Conference and subsequently published as chapter 6 in *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition*, ed. Geoffrey Cameron and Benjamin Schewel, 2017.

and close collaborators to help deepen understanding of the letter and its implications; the regular encouragement and guidance of members of the Continental Board of Counsellors and the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada; and the additional assistance of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States. The message calls on the Association to serve as an instrument for building capacity to engage in society's academic and professional discourses and to "consciously and progressively clarify" the elements of the evolving conceptual framework most relevant to its work. Now that the Association is approaching its 50th annual conference, it is timely to reflect on what has been learned.

Drawing on the Ten Year Retrospective published in 2023, the following account provides an overview of the features of the Association's development since 2013 related to its unfolding vision, its approach to learning, and the dispositions it is striving to cultivate in an effort to contribute to the development of a new paradigm of scholarship. The aim is to convey how the Association has come to understand its mandate, one that has emerged progressively from thirteen years of accumulated experience, which has in turn built on thirty-eight years of prior history and learning.

The mandate has been formulated as follows:

The Association plays a role in fostering the intellectual life of the community, focusing in particular

on helping to build the "capacity of the friends to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society in their academic fields and in their professions" in a manner that "enrich[es] the capacity of the Bahá'í community to discharge its mission."⁷ It aims to enable participants of varying backgrounds and academic interests to effectively explore how "to provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds." In this way, the Association understands its work as a contribution to "the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures."⁸

Recognizing that such formulations necessarily evolve with experience, the Association views this formulation as a point of reference that helps to unify its various activities and consolidate its understanding of the mutually reinforcing relationship between its work and the broader pattern of activity in which the Bahá'í community is engaged. The activities of the Association are understood to complement, and to be nurtured by, the full range of community endeavors of which it is a part. In this context, the Association seeks to be accessible to all who are interested

7 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 7 September 2015.

8 Quoted passages are from a letter of the Universal House of Justice dated 30 December 2021.

in actively learning to contribute to the discourses of their fields, and to support their efforts in doing so.

It is further understood that this approach aligns with the vision the House of Justice expressed in the 24 July 2013 message of rising generations entering diverse fields of human endeavor, with the Association being able to offer an important contribution to that arena. As Razavi notes, such engagement is not peripheral for Bahá'ís but goes “to the very heart of what it means to practice one’s faith.” The Association has embraced this vision, endeavoring to discover what it means to contribute to “a fuller expression of the Faith’s society-building powers”⁹ in the realm of academic and professional discourses. It strives to do so through systematic learning, the patient cultivation of capacities, and the fostering of a welcoming spirit of collaboration among those committed to this work.

The Association also recognizes that many of the foundational capacities and dispositions it seeks to cultivate—habits of study and reflection, the spirit of service, the ability to correlate the teachings with experience—are being developed more broadly through the institute process. The 24 July 2013 message notes that involvement in the institute is “a part of a lifetime of inquiry” that will extend throughout participants’ academic studies and beyond. The Association understands its work as building on these foundations,

providing specialized spaces in which “the knowledge, skills, and spiritual insights” developed in the institute can find further expression in the work of contributing to the discourses of “various disciplines of knowledge.”

Of particular relevance is Ruhi Book 14, *Participating in Public Discourse*, which seeks to help participants gain insight into the capabilities and attitudes that enable them to engage fruitfully in society’s discourses. Its first unit equips participants to analyze issues of social import in the light of Bahá'u'lláh’s Revelation, drawing on examples from economics and the news media to show how ideals that seem aligned with the teachings can, at a deeper level, contradict them. It also cautions against both extreme relativism and fanaticism, calling additionally for vigilance against the many subtle forms prejudice can take in individuals, social structures, and culture. The second unit examines the dynamics of the Bahá'í community’s participation in public discourse, situating such engagement within the same conceptual framework that gives coherence to expansion and consolidation, and social action. It explores the parameters of collaboration with like-minded organizations, and the approach to action, reflection, consultation and study that participants are encouraged to extend to public discourse, including the educational and professional settings in which many of them are engaged. Book 14 thus reinforces the very dispositions, capacities, and themes that are essential to the Association’s work.

9 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 9 May 2020.

APPROACH TO LEARNING:
FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

Crucially, the Association is building its capacity to operate in a mode of learning within an evolving conceptual framework. As noted above, this framework is central to advancing the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and involvement in the discourses of society. At the core of the conceptual framework are several foundational principles that work together to give coherence to the Association's activities and encourage unity in diversity of intellectual inquiry. As the Association develops, it aspires to more fully embody these principles in all dimensions of its work.

The first principle is the oneness of humanity, which frames how participants are meant to see one another: not as competitors, opponents, disputants, or even as debaters seeking to prevail, but as "potential partners to collaborate with." The Association's spaces aim to translate this principle into practice by working to "transcend differences" and "foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another,"¹⁰ building connections grounded in the essential nobility of every person and their place in humanity's shared journey. It aims to foster conditions in which, in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, participants associate in such a manner that no trace of self is detected from their

conduct and manners, from their words and deeds. This is because "Man's greatness lieth in humility, and his abiding glory is found in lowliness, self-effacement, and servitude to the servants of the Lord. This, verily, is the greatest attainment in this resplendent Day."¹¹ Such oneness, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains elsewhere, calls participants to become "the waves of one sea, and bright stars of the same endless sky, and pearls within the shell of singleness, and gleaming jewels quarried from the mines of unity," servants one to another, who "see nothing but good in one another, hear nothing but praise of one another, and speak no word of one another save only to praise."¹²

Closely related to the principles of oneness and nobility is the conviction that "all created things are connected one to another by a linkage complete and perfect."¹³ By extension, as Shoghi Effendi observes, "man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions."¹⁴ This concept of interdependence leads the Association to foster an orientation in which participants learn to draw fruitful connections between

10 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 30 December 2021.

11 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Light of the World* section 76.

12 *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* section 193.

13 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* section 21.

14 Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 17 February 1933.

domains of knowledge. Rather than succumbing to the impulse to fragment, atomize, or superficialize, they seek to recognize the intricacy and depth of any given matter and to draw connections where fragmentation has created chasms. As the Universal House of Justice has encouraged, the aim is to help one another “to analyse but not reduce, to ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify distinct areas of action but not compartmentalize.”¹⁵

Underlying this aspiration is a worldview that “includes the spiritual dimension as an indispensable component for consistency and coherence.” To approach any field of inquiry while bracketing this dimension is not scholarly neutrality but a form of reductionism, one that casts “the Faith into a mould which is essentially foreign to its nature.”¹⁶ A statement prepared by the Bahá'í International Community for the United Nations illustrates what is at stake in such instances of reductionism. The BIC observes that conceptual models of what is normal, natural, and possible shape not only personal behavior but the structures of society, privileging certain values over others. Assumptions that often go unexamined—that, for instance, prosperity depends on the pursuit of self-interest, or that the well-being of nations can be understood apart from the well-being of humanity as a whole—carry significant consequences once

they inform policy and practice. This is analogous to the practice of reducing an entire theme into one or two appealing phrases, against which the House of Justice cautions, noting that resisting this tendency “is no small task” in a society that “speaks more and more in slogans.” It thus hopes “that the habits the friends are forming . . . to work with full and complex thoughts and to achieve understanding will be extended to various spheres of activity.”¹⁷ The work of the Association is one such sphere of activity in which participants are learning to realize this aspiration in concrete ways, grounding their engagement with academic and professional discourses in the Bahá'í conceptual framework.

These principles—oneness, nobility, and interdependence—are inextricably linked with a conception of history that situates every act of scholarship within a larger story: that each human being is a protagonist on a collective journey toward the inevitable realization of humanity's oneness. This journey is propelled by the twin forces of disintegration and integration, both of which “serve to carry humanity, each in its own way, along the path leading towards its full maturity.”¹⁸ As the House of Justice affirms, “such is the view of history that underlies every endeavour pursued by the Bahá'í community.”¹⁹

15 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 28 December 2010.

16 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 4 October 1994.

17 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 28 December 2010.

18 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 2 March 2013.

19 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 2 March 2013.

This consciousness of where humanity has come from, where it is going, and what this moment demands increasingly shapes how the Association understands its work, giving its participants a dynamic sense of shared purpose and meaning. It plays a key role in enchanting what may otherwise seem purely instrumental. Along with these central principles, it provides the generative center of the framework through which various assumptions, concepts, and approaches informing different academic and professional discourses can be scrutinized for their strengths and limitations.

ELEMENTS OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RELATED DISPOSITIONS

With such principles shaping its approach, the Association has been engaged in a sustained effort to understand and apply the elements of the conceptual framework highlighted in the 24 July 2013 message. These elements—the relationship between study and action, focus, fostering capacity and accompaniment, organic growth, institutional arrangements, coherence among endeavors, sound relations among individuals, communities, and institutions, and learning in action—have come to serve as a touchstone for examining its priorities and assessing its progress. Attentiveness to them has helped generate new strengths, raise new challenges, and disclose new possibilities for advancement.

It has also helped frame the

Association's work as a contribution to the learning ecosystem described in the House of Justice message of 31 December 2025. As it explains, "in the natural environment, combinations and connections create vibrancy and new life; likewise, a flourishing process of learning arises from countless formal and informal interactions and their emergent properties." Central to this process is "a free-flowing, uninterrupted exchange of insights, experience, and ideas among the friends at the grassroots," unfolding upward through regional and national levels, with "learning at each level . . . fostered by the dynamic discussions that take place in spaces created for reflection on action." The Association plays its role in this ecosystem by striving to create and sustain the settings, processes, and conditions in which learning can flourish among those engaged in academic and professional discourses.

This sustained engagement with the framework and with the wider learning ecosystem, in turn, gives rise to related dispositions that enable the kind of inquiry the Association is working to cultivate. Rooted in the foundational principles described above, these dispositions foster the evolution of an intellectual community animated by divine love, grounded in humility and detachment, committed to the faithful correlation of insights, shaped by consultation in a dynamic interplay with independent investigation, and resolutely oriented toward transcending difference and harmonizing perspectives. Together, they illuminate how

the processes of the Association can unfold most fruitfully and what scholarship can be at its best.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDY AND ACTION

The first element mentioned by the Universal House of Justice in its 24 July 2013 message is “the relationship between study and action,” which is increasingly evident in the settings fostered by the Association. What participants read and reflect on in such spaces forms the study dimension of this relationship. In practice, this means engaging seriously with the texts, ideas, and questions of an academic or professional field, relating the insights found there to the teachings of the Revelation, and then bringing the resulting understanding to bear in conversations, writing, conference or seminar presentations, and other concrete forms of participation in the relevant discourse. This participation is the action dimension, which can in turn inform subsequent discussions in the group and enable deeper study of the texts and related guidance. The aim is an ongoing cycle in which such study and action mutually enrich one another. As Adaikkalam Zabihi et al. note in a recent article on methodology, “theory and practice advance hand in hand,” with knowledge “derived from and ascertained through effective action and distilled through spaces for reflection and deliberation that employ a consultative epistemology.”

The dynamics of this cycle are

directly related to the capacity “to correlate [the Faith’s] beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.”²⁰ Shoghi Effendi expressed the hope “that all the Bahá’í students will . . . investigate and analyse the principles of the Faith and . . . correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science,” noting that “therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth.”²¹ The Universal House of Justice has described this work as entailing “the devising of the new scholarly paradigm,” one that offers “a priceless opportunity of service and achievement to those Bahá’ís who enjoy the dual gifts of spiritual faith and intellectual faculties trained in the best that contemporary society has to offer.” It explains that the Bahá’í community “already has a unique approach to the exploration of reality” that “needs to be sharply honed as an ever more effective instrument of social transformation.”²²

Haleh Arbab’s analysis of migration, noted above, illustrates what this dynamic looks like in practice, demonstrating how the Revelation functions not as a source of ready-made answers but as a lens through which patterns of behavior that materialistic frameworks cannot see become visible and analytically significant. The result is a

20 Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 21 October 1943.

21 Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in Universal House of Justice, letter dated 19 October 1993.

22 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 5 October 1993.

bidirectional process of mutual enrichment. On the one hand, participants strive to understand social reality in a manner consistent with the teachings, applying elements of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation together with the contents and methods of science. On the other hand, engaging deeply with contemporary thought—its questions, methods, concepts, insights, becoming attuned to how these have all developed over time—enables participants to more fully grasp the significance of the teachings and their relevance to the pressing issues of the day. Such correlation enhances comprehension of contemporary problems while also illuminating the efficacy of the Faith's principles in addressing them.

This correlative work within reading groups, seminars, and other spaces is further enriched when participants draw upon at least four sources of knowledge: the academic or other texts participants are studying collectively; the writings of the Faith; the participants' own experiences, including those stemming from participation in disciplinary discourses and research; and the insights emerging from their consultation together. The interplay among these sources is most fully realized when animated by spiritual receptivity and the promptings of divine guidance, consistent with the explanation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that all methods of human comprehension must be augmented and guided by the bounty of the Holy Spirit.²³ This confluence

of sources, sustained by that spiritual dimension, enables participants to expand their horizons of understanding.

This work is irreducibly collaborative. Participants come to view intellectual exchange as shared exploration between partners rather than opponents, recognizing one another as both teachers and learners, scrutinizing ideas and interpretations while fostering fellow feeling across traditional divisions, and building on and combining valid insights rather than seeking to demolish arguments. In these spaces, human well-being becomes the guiding criterion, intellectual work is understood as service, and all are treated as protagonists in a collective endeavor to generate knowledge, each one bringing unique gifts and potentially viable contributions to shared challenges.

The consolidation of such understanding, moreover, is enlivened by the arts—music, poetry, drama, storytelling, and crafts. The Universal House of Justice affirms that the arts are “so integral a part of the development of a community from the start” and serve as “an important means of generating joy, strengthening bonds of unity, disseminating knowledge, and consolidating understanding.”²⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes all art as “a gift of the Holy Spirit.”²⁵ This gift is related to attraction to beauty, a spiritual force that not only draws participants closer to one

of *Universal Peace* 254.

24 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 30 December 2021.

25 'Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in *The Importance of the Arts* 23.

23 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation*

another but deepens their understanding of what is being studied.²⁶ Artistic endeavors are thus understood as not peripheral but as essential to intellectual development, connecting the material with the spiritual and contributing to the efflorescence of a culture of learning. With all such sources of knowledge, participants work toward the “synthesis” the House of Justice called for, “or at least a coherent correlation, of the vast amount of knowledge that has been acquired during the past century.”²⁷

FOCUS

Regarding the next element, “the need for focus, which is not to be confused with uniformity,”²⁸ the Association is learning to concentrate on various lines of action while giving priority to some over others as needed. The challenge is particularly acute for an organization whose mandate is inherently expansive and whose activities tend to multiply organically as new spaces and initiatives generate new possibilities. Much remains to be learned about how to focus energies, particularly given the demands on the time and energy of those who serve. Yet the Association’s growing capacity to name its priorities explicitly and align its activities around them, while welcoming a widening

circle of participation, reflects notable advancement in this dimension of its work. The identification of six specific objects of learning, outlined in the retrospective and discussed in more depth in the accompanying essay “Learning in Action,” is the Association’s most recent organizing principle for structuring and unifying its priorities.

Focus is directly related to systematization, a mode of operating that allows the Association to sustain its work over time rather than being pulled in too many directions all at once. As the House of Justice states, systematization “ensures consistency of lines of action based on well-conceived plans” and “implies an orderliness of approach in all that pertains to Bahá’í service, whether in teaching or administration, in individual or collective endeavour.” The value of such an approach, however, is not only organizational. Through consistent, focused effort, readings of prevailing conditions, including the obstacles they present and the opportunities they afford, can be more effectively tested and progressively refined. Without such continuity of action, the Association cannot build the experience needed to develop a clear sense of what is working, what requires adjustment, and what the possibilities for advancement are. While allowing for individual initiative and spontaneity, systematization calls for being “clear-headed, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced and harmonious,” a mode of functioning that is “animated

26 *Walking Together on a Path of Service* section 2.

27 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 23 March 1983.

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

by the urgency to act.”²⁹ As the House of Justice explains in its letter of 27 December 2005, this requires arriving at a unified vision of growth based on a realistic assessment of possibilities and resources, developing strategies accordingly, and devising plans of action commensurate with capacity—all while maintaining the agility to make adjustments as circumstances demand and experience accumulates.

To this end, the Association is striving to cultivate an atmosphere that encourages participants and collective initiatives “to be methodical but not rigid, creative but not haphazard, decisive but not hasty, careful but not controlling, recognizing that, in the final analysis, it is not technique but unity of thought, consistent action, and dedication to learning which will bring about progress.”³⁰ This balance between continuity and flexibility reflects the deeper dynamic of unity and diversity at the heart of the learning process itself. Continuity of action contributes to the unity that makes sustained investigation possible; openness to individual initiative and different perspectives contributes to the diversity from which new insights emerge. The interplay between them allows the Association’s collective understanding to advance. Learning to operate in this way remains a major objective at all levels, including among the Association’s committees, special interest groups, and other

collective endeavors. This interplay is explored further in the section on Learning in Action below.

FOSTERING CAPACITY AND ACCOMPANYING OTHERS

The next element is “fostering the capacity of individuals and accompanying others in service.”³¹ In the context of the Association’s work, this element entails developing participants’ ability to generate relevant learning about contributing to academic and professional discourses, to share that learning with others, and to expand the circle of those engaged in this process. The disposition to accompany others is vital to this capacity-building, enabling participants to elicit insights, build momentum, learn from and remove obstacles, and promote organic growth. This disposition reflects the growing emphasis on accompaniment across the worldwide Bahá’í community. As the House of Justice observes in its *Riḍván* 2010 message, the word “accompany” is being endowed with new meaning, signaling a culture in which learning is the mode of operation, in contrast to “the spiritually bankrupt and moribund ways of an old social order that so often seeks to harness human energy through domination, through greed, through guilt or through manipulation.” This culture takes shape among those who delight “not so much in their own

29 Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván Message* 1998.

30 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 28 December 2010.

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

accomplishments but in the progress and services of others.”

The Association has given particular attention to creating intimate settings for meaningful conversations in which experience, ideas, challenges, and progress can be shared among coordinators, seminar and reading group facilitators, and other collaborators, complemented by broader spaces for larger groups to share learning and coordinate efforts. A primary objective now is to expand the nucleus of friends who can accompany a widening network of collaborators, who can in turn encourage and coordinate an increasing number of collaborative settings that operate “on the principle of universal participation.”³²

It is, moreover, becoming clear that divine love is interwoven with this spirit of accompaniment. Contemporary discourse is too often characterized by a deep unwillingness to engage across differences, a condition in which disparate factions show little desire to discover truth or viable solutions together. In such a culture, logical argumentation easily degenerates into intellectual combat focused on winning rather than arriving at agreement on what is true or best. Divine love is essential to releasing the flow of reason and achieving mutual understanding. As the Universal House of Justice states: “Ultimately, the power to transform the world is effected by love, love originating from the relationship with the divine, love ablaze among members

of a community, love extended without restriction to every human being. This divine love, ignited by the Word of God, is disseminated by enkindled souls through intimate conversations that create new susceptibilities in human hearts, open minds to moral persuasion, and loosen the hold of biased norms and social systems so that they can gradually take on a new form in keeping with the requirements of humanity’s age of maturity.”³³ Love of this kind dissolves the defensiveness that calcifies reason into rationalization. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá exemplifies this dynamic interplay in His own writings and talks, seamlessly combining rigorous logic with absolute love. He states: “Love is the light that guideth in darkness, the living link that uniteth God with man, that assureth the progress of every illumined soul. Love is the most great law that ruleth this mighty and heavenly cycle... Love is the spirit of life unto the adorned body of mankind, the establisher of true civilization in this mortal world.”³⁴

The Association is learning to manifest the interplay between love and reason in the environments it is fostering. In a seminar, reading group, writing group, or other collective endeavor, participants come to “view every task and every interaction as an occasion to join hands in the pursuit of progress.”³⁵ Speaking “with words as mild

32 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 12 December 2011.

33 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 22 July 2020.

34 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* sec. 12.

35 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 28 December 2010.

as milk”³⁶ they nonetheless engage rigorously with one another’s ideas and the texts they are exploring together, taking to heart Bahá’u’lláh’s counsel: “Should any one among you be incapable of grasping a certain truth, or be striving to comprehend it, show forth, when conversing with him, a spirit of extreme kindness and good-will. Help him to see and recognize the truth, without esteeming yourself to be, in the least, superior to him, or to be possessed of greater endowments.”³⁷ They find, as Bahá’u’lláh affirms, that “a kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding.”³⁸ Such loving kindness imbues reason with a significance that resonates with and inspires a diverse community of inquirers to commit to the collective pursuit of truth and the common good. Without it, inquiry loses vitality and analysis becomes prone to dogmatism. Heart and mind are not competing faculties, but complementary dimensions of an integrated capacity for discovering truth.

THE DYNAMICS OF ORGANIC DEVELOPMENT

Also essential to all aspects of the Association’s work are “the dynamics of organic development.”³⁹ Lasting

capacity is built organically through a process that may begin modestly, but that evolves and becomes more complex over time. This principle rests on a conception of social bodies characterized by emergence, mutual transformation, and an ever-increasing capacity for complexity. The Universal House of Justice observes that Bahá’í administration “has coded within it the capacity to accommodate higher and higher degrees of complexity, in terms of structures and processes, relationships and activities, as it evolves.”⁴⁰ The Association’s spaces and endeavors are understood in this light. They are not fixed structures to be maintained. Rather, they are living expressions of collective learning whose potential manifests progressively as foundations mature and participation multiplies.

A newly formed reading group, for example, is encouraged to see itself as a setting that aims to advance understanding of how to contribute to a particular discourse, but to begin modestly. Its main objective is to create a consultative space in which participants can reflectively develop their capacity to correlate ideas from the texts they are reading with passages from the writings, their own experience, and the insights of their fellow participants. At the same time, the group is encouraged to view itself as part of a larger learning network, as one element in a constellation of Association endeavors. As

36 Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets*, Lawḥ-i-Maqsúd.

37 Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* V.

38 Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* CXXXII

39 Universal House of Justice, letter

dated 24 July 2013.

40 Universal House of Justice, *Ridván Message* 2010.

such, groups may start modestly, with some gradually giving rise to special interest groups that operate increasingly systematically, concentrating on identifying objects of sustained inquiry, focusing their energies, widening the circle of participation, and achieving coherence among their various endeavors. Over months and years of patient, cumulative effort, such special interest groups may take on multiple initiatives, making sustained contributions to different aspects of a given academic or professional discourse.

This expansion of both individual and collective capacity reflects the underlying principle that the whole becomes more than the sum of its parts: as collaboration strengthens, participants transcend what they could achieve individually, and the resulting collective understanding surpasses what any one of them could have generated alone. The gradual maturation of understanding and commitment that occurs along the way both emanates from and fuels this cumulative unfolding.

As noted earlier, the Universal House of Justice has urged the community to analyze, not reduce, and to identify distinct areas of action, not compartmentalize. This spirit is increasingly animating the Association's ongoing effort to bring its various lines of action into coherence while preserving the vitality and independence that give each space its distinctive role. The Universal House of Justice provides further grounding for this approach in a letter dated 21

January 2014, explaining that "the ability of the Bahá'í community to contribute to thought-shaping social change will increase, and answers to questions that appear to be unsolvable today will become apparent through a process of organic change, rather than as a result of imposing particular perspectives." The network of spaces the Association is working to develop is, in this sense, its contribution to the living ecosystem of learning described in the 31 December 2025 message, one in which combinations and connections create vibrancy and new life, opening onto novel vistas of complexity, coherence, and insight.

INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

The next element, "the institutional arrangements necessary to sustain ever more complex patterns of activity,"⁴¹ has evolved correspondingly. As just discussed, lasting capacity is built organically, and the Association's institutional dimension is no exception.

This evolution reflects the principle that as a body grows in the scope and depth of its work, its structures must develop the capacity to accommodate higher degrees of complexity. This is accomplished not by becoming more rigid or centralized, but by differentiating in ways that preserve coherence while enabling each part to contribute distinctively to the whole. The current configuration includes the

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

Executive Committee; the Committee for Collaborative Initiatives, which attends to strengthening the Association's reading groups, seminars, special interest groups, and related lines of action; the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* Editorial Committee; the ABS Publications Committee; and the Conference Committee, all supported by four full-time staff, one half-time position, and a growing volunteer network. A continuing focus of the Executive Committee has been how "to ensure that there are adequate arrangements in place, both institutional and less formal, to enable [the Association] to thrive, and that all those involved in the learning process are connected by loving relationships imbued with a spirit of humility and magnanimity."⁴²

The creation of the Conference Committee as a specialized body reflects the guidance of the 7 September 2015 letter. As the Executive Committee turned its attention to the purpose and character of Bahá'í studies and the nurturing of fledgling efforts, the House of Justice suggests it would be reasonable to delegate the complex organizational dimensions of the conference and other gatherings to a specialized sub-committee operating within a clear framework. The creation of the Committee for Collaborative Initiatives reflects this same broader pattern of delegation, allowing the Executive Committee to focus on the

purpose and character of Bahá'í studies while specialized bodies attend to particular lines of action. Much of this work entails accompanying and learning alongside the growing network of volunteers who facilitate or coordinate reading groups, special interest groups, seminars, writing endeavors, and elements of the annual conference, as well as synthesizing and disseminating what is learned. The ABS Publications Committee and the JBS Editorial Committee are similarly evolving in their scope and collaborative character.

The systematization of administrative and technical practices has proven equally critical to managing this growing complexity with consistency and care. Significant attention has been paid to establishing efficient administrative processes—logistical, financial, editorial, and communications—particularly through the efforts of the administrative aide and other staff to develop and employ appropriate technological tools across the Association's various committees and activities. At the same time, given the advances over the last thirteen years, the question of the human capacity needed to sustain this growth continues to be a regular topic of consultation, although in recent years it has led to some expansion of staff positions. In this regard, the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada has lovingly encouraged the Association to be judicious yet clear about its needs going forward, indicating that meeting those needs is a priority.

42 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 31 December 2025.

COHERENCE

The next element is “the coherence required among all areas of endeavour.”⁴³ As discussed above, the Association envisions each space as a node in a mutually reinforcing network whose combined efforts generate understanding that no single space could achieve on its own. In this network, large conferences serve as points of convergence where the various threads are brought together, reflected upon, and catalyzed for further development. The network itself is also part of the greater coherence being built across the Bahá'í community through the institute process, whose participants enrich the Association's spaces by bringing to it a shared vocabulary, common habits of learning, and a unified vision of service—as is true of those participating in the programs of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity.

Achieving coherence in the Association's ever-evolving work is an ongoing aspiration. The Association advances this aspiration in part through devising plans of action for each of the Association's areas of focus; creating spaces for the ongoing generation and dissemination of insights aimed at articulating an evolving unity of vision; and consulting with and accompanying staff members and collaborators in their efforts to further coordinate their work,

all while continuing to explore possibilities with, and receive guidance from, the senior institutions.

The Association is learning, moreover, that organizational coherence depends in turn on the quality of the relationships and mode of communication that animate its work. As noted earlier in the discussion of the ecosystem of learning, the promotion of serious learning about complex matters is fundamentally a communal enterprise, one that requires a quality of exchange capable of facilitating fruitful comparison and correlation of perspectives and, where warranted, the disciplined integration of insights from different lines of inquiry.

To this end, the Association is coming to appreciate that consultation is the preeminent means for advancing both collective inquiry and organizational development, one that proceeds from the conviction that truth is not a compromise between opposing interest groups, and that the desire to exercise power over one another dissipates rather than generates useful knowledge. Participants seek instead the power of unified thought and action, where they may see reality from different points of view, but where, as these views are examined and compared, further clarity is achieved. This power stems from the devotional quality of consultation, the recognition that it is a spiritual act undertaken with humility and impartiality rather than simply a technique for collective problem-solving. One who expresses an opinion sets it forth not as correct and right but as a genuine

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

contribution to a shared search for authentic knowledge, remaining sincerely open to being moved by the insights of others. By the same token, consultation stands in a mutually reinforcing relationship with the independent investigation of truth. Here, individual inquiry generates diverse insights that enrich consultation, while consultation provides participants with new ideas and considerations that further inspire their subsequent independent investigation. As Bahá'u'lláh affirms, consultation “bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude.”⁴⁴

In short, far from the adversarial debate and performative disagreement that characterize much of contemporary public and academic discourse, those engaged in consultation find points of unity whenever possible and proceed from the conviction that errors are fruitful, that everyone has the potential to contribute, and that solutions to complex questions rarely emerge from dichotomous or reductive thinking. In reading groups, seminars, and other settings, participants are learning, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá advises, to proceed with “the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation,”⁴⁵ searching out the truth rather than insisting upon their own opinions. Conversing in this manner is among the most potent means of nurturing the coherence and transformation the Association is striving to achieve.

SOUND RELATIONS

The next element, “sound relations among individuals, the community, and the institutions,”⁴⁶ is essential for the coherence of the Association’s work at every level. As the House of Justice observes in its 28 December 2010 message, the relationships that bind these three protagonists “are undergoing a profound transformation, bringing into the realm of existence civilization-building powers which can only be released through conformity with His decree.” They are characterized “at a fundamental level” by “cooperation and reciprocity, manifestations of the interconnectedness that governs the universe.” The transformation involves a reconceptualization of power itself. Here, power is exercised not through control or dominance but through what the House of Justice calls “the powers of the human spirit,” namely, “the power of unity, of love, of humble service, of pure deeds,” forms of power associated with words such as “release,” “encourage,” “channel,” “guide,” and “enable.”⁴⁷ In its 28 November 2023 message, the House of Justice elaborates on this reconceptualization, stating that, “In place of the quest for power over others, [Bahá'u'lláh] introduced arrangements that would cultivate the individual’s latent powers and their expression in service to the common good. Trustworthiness,

44 Bahá'u'lláh, qtd. in Universal House of Justice, letter dated 19 May 2009.

45 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* sec. 45.

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

47 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 2 March 2013.

truthfulness, rectitude of conduct, forbearance, love, and unity are among the spiritual qualities that form the basis of association between the three protagonists of a new way of life, while efforts for social advancement are all shaped by Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the oneness of humanity."

This vision is shaping how the Association understands the relationship between its organizational structures, its collaborative groups, and all those who participate in its spaces. The fundamental orientation is one of service, which infuses all dimensions of community life, including how leadership is understood and exercised. The House of Justice describes leadership as "that expression of service by which [an institution] invites and encourages the use of the manifold talents and abilities with which the community is endowed, and stimulates and guides the diverse elements of the community towards goals and strategies by which the effects of a coherent force for progress can be realized."⁴⁸ In the same letter, it states that a united and self-sustaining community depends on "a sense of partnership based on appreciation of each other's distinctive sphere of action" that is "fully recognized and unfailingly upheld," and that when this sense exists, "the community is transformed from being the mere sum of its parts to assuming a wholly new personality as an entity in which its members blend without losing their

individual uniqueness." Within such an environment, the Association's spaces can evolve from a collection of parallel endeavors into a lively ecosystem of learning.

The quality of the relations established, moreover, creates a climate in which the aspiration to transcend differences and harmonize perspectives can take root and flourish. In a reading group exploring questions of social cohesion, for example, participants may bring perspectives from sociology, anthropology, Africana Studies, education, community organizing, and Indigenous Studies. Rather than defending their particular explanatory frameworks, participants move toward recognizing how multiple factors—underlying assumptions, structural features, individual agency, collective identity, and spiritual transformation—interact dynamically. This approach reveals connections that no single disciplinary lens could disclose, producing a more integrative understanding, while reinforcing rather than displacing the importance of disciplinary investigation. Disciplinary focus and interdisciplinary openness become mutually reinforcing rather than competing impulses.

LEARNING IN ACTION

The House of Justice closes the paragraph on the elements of the conceptual framework by stating that "[p]erhaps the most important of these is learning in action; the friends participate in an ongoing process of action, reflection,

⁴⁸ Universal House of Justice, letter dated 19 May 1994.

study, and consultation in order to address obstacles and share successes, re-examine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time.”⁴⁹ This mode of learning is fundamental to everything the Association does, as it is to the broader work of society building. In its 28 November 2023 message, the House of Justice observes that the Bahá’í community is today “distinguished by a mode of operation characterized by study, consultation, action, and reflection,” one in which “individuals and communities become protagonists of their own development, an embrace of the oneness of humanity banishes prejudice and otherness, the spiritual dimension of human life is fostered through adherence to principle and strengthening of the community’s devotional character, and the capacity for learning is developed and directed towards personal and social transformation.” The message affirms that “the conscious grasp of the process of learning and its extension worldwide, from the grassroots to the international arena, are among the finest fruits of the first century of the Formative Age,” and that “this process will increasingly inform the work of every institution, community, and individual in the years ahead, as the Bahá’í world takes on ever-greater challenges and releases in ever-greater measures the Faith’s society-building power.” The more this mode of learning permeates the work, the more the three

protagonists harmonize in their respective efforts to contribute to individual and social transformation.

With such a vision in mind, the Association is learning to apply ongoing cycles of action, reflection, study, and consultation at various levels and among committee members, staff, and special interest groups. At the broader institutional level, it has become clearer over the past thirteen years that this process of learning advances when there are sufficient opportunities for reflection. These include quarterly reflection meetings, as well as regular smaller meetings and informal discussions that bring together different committees and collaborators to share insights, review progress, identify new opportunities, address challenges, and explore relevant guidance. In this way, the Association is developing its capacity to apply the conceptual framework to guide its own evolution as an organization, treating itself as a constellation of learning rather than merely a vehicle for facilitating others’ learning.

Moreover, this organizational learning matures to the extent that the harmony of science and religion is treated as a governing principle of development and inquiry itself. The 24 July 2013 message identified this harmony as among the concerns requiring particular attention in the years ahead, and the vision that Haleh Arbab, Paul Lample, Farzam Arbab, and Shahriar Razavi articulated in their respective essays has proven especially relevant here. Each engages with the implications of the harmony of science and religion for a

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

vision of development, of intellectual life, and of participation in discourses committed to the generation, application, and dissemination of knowledge as a dynamic, integrated process. The Association is learning, cycle by cycle, to embody this very process.

The quality of inquiry improves accordingly. Learning in action is strengthened when study of the Sacred Texts is woven together with scientific analysis. This is in part because the Writings furnish ontological assumptions, constructive dispositions, and a teleological orientation that guard the search for knowledge against ideological insularity and the unreflective rationalization of existing presuppositions. Reciprocally, rigorous engagement with the methods and findings of science ensures that interpretations of the Texts do not become forms of dogmatic self-confirmation. The reciprocity between these two systems, each cultivating the other and each checking the excesses of the other, enables a community of inquirers to achieve progressively more attuned readings of reality as they engage their respective discourses.⁵⁰ Fostering this interplay in reading groups, seminars, and collaborative writing projects is consequently among the most important contributions the Association can make.

The Association is also finding that learning in action requires the right

inner orientation, with humility as its governing disposition. According to the House of Justice, this entails “weighing alternatives in the light of His teachings, consulting to harmonize differing views and shape collective action, and marching forward with unbreakable unity in serried lines.”⁵¹ In this context, humility does not involve abandoning conviction. As Lample observes, even as individuals share their views on the teachings “with personal conviction and with the strongest possible supporting arguments,” this conviction should be accompanied by an appreciation that such views “are not authoritative and may be wrong.”⁵² The disposition of humility keeps inquiry genuinely open, allowing participants to be surprised, corrected, and enlarged by what they encounter in texts, in reality, and in others’ perspectives.

Closely related to humility is detachment, particularly from the competitive and self-aggrandizing habits that characterize much of academic life, and from the tendency to defend a position simply because it is one’s own. The House of Justice has specifically cautioned that “Bahá’í scholars must beware of the temptations of intellectual pride,” noting that “there are many aspects of western thinking which have been exalted to a status of unassailable principle in the general

50 See, Todd Smith, “Becoming Attuned to Reality: Presuppositions and the Power of Learning in Action.” *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2023.

51 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 22 July 2020.

52 Paul Lample, “Toward a Framework for Action.” *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2018, 26.

mind, that time may well show to have been erroneous or, at least, only partially true.”⁵³ Detachment requires, as Farzam Arbab observes, the courage to challenge such orthodoxies through “painstaking, spiritually illumined scientific and philosophical inquiry”⁵⁴ rather than mere dismissal. As noted earlier, what sustains both humility and detachment is a commitment to service for the betterment of humankind. When service rather than recognition is one’s deepest motivation, the willingness to be corrected, to acknowledge error, and to build upon the insights of others affirms one’s true identity as a noble being. The House of Justice describes such a culture as one that promotes “a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service, supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment,” recognizing that “therein lie the dynamics of an irrepressible movement.”⁵⁵

Equally essential is the principle of moderation. As noted in the discussion of accompaniment above, Bahá’u’lláh teaches that utterance “needeth moderation, without which the hearer would be unable to bear it, rather he would

manifest opposition from the very outset,” and that “moderation will be obtained by blending utterance with the tokens of divine wisdom which are recorded in the sacred Books and Tablets.”⁵⁶ When utterance is so endowed, He asserts, “it will prove highly effective and will be the prime factor in transforming the souls of men.” In the context of scholarly discourse, one direct implication is that the manner in which insights and criticism are shared is as consequential as their content. The ability to calibrate one’s contributions to what others are able to receive is an essential form of wisdom.

Razavi writes that the capacity to “weigh knowledge in the balance of spiritual principles constitutes an indispensable faculty demanded of those who participate in public discourse.”⁵⁷ This faculty protects participants from both dogmatic religious assertion and uncritical assent to every research claim advanced within a given discourse. In this light, humility, detachment, and moderation, taken together, are among the inner conditions for the emergence of a new kind of scholarly community within the Association, one animated by love, freed from the compulsions of ego and faction, and oriented toward generating knowledge that contributes to the well-being of humanity.

53 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 23 March 1983.

54 Farzam Arbab, “The Intellectual Life of the Bahá’í Community.” *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2016, 16.

55 Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván Message* 2010.

56 Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets*, Lawḥ-i-Síyyid-i-Mihdíy-i-Dahají ¶ 13.

57 Shahríar Razavi, “Bahá’í Participation in Public Discourse” in *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition* 177.

SUMMARY: CULTIVATING A
DISTINCTIVE CULTURE OF INQUIRY

In *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers a portrait of the truly learned: those in whom “the forms of transcendent realities are reflected,” who are “busy by night and by day with meticulous research into such sciences as are profitable to mankind,” and who “devote themselves to the training of students of capacity.” To such souls, He writes, “the proffered treasures of kings would not compare with a single drop of the waters of knowledge.” This vision of the scholar—at once rigorous and selfless, intellectually serious and spiritually striving—speaks directly to what the 24 July 2013 message identifies as a critical aspect of the conceptual framework: the generation and application of knowledge. The manner in which the search for truth is conducted is inseparable from both its outcomes and the spaces and processes that give it shape. Attending to the quality of this search is central to the Association’s distinctive contribution to cultivating the intellectual life of the community.

The House of Justice’s description of “enkindled souls” in its 30 December 2021 message offers a compelling encapsulation of many of the qualities the Association’s culture of learning seeks to foster among its participants:

They emphasize qualities and attitudes—such as trustworthiness, cooperation, and forbearance—that are building blocks of a stable social order. They champion

rationality and science as essential for human progress. They advocate tolerance and understanding, and with the inherent oneness of humanity uppermost in their minds, they view everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with, and they strive to foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another. They are conscious of how the forces of materialism are at work around them, and their eyes are wide open to the many injustices that persist in the world, yet they are equally clear sighted about the creative power of unity and humanity’s capacity for altruism. They see the power that true religion possesses to transform hearts and overcome distrust, and so, with confidence in what the future holds, they labour to cultivate the conditions in which progress can occur.

In its 31 December 2025 message, the House of Justice states that these same souls embody “a heightened spiritual consciousness that leads to a life of purpose and meaning, a life dedicated to developing their God-given potentialities and labouring for the transformation of society.” They “recognize the value of knowledge in propelling progress, are committed to its generation, and share it freely and humbly. Learning is a habit of mind for them, an orientation in all they do. In every face they see a fellow seeker after truth.” Crucially, they “are not

swept off course by the world's unabating distractions. Steady do they go, patient and perseverant, pledged to long-term endeavour." Such steadiness of purpose, combined with openness to learning and infused with historical consciousness, enables the work of the Association to advance. The dispositions being cultivated in the Association's spaces and processes embody the conviction that how one seeks truth is inseparable from what one finds, and that the quality of the search is itself a contribution to the civilization of oneness being built.

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